

Students' Errors in Writing Topic Sentence

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Abstract

This research investigates students' errors in writing topic sentence. Forty students (20 female and 20 male students) who are studying at Al-Noor University College participated in this study. The results show that students have committed different errors. These errors vary in their frequencies and numbers, also there is a difference between male and female students in number and frequency of errors.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, learning the English language becomes so important. This is due to the many roles it plays in countries over the world. English language is widely used in Iraq for communication, education and social purposes. English Language is not only taught as a subject in universities, but it is also the basic subject through which all other university subjects are taught. Despite this, the writing part of English is given less attention at the university level. Teachers and academics as well as students those trying to learn. Learning how to write paragraphs, sentences and topic sentences without making errors are important to learn the language in all. As a result, this study is focused on how to deal with this issue and tried to less of these errors as possible as could be.

Introduction

In communication, speakers usually engage in the use of address terms in order to refer to, identify or even call each other. This makes address terms an important communicative tool through which societal norms and practices can be inferred. Because of their interpersonal communicative function, they are also a vital tool with which human relationships are established and modified. (Afful, 2006:76). From the way a speaker addresses a hearer, either vocatively or referentially, one is able to infer the formality or informality of their relationship or the nature of the power relations that hold between these participants (Traugott and Pratt, 1980).

One of the different types of address terms, which cut across many cultures, is nicknames. De Klerk and Bosch (1997) perceive nicknames to be relatively impermanent, informal names. That is, a nickname is coined to a bearer to serve a specific purpose and it signals the level

of formality that a speaker and a hearer share. It is not meant to be permanent nor universally known; although in some cases they end up being more well-known than real names.

In addition to being reflective of the formality of relationships, nicknames are indicative of the attitude that the speaker has towards the bearer (De Klerk and Bosch,1996). The fact that they can originate from the bearer's physical and personal characteristics; and that they are mostly used referentially, renders them an important tool in gaining insight into whether the speaker approves or disapproves of the bearer's characteristics and thus the positivity or negativity of the user's attitude towards the bearer.

Nicknames are determinants of the power relations in a community. According to De Klerk and Bosch (1997), in tertiary institutions where students have a heightened knowledge about the social roles and relationships, nicknames can bear a wide range of implicatures about power relations and perceptions. They are functional in offering a significant insight into student-lecturer relations as well as their social and cultural expectation and roles.

In many African cultures nicknames exist and they serve a wide range of functions. Among the Ibibio in Nigeria, peers or age-mates coin a nickname for themselves or are endowed with one to reflect their peculiar attributes or achievements like prowess in intercommunity battles or contributions in community development. In the same way among the Igbo, Chinua Achebe (1958:3) writes in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, about a celebrated community wrestler, Amalinze, nicknamed "The Cat" because his back would never touch the ground. In the Basotho community nicknames are used either as praise names or as ridiculing devices as will be shown below.

2. Research Questions

This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the errors which committed by the students in writing topic sentence?
2. What are the most frequent errors in writing topic sentence?

3. Aim of the Research

This research aims at identifying the errors of students in writing topic sentence.

4.1. What makes a good paragraph?

Every paragraph you write should follow the principles listed below:

1. The paragraph must contain a topic sentence
2. All remaining sentences should support and develop the topic sentence
3. Only one main idea should be developed
4. The sentences should flow smoothly and logically

5. A concluding sentence may be added but is not essential Paragraph word length can and should vary. However, be aware that paragraphs that are too long can be hard to read, and that paragraphs that are too short look ‘choppy’ and can read like a list. To be more specific, a one sentence paragraph is usually too short, and writing only two paragraphs on one A4 page indicates paragraphs may be too long. However, there is no fixed rule about the number of sentences that should make up a paragraph.

What is important is that the paragraph only develops one main idea. This is the factor which should be the primary determinant of paragraph length.

When you need to say something else, start a new paragraph.(Oshima&Hogue:1999)

Paragraph structure

Now, let’s look at paragraph structure in more detail.

Think of a paragraph as having two, or possibly three sections:

1. A topic sentence: this states the main topic of the paragraph and the controlling idea.
2. Supporting sentences: these develop the topic sentence.
3. A concluding sentence: this signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember, but is often unnecessary.

Activity 1: Read the following paragraphs and try to identify the topic sentence in each one.

1. Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words “stingy” and “frugal” both mean “careful with money.” However, to call a person stingy is an insult, while the word frugal has a much more positive connotation. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, and aggressive, but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.
2. HRM policies affect certain immediate organisational outcomes and have long-term consequences. For example, policy choices made by managers affect the overall competence of employees, the commitment of employees, the degree of congruence between the goals of employees and those of the organisation, and the overall cost effectiveness of HRM practices. These four Cs are not exhaustive of the criteria that HRM policy makers may find useful in evaluating the effectiveness of human resource management. However, they are reasonably comprehensive. Ibid
3. Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important reasons: it is both beautiful and useful. First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion. For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today as the day it was minted twenty three

centuries ago. Another important characteristic of gold is its utility in industry and science. The most recent application of gold is in astronauts' suits.

4. Albert Einstein, one of the world's geniuses, failed his university entrance examinations on his first attempt. William Faulkner, one of America's noted writers, never finished college because he could not pass his English courses. Sir Winston Churchill, who is considered one of the masters of the English language, had to have special tutoring in English during elementary school. These few examples show that failure in school does not always predict failure in life.
5. As can be seen from these paragraphs, the topic sentence gives the reader a clear idea of what the paragraph is about and is thereby the most important sentence in the paragraph. The topic sentence does not have to be the first sentence of the paragraph. However, this is the clearest way to present your points. For this reason, there is no danger in making the first sentence of almost every paragraph you write your topic sentence. Ibid

4.2. Writing the topic sentence

When writing the topic sentence, try to state the main point of the paragraph as clearly and as accurately as possible. Do not make the topic sentence too general or too specific.

Too general

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult.

Too specific

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed who cited a range of difficulties including homesickness, loneliness, difficulty making Australian friends, changes to diets, health problems, weight gain, and difficulties with money and jobs.

Good #1

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult in three main respects for 63% of the people surveyed.

Good #2

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed due to the impacts of culture shock, financial concerns and health concerns.

The two parts of the topic sentence

A topic sentence contains:

1. A topic
eg. Studying overseas

2. A controlling idea (what you say about the topic)eg. ...was deemed to be very difficult...

The topic is best placed at or near the start of the sentence. The topic should not be a pronoun (he, she, his, this, it) as starting with a pronoun often makes the focus of the paragraph unclear. The controlling idea ‘controls’ everything else in the paragraph; it indicates what you want to say about the topic.

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult...

In this case, do not talk about such things as the benefits of studying overseas, or statistics about the overseas student population. If you want to do this, start a new paragraph. Ibid

4.3. Supporting Evidence and Analysis

These sentences discuss the main idea of the paragraph and support the topic sentence with evidence. Evidence will be made up of your research, including academic sources and direct examples from primary texts or studies that will support your claim (note: remember to reference these sources according to your prescribed referencing format).

However, you will need to find a balance between the evidence you provide and the analysis (interpretation of evidence). As you progress in your academic career, the analysis of evidence will become increasingly important.

4.4. The Concluding Observation (or Linking Sentence)

The concluding observation closes your paragraph with an observation that is more than just a summary of the contents of the paragraph (note: do not restate content here because it will become repetitive).

It is a final statement that ties together the ideas brought up in the paragraph and emphasizes the main idea, thereby leading to the next step in your argument. Therefore, it can also serve as a transition to the main idea of the next paragraph.

5. Error Analysis

Error analysis theory is employed to challenge and criticize of the comparative analysis in the early 1970s. The error analysis is focused on second/foreign language acquisition. However, the traditional comparative analysis is the major obstacles to foreign language learning derive from the interference of mother tongue. The main objective is to have the effective teaching method by comparing systematically the similarities and differences between the mother tongue and English language. Besides, the interference of mother tongue, and many factors effect in the course of English writing too.

According to Corder (1974), error analysis has two objectives: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical objective serves to “elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language.” and the applied object serves to enable the learner “to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes”. The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can present us the learner’s state of the language (Corder,1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can inform course organizers to reorient language learning materials based on the learners 'current problems.

Likewise, Norish (1983) defines ‘an error’ as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently ‘get(s) it wrong’. Ellis (1985) states that, the most significant contribution of Error Analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide. Also, errors are no longer seen as ‘unwanted forms’, but as evidence of the learner’s active contribution to second language acquisition.

However, (Khan, Riaz, & Khan, 2016) state that error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the error’s learners make in writing. Error analysis is the way to find the student’s errors which are not systematic in any simple way. Error analysis could be employed to study how students construct their own rules on the writing basis. Next, the review of error analysis is elucidated.

6. Steps of Error Analysis

Some scholars suggest some steps helping the researchers during analyzing students' errors. For instance, Corder in (1974) mentions five steps, they are Selection, identification, classification, explanation and evaluation.

In (1997), Ellis proposes four main steps, identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. After Corder and Ellis came Gass and Selinker and suggest six steps in order to analyze students' errors, *collect data, identify errors, classify errors, quantify errors, analyze source and remediate* (2008,p.103).

7. Research Design and Methodology

The present study aims at investigating the types and frequency of writing errors committed by students of Al-Noor University College /Department of English/ Second year students. The study adopts the quantitative research design in order to achieve its objectives. Nunan (2001) defines quantitative research as techniques employed to collect a large number of

data or any measurable things. In addition, quantitative research enables us to summarize vast resources of data and helps in comparisons with other studies (Kruger, 2003). Forty students (20 female and 20 male students) who are studying at Al-Noor University College participated in this study. The students were asked to write three topic sentences within a period of 20 minutes. Then, the written paragraphs were collected in order to be analyzed.

Table (4) numbers and frequencies of students' errors

Type of Error	Males No. of Errors and Frequencies		Females No. of Errors and Frequencies		Total Frequency
Wrong Structure	20	20.618%	14	14.432%	35.05 %
No Verb	10	10.309%	5	5.154%	15.463%
Wrong Definite Article	1	2.173%	5	5.154%	7.327%
Wrong Subject	2	1.03%	5	5.154%	6.184%
Wrong use of Verb	5	5.145%	12	12.371%	17.516%
Double Subject	0	0	1	1.03%	1.03%
Wrong Complement	8	8.247%	8	8.247%	16.494%
Wrong pronoun	0	0	1	1.03%	1.03%

8. Results and Data Analysis

As shown in table 1, the results reveal that Al-Noor University students have committed several errors when writing Topic sentence. These errors include: wrong structure which includes wrong sentence pattern, no verb, wrong verb which includes either writing a verb with wrong concord with the subject or the use of double verb, wrong subject, no subject, the use of wrong definite article, wrong pronoun and the use of wrong complement. The most frequent error committed by the students is the use of wrong structure for the topic sentence while the least frequent error is the use of wrong pronoun and the use of double subject. In addition errors such as writing a topic sentence with no verb and the use of wrong complement scored a high frequency.

The results also revealed a difference between males and females in the number and frequency of errors. As for the use of wrong topic sentence structure the results revealed that male students committed 20 errors while females committed only 15 errors. On the contrary, when dealing with the

error of writing a topic sentence without a verb female students committed more frequent errors than male students. In addition, certain error has the same frequency for males and females such as the use of wrong complement and certain errors are committed only by females such as the use of wrong pronoun and the use of double subject.

9. Conclusion

This research focused on the most important errors that students commit in writing topic sentence. The results show that students commit different errors in writing topic sentence. These errors varies in their frequency from most to least and there is difference between males and females in certain types of errors. The most frequent error is the use of the wrong structure for a topic sentence beside the use of wrong verb. The results indicate the students' lack of knowledge about how to structure a topic sentence also, there is a lack of rules of grammar.

10. Recommendations

1. The researchers suggested that teachers should devote more time to explain the structure of a topic sentence in details.
2. The researchers suggested that teachers should explain the grammatical errors that students have committed with high frequency in order to avoid such errors in the future.

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