



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

International Journal of Current Research  
Vol. 11, Issue, 08, pp.6045-6049, August, 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.36312.08.2019>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CHALLENGES IN LEARNING PARAGRAPH WRITING SKILLS THROUGH PROCESS WRITING APPROACH

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2019  
Received in revised form  
16<sup>th</sup> June, 2019  
Accepted 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2019  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019

##### Key Words:

Writing Skills, Writing Challenges,  
Paragraph Development, Process Writing  
Approach.

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**Citation:** **Wondwosen Tesfamichael Ali**, 2019. "Challenges in Learning Paragraph Writing Skills through Process Writing Approach", *International Journal of Current Research*, 11, (08), 6045-6049.

#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify challenges that the students faced while learning paragraph writing through process writing approach and a descriptive research design was used. The participants of the study were grade 11 students at Yekatit 12 Preparatory School, Ethiopia. The data for the study were gathered through questionnaires. The results of the study showed that inadequate learning resources, irregular written feedback, inadequate practice of paragraph writing, interference of mother tongue while writing paragraphs, limited vocabularies, not rewriting the corrected version of the paragraphs, inappropriate usage of grammar and unable to use the different stages of process writing approach to compose paragraphs were the students' challenges. Recommendations based on the study were made to enable curriculum developers, policy makers and teachers to come up with strategies to address the challenges that the students faced in writing different types of paragraphs through process writing approach.

#### INTRODUCTION

Learning to write in a first, second or foreign language seems to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire in academic contexts (Negari, 2011). Similarly, Richards (2008) said that learning to write in either first or second language is one of the most difficult tasks students encounter and one that few people can be said to fully master. Kroll (2003) also observed that writing is a complex process that involves the mastery of multiple skills that contribute to the overall difficulty of writing for any language user. Thus, it is a challenging and difficult skill for both native and non-native speakers to acquire. According to Hyland (2003), writing requires composing, which implies the ability either to tell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Therefore, it is viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of writing to the more complex act of composing. Hedge (2000) discussed foreign language teaching and learning with its four skills is a complex process especially, the writing skill, and added that when teaching these skills teachers usually follow a certain order beginning with listening, speaking, reading and writing. In learning languageskills, adults devote 45% of their energies to listening, 30% to speaking, 16% to reading and 9% to writing. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) strengthened the aforementioned ideas by

saying that probably half of the world's populations do not know how to write adequately and effectively. Writing and learning to write is assumed to be the most complex language skill. Nunan (1989) claimed it is easier to learn to speak than to write no matter it is first or second language. However, it is not a very easy task to achieve the skill of writing and develop the ability to writebecause it requires hard work, lengthy steps, enough timeand more practice.

**Objectives of the Study:** The main objective was to identify the challenges that grade 11 students faced while learning paragraph writing through process writing approach.

**The process approach:** The process approach is also recommended for teaching writing because the emphasis is on the process of writing itself, not on the product (Sun &Feng, 2009). Thus, writers should be trained to constantly ask themselves how to write and how to get writing started. They should also be trained to generate ideas for writing, think of the purpose and audience, and write multiple drafts in order to present written products that express their own ideas. Teachers who use this approach give students time to develop ideas and get feedback on the content of what they write in their drafts because writing becomes a process of discovery for them as they discover new ideas and new language forms to express them.

Adopting the process approach requires teachers to give students a greater responsibility for their own learning through making decisions about genre and choice of topics besides collaborating while writing. During the writing process, students should be engaged in pre-writing, planning, drafting, and post-writing activities. Moreover, Blanchard and Root (2004) supposed the following figure by which they show different steps of the process of writing. Thus, process approach emphasizes on the process that writers involve during writing session. According to Hedge (1988), it was an approach toward writing skill that was distinguished as process rather than product approach started and practiced and it was the time in which teaching writing shifted from a construction on written product to the process of writing.

### **Difficulties of writing paragraphs through process approach**

**Linguistic Problem:** In writing, there may have barrier of communication unless the correct form of language such as language structure, words, mechanics and others are used effectively (Pincas, 1982). Besides, Raimes (1983) showed the linguistic problems that the students faced in their paragraph writing and attempted to mention some: writing ungrammatical and long sentences, the unbalanced distribution of words in the given samples, wrong distribution of parts of speech, and some of grammatical errors are believed to be major areas in which linguistic problems can affect paragraph writing.

**Grammatical Problems:** Students have committed a number of mechanical problems in their foreign language (English) writing (Hedge, 1988). For example, according to Tyler (1987), students may not use verbs properly. This means, they don't realize that verbs can make different forms depending on these, subjects are used with. Therefore, due to this problem, students may face a great challenge when they take a test of writing paragraph with careful instruction to keep the proper grammatical patterns. Moreover, students have problems with subject verb agreement, pronoun references, and connectors and so on (Krashen, 1984). From this, one may realize that if students are not well acquainted with grammatical usage of the language, it is challengeable to practice paragraph writing through process approach.

**The Problem of Diction:** A good writing or composition should consist of appropriate and varied range of vocabulary used along with proper grammatical and varied range of sentences (Norrish, 1983). When the writer makes a choice of vocabulary that would reflect a concern for the reader and purpose of writing, the composition written would give sense to reader (Reid, 1993). However, writing in foreign language or second language using appropriate words in their right place is major problem for most students. White (1980) says that most students usually use 'big words' which may not go with the actual context in writing their paragraph writing to impress their teachers. Inevitably, this attempt leads to a problem of diction, so the problem with diction can lead students to a negative attitude towards their paragraph writing in English language.

**Punctuation Problem:** Students most often encounter punctuation problems in any form of writing. According to Carroll and Wilson (1995), there are three basic reasons which make to use wrong punctuation for students to learn and apply in their paragraph writing.

Firstly, the rules of punctuation are no universal or absolute to the meaning they give. Secondly, punctuation marks are complex to learn and lastly, punctuation relies on the style of the writer and the intended meaning. When students take writing tests, they have to know the actual words which should be capitalized (Kharm, 1986). As Kroll (1991) explains, capital letters have always signified important words. Besides, they are useful to sentences initials, important words in headings or topics, in proper names, and even including first person pronoun (I) wherever it appears; it should be capitalized.

**Spelling Problem:** Using correct spelling has important role to practice writing through process approach. However, owing to the influence of the other languages variant pronunciation and other historical reasons, the English spelling system which has become inconsistent and complex for students (Kharm, 1986). That is why students are expected to study or memorize the spelling rules before they are going to it for writing. This is because teachers while checking students answer scripts, most often consider spelling as one parameter in giving marks. As students know this very well, they usually get frustrated when they are not sure of the correct spelling of the words in their writing.

**Organization Problem:** Students may also have problems of structuring the paragraph topic development of paragraph, organizing the whole discourse and theme (Krahm, 1986). As Pincas (1982) showed that students or writers have problems of writing united paragraph. The reason is due to their failure to use cohesive devices appropriately. Using these devices may help the writer to create clear transition from idea to the next developing coherent paragraph, summarizing main points, and putting them chronologically.

**Lack of Motivation:** Motivation has a great role for the success and achievement of good writing. According to Hamer (2006), people involved in language teaching often say that students who really want to learn will succeed whatever circumstances in which they study. This indicates that motivation is highly related to achievements. Learners may lack confidence about their writing but teachers should motivate them. The majority of students fear making mistakes when they practice writing paragraph. Some of the students may not show their hand writing to their friends even. As to Seow (2002), the process writing approach consists of the following stages: 1) planning or pre-writing, 2) drafting, and 3) revising. He farther discussed the stages as follows. In the stage of planning or pre-writing, a teacher proposes the writing topic to class, raises motivation, sets up writing purposes, determines audience, discusses the contents with students, screens and orders contents, plans the writing, and outlines it. During this stage, there are many techniques to employ such as brainstorming, discussing, making notes, clustering, and rapid free writing. The second step is the drafting (composing). After the students get enough ideas to produce a piece of writing, they put the idea on the paper quickly. They do not still need to pay much attention to appropriate language, grammar and spelling. The focus of this stage is on the ideas that the students want to convey to the reader, the purpose of writing and pattern, and mechanics appropriate to the topic. Teachers who are trying to implement the process approach to writing instruction are mostly expected to facilitate their students' learning by giving them ample time to plan, think and discover meaning through their writing.

In general, the teachers' role is to organize and facilitate situations for learners to write continuously and abundantly (Mesfin, 2013). In connection with this, Richards (1988) as cited in Mesfin (2013) further suggested that the teacher is a facilitator of the writing process employed by the students; his/her observation and discussion mechanisms to identify more successful techniques would help students pass through the process more successfully.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research design:** This study adopted a descriptive research design. With regard to Kothari (2004), a descriptive research design is appropriate to make investigation with narration of events and drawing of conclusions based on the information obtained from relatively large and representative samples of the target population.

So, it was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather information from the respondents on challenges students faced in learning paragraph writing through process approach at preparatory school. This design was also chosen because it allowed the researcher obtain both quantitative and qualitative data concerning challenges students faced learning paragraph writing skills in English language.

**Participants of the Study:** Israel (1992) described participants as any set of people or events from which the sample is selected and to which the study results are generalized. Therefore, the target population of this study was grade 11 students of Yekatit 12 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. At Yekatit 12 Preparatory students, there were 360 students who were being taught in the six sections.



**Blanchard & Root's Process Writing (2004:11)**

No	How often _____?	Frequencies											
		Always		Usually		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total	
		f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
1	Do you get adequate writing resources from your school	0	0	7	11.67	10	16.67	30	50	13	21.67	60	100
2	Are you given regular written feedback while being taught paragraph writing skills through process writing approach	5	8.33	7	16.67	23	38.33	20	33.33	5	8.33	60	100
3	Are you made to practice paragraph writing adequately through process writing approach	7	11.67	8	13.33	8	13.33	20	33.33	19	31.67	60	100
4	Do you use First language while writing paragraph in pairs/groups through process writing approach	35	58.33	20	33.33	4	6.67	2	3.33	2	3.33	60	100
5	Do your Limited vocabulary make you not to express your ideas in the way that you like while writing paragraphs through process writing approach	18	30	34	56.67	4	6.67	2	3.33	2	3.33	60	100
6	Do you rewrite the corrected version of the paragraphs after being taught through process writing approach	4	6.67	3	5	28	46.67	15	25	10	16.67	60	100
7	Do you use grammar (tenses, sentence structure) appropriately to write good paragraph through process writing approach	11	18.33	8	13.33	9	15	27	45	5	8.33	60	100
8	Do you make use of planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing stages while writing paragraphs through process writing approach	4	6.67	6	10	2	3.33	25	41.67	23	38.33	60	100

From the 360 students, the researcher used lottery method to select one of the six sections which contained 60 students as Sidhu (1984) said that students are similar in many aspects and therefore, a study on some of them will throw significant light upon the whole students. All the students found in the one sections were made to respond to the questionnaires.

## DISCUSSION

In this part, the students' responses to the following items were analyzed and discussed. These items were designed to get information from the students with regard to their challenges to learn paragraph writing skills through process writing approach. As can be observed in item 1, 60(16.67%) , 30(50%) and 13(21.67%) of the 60 sample students responded that they sometimes, rarely and never got different writing materials that would help them improve their paragraph writing respectively in the school where they were learning. On the other hand, the rest students, i.e. 7(11.67%) said that the resources were available in their school. This implies that the students had scarcity of materials related to their writing skills in the school. This is also supported by Eyinda and Shariffs' (2009) ideas which showed that inadequate teaching and learning resources are challenges in the acquisition of writing skills. Besides, as in item 2, 23 (38.33%) and 20(33.33%) of the respondents stated that they were sometimes and rarely given regular feedback while they were learning paragraph writing skills respectively. In contrast, 5 (8.33%) and 13(21.67%) of the students answered that they always and usually got feedback regularly after they had been taught paragraph writing skills respectively. It is possible to deduce from their responses that getting appropriate feedback that could indicate where the students problems laidis challenging for them and this in turn affected them not to mitigate their paragraph writing skills. For the question "Are you made to practice paragraph writing skills through process writing approach?" 20(33.33%) and 19(31.67%) of the students answered that they were rarely and never made to practice writing paragraphs via process writing approach respectively. Nevertheless, the rest students, i.e. 7(11.67%), 8(13.33%) and 8(13.33%) said that they were always, usually and sometimes made to practice paragraph writing through process writing approach. The implication of the data is that the students did not practice writing paragraphs and were subjected not to show progress in their writing. Furthermore, almost all the students, i.e. 35(58.33%) and 20(33.33%) the respondents confirmed that their mother tongues always and usually interfered while doing the writing activities in pairs or groups respectively and this is not in agreement with Harmer's (2004) idea, i.e. in using the process approach, teachers are expected to spend time with learners on pre-writing phases, editing, redrafting, and finally publishing their work, but insignificant number of the students, 2 (3.33%) and 2(3.33%) said that they were rarely and never influenced by their first languages while they were in pairs and groups to write paragraphs.

18(30%) and 34(56.67%) of the students' responses revealed that most of them, i.e. 18(30%) and 34(56.67%) had scarcity of vocabulary usage in the process of composing paragraphs through process writing approach. In contrast, 4(6.67%), 2(3.33%) and 2(3.33) of the respondents said that their abilities to make use of vocabularies while writing paragraphs through process writing approach were limited. Thus, from the aforementioned data, the students could not express their ideas coherently in paragraph writing due to limited vocabularies.

The students were asked whether or not they rewrote the corrected version of the paragraphs. In response to this, 28(46.67%), 15(25%) and 10(16.67%) said that they sometimes, rarely and never did not rewrite the corrected version of the paragraphs respectively; however, 4(6.67%) and 3(5%) of the respondents answered that they always and usually rewrote the corrected version of the paragraphs as per their teachers' comments. The data imply that the students did not get an opportunity to get what they had written corrected. 27 (45%) of the students said that they rarely rewrote appropriate grammar while composing paragraphs.

In contrary to this, 11(18.33%), 8(13.33%) and 9(15%) of the students' answers show that they always, usually and regularly compose their paragraphs with correct grammar respectively. On the basis of their responses, it may be inferred that the students lacked grammar abilities to produce paragraphs that sound germane; moreover, the students could not implement the stages of process writing approach, i.e. planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing while writing different genres of paragraphs. In this regard, 25(41.67%) and 23(38.33) of the students responded that they rarely and never used the stages in the process of writing paragraphs respectively. On the other hand, 4(6.67), 6(10%) and 2(3.33%) of the respondents assured that they always, usually and sometimes used the stages to compose paragraphs respectively. The implication of the data is that the students were not made to employ the salient steps in the process of composing paragraphs.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed: The teachers need to give considerable attention to the paragraph writing skills through process writing approach to upgrade the students' paragraph writing abilities. The teachers should use varieties of paragraph writing activities through process writing approach in teaching writing to make the teaching of paragraph writing interesting and to help students express their feelings and ideas freely in writing in English. The teachers should pay attention to contents and organizations of ideas than focusing mainly on the mechanical aspects such as grammar, punctuation and spelling. The teachers should use varieties of supplementary materials other than the textbook to meet the interests of most of the students and to help them improve their paragraph writing skills. The teachers should arrange tutorial classes especially for teaching paragraph writing through process writing approach to help their students get adequate time in practicing the paragraph writing skills in the classroom.

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