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Problems of English Paragraph Structure in the Writing of Female Students at Albaha University

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Dedication

I dedicate the success of this humble project to my beloved parents; I immensely thank them for offering me the constant love, compassion and support.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the most common writing problems at the paragraph level made by Saudi undergraduate female students with special focus on the basic structural components of the paragraph unit. The study also examined the most challenging paragraph component. Twenty female English-major students at the College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa, Albaha University participated in this study. Each student wrote a paragraph describing her hometown as a main tool for collecting the needed data. In order to analyze the data, the researcher used content analysis and frequency percentages to evaluate the written documents using an evaluation checklist developed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The findings revealed that writing supporting sentences was the most challenging component as it was the most frequent failed structural component, followed by the component of the concluding sentence, then the component of the topic sentence. The most common failed specific criterion was using appropriate transitions to connect the supporting sentences. It is concluded that most of the sentences are generally weak. The study has implications for specialists of EFL instruction in universities. The study recommended that the students should be given more written feedback as well as written exercises in order to be able to write more effective paragraphs. It is suggested that more studies could be conducted for the male students to investigate each structural paragraph component separately.

ملخص الدراسة

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى استقصاء أكثر مشاكل الكتابة شيوعاً على مستوى الفقرة النصية لدى طالبات جامعة الباحة السعوديات مع التركيز بشكل خاص على المكونات البنائية الأساسية لوحدة الفقرة النصية. استقصت الدراسة أيضاً المكون أو العنصر من الفقرة الأكثر تحدياً حيث شاركت في هذه الدراسة عشرون طالبة من طالبات قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية العلوم والآداب بقلوة بجامعة الباحة. وقامت كل طالبة بكتابة فقرة تصف مسقط رأسها، وكانت هذه الكتابات أداة جمع البيانات المطلوبة لإجراء الدراسة. وللقيام بتحليل البيانات، استخدم الباحث تحليل المحتوى ونسب التكرار لتقييم المستندات المكتوبة باستخدام استمارة تقييم تم تطويرها من قبل الباحث لغرض هذه الدراسة. أوضحت النتائج أن كتابة الجمل الداعمة للفقرة كانت العنصر الأكثر تحدياً حيث كان المكون التركيبي الأكثر تكراراً متبوعاً بكتابة الجمل الختامية يليه كتابة جمل الموضوع. وكان المعيار الخاص الأكثر إخفاقاً هو استخدام أدوات الانتقال المناسبة لربط الجمل الداعمة. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الجمل ضعيفة التركيب بصفة عامة. والدراسة لها آثار على المتخصصين في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات واختتمت الدراسة بعرض التوصيات والمقترحات البحثية للدراسات المستقبلية. وأوصت الدراسة بتزويد المتعلمين بالمزيد من التغذية الراجعة المكتوبة والتمارين الكتابية بهدف كتابة نصوص أكثر فاعلية. واقترحت الدراسة بتطبيق على المتعلمين الذكور واستقصاء كل عنصر تركيبى على حده.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Writing is one of the main four skills that language consists of (Brown, 2000). Having good writing skills has become one of the most important requirements in the academic sphere. However, writing in English as EFL/ESL poses major difficulties for many Second Language Learners (SLLs) when it comes to writing well-structured paragraphs. Writing is a productive skill in which the learners are not only to produce sentences but further to connect these sentences in a particular order. Thus, the written production of the language is among the most difficult tasks for many L2 learners as they are required to operate many subskills and strategies concerning the target language. Furthermore, writing is a complicated process as the writer has to move repeatedly backwards and forwards between his/her ideas and the written text (Harris and Cunningham, 1994). This interaction between the learner and the text is a two-way interaction between developing the required knowledge and developing the written text (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). This complexity is due to the requirement of operating a high level of language control, generating ideas, monitoring and assessing the written production (Murcia and Olshtain, 2000). Moreover, Nunan (1999) argues that production of a coherent piece of writing is an enormous challenge, especially in one's second language.

In fact, one of the most important topics to be discussed in L2 writing research is the analysis of L2 students' problems and difficulties. The current research studies implemented the descriptive approach to identify specific writing problems. It was

conducted in Albaha University, Qillwa College of Sciences and Arts the female section. It aimed at investigating the students' writing abilities at structuring paragraphs through analyzing some of the students' written samples or documents. Therefore, evaluating the structure of the paragraph has a primary importance to the current research study. The problems faced by students to produce a well-structured piece of writing in the foreign language are to be pinpointed and analyzed. The main scope of this research study is to identify the most frequent L2 writing problems at the paragraph level, in general, and the paragraph structure in particular.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Most of English language faculty members at Albaha University suffer from the learners' weak language performance especially in writing skills. Some of the learners have a poor command in English language. This weakness subsequently has affected their academic progress. The students' poor command in English is strongly evident in the writing courses. It is the type of courses that most of the students fail to pass successfully. Such courses pose a great difficulty for most of them. Moreover, writing is sometimes the reason behind college dropouts. Even though the students have been learning English for a number of years at school, they still make enormous and severe problems in writing. This research study tried to highlight the most frequent problematic areas in L2 writing at the level of the paragraph structure.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the way that it enhances the L2 writing field in the aspect of paragraph structure among undergraduate students majoring in English Language Departments. Moreover, further studies might be conducted to address

these problematic areas in much details. The results are supposed to be beneficial to the instructors of the writing courses at the universities.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

This study aimed at investigating common writing problems related to paragraph structure among Saudi female English-majoring students. The students are supposed to take writing courses at the third level (Writing 01), the fourth level (Writing 02) and the fifth level (Essay Writing). All the students participating in this study are female Saudi university English-majoring students at Albaha University, College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa, the fifth level. The study also aimed at raising the awareness of the writing courses' instructors of the problems faced by the students in writing well-structured paragraphs.

1.5 Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

Q1- What are the types of structural problems do students face when writing their paragraphs?

Q2- What are the most frequent challenging paragraph components among the students?

1.6 Hypotheses of the Study

H1= The students face no structural problems in paragraph writing.

H2= The types of structural problems are at equal rates among the students.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study had two main limitations.

First, all students participated in this study were female Saudi university students majoring in English at Albaha University, College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa. Different results might be obtained in the case of conducting the study on other EFL Saudi students due to differences in the setting, instructors and teaching methodologies. The sample of this study is representative only of the female English-majoring students at English Department of the College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa. Second, the participants were native Arabic speakers and have passed the first two levels in the Department successfully.

1.8 Definition of Terms

1.8.1 Writing

Enormous researchers and language specialists have attempted to approach definitions for writing as a language skill. Writing could be defined as a "... curiously solitary form of communication, addressed to an absent and often unknown reader" (Peters, 1986, p.169). Another definition that sums up the views of many researchers depicts writing as a complicated cognitive task because of the fact that it "... demands careful thought, discipline, and concentration, and it is not just a simple direct production of what the brain knows or can do at a particular moment." (Grami, 2010, p.9). From the above cited definitions, it could be stated that writing is mainly a cognitive process that includes a multi of cognitive tasks of thinking, reflecting and reviewing.

The importance of writing as a language skill has been stated by many researchers. Javid and Umer (2014) view writing as the primary means by which students are able to show their academic progress. They added that the students' competence in other skills depends mainly on their writing skills. In addition, Silva and Mastuda (2013) mentioned that Vivian Zamel as an ESL specialist was the first to call for the notion of viewing the writing skill as a process and emphasize the need for conducting more empirical research in order to get more insights on how students approach writing as a process. Most importantly, Fageeh (2011) highlighted that the writing skill is an integral skill to language learning.

1.8.2 Paragraph Structure

Hogue (2007) explained that a well-structured paragraph has three parts. These parts are the topic sentence, several supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. The topic sentence is the most important sentence in the paragraph. It is usually the first sentence. Some experienced writers sometimes put it at the end, but the best place is right at the beginning. It gives the readers an idea of what they will read; thus, it helps to make the paragraph clear and easy to understand. A good topic is neither too general nor too specific. As for supporting sentences, they clarify the topic by giving more information about it. Regarding the third part, the concluding sentence, it signals the end of the paragraph and reminds the reader of the main idea. A good concluding sentence begins with conclusion signals such as "in brief", "in short", "to summarize,", "in conclusion" or "to sum up,".

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical background of the topic of the current research study. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section addresses the concept of the paragraph including its definition, length, the paragraph structural components and paragraph coherence and cohesion. The second section is concerned with the previous conducted studies. It aims to probe the problems faced by EFL/ESL University Arab and Saudi students in writing paragraphs respectively. It also investigates how the researchers identify these problems in their research studies. At last, some of the related previous research is to be scrutinized.

2.2 Theoretical Background

2.2.1 The Concept of the Paragraph

a. Definition

A paragraph could be defined as “a group of sentences about a single topic. Together, the sentences of the paragraph reflect the writer’s main idea (the most important idea) about the topic” (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005, p.11). In other words, a paragraph is a group of “related sentences about one topic or idea. Each sentence fits into a logical pattern and relates to the other sentences in the paragraph” (Bonet, 1991, p.71). Moreover, Fowler (2006:26) clarified the paragraph as the “main unit of composition, It develops a single topic, and so has a distinct, independent unity.”

b. Paragraph length

Wyrick (2013) explained that the paragraph is a set of sentences developing the general idea. Eventually, it should be long enough to accomplish this purpose. Although the paragraph length varies, students should avoid the one- or two-sentence paragraphs that are frequently noticed in newspapers because journalists have specific rules to follow. Therefore, it is usually recommended that in typical student writing, a paragraph should include a minimum of five or six sentences. In fact, it should not normally be shorter than this, but it could be longer, depending on the overall length of the whole writing.

In fact, the most common mistake made by students is to make paragraphs too short. Writing in such a way may tend to appear more like a series of notes or a list of simple points. This may possibly indicate that student has not developed the topic sentence sufficiently. Alternatively, some other students may just write some fragment sentences and link them together to make one paragraph. The students usually put unrelated ideas or information together in a paragraph without considering their relation.

On the other hand, some other students tend to make their paragraphs too long. Over-long paragraphs turn the writing to be difficult to follow and indicate that the writer is probably not in control of the ideas. The main concept is that one paragraph explains one general point. According to Markel (1994), writing 250 to 300 words would support the topic sentence adequately.

c. Paragraph structural components

According to Walters (2000), the formal academic English paragraph has three principal parts. These three parts are the topic sentence, supporting or body sentences, and the concluding sentence. These basic parts are to be discussed briefly as follows:

1. Firstly, the topic sentence states what the paragraph is about. It normally comes at the beginning of the paragraph and asserts one main idea. The topic sentence has three important functions. First, it clearly states the main point of the paragraph. Second, it declares what the paragraph will be about. Third, it controls the subject-matter of the paragraph. All details and explanations must directly relate and support the topic sentence.
2. Secondly, supporting sentences are a group of sentences that explain the idea presented in the topic sentence. In addition, there are many sources to add specific details and examples such as personal experience, memories, observations, facts, statistics and research studies.
3. Finally, the concluding sentence or the summary sentence comes at the end of the paragraph in order to summarize the information that has been presented. It is not existed in every academic paragraph. Some paragraphs tend to be very short; thus they do not include concluding sentences.

To conclude, these three components or parts are essential in writing well-structured paragraphs that have academic purposes.

d. Paragraph coherence and cohesion

These two terms are closely related to one another. This relatedness leads to wide confusion between them. To clear the confusion, it would be better to state that coherence refers to the logical connection or the unity of the ideas at the idea level; while cohesion refers to the connection of the structural elements at the sentence level. The next two paragraphs illustrate these two in more elaboration.

Coherence refers to connectedness of ideas for lack of connectedness that would make a text difficult to read or unreadable (Brostoff, 1981). The coherent paragraph should flow smoothly from beginning to the end. Every sentence leads naturally to the next in the sense that there are no sudden gaps between the sentences. Coherence is achieved through three methods: the consistent use of nouns and pronouns, the use of transition signals and the use of a logical order of ideas. Transitional words or phrases are used to reveal relationships among ideas such as (*first, second, furthermore, on the other hand, for example, and in conclusion*). Some of the patterns to order the ideas are order of time or sequence, order of importance, order of contrast and comparison, order of problem to answer and order of position or place (Hogue,2007; Stanford and Smith,1980).

As for cohesion, it is a semantic relation that is realized through the lexicogrammatical system including forms of grammar and vocabulary of a text. Cohesive devices are divided into different kinds such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. As for reference cohesion, it includes personal pronouns, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Substitution and ellipses are of three types: nominal, verbal and clausal. As for conjunction, it involves the use of conjunctive ties. Lexical cohesion involves the use of the vocabulary items in

repetition, synonymy, antonymy and collocation. Reference, substitution and ellipsis are used to refer to grammatical cohesion, while conjunction is on the borderline of the two. Conjunction cohesion is mainly grammatical with a lexical component (Halliday and Hasan 2014).

To sum up, coherence refers mainly to the logical connectedness of the ideas presented in the paragraph. On the contrary, cohesion is the semantic relationships among the ideas which is created through the use of vocabulary and grammar.

2.3 Previous Studies

2.3.1 View of Research in Writing Problems of L2 Arab Learners

Studies conducted on the problems encountered by Arab university students in L2 writing revealed that these students experienced a wide range of problems. The studies cited below showed that Arab students encountered grammatical, lexical, and L1 style transfer, coherence, cohesion and organizational difficulties in L2 writing.

Ahmed (2010) investigated the organizational problems of Egyptian students using a mixed-method research design. Two tools were utilized to collect the data, questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The results revealed that students had problems in their English writing. They had difficulties in writing coherent introductions, thesis statements, topic sentences, concluding sentences and conclusions. Cohesion was also problematic to the Egyptian students. They have difficulties in using reference, substitution, ellipsis and cohesive ties.

Al-Khasawneh (2014) investigated the errors of English written paragraphs of twenty-six Jordanian students. All errors were checked and categorized into different categorizations. The findings of the study revealed that students have committed several

errors such as: spelling, word order, and subject-verb agreement. The results also showed that the most frequent error was the improper use of English articles. The participants came from different majors in the university.

Another study by (Rass, 2015) investigated the problems faced by Palestinian students majoring in EFL teaching to develop well-written paragraphs. The researcher analyzed the accumulated data for the last fourteen years. The data included written samples of 205 students. The analysis revealed that the students face similar repeated types of mistakes. The accumulated data showed that students face many problems in writing good topic as well as concluding sentences, supporting details by adding examples and reasons and using discourse markers appropriately. Rass also reported that the students inappropriately transfer Arabic style in their writing. They tended to write long and run-on sentences to illustrate their points.

Some studies focus on the problems encountered by Arab L2 students in paragraph writing in order to suggest ways to solve these problems and formulate further recommendations. For example, Muslim (2014) investigated EFL writing problems in Baghdad University. The study aimed at identifying the EFL writing problems of the 2nd year English Department female students. The study aimed to improve the students' writing performance through the use of repeated writing activities strategy. It employed an experimental study. The results revealed that the difference was significant. The tool of the study was a rubric prepared by the researcher and submitted to a jury of experts to check validity. The study revealed that using the repeated writing activities strategy improved the aspects of writing topic sentences and organizing the paragraphs' essential parts.

Alfaki (2015) conducted a study on EFL Sudanese students. The study utilized a descriptive research method. The study sample consisted of 20 English major students. They were instructed to write compositions of about 150-200 words. The compositions were marked and reviewed twice. The findings revealed that the students had various writing problems including language problems in morphology and syntax, cognitive problems in developing and organizing ideas and graphomotor problems in punctuation and spelling. The study recommended the extensive reading, free writing practice exercises and use of note-taking strategy as ways to improve the students' writing skills.

2.3.2 Views of Research in L2 Writing Problems within Saudi Context

Examination of previous research reveals a number of studies identifying the problems faced by Saudi English-majors in writing as EFL learners. Some of these studies dealt with using writing strategies in L1 and L2, while other studies were concerned with analyzing errors committed by the learners. In the following paragraphs, a review on some of the error analysis studies will be presented.

In 2013, Al-Khairiy carried out a study to investigate the problems faced by Saudi English-major undergraduate students in academic writing at Al-Taif University. The study aimed at exploring the problems that the students faced from the perspectives of the instructors or the faculty members as well as the students themselves. The data were collected through interviews and questionnaires. The study revealed that the students' writing skills were very weak. They committed a lot of errors related to the sentence-level as well as the paragraph-level. The study then offered some recommendations to solve these problems such as diagnosing the students' writing problems at the beginning of their university studying period.

Another study hold by Younes and Albalawi (2015), explored the most common types of writing problems among English language and translation major female students at Tabuk University. The data were collected through writing documents and questionnaires. The findings showed that the problems fall in three main categories. The first category was grammatical problems related to tenses, prepositions, syntax, subject–verb agreement and the use of articles. The second category was punctuation problems in terms of absence, misuse or addition of punctuation marks. The third category was spelling concerning substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and unrecognizable words.

In 2016, Mohammad and Hazarika conducted a study to probe the difficulties that Najran University students have in writing skills. The data collected through using a questionnaire and written samples of paragraphs. The study analyzed a sample of 50 students at the Preparatory Year Program. The analysis mainly focused on capitalization, punctuation, language use, grammar and spelling. The study revealed that students used ways to pass exams like memorizing the answer paragraphs rather than applying the proper approaches to write answer paragraphs. The study offered some remedial measures for writing problems such as employing learner-centered teaching strategies as well as demanding the students to write more descriptive paragraphs on the topics they like.

Saud (2016) investigated the misuse of cohesive devices. The data collected through an achievement test. A sample of 50 Saudi female third-year English major students at King Khaled University was asked to write essays in English. The essays were assessed by the researcher and analyzed using Halliday and Hasan's (2014) model. The analysis of the data investigated the relationship between the use of the cohesive devices and the writing score. It found out that good students used more cohesive

devices in their writings compared with weak students. The most used cohesive devices were reference followed by conjunction, then lexical. The least frequent ones were substitution and ellipsis.

In 2017, Alhaisoni, Gaudel and Al-Zuoud investigated problems in article use by Saudi students at Ha'il University. The study sample consisted of the Preparatory Year students. Data were collected from the written samples of 150 students. The participants were asked to write descriptive paragraphs on one of four topics. The analysis of the written samples revealed that students tended to eliminate the definite as well as the indefinite articles, insert unnecessary articles or substitute the articles with one another. However, the elimination of the articles was the most frequent problem among the students.

Ababneh (2017) shed light on the difficulties faced by Saudi female students of the fourth year in the department of languages and translation at the University of Tabuk. The researcher used a writing quiz with three different topics. The students completed the quiz in three separate sessions, one topic in each session. The students were given ample time to write approximately one page (100–150 words) about each topic. The written samples were graded and the writing errors were classified into four main categories: grammatical, syntactic, substance, and lexical types following Hubbard et al.'s (1996) classifications of errors. The findings showed that most frequent types of errors were in the categories of grammar (tenses, singular/plural, articles), syntax (subject–verb agreement), and substance (spelling).

2.4 Summary

Based on the literature review above, it appears that little research has specifically addressed the problems related to the structure of the paragraph among

English-major female students in a Saudi setting regarding the aspects of writing the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. This research study tries to bridge this gap and investigates the paragraph structural elements in more details.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the process of data collection that is involved in the study. It consists of three sections. The first section explains the study population. The second section points out the design that the study adopted. The third section highlights the procedures implemented in collecting the needed data. The last section presents the tool of the study.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population of this research study is the female students majoring in English Language in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Albaha University.

3.2.1 Sample of the Study

The sample of the study comprises the female students in the English Department, College of Sciences and Arts , Qillwa Branch at Albaha University. The students were taking the Essay Writing course at the fifth level. During the course, the students are asked to write paragraphs by the instructors. In order to have more reliable results, twenty paragraphs were collected and analyzed after obtaining the participants' consent (Appendix 1).

3.3 The Study Design

The current study employed the descriptive research design. The study obtained the needed data through students' documents that were submitted in the writing course.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

In order to pinpoint the problems that are related to the structure of the written paragraphs of the participants, the documents or the students' writing samples were analyzed using an evaluation checklist. The tool was developed by the researcher and was tested for validity and reliability by submitting it to a jury of experts at Albaha University to give remarks and suggest better editions. The jury agreed upon the checklist given in Table 1.

The checklist is divided into three main items: criteria related to the topic sentence, other criteria related to the supporting sentences and the criteria of the concluding sentences. Each paragraph structure component has its own criteria. There are three main criteria for every structural part in the paragraphs. The participants' paragraphs were evaluated using this tool.

The participants were asked to write descriptive paragraphs about "My Hometown" by the instructor of the Essay Writing course. They were notified to pay attention to the qualities of a well-structured paragraph in terms of the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentence (Appendix 2). Each participant wrote about her hometown city, town or village. The paragraphs were given numbers from one to twenty. Then, each paragraph was reviewed using the checklist. Moreover, the checklist was attached to each single paragraph.

3.4.1 The Study Tool

The study adopted one tool to collect the data. An improved evaluation checklist by some of Albaha University Applied Linguistics professors was used to accumulate the needed data. Twenty evaluation checklists were filled out for twenty written paragraphs.

Table 1: The paragraph evaluation checklist used for reviewing and marking

Items to be evaluated “Structural Component”	Criteria	Meeting the criteria	Failing to meet the criteria	Notes
1-Topic Sentence	a- is clearly stated at the beginning.			
	b-reflects a thought or an insight.			
	c-focuses on one main idea.			
2-Supporting Sentences	a- relevant to the topic.			
	b- sufficiently, develop the topic.			
	c- examples are given in appropriate transitions, i.e. connectors or conjunctions.			
3-Concluding Sentence	a-is written towards the end of the paragraph.			
	b- re-states the idea of the topic using different words.			
	c-reflects the writer’s opinion towards the topic.			

Spaces for other problems:

.....

.....

.....

Chapter Four

Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data analysis, results and discussion. Content analysis, frequency and percentage are used to analyze the data of the paragraph structural components' criteria listed in the evaluation checklist.

4.2 Data Analysis Procedures

At first, the students' paragraphs were numbered, reviewed and marked. The total numbers of the evaluated paragraphs were twenty. The evaluation checklist examined the three main structural components of the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. There are three criteria to be investigated for each structural component. There were two evaluations for each criterion. Each paragraph was assessed as either meeting or failing to meet each specific criterion. Samples of the participants' paragraphs appeared in (Appendix 3).

Afterwards, the numbers of the paragraphs, whether meeting or failing the specific criteria being investigated, were identified. Based on the total number of the paragraphs that meet or fail the criteria, percentages for the two cases were calculated. Thus, there were two percentages for each criterion. The first percentage was the percentage of paragraphs meeting the specific criterion, while the second one was that of paragraphs failing to meet that specific criterion.

Finally, the criterion that the students most struggle to meet in writing each structural component was identified as the most difficulty in that component. This procedure was

applied for the criteria of writing supporting sentences as well as concluding sentences. The percentages of the failed criteria were calculated. Consequently, the analysis revealed the most challenging component of paragraph structure among the students through identifying the average.

4.3 Results and Findings of the Analysis

In order to keep the analysis organized, the percentage column is added next to each structural component. This table is used to analyze the twenty paragraphs.

Table 2: The paragraph evaluation checklist used for the analysis

Items to be evaluated “Structural Component”	Criteria	No. of paragraphs meeting the criteria	Percentage	No. of paragraphs failing to meet the criteria	Percentage
1-Topic Sentence	a-is clearly stated at the beginning.				
	b-reflects a thought or an insight.				
	c-focuses on one main idea.				
2-Supporting Sentences	a-relevant to the topic.				
	b-sufficiently, develop the topic				
	c-examples are given in appropriate transitions, i.e. connectors or conjunctions.				
3-Concluding Sentence	a-is written towards the end of the paragraph.				
	b-re-states the idea of the topic using different words.				
	c-reflects the writer’s opinion towards the topic.				

4.3.1 The Topic Sentence Component

In this section, the analysis focuses on the component of the topic sentence. Three specific criteria are investigated. The criteria are stating the topic at the beginning, expressing an insight and focusing on one main idea.

a. The topic sentence is clearly stated at the beginning of the paragraph

Twelve paragraphs out of twenty stated the topic sentence at the beginning. The remainder eight paragraphs did not have topic sentences. In another words, the topic sentences were non-existent in eight paragraphs. This is similar to Muslim (2014) in the aspect that some EFL English Department students face problems in writing topic sentences and developing supporting sentences. Only 60% percent of the study samples were able to write topic sentences clearly at the beginning of their paragraphs. This indicates that writing clear topic sentences at the beginning is still problematic to almost 40% of the study participants. Table 3 below shows the percentages of this specific criterion.

Table 3: The topic sentence is clearly stated at the beginning

Items to be evaluated “Structural Component”	Criteria	No. of paragraphs meeting the criteria	Percentage	No. of paragraphs failing to meet the criteria	Percentage
1-Topic Sentence	a-is clearly stated at the beginning.	12	$(12 \div 20) \times 100 = 60\%$	8	$(8 \div 20) \times 100 = 40\%$

b. The topic sentence reflects a thought or an insight

As for the criterion of expressing a thought or an insight in the topic sentence, almost 45% of the participants were able to fulfill it. The remaining 55% either had very general factual statements or null topics. Eleven paragraphs failed to meet this

criterion. Eight paragraphs already lacked the existence of topic sentences, while the remaining three paragraphs expressed factual statements rather than thoughts. The topic sentences that fail to express thoughts or insights are the following:

1- “It’s a small city, but very crowded” paragraph number 19.

2- “This is my city since a long time” paragraph number 11.

3- “The Jeddah is a big city” paragraph number 18.

Table 4: The topic sentence reflects a thought or an insight

1-Topic Sentence	b-reflects a thought or an insight.	9	$(9 \div 20) \times 100 = 45\%$	11	$(11 \div 20) \times 100 = 55\%$
-------------------------	-------------------------------------	---	---------------------------------	----	----------------------------------

c. The topic sentence focuses on one main idea

In fact, all the topic sentences in the twelve paragraphs had one main idea that expresses whether the students like their hometown or how big or small their hometowns are.

Table 5: The topic sentence focuses on one main idea

1-Topic Sentence	c-focuses on one main idea.	12	$(12 \div 20) \times 100 = 60\%$	8	$(8 \div 20) \times 100 = 40\%$
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Based on the analysis above, writing a good topic sentence is a challenge to most of the participants. The most unfulfilled criterion was writing a topic sentence that has an insight. As a matter of fact, writing an insightful topic sentence demands the participants to think critically about the subject that they intend to write about. Thus, the participants need to practice critical thinking in writing courses. This finding supported the study of Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) in the aspect that the students need to practice writing strategies rather than memorizing paragraphs.

Regarding the other problems that have been observed in writing this structural component and supported the findings of Ahmed (2010) are the following:

1- The misuse of the articles as in “The Jeddah is big city”, “Jeddah is nice city”, “Al-Baha is nice city”, “The city is very beautiful”, “Jeddah is beautiful place”, “The city Jeddah it’s nice”.

2-The misuse of demonstrative reference like in “This is my city”, “The city is very beautiful” and “It’s a small city, but very crowded” without previous mention of that city.

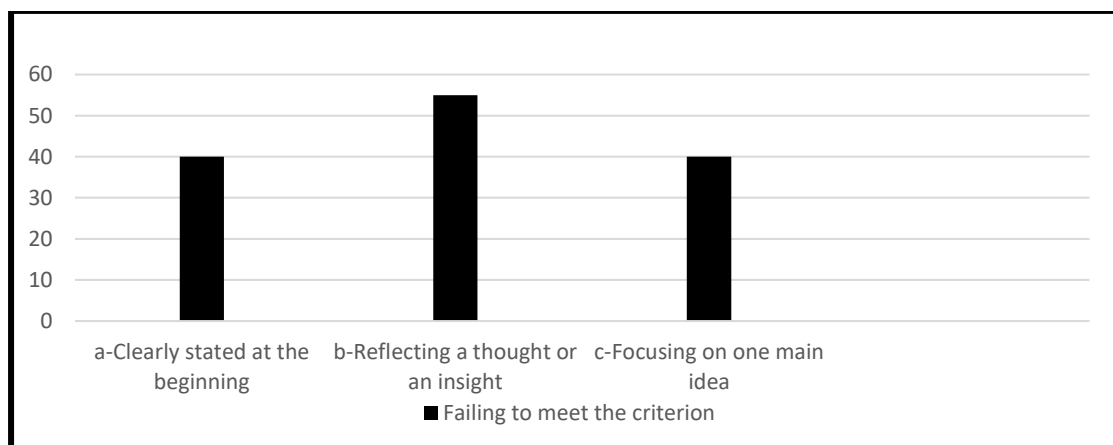
3-Spelling errors like in “vist” instead of visit , “becaos” instead of because, “buottfel” instead of beautiful, “bag” instead of big, “Jeedah” instead of Jeddah

4-The misuse of prepositions as “I enjoy in Jeddah”, “I vist to Jeddah”.

5-Wrong sentence structure by adding unnecessary pronoun like in “The city Jeddah it’s nice.” and missing the sentence complement “I like my city very.”

Figure: 1 illustrates clearly that the students have problems to write good topic sentences. The most struggling issue is writing a topic that reflects their own insights and thoughts. 55% of the students were unable to produce insightful topic sentences.

Figure 1: Percentages of failure to meet the criteria of the topic sentence



4.3.2 The Supporting Sentences Component

This part addresses the criteria of the supporting sentences. It involves the relevance to the topic sentence, the sufficient development of the topic sentence and the use of the appropriate transitions.

a. Supporting sentences are relevant to the topic sentence

Through the analysis of the paragraphs, almost 50% of the participants wrote supporting sentences that are related to the topic sentence. Eight paragraphs had no supporting sentences and two paragraphs failed to meet the criterion. This failure was due to the following:

- 1- The absence or the lack of complete supporting sentences as shown in paragraph 17.
- 2- The existence of some irrelevant examples as shown in paragraph 14. The two paragraphs are found in Appendix 2. Table 6 shows the percentages.

Table 6: Supporting sentences are relevant to the topic

Items to be evaluated “Structural Component”	Criteria	No. of paragraphs meeting the criteria	Percentage	No. of paragraphs failing to meet the criteria	Percentage
2-Supporting Sentences	a- relevant to the topic	10	$(10 \div 20) \times 100 = 50\%$	10	$(10 \div 20) \times 100 = 50\%$

b. Supporting sentences sufficiently develop the topic sentence

As for the development of the topic sentence criterion, the analysis indicated that only 5% of the participants were able to develop their topic sentences sufficiently. Almost 75% of the sample failed to develop the idea of the topic sentence using sufficient examples. They failed to convince the reader of the idea of the topic sentence. This weak development was due to the following:

1-writing incomplete or obscure sentences as in paragraphs 14 and 16.

2- including very little examples like in Paragraphs 11, 12, 13 and 17.

3- repeating vague phrases and fragments like in Paragraph 18.

This finding is in line with Al-Khairy (2013) who reported that English-majoring students still have difficulties at the paragraph-level in the aspects of writing topic sentences and supporting details. Table 7 illustrates the significant difference between the two percentages.

Table 7: Supporting sentences sufficiently develop the topic

2-Supporting Sentences	b-sufficiently, develop the topic	5	$5 \div 20 \times 100 = 25\%$	15	$(15 \div 20) \times 100 = 75\%$
-------------------------------	-----------------------------------	---	-------------------------------	----	----------------------------------

c. The examples are given in appropriate transitions

Analysis of the data revealed that this criterion was very critical for the participants. Most of the participants showed problems in this criterion. Almost 80% percent of the participants fail to use the appropriate transitional words or phrases to link the example sentences. The failure to meet this specific criterion was of three forms:

1- Total absence of transitions: the examples are listed without using any linking conjunctions like in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18.

2- Excessive use of the coordinating conjunction “and” to connect some incomplete sentences and phrases as in paragraph 8, 6, 5 and 3.

3- Incorrect use of the conjunctions. In paragraph 14 the connectors “and” and “because” are used incorrectly. The coordinating conjunction “and” is used to connect

adjectives, sentences and nouns in one long sentence. The causative conjunction “because” demands two clauses to show the cause and effect relationship. Thus, “Because I like it.” is incorrect usage of the connector “because”.

These problems in using transitions or connectors supported the results of Ahmed (2010) that Arab students face problems in writing cohesive paragraphs. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the participants have actually used a limited number of transitions or conjunctions. The analysis recorded that they used the following connectors: and, so, because, but and finally. This usage of limited one-word connectors reflected the participants’ weak writing skills. Moreover, these one-word connectors are only used by good participants who wrote good paragraphs as shown in paragraphs 19 and 20. This finding is identical to that of Saud (2016) confirming that the students with good writing skills tend to use more conjunctions. Table 8 illustrates the percentages.

Table 8: The examples are given in appropriate transitions

2-Supporting Sentences	c- examples are given in appropriate transitions, i.e. connectors or conjunctions.	2	$(2 \div 20) \times 10$ 0=10%	18	$(18 \div 20) \times 10$ 0=90%
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Through the analysis of the supporting sentences criteria, the most challenging criterion is the use of appropriate conjunctions. Almost 90% percent of the data lacks the use of transitions. Other observed problems in writing the component of supporting sentences involve the following:

1- Severe spelling mistakes that lead to write unreadable words as in paragraphs 5, 3, 16 and 17. This is similar to Bani Younes and Albalawi (2015) in the aspect that some words are unrecognizable and understandable.

2- Incorrect usage of punctuation marks such as the commas with the connectors and capitalizing the first letter in each sentence, this is evident in paragraphs 14, and 8.

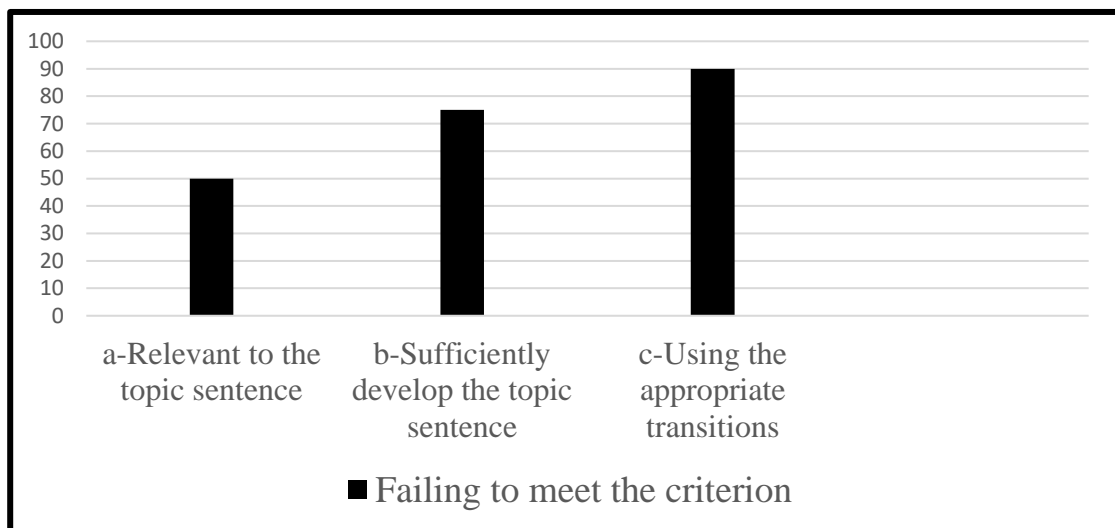
3- Misuse of the articles as in paragraph 15 and 18

4- Grammar mistakes of using “verb to be” and “subject” like in paragraph 14, 16, 8 and 9

5-The misuse of the two prepositions (in and at) for places as in paragraph 13 and 18.

Figure: 2 shows that the students’ most problematic issue in writing supporting sentences is using the appropriate transitions. 90% of the students were unsuccessful to use transitions.

Figure 2: Percentages of failure to meet the criteria of the supporting sentence



4.3.3 The Concluding Sentence Component

Through the analysis of the third component of the paragraph structure, the data revealed that the participants had difficulties in writing this part. Three criteria were evaluated. The first criterion is that of the location along with its existence. The second criterion is concerned with the idea stated in the concluding sentence. The last criterion is the reflection of the writer's opinion towards the topic.

a. The concluding sentence is written towards the end of the paragraph

Based on the analysis, nearly 60% of the participants failed to write concluding sentences at the end of the paragraphs. This was attributed to the following:

- 1- non-existing concluding sentence in eleven paragraphs, and
- 2- adding some example (sentences) after the concluding sentence as in paragraph 2.

This result supported that of Rass (2015) in the aspect that Arab students face many problems in writing the concluding sentences. Table 9 shows the percentages for this criterion.

Table 9: The location of the concluding sentence

Items to be evaluated "Structural Component"	Criteria	No. of paragraphs meeting the criteria	Percentage	No. of paragraphs failing to meet the criteria	Percentage
3-Concluding Sentence	a-is written towards the end of the paragraph.	8	$(8 \div 20) \times 100 = 40\%$	12	$(12 \div 20) \times 100 = 60\%$

b. The concluding sentence re-states the idea of the topic using different words

Regarding the idea of the concluding sentence, 65% of the participants failed to relate to the topic sentences. This could be attributed to the following:

1- Absence of the concluding sentence an in paragraphs 9, 10, 6, 15, 5, 3, 17, 12, 11, 1 and 4.

2- Introduction of a new idea that has not been mentioned in the topic sentence as in paragraph 8.

3- Repetition of the same words that have been used in the topic sentence as in paragraph 14.

Thus, this criterion is the most challenging for the students to meet in writing this paragraph component. Table 10 shows the significant difference between the two percentages.

Table 10: Re-stating the idea of the topic sentence

3-Concluding Sentence	b-re-states the idea of the topic using different words.	7	$(7 \div 20) \times 100 = 35\%$	13	$(13 \div 20) \times 100 = 65\%$
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c. The concluding sentence reflects the writer's opinion towards the topic

As for this criterion, the participants generally tended to conclude their paragraphs expressing their personal preferences of their hometowns. There was no significant difference between the two percentages in this criterion as shown in the Table 11.

Table 11: Reflecting the writer's opinion

3-Concluding Sentence	c-reflects the writer's opinion towards the topic	9	$(9 \div 20) \times 100 = 45\%$	11	$(11 \div 20) \times 100 = 55\%$
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Regarding the common problems, the researcher observed the following:

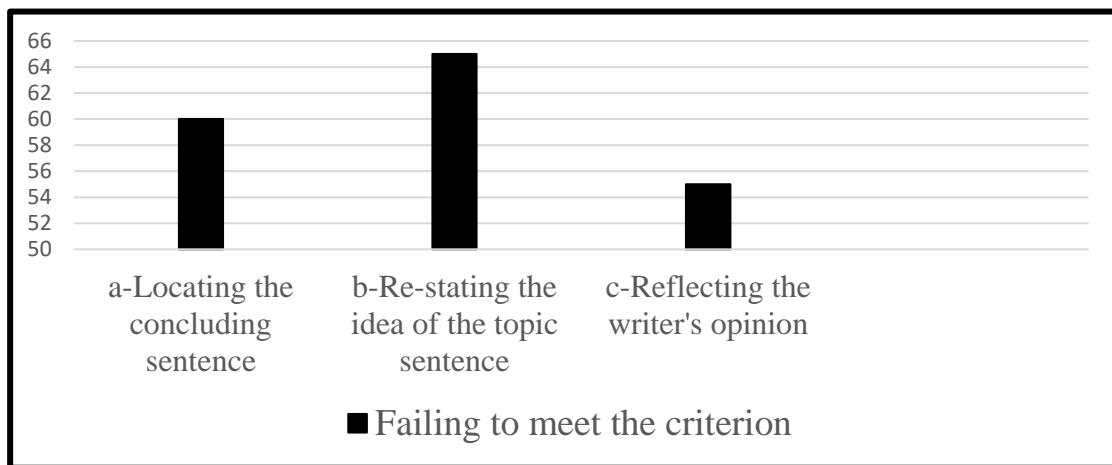
1- A lot of grammatical mistakes in using pronouns and verb “to be” as in paragraph 16.

2- The wrong use of verbs in present simple tense as in paragraph 12.

3-Committing mistakes in the capitalization of the proper nouns such as Jeddah as in paragraph 13.

Figure: 3 clarifies the students’ difficulties in writing their concluding sentences. The most common problem was the inability to re-state the idea brought up in the topic using different words or expressions. 65% of the students failed to relate the concluding sentences to the topic sentences.

Figure 3: Percentages of failure to meet the criteria of the concluding sentence



4.3 Summary

The findings of this study show that the participants face problems in writing the basic paragraph structural components and this finding answers the first question of the study. As for the second question regarding the types of the problems, the study revealed that students have problems in writing each component. As shown in Figure:

1, Figure: 2 and Figure:3, each component has three criteria. Each figure determines the most problematic criterion for the students

Table 12: The average and frequency of paragraph structural components' problems

Items to be evaluated “Structural Component”	Criteria	Percentage of the failed criteria	The Average	The Frequency
1-Topic Sentence	a-is clearly stated at the beginning.	40%	$(40+55+40) \div 3 = 45\%$	The third frequent challenging paragraph component
	b-reflects a thought or an insight.	55%		
	c-focuses on one main idea.	40%		
2-Supporting Sentences	a-relevant to the topic.	50%	$(50+75+90) \div 3 = 71,66 \sim 72\%$	The first frequent challenging paragraph component
	b-sufficiently, develop the topic	75%		
	c-examples are given in appropriate transitions, i.e. connectors or conjunctions.	90%		
3-Concluding Sentence	a-is written towards the end of the paragraph.	60%	$(60+65+55) \div 3 = 60\%$	The second frequent challenging paragraph component
	b-re-states the idea of the topic using different words.	65%		
	c-reflects the writer’s opinion towards the topic.	55%		

In order to answer the third question of this research study and decide the most frequent challenging component, the average of the failed criteria calculated for each structural component. Table:13 shows the average and the frequency of each paragraph component. The average of the topic sentence component failure is 45%. The supporting sentences component has the average of almost 72%. As for the concluding sentence component, it reaches the average of 60%. Therefore, the most challenging component in paragraph writing is the supporting sentences followed by the concluding sentences. The least problematic is writing the topic sentence.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is going to shed light on the conclusions as well as recommendations and suggestions for further research studies.

5.2 Conclusions

The current study is concluded that most of the sentences are weak and need to be further improved; the students face many problems in writing the three basic paragraph components. In addition, the study finds out that writing supporting sentences is the most challenging component in paragraph writing. The specific criterion of using appropriate transitions or conjunctions poses a great difficulty to a huge number of the students. Among the other most common problems are spelling, grammar and punctuation problems.

5.3 Recommendations

This research study is recommended that:

1. Students should be aware of the criteria that will be assessed in their writings before starting to write, this will help them to write better.
2. Students should be given more written feedback in order to improve their writing skills.
3. Students should learn how to write more effective topic sentences.
5. Instructors should give students more written exercises to improve their writing skills.

6. More active teaching strategies should be adopted and assessed by the instructors.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies

In the light of the findings of this study, the researcher has suggested the following:

1. Further studies can be applied for male students.
2. Further writing courses could be added to the main courses
3. More studies can be carried to address the problems of writing good topic sentences on the paragraph level.
4. Further studies can investigate the paragraph structural components separately.
5. More studies concerning teaching paragraph writing can be conducted in order to improve the students' writing skills.

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Appendices

Appendix: 1 The participants' consent

The participant's consent

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Ministry of Education
Albaha University
College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa
Department of English Language



Consent Form of the Participant

The researcher name: Samearah Ali Alzahrani

The title of the project:

“Problems of English Paragraph Structure in the Writing of Female Students at Albaha University”

Dear Participant;

- You are being asked to be in this research study.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are studying at level 3 in the English major at Albaha University.
- The researcher ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.
- The purpose of the study is to identify the problems of paragraph structure in the writings of female students at Albaha University. Thus, almost twenty-eight samples of written paragraphs will be will be collected by the researcher and analyzed.
 - This study is anonymous. The researcher will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
 - The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study.
 - You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher at samoorah-777@hotmail.com
 - Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read, understood the information provided above and agreed that the data collected from you to be used in the research. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

Name of the participant : _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Name of the researcher: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix:2 Paragraph writing topic

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Ministry of Education
Albaha University
College of Sciences and Arts in Qillwa
Department of English Language



Dear participant,

Write a paragraph on the topic of “My Hometown” paying attention to the qualities of a well-structured English paragraph including the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentence.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

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.....

Appendix: 3 Samples of the participants' paragraphs

TS.
clear
- Albaha is city in Saudi Arabia
too much mistakes
It
fact
thought
She is city but the people
Come visited. she sometimes
S.S. no enough examples + no transitions
she very cool in mor mounts
and monkeys. in summer come
No C.S.
mor people,
Rearr sentence structure.
Parag. No. 17

Parag. No. 14

not clear Al Bahah

T.S. Too much grammar mistakes

I am Baskayer. I Born in Bahah.
 I like my city very its there is
 mor Rin, and there is supper old.
 There is something like. I like my
 Town so much. Because I like it.
is live. Very simple, and very
 Buteful, and I love me, and
 my city. No. C.S.

no transitions
 S.S.
 not sufficient
 not enough

Revise sentence structure,

Parag. No. 11

Qelwah City

T.S ✓✓

This is my City since long Time.

I ~~is~~ live ⁱⁿ Qelwah with my Family.

my City it's very bad and There is not

good Place. Qelwah is very Small.

in Qelwah Some Parks ~~are~~ like To

Alafa.

Not enough: S-S. ^{no transitions} not enough examples
No. C-S. at all.

Parag. No. 12.

AL Baha

T.S clear

Al-Baha is nice city. I like
wether in Al-Baha. There are Ragdan.
Al-Baha? big city. I'm living Al-Baha
with my family. - No S.S
not enough

too much mistakes
no transitions

~~---~~ C-S No-

Subject

Dat / /

Parag. No. 13

Jeedah

T.S. ✓ clear

Jeedah is a nice city. There
are See a mall and resturant. I

S.S. no transitions

like this is city. People go to

Jeedah from all the world. Jeedah

big city not small. My sister

and my brother lives Jeedah.

My favorite city is Jeedah.

C.S. ✓ clear

✓ opinion.

not clear
✓ N.T.S

My City Jeddah

I list to Jeddah because Beautiful and
bag. I love to Jeddah. There are see
and shopping. My sister don't love Jeddah.

Grand mother there is nozes in Jeddah. My
S.S. - no transitions + no enough examples + irrelevant
brother is work in Jeddah in hospital. Jeddah
hot water, There is Pink women very
nice. I love in Jeddah.

✓ C.S. not clear
too much mistakes that hinder understanding

Parag. No. 16.

Paragra No. 18

T.S. beginning but (Jeddah)

9 fact not an insight

The Jeddah is big city. The shopping in the

Jeddah is very more. In the Jeddah the street

S-S. no transitive

is very crowded. In the Jeddah big sea.

The best to Jeddah Aziz mall. In the

^{there} Jeddah Abdul Aziz. In the Jeddah there very

hospital. My family live to Jeddah. Because

nice city. In the Jeddah very park. My

C-S. grammatical errors

sister study to Jeddah. I like Jeddah. Because

spelling mistakes

My friends live to Jeddah

in ← wrong use of grammar

capital (M)

in (there) (pronoun)

(because) as a conjunction but true to give reasons.

My Hometown

consider

T.S. ^{clear} beginning

I am smah. I live in a very small village. It is very ~~quite~~ quiet. We don't have many places in it. I can say we have a hospital but it is very small and sometimes they made bad mistakes to the sick people. So we have to go to the other hospital in the other city. We also have a small market but it doesn't have ~~no~~ ~~very~~ that great things we ~~wish~~ wish to buy. We don't have library in my hometown. I know that I said bad things about my hometown, but I know also that I am very happy ^{C-S} in it. You may ask yourself why did she say that she ^{is} happy in that place? I will tell you it is because I have my ^{is} family and friends in it. They are all what I need to be happy. The place I am in it doesn't matter if I stay with them. They are my happiness

paragraph No. 20

Jeddah

Jeddah

T.S. - beginning
- clear but no insight (Act) two ideas -
It's a small city, but very crowded. It has Red Sea.
My brother and sister in this city. I visit Jeddah every
vacation with my family. I love this city because it has
my favorite restaurant is Al Baik. And it has many S.S. malls. ^{enough}
And because it is near from Makkah. And we
visit the beautiful place is Alsholal. I love sea
because I feeling relax at morning because it is
my favorite time. Finally I like this city
because it has every things. C.S. ✓ and
✓ opinion
reflect the
topic.

Paragraph. No. 19.

Dr. Hussain.

Parag. 2.

Abha

"Abha"

T.S. clear v beginning v might v

The city is very ~~big~~ beautiful. It's very
crowded. There is many Garden and wonderful
weather. There is many people for Pinc.
It's big city. you find there Zoo garden.
I enjoy in Abha. I visit this city be for two
years ago. ~~the~~ I think Changhow. I rest
shopping there but not find many stor or mall.

S.S. not transition s

C.S. not at the end/opinion

restor
the T.S

Parag. No. 8 city Jeddah

city Jeddah ^{fact} there is in sodia
T-S beginning ✓ thought X one idea X

Arabic next to city Makkah, there are

S-S not enough examples
no transitions
restekant and mall and garden and

colleg King Abd alaziz and colleg other

also sea there is Port Jeddah Islami

and AirPort King Abdalaziz I'm like

C-S. opinion ✓
and ✓
Jeddah and visiting in holiday

X restates new ideas not in topic

purise sentence structure

