The Fragments, Run-Ons, and Comma Splices in Selected Types of Paragraph Writing

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Abstract

Writing is a challenge for non-native English writers since the process of transferring the message includes the writers' writing competence and it is recorded permanently. As a result, the English learners make errors when they lack the writing skill and knowledge. This study aims to reveal the fragments, run-ons, and comma splices in selected types of paragraphs, namely descriptive paragraph, paragraph of logical division of ideas, process paragraph, and comparison-contrast paragraph. The empirical, quantitative approach is used to identify the frequency of each kind of error in the paragraphs written by students of English Department in University of Widya Dharma Pontianak in academic year 2021/2022. To conclude, the errors occur mostly in comparison-contrast paragraphs (37.96%) as there are different ways of organization. Furthermore, the most frequent kind of error is fragment (66.67%), which is missing an independent clause (41.67%). This is due to the students' experiencing incomplete thought or their having an afterthought following their previous finished sentence. Lastly, the paragraph of logical divisions of ideas has the least errors (13.89%) and the kind of error that rarely occurs is run-on (9.26%).

Keywords: Fragments, Run-Ons, Comma Splices, Paragraph Writing

Introduction

Writing is one of the language skills acquired not instantly since someone is born, as it belongs to a productive skill that must be learned. Stage of writing in English starts with the acknowledgment of alphabets, and is followed by their arrangements into syllables, words, sentences, and even bigger compositions. As a productive skill, writing is objectively used to record thoughts, actions, and decisions in a permanent form (Reinking & von der Osten, 2017). The reader encodes this written form and interpret the meaning. Writers have flexibility to produce the message through the writing with little errors in grammatical, and sometimes in semantic and pragmatic matters. Proof-reading and editing tools help to minimize the errors made in the compositions. This writing skill differs from the other form of productive skill, which is speaking. In speaking, the message is produced instantly and the recipient interprets the meaning soon after listening to the utterance. Speakers often conduct errors unconsciously and it is not possible to undo and thus, learners' inability to transfer their messages in English can avert them to speak actively (Hastuti, 2017). Both writing and speaking are difficult skills to acquired especially by the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Nevertheless, errors in writing are easier to acknowledge since the written compositions are visually available and simply analyzable.

EFL learners acquire writing skills together with the knowledge on the grammar and semantic matters. Since English is not their first language, the learners have to ascertain that their composition is understandable and follows the rule of grammar in English. They start by writing meaningful sentences, and then they develop a paragraph of related sentences that are incorporated around one main idea (Zemach & Islam, 2004; Hacker & Sommers, 2015). In

writing the paragraph, the learners also apply the proper use of punctuation, capitalization, and transitional signals as some of the ways to maintain the unity and coherence of the paragraph. However, although the learners have studied about the grammar and semantic knowledge as well as the writing elements, they seem to still produce errors unconsciously. Errors, such as misspelling, misuse of capital letters and misuse of punctuations, are basic problems that can be overcome by consulting the dictionary and checking the rules of using capital letters and punctuation.

Other errors, like fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices, are problematic in that they may refer to the learners' lack of knowledge in grammar as well as their habit to transfer their speaking attitude to their writing. Pornthanachotanan (2020) discusses the students' errors by comparing the non-native and native English-speaking teachers. The study reveals that comma splices occur most frequently in a program taught by a non-native English-speaking teacher and the run-ons in a program taught by the native teacher one.

Writing courses in English Department in Universitas Widya Dharma Pontianak (University of Widya Dharma Pontianak) are given in the first to fourth semesters continuously. Paragraph writing is mainly taught in the third semester in which students are exposed to the paragraph elements such as the parts of paragraph, the unity, and the coherence, and the kinds of paragraph, namely descriptive paragraphs, paragraphs of logical division of ideas, process paragraphs, and comparison-contrast paragraphs. In addition to the materials on the paragraph writing, students are also introduced to the seven kinds of errors, namely misspelling, misuse of punctuations, misuse of capital letters, subject-verb discord, fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices. Thus, knowing these errors contribute to assist them finding strategies to prevent them doing the errors in their final compositions.

A research on writing errors in different text types as the interference by the first language was conducted on genres such as narration, description, and comparison/contrast (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2012). This research revealed that a genre affected writing errors since different structural features were required in different text types. Other previous studies about students' errors in paragraph writing did not specifically classify the kinds of errors in different types of paragraphs (Qamariah & Wahyuni, 2016; Abie & Asafa, 2019; Suntara, 2021). These studies focused on the errors in one type of paragraph conducted by the non-native English-speaking students.

Acknowledging that students are taught about the errors beforehand, this study focuses on investigating the occurrences of known errors, namely fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices, in students' different kinds of paragraph, namely descriptive paragraphs, paragraphs of logical division of ideas, process paragraphs, and comparison-contrast paragraphs. The number of errors conducting by the students will reveal the depth of their knowledge toward the materials and at the same time, infer strategies to help them write better with less or even no errors.

Methods

This study employs an empirical, quantitative research. Empirical means that the aim of this study is to construct new knowledge by observing phenomena (Bachman, 2009). The data for this study is taken from the different types of paragraphs written by the second-year students of English Department in University of Widya Dharma Pontianak in academic year 2021/2022. There are thirty students writing four different kinds of paragraphs: descriptive paragraphs, paragraphs of logical division of ideas, process paragraphs, and comparison-contrast paragraphs. So, there is a total number of 120 paragraphs.

In collecting the paragraphs, the students are asked to write four different paragraphs in different meetings in duration of sixty minutes for each paragraph. Each paragraph is written in more than 100 words. This allows the students to focus on each kind of paragraph and to edit their draft numerous times before submitting. It is important to let the students acknowledge their mistake and revise it before submission because the errors that are still available in the paragraphs are the results of their unawareness and lack of knowledge. An error occurs because the learners cannot identify the correct and incorrect writing form due to the gaps in their writing knowledge (Ellis, 1997; Brown, 2014).

After the paragraphs are collected, the data are taken by reading the paragraphs one by one and sorting out the errors. The data is divided according to the kinds of errors and the kinds of paragraphs. In analyzing the data, a descriptive approach is used as the data is then described based on the theories related to the subject matter. The descriptive research focuses on describing the nature, incidence, or distribution of variables (Ary et al., 2014). The frequency of the errors is used to describe the characteristics of the errors and the causes of students making the errors themselves.

Results and Discussion

Having read all the paragraphs and sorted out all the errors in four kinds of paragraphs, the findings reveal that students still make the errors of fragments, run-ons, and comma splices numerous times.

Table 1. The numbers of errors based on its kinds and the paragraph types

Kinds of Errors	Paragraph Types				TOTAL	%
	Descriptive Paragraphs	Paragraphs of Logical Division of Ideas	Process Paragraphs	Comparison- Contrast Paragraphs		
Fragments	44	24	24	52	144	66.67
Run-ons	8	0	4	8	20	9.26
Comma Splices	16	6	8	22	52	24.07
TOTAL	68	30	36	82	216	100
%	31.48	13.89	16.67	37.96	100	

Table 1 above displays the number of errors conducted in the students' compositions. There is a total of 216 errors in the data, that comprises of 144 fragments (66.67 %), 20 run-ons (9.26 %), and 52 comma splices (24.07 %). Based on the kinds of paragraphs, it is revealed that most errors happen in comparison-contrast paragraphs (37.96 %), while a least number of errors happen in paragraphs of logical division of ideas (13.89 %).

Students make most errors (82 occurrences) in comparison-contrast paragraphs since this kind of paragraph is considered as the most difficult to compose among the listed kinds of paragraphs. Not only does this kind of paragraph contain comparative and contrastive elements at once, it also urges students to write in different ways of organization, namely block organization and point-by-point organization (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Farneste, 2012). Thus, students find it complicated to organize the ideas systemically and systematically. This can be clearly seen in the student's sample of comparison-contrast paragraph below:

Both Alaska and Hawaii are places that are visited by many tourists because of the beauty and characteristics of the two places. Based on the class contained in the two places both provide standard class quality to luxury class quality. However, both places

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can be judged in terms of place quality Hawaii is better than Alaska. The climate difference between the two places is also different, Hawaii is a place that often rains and is humid. While Alaska rarely rains and is not humid. In short, The two places have similarities and differences that are not much different. For travellers who like a humid climate and quality, Hawaii is the solution. For travellers who prefer summer, I recommend going to Alaska.

Paragraph above contains all three errors discussed in this study. The first error, fragment, can be seen in the 6th line in the paragraph (*While Alaska rarely rains and is not humid*). *While* is a subordinating conjunction that connects a dependent clause to its independent clause in a complex sentence. In this example, the dependent clause stands by itself, missing an independent clause. The next error found in the 3rd-4th lines is a run-on sentence (*both places can be judged in terms of place quality Hawaii is better than Alaska*). This sentence contains two separated independent clauses joined together without any proper conjunction. The first clause is *both places can be judged,* and the second clause is *in terms of place quality Hawaii is better than Alaska.* It is best if the clauses are written as two different sentences. The last error in the sample paragraph above is in the sentence *The climate difference between the two places is also different, Hawaii is a place that often rains and is humid* (line 4-6). In this sentence, two independent clauses are incorrectly joined together with a comma. The absence of conjunction also makes this sentence problematic as both clauses slightly lose their related meaning as one sentence. Dividing these clauses into two different sentence makes the coherence in the paragraph better.

In contrast to comparison-contrast paragraphs, students make the least errors in making paragraphs of logical division of ideas (30 occurrences). This is due to the easier requirements needed in writing this kind of paragraph. A paragraph of logical division of ideas contains a list of things, reasons, et cetera while a descriptive paragraph needs a detailed explanation using senses, spatial order, and adjectives placements; a process paragraph requires detailed steps systematically and orderly; and a comparison-contrast paragraph must be written in block or point-by-point style;

Further discussion on each of the errors found in the students' paragraph writing can be seen as follows.

Fragments

A fragment is an incomplete form of a sentence in which a sentence misses its subject, verb, or independent clause (Belmont & Sharkey, 2011). Since a sentence must have at least a subject and a verb to send a complete thought, missing one element is erroneous. The data discloses that fragments are the most frequent errors in the students' paragraphs. The fragments happen 144 times, or 66.67 %, out of the total of 216 errors. It means that students are still careless in acknowledging the completeness of a sentence. From four types of paragraphs, the fragments happen the most in comparison-contrast paragraphs (52 times or 36.11 %) and the least in both paragraphs of logical division of ideas and process paragraphs (both are 24 times or 16.67 %).

According to the missing part in a sentence, fragments can be identified as missing a subject, missing a verb, or missing an independent clause. The following Table 2 reveals the number of fragments based on its kinds in each type of paragraphs that the students made.

Table 2. The numbers of fragments based on its missing parts

Kinds of Fragments	Number of Errors				TOTAL	%
	Descriptive Paragraphs	Paragraphs of Logical Division of Ideas	Process Paragraphs	Comparison - Contrast Paragraphs		
Missing a Subject	14	4	2	10	30	20.83
Missing a Verb	10	8	18	18	54	37.50
Missing an Independent Clause	20	12	4	24	60	41.67
TOTAL	44	24	24	52	144	100
%	30.55	16.67	16.67	36.11	100	

The data in Table 2 presents that the fragments conducted by the students are mostly in form of missing an independent clause, with a total of 60 occurrences or 41.67 % out of the total number of fragments. It is found most frequently in comparison-contrast paragraphs (24 times). Meanwhile, missing a subject has the least number of occurrences, which is 30 times or 20.83 %.

Missing a Subject

The least number of missing the subjects in students' sentences conveys that students are aware of the importance of what or whom the sentence is about. The absence of a subject is mostly due to the misperception of what a subject is. A subject, which should be a noun or a pronoun, is sometimes wrongly replaced with a prepositional phrase. Look at the sentences taken from the data below:

> (1) *On the left are bookshelves that are arranged very neatly and impressively.*
>
> (2) *On the top of bed are the phone, pillow and bolsters.*
>
> (3) *Here, will be explain how to make an aesthetic table from used cardboard.*
>
> (4) *In Hawaii more often rains.*

Sentences (1) and (2) above start with the prepositional phrases *On the left* and *On the top of the bed* respectively, followed with the linking verb *are*. Both sentences need a subject *there* to complete the meaning of listing the objects in the intended places. As for sentence (3), the subject *it* is missing in completion of the sentence. Subject *it* should be placed right before the modal *will*. Lastly, subject *it* is also needed to complete sentence (4) since it starts with a prepositional phrase *In Hawaii* and is directly followed with verb phrase *more often rains*.

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that the cause of students' missing the subjects in their sentences is because the sentences start with prepositional phrases which contain nouns. The students consider these nouns as the subjects in those sentences. Therefore, it is necessary to improve students' knowledge on the prepositional phrase material.

Missing a Verb

Missing a verb comes second in terms of the number of incidences in the data. The small differences in the number of occurrences among the different types of paragraphs reveals that this error constantly happen in any paragraphs. Sentences (5) – (7) below show the absence of linking verbs. These sentences have subjects and complements. However, the complements are

written directly after the subjects, without any linking verb. There should be *are* after *There* in sentence (5) and *is* after the subjects in sentences (6) and (7). Meanwhile, sentence (8) needs a state verb *has* to deliver the complete meaning.

> *(5) There two speakers on right and left sides.*
>
> *(6) It very untidy.*
>
> *(7) The first reason it helps relieve feelings of anxiety.*
>
> *(8) PC more endurance.*

Different from the list of incomplete sentences above, the following sentences contain only noun phrases functioned as the subjects in the sentences.

> *(9) A comfortable and quiet place to get inspiration or business ideas.*
>
> *(10)   Isolation from the top, right, left and bottom so as not to shake.*
>
> *(11)   Some places that you need to consider for your next vacation.*
>
> *(12)   First, accommodations.*

Sentences (9) – (12) above list the main nouns as *place, isolation, places,* and *accommodations* respectively. These nouns require verbs to complete the sentences meaningfully. For example, sentence (9) can be *A comfortable and quiet place to get inspiration or business ideas should be prioritized in the co-working space* and for sentence (12), it can be *First, accommodations play important factor in the travel plan.*

To conclude, the only strategy to overcome this error is by adding the proper verb. Students must first be able to identify the kinds of complement that the sentence contains, in cases like sentences (5) – (8) above. Besides that, students must also be able to differentiate a noun phrase with a sentence that contains at least a subject, in forms of a noun and a pronoun, and a verb.

Missing an Independent Clause

The previous two kinds of fragments mostly happen in a simple sentence, which only contains a single independent clause. In a sentence containing more than a single clause, namely a compound sentence and a complex sentence, the kind of fragments that frequently occurs is missing an independent clause. Since a paragraph is a group of related sentences, it is often a condition that compound sentences and complex sentences are used. Thus, the probability of making an error is high (41.67 %), as presented in Table 2 above.

Missing the independent clauses in compound sentences can be seen in sentences (13) – (15) below. The conjunctions *and, for,* and *but* in the beginning of sentences are erroneous and unacceptable since they carry incomplete meanings. These coordinating conjunctions must be placed in the middle of sentences between two independent clauses. Some ways of fixing this kind of error are by adding an independent clause in the beginning of the sentence, joining the sentence with the previous sentence if they are closely related, or simply omitting the conjunction so as to make it a simple sentence.

> *(13)   And on the floor is a rug to give a warm feel while working.*
>
> *(14)   For the wallpaper already had glue there.*
>
> *(15)   But, Hawaii is more hot and humid than Alaska in the summer.*

Similar to the fragment in compound sentences, incomplete complex sentences need independent clauses to solve the error. However, the position of the independent clauses is not restricted in the beginning of the sentences, but it can take later position as well. If the complex

sentence begins with a dependent clause containing a subordinating conjunction like *because, if,* or *while*, the independent clause is put after a comma. For example, sentence (16) can be corrected into *Because our parents have two children, we have three bedrooms in our house.* The other complex sentences containing a fragment of missing an independent clause are as follows.

(16)   *Because our parents have two children.*

(17)   *If the papers are no longer used.*

(18)   *While Alaska is cold, dry, and never rain.*

The findings above reveal that missing an independent clause happens because either students experience incomplete thought or they have an afterthought continuing their previous finished sentence. Identifying this kind of fragment is possible if students clearly understand the difference between independent and dependent clauses.

Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is a type of error in which two or more independent clauses are joined together without a proper punctuation or conjunction (Belmont & Sharkey, 2011; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). This condition is erroneous because one sentence must have a complete thought. A sentence containing more than one complete thought may cause confusion to the readers and as a result, the intended meaning is not transferred well. Table 1 above shows that run-ons occur in three types of paragraphs, namely descriptive paragraphs, process paragraphs, and comparison-contrast paragraphs. This error has the least number of occurrences with a percentage of 9.26 % out of all kinds of errors. It shows that students are more careful in creating a sentence containing more than a single complete thought, especially when they make paragraphs of logical division which results in zero occurrence of run-ons.

The findings reveal that the run-ons can be divided into two kinds: the one containing two independent clauses with clear separation, and the one having an independent clause and a hidden dependent clause. The former kind can be seen in sentences (19) and (20) below. The sentences can be corrected by directly separating the independent clauses into different sentences. For example, sentence (19) can be divided into two sentences: (a) *I am going to translate how to make and give some steps to do it* and (b) *Let's go to the first step.* The other way is by adding a proper conjunction. So, for sentence (20), the correct sentence can be (a) *I have a friend <u>and</u> he invited me on his secret base*, and (b) *Its other name is bedroom.*

(19)   *I am going to translate how to make and give some steps to do it let's go to the first step.*

(20)   *I have friend he invited me on his secret base other name is bedroom.*

(21)   *The second step is combining the cardboards have been formed into one.*

Sentence (21) is a run-on which must be treated differently from the previous two sentences. This sentence contains a dependent clause in a form of a noun clause. Thus, a relative pronoun must be added to the clause which should be dependent. Hence, it should be *The second step is combining the cardboards <u>that</u> have been formed into one.*

To summarize, students conduct less errors in form of run-on sentences compared to the other types of errors. The strategies to overcome this kind of error are by separating the clauses into different sentences, by adding a conjunction to clear the relationship between the clauses within the sentence, or by adding a relative pronoun to a supposedly dependent clause in a form of a noun clause.

Comma Splices

A comma splice has almost similar meaning as a run-on sentence in that it contains an incorrect joining of two or more independent clauses. While the clauses are joined without any proper punctuation or conjunction in a run-on, the comma splice refers to the clauses that are joined with a comma without any conjunction (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Comma splice may cause misperception to the readers since the produced sentence holds unclear relationship between the two clauses. The percentage of comma splices conducted by the students is 24.07 % out of all kinds of errors. Based on the paragraph types, comma splices happen mostly in comparison-contrast paragraphs. It is instigated by the different styles of writing a comparison-contrast paragraph, namely block and point-by-point organizations, that lead students to join the idea of comparing and contrasting two or more things in a sentence without proper conjunction.

Sentences (22), (23), and (24) below are taken from a descriptive paragraph, a paragraph or logical division, and a process paragraph, respectively, and sentences (25) – (27) are from comparison-contrast paragraphs. The independent clauses in sentence (22) are *There is a very big wooden shelf* and *It can put two computers.* The clauses are separated merely by a comma without any correlation. If the writer intends the second clause to be an addition idea to the first clause, a coordinating conjunction *and* should be used instead of the comma. Meanwhile, if the sentence is intended to have a cause-effect relationship, a conjunction *so* should be put preceding the second clause. However, if there is no any relationship is expected, separating the clauses into different sentences should be the best solution. The same ways to fix the errors can be applied to sentences (23) – (27).

> (22)   There is a very big wooden shelf, it can put two computers.

> (23)   Ryan started smoking after graduating from high school, he got addicted to smoking.

> (24)   You don't need power tools to work with cardboard, a simple cuter or a pair of scissors is enough.

> (25)   The climate difference between the two places is also different, Hawaii is a place that often rains and is humid.

> (26)   First is accommodations, Alaska and Hawaii have luxury with same type.

> (27)   Alaska would be a better choice if you want something new and fresh, if you want to feel funny and unique Hawaii is the best choice.

As comma splices slightly have similar problem with run-ons, the strategies in overcoming the error are also the same. They are to separate the clauses into different sentences or to add a conjunction to show clear relationship between the clauses. The difference is that in a run-on sentence, there is a possibility of having a noun clause as a dependent clause, while it cannot be a case in a comma splice.

Conclusion

In summary, the EFL learners make the errors mostly in writing comparison-contrast paragraphs. It shows that a comparison-contrast paragraph is the most complicated one as it can be written in different ways of organization, namely block and point-by-point. Furthermore, the most frequent kind of error conducted by EFL learners is fragments, most specifically in cases of missing an independent clause. This is due to the students' experiencing incomplete thought or their having an afterthought following their previous finished sentence. Meanwhile, the type of paragraph with the least errors is the paragraph of logical divisions of ideas and the kind of error that rarely happens is run-ons. There are some limitations to this

study that can be recommended to the future researchers. Firstly, this study was conducted to a small scale of participants in one institution, so the result cannot be really used to generalize all EFL learners. Further research should take more population from various institutions. The second limitation is that the study investigated the errors in paragraph writings quantitatively. Next researchers can try to conduct a pre-test and a post-test to investigate the students' difficulties or improvements in preventing the errors. All in all, it is hoped that this study can be beneficial to educators in teaching paragraph writings so as to anticipate the errors in the making.

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