

Original Research Article

Suggestions for Teaching Paragraph Writing for Students of Hanoi University of Home Affairs (HUHA) in Ho Chi Minh Campus

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Article History

Received: 27.04.2021

Accepted: 06.06.2021

Published: 14.06.2021

Abstract: The language knowledge of students at HUHA is still very weak, they get many different mistakes related to grammar, vocabulary, coherence, etc. There are many causes coming from students themselves as well as from the teachers of English. But in general, teachers need to give students different kinds of exercises to practice, especially the ones that can help them recognize their popular mistakes in order to avoid when they write a paragraph.

Keywords: Teaching writing, paragraph writing, HUHA.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of teaching and learning foreign languages is providing the learners with a means of communication or in other words, improving the communicative competence for learners. To acquire the communicative competence, four language skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing) are taught regularly at schools and universities, among which writing skill is very important because it is a productive skill. It is also because of the fact that besides speaking, people frequently have to communicate with each other in writing.

Moreover, writing helps learners learn other skills better. “First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary that we have been teaching our students. Second, when they write, they have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks [1]. Third, when students write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language; the effort to express ideas. They discover a real need for finding the right word and the right sentence. The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language courses [2]

At Hanoi University of Home Affairs, paragraph writing is conducted for the second-year students because it is one of the fundamental and basic writing skills. Paragraph writing is the background for students to learn other writing skills in the next terms [3, 4]. For example, they will learn to write essays, formal letters.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is the fact that students at HUHA in general and the students in Ho Chi Minh campus in particular are very weak at paragraph writing. The main reason why they face a number of problems when studying paragraph writing is that most students just got acquainted with very informal writing styles like note-taking and close-e-mails writing in the previous terms, so when they write a paragraph, they make many different mistakes.

As revealed in the sample, each student has his own difficulties. But the most serious ones are limitations of vocabulary and grammar, weakness in expressing ideas and using linking words.

First, students use the wrong words when they write a paragraph because of their misunderstanding the meaning of words so they face lots of confusion in vocabulary use. Second, weakness in expressing ideas is also a big problem for the students. Students get accustomed to the way of Vietnamese thought, so their ideas come out indirectly and lengthily. They do not focus on the main point of the problem, they write a lot but the sentences are not connected, so their writings are vague and illogical. The students themselves feel very difficult to write a good paragraph in English. Third, linking words cause some difficulties for students. As we all know, linking words play an essential part in writing because they are used to link the ideas in paragraph to make the writing transparent and understandable. And without using linking words such as and, but, however, although, etc., the students cannot compose a paragraph logically and clearly. Last but not least, there are students who feel it very difficult to make a good topic sentence. They cannot write a sentence which includes all the ideas they want to mention later. So showing them the best way to write a topic sentence is also important element in teaching paragraph writing because the writing is good or bad depends a lot on the topic sentence.

Because of those difficulties, teaching paragraph writing is really a challenge. What the teacher should do now is to develop effective teaching strategies that help students work out the way of writing a paragraph and help them avoid mistakes. It's a big problem for our teachers. To find the best answer, I'd like to find out the common errors and the causes of those errors that the students are likely to make. After that I recommend some appropriate teaching strategies and useful exercises with the hope that students of HUHA not only avoid their errors in writing paragraph but also improve their paragraph writing skill.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are 120 students of HUHA in Ho Chi Minh campus who are examined. Their level of English proficiency is equal to pre- intermediate that is shown by their result of their English test in the entrance examination. The students' sample was a 45-minute task and the subjects were required to write about one of the following topics: What country do you want to visit?/Why do many students go abroad to study?/The importance of English.

The reason to choose the topics is that students have chance to choose the topic that they are interested in, so they can write the paragraph with their own ideas basing on the topic they like, which helps me to see the typical errors of their writings. The errors in these papers will be collected, categorized so that those errors can be explained and the teacher can help students avoid them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of Paragraph

There are various definitions of a paragraph but in general a paragraph can be understood including topic sentence and supporting sentences (if necessary) to make the main idea clearer and elements of unity and coherence. A paragraph should have three main parts. They are the topic sentence, supporting sentences and the concluding sentence.

What is a topic sentence? A topic sentence is usually the first sentence that summarizes the main idea of a paragraph. It states the most important thing that you want to say about your topic. In the other words, a topic sentence must be the controlling idea of the paragraph [3, 5]. To write a good topic sentence, writer should put it in a complete sentence. What are supporting sentences? They are the sentences those include the ideas related to the topic [3]. Supporting sentences may develop various aspects of the topic such as causes, effects, reasons, example, etc. All the supporting sentences are connected together by cohesive devices. What is a concluding sentence? It is usually a single sentence. But some paragraphs may require more than one concluding sentence. The conclusion is usually placed at the end of paragraph. It summarizes or restates the main point you made.

Writing process of paragraph

There are many different writing processes. However, when a paragraph is written, writers should follow five main steps, as follows:

Step 1: Prewriting

Taking time to complete this step is important because it helps with gathering and preparing everything writers need for the subsequent writing steps. In this stage, writers spend time brainstorming to aware of their topics better and gather relevant information.

Step 2: Drafting

Writers create a rough draft basing on the outline and vocabulary they have already done in step 1. This is only the first draft, so it's important that writers only focus on getting the ideas roughly into sentences without worrying too much about spelling, grammar or vocabulary because they will be revised and edited in the later steps.

Step 3: Revising

This is a critical part of the writing process during this stage writers will reread the draft and improve it by modifying and rearranging the content. To make it more interesting, authors can add, rewrite or delete sentences or paragraphs by themselves or can ask for help from others such as classmates, colleagues or peers.

Step 4: Editing

Editing means fixing grammar mistakes, spelling or punctuation errors, repetition, and style. Writers makes ensure that their articles deliver what their titles promise. It's better to get someone else to read them in this step because they may find errors that you cannot notice after reading many times.

Step 5: Publishing

Finally, sharing the articles with audience

FINDINGS

The table shows the results of the error. There are a lot of errors that are found and counted in 120 paragraph writings. They are errors in content, in organization and in language.

	Content	Idea Organization	Language
Problem areas	25 topic sentences	40 logical order	352 grammar
	98 supporting sentences	60 coherence	169 vocabulary
	20 concluding sentences	15 format	90 orthography (punctuation & spelling)
Number of errors	143	115	611
Percentage	16,4%	13,2%	70,3%

The table shows that the number of students who got language mistakes is 70,3%. In which, the grammar mistakes are the highest, and then vocabulary. While there are only 13,2% students getting idea organization mistakes and 16,4% students getting mistakes related to content.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Using pictures to teach paragraph writing

Using pictures in teaching paragraph writing is very useful. It not only helps students to enrich their vocabulary and sentence structures according to the topics but also helps them to have more motivation during the lessons because pictures or paragraphs are very attractive for every student.

Firstly, using pictures makes the lesson more vivid because pictures can bring the outside world into the classroom and every student likes looking at pictures, which stimulate students to pay more attention to the lesson. As a result, students are more interested in paragraph writing.

Secondly, with a picture, student will immediately need the appropriate vocabulary, idioms or sentence structures to write a paragraph about what they observe it.

Thirdly, pictures provide a shared experience for all students in the class to write a paragraph. It is very difficult for a teacher who provides them with a personal topic like: "Your last holiday". It is not shared experience. Apart from preparing the use of the past tense, teachers cannot help whole the class deal with the vocabulary and grammatical structures that student writers will need. Because each student has different ideas so they need different vocabulary, grammatical structures.

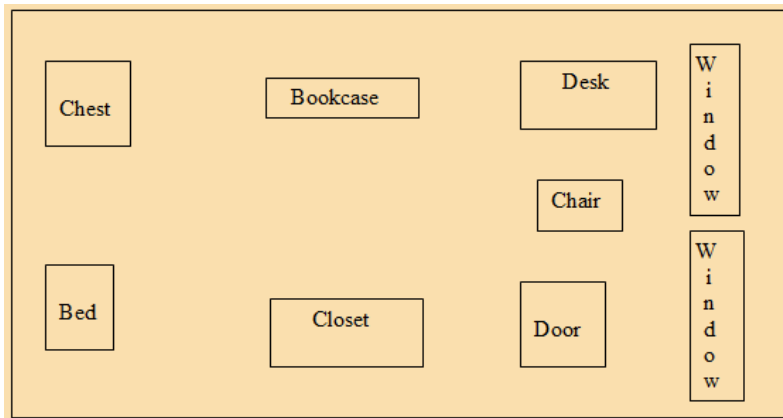
Here are some suggested strategies for using pictures in teaching paragraph writing

Teachers can use many types of pictures, such as textbook pictures, magazine pictures, posters and paste them around the wall or on the board. Students discuss the pictures in small groups of four or five and each one has to write a paragraph about his chosen picture. This strategy will help poor students learn idea generation, vocabulary and sentence structures from the better students before they start writing a paragraph. Or with different types pictures students can make inferences, predictions and suppositions about the world beyond the frame of the picture. Students should be asked to use their imagination to visualize what happened just before the moment in the picture and what will happen next, or to infer what caused the situation and so on.

A paragraph writing task can be developed by using the classroom pictures that the students themselves provide. There are two advantages when we apply this strategy. That is the teacher is relieved of the task of finding a picture and the students have something that has personal meaning for them to answer questions and write about what in the classroom. Students can be asked to provide their favorite advertisements, their own drawings or their family pictures.

Some suggested activities and exercises

Using a sketch: Raims [1] suggests the following sketch: We can see, the sketch is very easy to draw on the board, and it can be clearly understood by every student in the class. Looking at all the furniture from the sketch students can realize an apartment floor plan. It is very easy for teachers to convey the language elements through different series of exercises not just only though the mundane exercise: "Write a paragraph to describe the picture".



A sample sketch in teaching paragraph writing

Using this picture, teachers can ask students to write a paragraph describing the room. Before writing, students are asked to provide related words and sentence structures in order to help them enrich vocabulary, preposition (next to, on the right, etc.), articles (a, an, the), and grammatical structures (there is, there are) to write a good paragraph.

Basing on this sketch, students can provide their room-arrangement to describe their rooms or their houses using different sentence structures.

Using a paragraph model: A paragraph sample for the picture may be provided to provide students with a model to describe their rooms:

Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small but practical. The room is only 10'x14', but the furniture is conveniently placed. As you walk through the door, you see the desk on the right side of the long wall. To the left on the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves. In the farther left corner of the room, there is a chest of drawers. The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by the bed. Then, on the wall next to the bed there is a big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes. It is next to the door. On the right hand wall there are two windows, which make the room very light and airy [1, 6].

However, the paragraph sample can be very useful for students if teachers design it under different kinds of exercises as follows. Teachers can ask students to complete the paragraph with linking words to help them practice combine the sentences together.

Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small,...(1) practical. The room is only 10'x14',.... (2) the furniture is conveniently placed. As you walk through the door, you see the desk on the right side of the long wall. To the left on the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves. In the farther left corner of the room, there is a chest of drawers. The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by the bed,...(3), on the wall next to the bed there is a big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes. It is next to the door. On the right hand wall there are two windows, which make the room very light and airy.

Teachers can also ask students to complete the paragraph with articles:

Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small but practical. ...(1) room is only 10'x14', but ...(2) furniture is conveniently placed. As you walk through ...(3) door, you see the desk on the right side of the long wall. To ...(4) left on the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves. In the farther left corner of ...(5) room, there is ...(6) chest of drawers. The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by ...(7) bed. Then, on ...(8) wall next to the bed there is

...(9) big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes. It is next to the door. On the right hand wall there are two windows, which make...(10) room very light and airy.

Or teachers can ask students to complete the paragraph with prepositions:

Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home ... (1) Catskill is small but practical. The room is only 10'x14', but the furniture is conveniently placed. As you walk ... (2) the door, you see the desk ... (3) the right side of the long wall. To the left ... (4) the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves. In the farther left corner ... (5) the room, there is a chest of drawers. The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by the bed. Then, on the wall ... (6) the bed there is a big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes. It is next to the door. ... (7) the right hand wall there are two windows, which make the room very light and airy.

Using a paragraph-completion Task: Write a part of paragraph on the board, ask students to discuss how to end the paragraph in small groups then write and compare their versions with each other's and with the model; Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small but practical. The room is only 10'x14', but the furniture is conveniently placed. As you walk through the door, etc.

Using a paragraph-assembly Task: Teachers prepare index cards with one sentence on each, which together form a paragraph about the picture, hand out one index card to each pair or small group of students. The task for the whole class is to put the sentences on the cards in order on the board so that they form a paragraph.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

<i>In the farther left corner of the room, there is a chest of drawers</i>	<i>The room is only 10'x14', but the furniture is conveniently placed</i>	<i>As you walk through the door, you see the desk on the right side of the long wall</i>	<i>Debbie Johnson's bedroom in her home in Catskill is small but practical</i>
<i>To the left on the desk, there is a bookcase with four shelves</i>	<i>The rest of the short wall on the left is occupied by the bed</i>	<i>Then, on the wall next to the bed there is a big closet with two shelves and space to hang clothes. It is next to the door</i>	<i>On the right hand wall there are two windows, which make the room very light</i>

After discussion, teachers ask students to put the correct order on the board by using some questions: "Who has a sentence that could be the first/second/third... sentence of the paragraph?" This kind of exercises makes students more interested in the class activities.

Using a picture-topic: Using a picture as a topic can give us the chance to develop many kinds of exercises, which help students gather more vocabulary, idioms, sentence structures as well as organizational skill. For example, the following picture can create different tasks.



Students discuss in small groups the question: “What is happening in the picture?” The task of students is to write down all the possible answers and the words or phrases to prepare the description.

Students write a paragraph in the same groups based on the given questions:

What are their jobs?/What are they discussing?/How do they work?/What does the picture infer to?

Using readings to teach paragraph writing

Reading a short story, a part of newspaper or a letter to lead paragraph writing also helps students deal with different contents. Students will be provided with real information from the reading when they write a paragraph.

Using readings lead to paragraph writing is very effective. Firstly, if students work with variety of readings while they are writing, they will be dealing with different contents and all the things they write will be authentic because the information that they get from the readings is plenty and realizable. The readings taken from newspapers, magazines, textbooks, etc. are various about the content. Secondly, when students read, they will become familiar with the vocabulary, idiom, sentence patterns, organizational flow and cultural assumptions of native speakers of the language, which can help students a lot when they begin to write a paragraph. Lastly, students who read a text or interact with a text that belongs to someone, they can learn his or her writing style, which positively affect students’ writings.

Teachers can ask students to read a short passage and pay attention to all the choices that the writer uses, such as content, vocabulary, organization and examples. And they can ask students to do different activities in the classroom. Ask them to work with the text to examine the writer’s choices of linguistics, logical features, such as cohesive links, punctuation, grammar, and sentence arrangement.

Some suggested activities and exercises

Working with the text using copying: Copy gives all students practice with punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraph indentation. In the classroom, it is very useful for students to remember the words, structures if a teacher asks students to copy down some information that they will really use.

Students in the class copy the answers for the questions (about the text) given by different groups after reading, so that they can assembly chains of ideas before they begin to plan and organize their paragraph writing or students copy one sentence they like best from the text or story they read at home. Then, in class, they discuss with their classmates to analyze the idea of the sentence before writing a paragraph.

All the students copy a good piece of paragraph writing written by one student on the board as a model. And then a student can use that version to summarize.

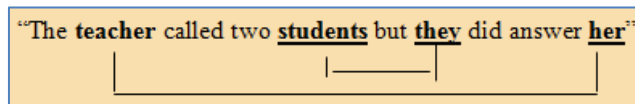
Work with the text to examine cohesive links: Writing a paragraph is different from writing a series of sentences in an exercise. It is a piece of connected sentences, or in the other words, there are logical and linguistic links between sentences. So learning how to use these links is an important part of learning how to write a language. Obviously, students need to learn the way of using devices for a paragraph cohesive such as personal pronoun and adjectives, demonstrative pronouns and adjectives, definite article, and linking words.

Students can look at a paragraph model. While they are reading the paragraph model, the teacher asks them to underline the devices that the writer uses to connect one sentence with another in order to make the text cohesive. For example, students underline words or phrases to show sequence (firstly, secondly, lastly, first, after that, then, next,

finally), to show contrast (however, on the other hand, but, on the contrast, nevertheless), to show the result (so, therefore, consequently), to show addition (also, furthermore, in addition, moreover, and).

Teachers copy a paragraph and leave blanks for any connecting words, then ask students to complete the paragraph with cohesive devices (as I mentioned in Using a paragraph Model).

Draw a line to connect the underlined words to the words they refer to. For instance,



Students are asked to read a passage and underline the instance of “the”, then determine in which cases “the” provide as a cohesive device. For example; “I have a new house in New York. The house is very beautiful and comfortable. Especially, there is a garden in front of the house, etc.”

Work with the text to combine sentence: To help students write a logical writing, it is necessary to provide them with sentence-combining exercises that can improve their sentence structure, length of sentence and sentence variety. For example, students are given the following pair of sentences taken from a student’s writing or text book paragraph. Ask them to combine two sentences using different connectors.

He did not meet her. He missed the flight.

Students can discover the variety of sentence combining using the connectors like:

Since/As/Because he missed the flight, he did not meet her

He did not meet her because he missed the flight

He missed the flight, so he did not meet her

He did not meet her because of missing the flight, etc.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the language knowledge of students at HUHA are still very weak, they get many different mistakes related to grammar, vocabulary, coherence,...There are many causes coming from students themselves as well as from the teachers of English. But in general, teachers need to give students different kinds of exercises to practise, especially the ones can help them recognize their popular mistakes. The author strongly believes that some suggested strategies and exercises that are mentioned above can help students of HUHA in Ho Chi Minh campus overcome their difficulties in writing paragraph.

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CITATION: Bui Thi Phuong Lan (2021). Suggestions for Teaching Paragraph Writing for Students of Hanoi University of Home Affairs (Huha) in Ho Chi Minh Campus. *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit*, 3(3): 50-56.