



ISSN: 2995-9837 (ONLINE)

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PUBLISHED BY  
**E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA**

## Students' Challenges in Writing Paragraph at Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute

Sultan Ali Haidari<sup>\*</sup>, Mohammad Zamin Zada<sup>1</sup>

### Article Information

**Received:** January 03, 2025

**Accepted:** February 05, 2025

**Published:** March 17, 2025

### Keywords

*EFL Students, Challenges, Writing Paragraph*

### ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to discover EFL undergraduate students' major writing paragraph challenges. The data was collected through questionnaire and 28 third-year students of English Language and Literature Department of Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute participated in this study. The data was analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS software program. The results of this study showed that students had several challenges in writing paragraph although they followed the stages of writing; they had positive attitudes and were eager to practice writing. They did not know the organization and functions of parts of paragraph and they had difficulties on how to give details and support the main idea of the paragraph. Also the results showed that the lack of vocabulary is the reason for writing poor paragraph. In addition, organization, coherence, cohesion, spelling, and grammar are the major challenging aspects in writing paragraph. Therefore, EFL teachers are recommended to utilize active learning methods, assign students writing different paragraphs, and give feedback in order to avoid students' challenges.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is very difficult in our own language, and a new language, it will be more difficult. Fortunately, it is not a natural activity and it involves skills that people can learn (Blanchard & Root, 2010). Writing in English also is not a natural activity but it is cognitive that can be practiced and learned. Yunhadi (2016) stated that writing in English is a complicated activity and writer while producing any piece of text should consider many things like grammar, organization, audience, tone, and the purpose of writing. There are many different levels in writing such as sentence level, paragraph level, and essay level.

According Baylie (2020), paragraph writing is the most focus among different levels in English. Most piece of writing which contains a few sentences is usually written in paragraph format. Paragraph is group of related sentences that talks about one single idea. It has three parts: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. Dao and Dan (2024) argue that paragraph writing is one of the abilities that the students should learn.

### Problem Statement

Afghanistan is the country that views English as a foreign language, and most of the students who are majoring in English in Afghanistan at the university level study writing courses for six semesters. They view writing is the most challenging skill and paragraph writing is not an exception. According to Muslim (2014), writing ability is very complicated and complex because it requires generation of ideas, their organization into coherent prose.

### The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to find out the challenges of EFL students in writing paragraph. It also has the following objectives:

To figure out what part of paragraph is more challenging to write.

To identify what percentages of EFL students follow steps of writing while writing English paragraph.

### Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major problems of EFL students in writing paragraph?
2. What part of paragraph is more challenging to write?
3. To what extent, do EFL students follow the process of writing?

### Limitation of the Study

The current study has the following limitations: firstly, all the student who participated were male because nowadays, it is very difficult to find female EFL students in Afghanistan. Secondly, the population of this study is only EFL students of Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute. Different result might be found in the case of conducting the study of other EFL Afghan students because of differences in the instructors, and methodologies.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Definition of Writing

Writing is one of the ways of communicating and expressing our opinions, our thoughts and feeling to other people. There are many ways to utilize writing in our daily life and also it is a skill that needs to be practiced and works to be mastered (Putri, 2021). Writing skill according to Mohmmmed (2019) has become an important part of students' life; therefore, students are asked to write different kinds of paragraphs, essays, response papers, research papers and some other kinds of piece of writing.

<sup>1</sup> Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute, Afghanistan

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author's e-mail: [h.sultanali@gmail.com](mailto:h.sultanali@gmail.com)

### Definition of Paragraph

There are many various definition of paragraph; according to Lunsford and Collins (2003) cited in Putri (2021), paragraph is a product that contains group of sentences about one single thought. Owl (2009) defined that paragraph is like a family in which all members are related to each other. Similarly, a paragraph is a group of sentences that are related closely and focus on one main idea. According to him, any piece of writing longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. Paragraphs in English contain three parts: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence.

The first part of paragraph is topic sentence. Topic sentence as Al-Zahrani (20018) argues, has three functions: topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of paragraph and asserts the main idea of paragraph. Secondly, topic sentence controls all details and explanation that come after topic sentence. Thirdly, topic sentence says the subject of paragraph.

The second part of paragraphs is supporting sentences. Supporting sentences which is the second part of paragraphs is group of sentences give details, example, facts and statistics related to topic sentence (Al-Zahrani, 20018). The third part of paragraph is concluding sentence. Concluding sentence which is the last part of the paragraph, signals the end of the paragraph and summarizes information presented or restate the topic sentence, but some short paragraphs sometimes do not have a concluding sentence.

### Qualities of Good Paragraph

According to Baylie, *et al.* (2020), the good paragraph has some qualities. The first quality of paragraphs is having unity. Unity means when all the sentences of paragraphs are related to one main idea and there is no any irrelevant sentence in paragraphs. Another quality of good paragraph is containing coherence. Coherence means when the sentences of paragraph are joined together and the movement from one sentence to the next must be smooth and logical. It means that there should not be sudden jump from one sentence of paragraph to the next. Completeness is another quality of the paragraph. Completeness means when the expected message is conveyed. If the paragraph is not complete, reader cannot understand easily. So the length of paragraph should be neither too long nor too short. Moreover, utilizing variety of sentences in a paragraph can be counted as the quality of paragraph. The writers are expected to have the ability to write variety of sentence structure to convince and attract the attention of reader.

### Kinds of Paragraph

Paragraph, according to Dao and Dan (2024), can be in four kinds: narrative paragraph, descriptive paragraph, explanation paragraph and persuasive or argumentative paragraph. Narrative paragraph is the kind of paragraph in which the writer describes an event that happened before. In descriptive paragraph, writer describes a

person, object, or location using the words related to the five senses. Explanation paragraph contains information about how to do something. In explanation paragraph, the writer instructs, conveys ideas. Another kind of paragraph is persuasive (argumentative paragraph). In this paragraph, the writer expresses his or her perspective and tries to demonstrate the value or importance of something.

### EFL Students Difficulties

Many researches are done about the challenges of EFL students in writing paragraph. After reviewing many researches, it has been found that major EFL students' difficulties are in the following aspects:

#### Grammar

According to Ammar Hussen (2017) cited in Ly, *et al.* (2021), grammar is very important and writing good paragraph needs the knowledge of grammar and there are some important grammatical forms such as tenses, modals, voices, and articles. He added that majority of EFL learners suffer from the components of grammar. Muradi and Amarkhil (2024) stated that grammar is the most crucial aspect of language. Putri (2021) argues that a person cannot write well when he or she does not know the use of grammatical components well. Anh (2019) points out that using and understanding grammatical rules are not easy because verbs are formed regularly and irregularly. Using cohesive devices, pronouns, articles and preposition appropriately is hard for them. In addition, there are many types of sentence structures with the use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and main clauses/subordinating clauses

#### Organization

Dao and Dan (2024) claim that while writing a paragraph, organization is like a key for writing. Students should arrange ideas and the ability of the students to write and arrange the ideas impact the quality of piece of writing. Most of the time, poor organization and arranging their thoughts are the problems of EFL students. Good organization in writing helps readers in order to understand the ideas, but students have problems in organization. They do not know what should be written first and what should be the next (Husnal, 2013; Ly, 2021). The ideas in paragraph should be organized logically and it is challenging for students and they cannot write paragraph well because of inefficient organization of writing text (Anh, 2019).

#### Lack of Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary, students need enough vocabulary in order to have the ability of using them flexibly (Dao & Dan, 2024). Expanding vocabulary is one of the best approaches to form a paragraph. Students with lack of vocabulary for sure struggle with writing paragraph. Krashen (1989) declares that if the vocabulary of students is limited, their paragraph will be brief and lack

of vocabulary prevents students from using language skills. Therefore, a broad vocabulary is essential for language mastering.

### Mechanic

Students find mechanic as a challenge in writing. Mechanic in writing includes punctuation, capitalization, and spelling (Putri, 2021). Wrong spelling leads misconception or changes the meaning of the sentences. Likewise, punctuation marks like body language helps readers understand and get the meaning of the text. If punctuation marks are not used correctly can be the cause of misconception.

### Previous Studies

Yunhadi (2016) has conducted a study under the title of (The Structural Parts of Paragraph Writing by Indonesian EFL Learners). He used content analysis as the design in his research. The results showed that students had problems in three parts of paragraph; especially their problems were in supporting sentence. Furthermore, the other difficulties were related to unity and most of the students did not know the functions of topic sentence.

Qamariah and Wahyuni, (2016) have done a research entitled “An Analysis of EFL Students’ Paragraph Writing Errors and Their Causes”. Their study revealed the students’ challenges were in terms of organization of paragraph on all components: topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. Moreover, the students’ errors were found in language structure. In addition, syntactic and stylistic errors were the most frequently mistakes that students committed.

Shahhoseiny (2015) has done a study entitled “A Study of Errors in the Paragraph Writing of EFL Learners”. 70 EFL first year translation students at University of Applied Science and Technology participated in this study. 165 errors of EFL students in paragraph writing were found. The result showed that there was no significant different in number of errors between topic sentence and supporting sentences. Also the number of errors in topic sentences and supporting sentences is almost the same. However, there was much different in number of errors between concluding sentence and supporting sentences and the large number of errors were related to supporting sentences.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

In order to find out the difficulties of EFL students of Sar-e-Pul Higher Education of Institute, the researcher conducted a quantitative method research, so the researcher used a closed ended questionnaire containing 14 questions. The questionnaire was adopted from Ahmed (2019) with little change. Ahmed conducted a study entitled “Major Writing Challenges Experienced by EFL Learners”. This was because of the nature of

information required and the form of analysis to be conducted. It is to be mentioned that, based on the aim and objectives of the current study, only the responses of 7 questions of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software program.

### Participants

The current study was conducted in English Language and Literature Department of Faculty of Education of Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute. This study in order to be in a specific level and keeping in mind the table of sample size by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), involved 28 out of 30 third year EFL students who have already studied for four semesters (studying their fifth semester) in English Department as their major. All of the students were male between 22 and 26 years of age. The reason for selecting the third year students was that they have written English paragraph a lot and they were familiar with writing all kinds of paragraphs.

### Data Analysis

Firstly, the researcher of this study explained the research project to participants and the necessary information related to it was given to them. The participants were asked to read each statement of questionnaire carefully and respond honestly. Enough time was given. After collecting the data from all 28 EFL students, the researcher numbered all the papers. Then, the received data was evaluated and analyzed based on the quantitative research criteria. The data is analyzed through the SPSS software in this research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Results

It is to be mentioned that based on the aim and objectives of this study, only the responses of 7 questions were analyzed. The 7 questions were related to motivation of students in writing, difficulty of parts of paragraph, process of writing, paying attention to punctuation marks, writing outside of the classroom, the effectiveness of lack of vocabulary, and the major challenges of writing paragraph.

After analyzing the data, the results show that EFL students at Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute have positive attitudes toward writing and they were interested to learn writing but there were many challenges that they faced while writing paragraph. In order to talk with details, each of them should be presented step by step.

### Students’ Motivation to Learn Writing

In order to check the students’ motivation, only one question was designed. According to the above chart, all the participants responded to the question; 25 students (89.3%) reasoned that they like writing skill and only 3 students (10.7%) responded that they do not like writing.

Chart 1: Students Motivation to Learn Writing

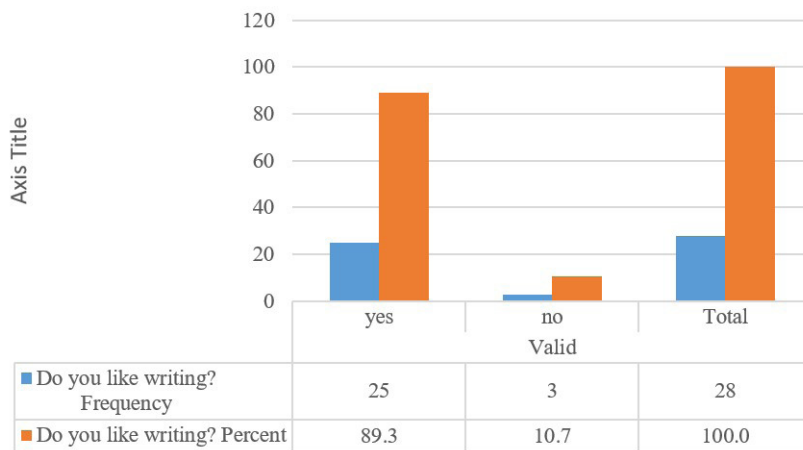


Figure 1: Students' Motivation to Learn Writing

### Difficulty of Parts of Paragraph

Above percentage of data reveals that there were 28 students' responds. 7 students that is (25%) of all participants responded that writing topic sentence is more difficult in a paragraph. 11 students that is (39.3%) of all

participants answered that writing supporting sentence is difficult to write and also there were 10 students that is (35.7%) of participant responded that writing concluding sentence is difficult to write.

Chart 2: Difficulty of Parts of Paragraph

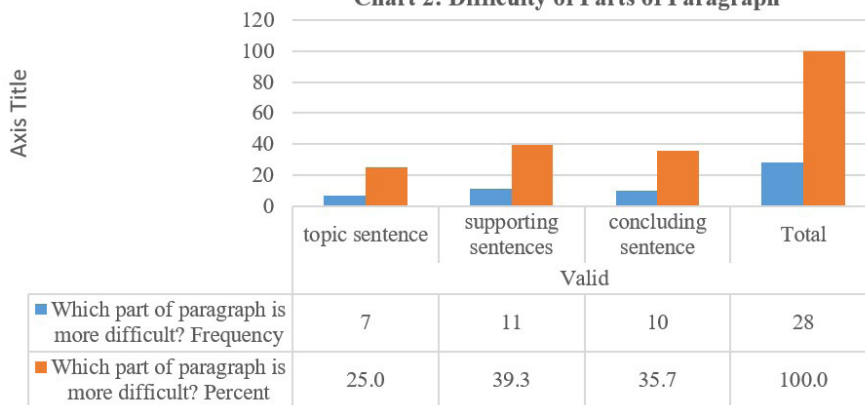


Figure 2: Difficulty of Parts of Paragraph

### Following the Steps of Writing

According to the chart 3, all the participants responded to the question. Majority of the students (96.4%) responded

that they follow the process of writing. Only 1 student (3.6%) replied that he does not follow the writing process while writing a paragraph.

Chart 3: Steps of Writing Process

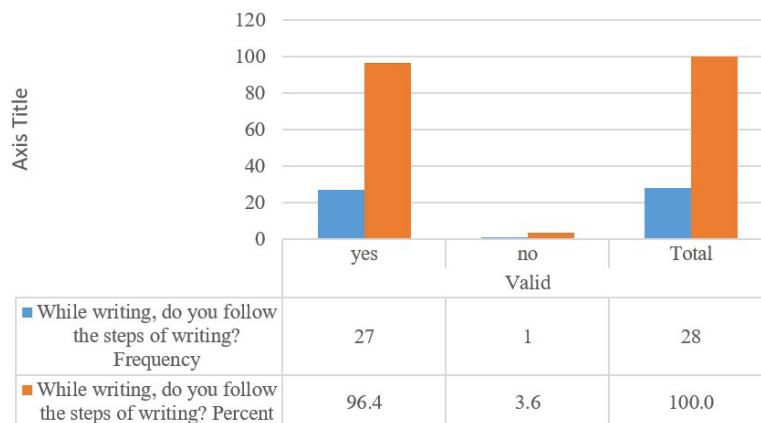


Figure 3: Following the Steps of Writing



### Paying Attention to Punctuation Marks

Based on the above chart, 27 students (96.4%) responded that they pay attention to punctuation marks while

writing. Only 1 student (3.6%) replied that he does not pay attention to punctuating marks.

Chart 4: Attention to Punctuation Marks

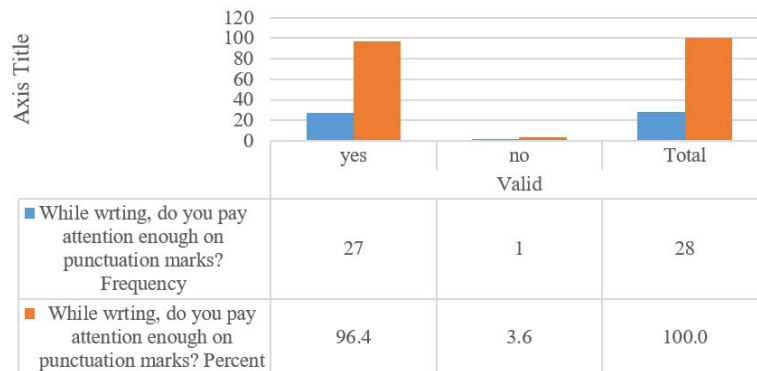


Figure 4: Paying Attention to Punctuation Marks

### Writing Outside of Classroom

The above chart shows that all the students (28) responded to the question. 6 students (21.4%) responded that they always write outside of the classroom. 18

students (64.3%) replied that they often write outside of the classroom. 4 students (14.3%) responded that they rarely write outside of the classroom. No student opted the never option.

Chart 5: writing Outside of Classroom

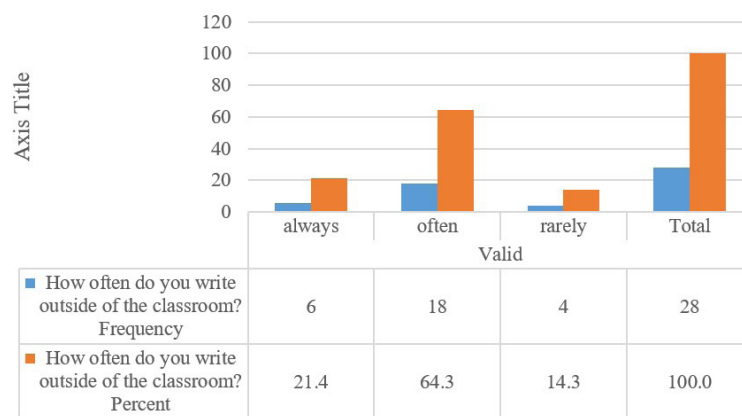


Figure 5: Writing Outside of Classroom

### Lack of Vocabulary

Based on the chart 6, 28 students (all participants) responded to the question. 25 students (89.3%) of the students responded that the lack of vocabulary is the

reason for writing poor paragraph. Only 3 students (10.7%) answered that the lack of vocabulary is not the reason for writing poor paragraph.

Chart 6: Lack of Vocabulary

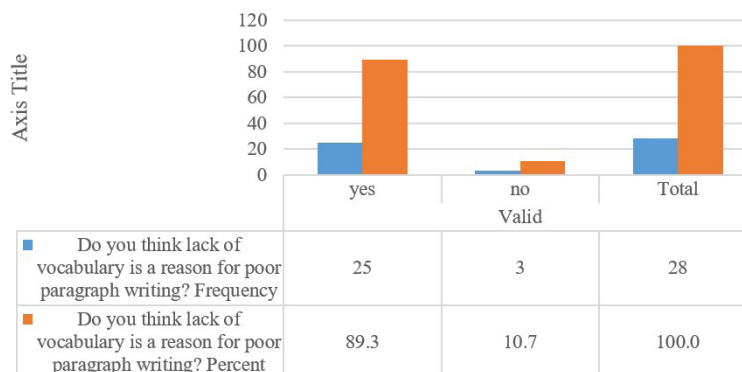
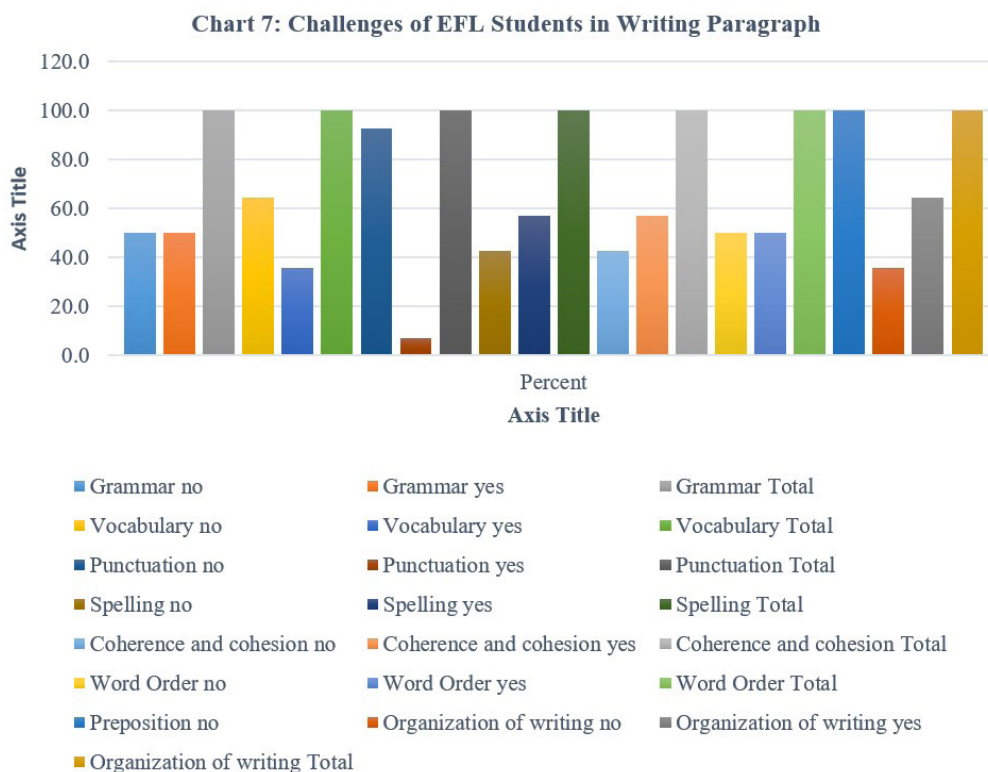


Figure 6: Lack of Vocabulary

### Challenges of EFL Students in Writing Paragraph

The results show that that organization 64.3%, coherence and cohesion 57.1%, and spelling 57.1%, are the most common aspects of difficulties in writing paragraph. 50% of the participants stated that grammar and word order

are the challenge of writing paragraph. 35.7% of the participants opted vocabulary is as challenge of writing. A few students (7.1%) opted punctuation as a challenge but no one (0%) opted preposition as the challenge of EFL students in writing paragraph.



**Figure 7:** Challenges of EFL Students in Writing Paragraph

### Discussion

This section presents the discussion based on the findings of the study. Based on the finding related to motivation of students in writing, majority of the students like writing so it could be interpreted that most of the students have positive attitude and they like to practice writing skill.

The result related the difficulty of parts of paragraph clarifies that EFL students have more difficulties in writing the middle part of paragraph. This study compared to Shahhoseiny (2015) study in terms of difficulty of parts of paragraph, showed almost the same result. Both studies showed that writing supporting sentences is much difficult and they do not know how to give details and support the main idea.

Based on the result in terms of the stages of writing, most of third year EFL students at Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute follow the stages of writing and it is interpreted that the students know that writing is process and it is hard to write a complete paragraph in the first try. Based on the finding related to paying attention of punctuation marks, most of the students keep in mind punctuation marks while writing. The result demonstrated that most of the students believe that punctuation marks are important and they can change the meaning of the sentences of paragraph. Only 3.6% of participants did not pay attention to punctuation marks. It might be because of lack of practice, or carelessness.

Result shows that majority of the students often write outside of the classroom. Only a few students responded that they rarely write outside of the classroom but there was no student choosing the never option. So it is clarified that the majority of the students often write outside of the classroom and writing outside of the classroom can be the best way in order to improve writing skill.

The finding related to lack of vocabulary shows that (89.3%) of the students responded that the lack of vocabulary is the reason for writing poor paragraph. However, a few students answered that the lack of vocabulary is not the reason for writing poor paragraph. The result shows utilizing suitable vocabulary is essential for writing a paragraph. If the students have not enough vocabulary, they cannot write paragraph well.

In addition to lack of vocabulary, the finding related to the challenge of EFL students in writing paragraph shows that organization is the most challenging aspect, coherence and cohesion and spelling come to second challenging aspects, grammar and word order come to the third; vocabulary is the fourth challenging aspect in writing paragraph. The result of this study in terms of challenging aspects of writing paragraph agrees with the statement of Dao and Dan (2024). According to them, most of the EFL students have difficulties in organization and poor organization and arranging their thoughts are the problems of EFL students.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, the followings have been concluded: first, the results of this study show that majority of EFL students at Sar-e-Pul Higher Education Institute have positive attitudes toward writing and they followed the stages of writing. However, they have difficulties in understanding the functions of each part of paragraph. Some of them do not know how conclude their composition and high percentage of the students have not the ability of giving details and supporting the main idea of paragraph. In addition, this study revealed that lack of vocabulary organization, coherence, cohesion, spelling, and grammar are the challenging aspects in writing paragraph. Therefore, for avoiding students' challenges, EFL teachers should pay attention to give writing different paragraph tasks, give feedback and utilize active learning methods.

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