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Academic Writing Challenges in Vocational Contexts: A Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract

This study uses a qualitative discourse analysis approach to examine students' written paragraphs, focusing on topic sentences, paragraph structure, cohesion, coherence, and grammar. The results show that students' writing skills are still below academic expectations. Many paragraphs lack clear topic sentences, develop ideas inconsistently, and show weak cohesion and coherence due to inappropriate conjunctions and poor logical flow. Frequent grammatical errors—such as faulty sentence structure, incorrect affix use, and inconsistent punctuation—also reduce clarity. These findings highlight the need for contextual, skills-based teaching materials that emphasize process-oriented writing, explicit instruction on topic sentences, and stronger mastery of cohesion, coherence, and basic grammar. The study further suggests improvements for curriculum design, especially through systematic writing practice and feedback in Indonesian language courses. Theoretically, the research expands discourse-analysis studies in vocational settings, while practically supporting students' ability to write technical and scientific reports. Overall, the study contributes to strengthening academic writing readiness and improving academic literacy in Indonesia's polytechnic education system.

1. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental skill in the academic world, functioning as a primary medium for communicating ideas in a structured and logical manner (Hyland, 2019). In higher education, this skill is essential not only for routine academic activities such as writing papers and reports but also as a critical requirement for completing final assignments (Emilia, 2010). This poses a particular challenge for polytechnic students, who are primarily trained in vocational and technical competencies, where academic writing is often not the primary focus of their learning (Hammond, 2001).

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Writing a final assignment requires mastery of various linguistic elements, including the ability to develop ideas, construct coherent and logical arguments, and employ effective and standardized language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Unfortunately, many students struggle to produce texts with clear structure and coherent flows of thought. These challenges typically stem from weak foundational writing skills, especially in the development and organization of paragraphs. As the basic unit of academic discourse, paragraphs are often produced without clear topic sentences, lack internal cohesion, and frequently contain grammatical errors (Tribble, 1996).

The State Polytechnic of Kupang, as a vocational higher education institution, faces the challenge of balancing technical competency with academic literacy. Students across majors such as Accounting, Electrical Engineering, and Civil Engineering are expected to communicate their technical ideas in written form, particularly when preparing their final assignments. Thus, it is essential to conduct an in-depth examination of students' writing abilities early in their academic journey, especially in academic writing.

In this context, discourse analysis serves as an appropriate approach for comprehensively assessing students' writing abilities. It enables the identification of textual structure, interconnectedness of ideas, cohesion, and paragraph use within authentic writing contexts (Gee, 2014). This approach allows researchers to investigate the writing skills of second-semester students at the State Polytechnic of Kupang as a starting point for preparing them to successfully produce their final assignments.

By mapping both weaknesses and potential strengths in students' writing, this study aims to contribute to the development of more effective academic writing instructional strategies that align with the vocational education context. As a result, students will be prepared not only in technical terms but also in their ability to express ideas academically through well-structured, high-quality writing. Ultimately, the findings of this study are expected to provide an empirical overview of students' academic writing proficiency and serve as the basis for developing more contextual and applicable writing teaching materials within vocational education environments. The objectives of this study are:

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it aims to analyze the paragraph writing skills of students from three departments at the State Polytechnic of Kupang, providing an overview of their ability to construct coherent and well-structured academic paragraphs. Second, the study seeks to identify the strategies employed by students in developing topic sentences across various types of paragraphs, revealing how they initiate, frame, and direct the flow of ideas in their writing. Third, it aims to describe the types of errors that commonly occur in students' paragraph construction, including issues related to structure, cohesion, and grammar, which often hinder clarity and readability. Finally, the study assesses the extent to which students' existing paragraph writing skills can serve as a foundation for preparing their academic final assignments. Together, these objectives provide a comprehensive understanding of students' academic writing readiness within the vocational education context.

2. Material and Method

2.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is an approach to language study that examines not only the linguistic aspects of the text but also the meaning, context, and communicative function of a text (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997). Discourse analysis examines not only the linguistic structure of a text but also the context in which language is used, including the purpose of communication, the organization of the text, and the meaning constructed by the author (Gee, 2014).

2.2. Main Components of Discourse Analysis in Written Text

The discourse, in this context, is paragraphs writing which is a crucial initial step in mastering scientific writing (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). The analysis of the discourse is conducte in; First, Text Structure (Paragraph Organization) examines how sentences are arranged coherently and systematically within a paragraph. An ideal paragraph consists of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence that mutually support one main idea. Second, cohesiveness. Cohesiveness examines linguistic devices that connect one sentence to another, such as the use of conjunctions, references, substitutions, and ellipsis (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Cohesion ensures cohesion between parts of a text. Third, coherence. This section examines the logical and meaningful relationships between sentences so that the text is easily understood by the reader (Schiffrin, 1987). Coherence is cognitive and depends on understanding the context.

2.3 Discourse Analysis to Assess Students' Paragraph Writing Skills

In the context of language learning, discourse analysis is employed to identify and assess how students construct effective paragraphs by examining several key components. First, it evaluates students' ability to accurately determine and develop topic sentences. As units of thought that constitute a larger discourse, paragraphs require a clear topic sentence, supporting sentences, and, in many cases, a concluding sentence. The topic sentence functions as the central focus that guides the development of ideas within the paragraph (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002). Second, discourse analysis examines how well students construct explanatory sentences that are cohesively connected, ensuring that each sentence contributes logically to the development of the main idea. Third, it assesses the coherence of ideas, as coherence and cohesion represent the formal relationships between textual elements that create clarity and meaning within a paragraph (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In addition, the analysis considers the accuracy of grammatical features, including sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling, in accordance with Indonesian language norms. Finally, discourse analysis observes students' ability to use an appropriate writing style for different paragraph types—narrative, descriptive, or argumentative—as part of academic communication. Since writing a final project requires the systematic and coherent organization of ideas, paragraph writing skills serve as an essential foundation that must be nurtured from the early stages of students' academic experience (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

2. 4. Discourse Analysis in Assessing Students' Paragraph Writing Skills

Discourse analysis is an approach to language studies that examines how language is used in a social context to convey meaning and effectively communicate functions. According to Fairclough (1992), discourse analysis examines not only the linguistic structure of a text but also the relationship between the text, context, and underlying social practices. This is crucial for assessing students' writing skills, particularly in constructing cohesive and coherent paragraphs. According to Van Dijk (1997), discourse is a linguistic unit larger than a sentence and involves pragmatic and cognitive aspects in understanding meaning. Thus, discourse analysis is suitable for assessing the development of topic sentences and the relationships between sentences in student-written paragraphs.

One of the main aspects of discourse analysis is text structure. A good paragraph should have a clear topic sentence, supporting sentences that develop the main idea, and a concluding sentence that reinforces or concludes the paragraph (Derewianka, 1990). This structure ensures

unity and cohesion of ideas within the paragraph. Furthermore, cohesion is an important aspect that connects sentences within a paragraph linguistically.

Haliday and Hasan (1976) explain cohesion through the use of linguistic devices such as conjunctions, references, repetition, and substitution. Cohesion ensures that sentences within a paragraph are well-connected, making the paragraph easy to understand. Moreover, cognitive and semantic coherence ensure a paragraph has a logical and consistent flow of thought (Schiffrin, 1987). Coherence depends heavily on an understanding of context and the writer's ability to organize ideas coherently.

In the context of higher education, the ability to write good paragraphs is crucial as a foundation for producing scientific papers, such as final assignments. Through discourse analysis, lecturers and researchers can identify weaknesses and strengths in student writing and then direct appropriate learning strategies (Hyland, 2003).

Using discourse analysis as a theoretical framework, this study aims to evaluate the ability of Kupang State Polytechnic students to write narrative, descriptive, and argumentative paragraphs, specifically in developing topic sentences and aspects of paragraph cohesion and coherence.

2.5 Research Methodology

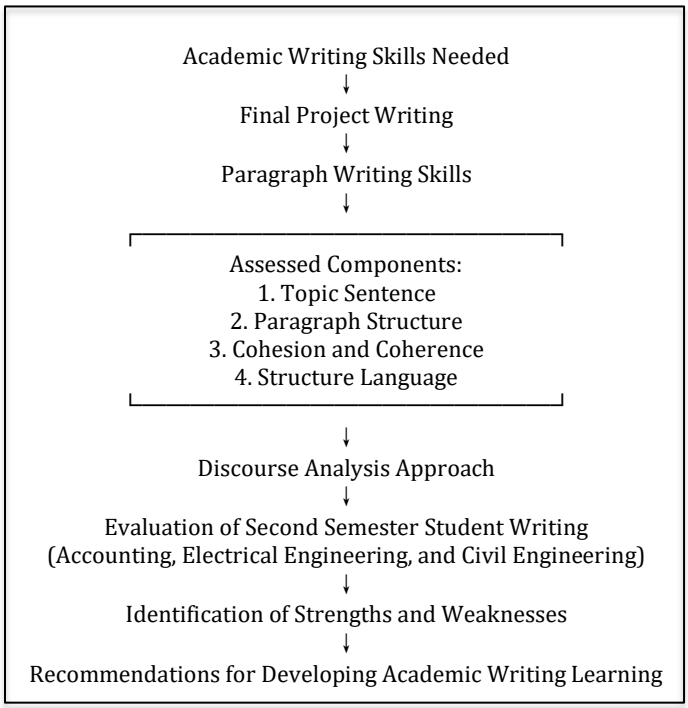
This research uses a qualitative approach with discourse analysis as the study type. This approach was chosen to in-depth explore students' writing skills through an analysis of the structure of their written texts. The research subjects were second and sixth semester students from three departments at Kupang State Polytechnic: Accounting, Electrical Engineering, and Civil Engineering. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, including students who had taken Indonesian Language courses.

The primary data in this study consisted of student-written texts in the form of paragraphs. A documentation method was used to collect these writing samples, which were then examined to assess paragraph structure, topic sentence development, cohesion, and grammatical accuracy. The data were analyzed using a textual discourse analysis approach, involving several analytical components. These included identifying topic sentences within each paragraph, analyzing overall paragraph structure—covering topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences—and examining cohesion through the use of conjunctions, references, repetition, and substitution. In addition, grammatical features such as spelling, sentence structure, and the appropriateness of language were assessed to determine the extent of students' mastery of academic writing conventions.

The analytical process followed the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. Through this systematic approach, the study aimed to generate a comprehensive and reliable understanding of students' paragraph writing skills and the linguistic elements that influence the clarity and coherence of their academic texts.

Paragraph writing skills are assessed through several important components: the ability to construct clear topic sentences, develop a coherent paragraph structure, maintain cohesiveness and coherence between sentences, and apply grammar appropriately. Assessment of these components is conducted using a discourse analysis approach, which allows researchers to deeply examine the structure, meaning relationships, and language use in students' texts. Through this approach, the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing can be comprehensively identified.

The results of this identification will then serve as the basis for developing recommendations for developing academic writing instruction in vocational education. Thus, this research not only provides an overview of student writing skills but also contributes to improving the quality of language and academic writing instruction at Kupang State Polytechnic.



To support the analysis as depicted in the conceptual framework diagram above, an instrument capable of systematically assessing students' paragraph writing skills is required. This instrument is structured based on the main components of discourse analysis: topic sentences, paragraph structure, cohesion and coherence, and grammar. Each aspect is described in measurable assessment indicators to identify the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing. The following table presents the aspects analyzed, along with indicators, qualitative descriptions, and additional explanatory notes that serve as references in the process of evaluating students' academic writing skills.

Table 1.
Assessment Instrument

No	Aspects Analyzed	Assessment Indicators	Qualitative Score/Description	Additional Notes/Explanations
1	Paragraph Structure	- There is an opening, body, and closing paragraph. - Ideas are developed logically.	Good / Adequate / Poor	Does the paragraph have a coherent structure?
2	Topic Sentences	- The topic sentence is clear and focuses on one main idea. - Sentence position is appropriate.	Clear / Unclear / Absent	Is the main idea well-conveyed?
3	Cohesion	- The use of conjunctions between sentences is appropriate. - There are consistent references or pronouns.	Good / Adequate / Poor	Are the sentences connected?
4	Coherence	- The ideas in the paragraph are meaningfully related.	Logic / Less logic/ Not logic	Can the reader follow the flow of thought?

5	Grammar	- Use of spelling and punctuation. - Appropriate sentence structure (S-P-O-Comp). - Consistency of time, aspect, and point of view.	Clear / Unclear / many errors	Are the sentences easy to understand and grammatically correct?

The qualitative assessment used in this study includes three categories: *Good/Clear/Accurate*, indicating that the student meets the criteria very well; *Adequate/Minor Errors*, showing that the student demonstrates proficiency but still exhibits minor deficiencies; and *Poor/Unclear/Many Errors*, which reflects that the student has not yet demonstrated mastery of the assessed aspect. These categories serve as a guideline for evaluating the various components of paragraph writing.

After the assessment instrument was developed based on the specific aspects and indicators of paragraph writing ability, the next step involved applying it to the students' written data. This application was intended to determine how each assessment criterion operates in analyzing the quality of the paragraphs produced by students. To illustrate this process, an example of the instrument's use is presented, demonstrating a concrete evaluation of a single student paragraph. This example highlights the assessment of paragraph structure, clarity of the topic sentence, cohesion, coherence, and grammatical accuracy, thereby providing a clearer understanding of how the evaluation framework functions in practice.

Table 2.
Example of Using Instruments (For Each Student Paragraph)

No	Aspects	Assessment	Notes
1	Paragraph Structure	Quite	There is an opening and body sentence, but the conclusion is unclear.
2	Topic Sentence	Unclear	There is no clear main idea at the beginning of the paragraph.
3	Cohesion	Very unclear	The conjunction "besides" is used, but it is inconsistent throughout the sentence.
4	Coherence	Lack of Logic	Ideas jump around without a logical flow.
5	Grammar	Many Errors	There are errors in sentence structure and spelling.

3. Results and Discussion

Academic writing skills are an important indicator of a student's readiness to write a scientific paper, such as a final project. In the context of vocational education, such as at Kupang State Polytechnic, this skill often remains a challenge because learning tends to focus on technical or practical aspects. However, the final project, which is a graduation requirement, requires students to be able to convey ideas in writing with a clear, cohesive structure and in accordance with academic principles. Related to the academic writing, the current research found some data as follows.

Data 1

"In campus life many activities that students must follow because to improve their knowledge and also the lecturers always give assignment although the time is busy but students must do it."

The annotation indicates several significant writing issues within the sentence. First, the topic sentence lacks clarity because it attempts to introduce multiple ideas simultaneously without establishing a single, coherent focus. In terms of cohesion, the sentence demonstrates an overuse and misuse of conjunctions—such as *because*, *also*, *although*, and *but*—which disrupts

the logical flow and produces an incoherent progression of ideas. The development of meaning is further weakened by unclear logical relations among the concepts of campus activities, lecturer assignments, and students' busy schedules, making it difficult to determine how these elements connect. Additionally, several grammatical errors are evident, including missing verbs (as in "many activities that students must follow"), incorrect infinitive constructions ("because to improve"), and inconsistent plural forms ("give assignment"). The absence of appropriate punctuation, particularly commas, results in a long run-on structure that further diminishes readability and clarity. Overall, these weaknesses significantly hinder the sentence's effectiveness as an academic expression.

Data 2

"Technology is important in modern era, but the students sometimes feel bored to study because the environment not support and therefore the learning process become not effective which the teacher must understand."

The annotation reveals several critical weaknesses within the paragraph. The topic sentence is problematic because it begins by stating that "technology is important," yet the discussion shifts abruptly to student boredom, resulting in an unfocused and unstable central idea. Cohesion and coherence are also compromised, as the conjunctions—such as *but*, *because*, and *therefore*—fail to establish logical connections between the ideas presented. Grammatical issues further contribute to the lack of clarity, including incorrect verb forms ("environment not support," "process become") and the absence of necessary articles in phrases such as "modern era" and "learning process." In addition, there is a significant logical gap: the paragraph does not clearly explain how the concepts of technology, learning environment, and teacher understanding are related, leaving the overall argument conceptually fragmented. The sentence structure itself is overly long and contains multiple mixed ideas, making the paragraph difficult to process and diminishing its effectiveness in conveying a coherent message.

Data 3

"Library is facility that every university has it, so the students must going there for reading but many of them not do because they have many another works and also because the time is not enough."

The student's paragraph demonstrates several notable issues that impede clarity and coherence. Although the topic sentence introduces the idea of the library as an important academic facility, this focus is quickly abandoned as the paragraph shifts to unrelated issues such as student obligations, time management, and work demands. This indicates a weak or unfocused topic sentence that fails to guide the development of subsequent ideas. In addition, several grammatical errors are present, including missing articles (e.g., *"library is a facility"*), incorrect verb forms (e.g., *"must going," "not do"*), and incorrect expressions such as *"many another works."* These errors reduce readability and disrupt the academic tone of the writing. Cohesion is also compromised by the repetitive and imprecise use of causal connectors such as *"because,"* which interrupts the logical flow and creates unclear causal links between the various points raised. Furthermore, the paragraph lacks coherence because it mixes different concepts—student obligations, time limitations, academic requirements—without a clear organizational structure to connect them. Redundancies such as *"every university has it"* further dilute the main idea and do not contribute meaningfully to the argument. Taken together, these issues show that the paragraph needs substantial improvement in topic development, grammar accuracy, and discourse organization.

Data 4
"Writing skill is difficult because students cannot understand grammar, and the sentences become not clear, however they try but the result still not good due to they don't know how to arrange the ideas logically."

The paragraph exhibits several cohesion issues, particularly in the use of conjunctions such as *because, and, however,* and *but.* These connectors are employed in ways that create contradictory sequencing, causing the ideas to appear disjointed rather than logically ordered. In addition to cohesion problems, the paragraph contains multiple grammatical errors. These include incorrect word placement, as seen in *"become not clear,"* the absence of necessary subjects in clauses such as *"the result still not good,"* and structurally incorrect subordinate clauses like *"due to they don't know."* Such errors hinder comprehension and weaken the overall clarity of the argument. Moreover, the paragraph struggles with logical development. Although it attempts to explain causes and effects, the sequence in which these relationships are presented is unclear, making it difficult for readers to follow the intended reasoning. Lastly, the paragraph functions as a run-on sentence, combining several ideas into a single extended structure. This lack of sentence boundaries reduces readability and further obscures the conceptual connections. To improve clarity, the paragraph should be divided into multiple well-structured sentences with appropriate connectors and syntactic accuracy.

Data 5
"The lecturer explain about paragraph but the students still confuse since the explanation too theory and not give example, which make the students don't improve their writing even though they already learn it in class."

The sentence contains several grammatical errors, including incorrect verb forms such as *"explain"* and *"still confuse,"* the inappropriate use of the noun phrase *"too theory,"* and an incorrect pronoun structure in *"make the students."* These mistakes contribute to reduced clarity and hinder the sentence's communicative effectiveness. Coherence issues also emerge, as the ideas concerning teacher explanation, student confusion, and learning outcomes are presented without a logical sequence, making the relationship between them difficult to interpret. Misused conjunctions such as *but* and *since* further disrupt the flow of ideas, as they are employed without a clear causal or hierarchical connection. Additionally, the topic sentence lacks strength because it attempts to critique teaching methods while simultaneously referencing several unrelated challenges, resulting in an unfocused central idea. The statement is further weakened by ambiguity, particularly in the phrase *"learn it in class,"* which does not specify what content or skill is being referred to. Overall, the sentence requires structural revision, clearer logical progression, and more precise language to enhance readability and meaning.

Data 6
"Many students want to write good paragraph, but the feedback from lecturer not routine and so they continue doing same mistake again and again although they already submit the assignment many times."

The sentence contains several grammatical problems, including the absence of a necessary verb in the clause *"feedback… not routine,"* incorrect article usage in phrases such as *"good paragraph,"* and plural inconsistencies exemplified by *"same mistake."* These errors reduce clarity and weaken the overall linguistic accuracy. Cohesion is also compromised due to the illogical sequencing of conjunctions—*but, so,* and *although*—which are used without a coherent rhetorical or causal structure. The topic development further lacks clarity, as the sentence abruptly shifts

from discussing students' desire to write effectively to the issue of insufficient feedback, providing no explicit link between these ideas. Redundancy emerges through unnecessary repetition, particularly in the pairing of *"again and again"* with *"many times,"* which conveys the same meaning. Additionally, the sentence suffers from mechanical issues, including a comma splice that joins independent clauses improperly. These weaknesses collectively diminish the sentence's readability and argumentative precision, indicating the need for clearer structure, more accurate grammar, and stronger logical progression.

Data 7

"Reading habit is important because can increase vocabulary, however the students seldom reading book, therefore their writing become lack and the grammar cannot develop well."

The sentence demonstrates several grammatical weaknesses, including a missing subject in the clause *"because it can increase,"* as well as incorrect verb forms such as *"seldom reading"* and the ungrammatical expression *"become lack."* Cohesion is also compromised by the inappropriate sequencing of conjunctions—*because, however,* and *therefore*—which are used without a logical rhetorical progression. The topic sentence lacks focus, as the discussion begins with reading habits but shifts abruptly to grammar development without establishing a meaningful connection between the two themes. As a result, coherence is weakened; the ideas relating to reading frequency, vocabulary acquisition, writing quality, and grammatical ability are presented in a disjointed manner rather than as a logically integrated argument. Additionally, the phrase *"become lack"* reflects inaccurate word choice and contributes further to the overall linguistic imprecision. These issues collectively obscure the intended message, indicating the need for clearer topic orientation, more appropriate grammar, and stronger logical sequencing.

Data 8

"Some paragraphs is not having topic sentence, then the ideas suddenly change to other issues that not relation, and the conjunctions using wrong so the paragraph look jump and not coherent."

The sentence contains multiple grammatical errors, including incorrect subject–verb agreement in the phrase *"paragraphs is,"* inappropriate use of the continuous form in *"not having,"* improper adjective construction such as *"not relation,"* and incorrect verb forms like *"using wrong."* Cohesion is also weak, as the conjunctions *then, and,* and *so* are used in a sequence that does not convey a clear or logical progression of ideas. Coherence problems are evident as well; although the sentence attempts to describe weaknesses in paragraph construction, it shifts abruptly between unrelated points, inadvertently mirroring the very issues it seeks to explain. The topic is insufficiently developed, offering only fragmented statements rather than a structured elaboration. Moreover, the sentence exhibits mechanical flaws, including missing articles and informal expressions such as *"look jump,"* which further reduce its clarity and academic appropriateness. Collectively, these issues highlight the need for greater grammatical accuracy, clearer logical organization, and more formal academic diction.

The findings of this study reveal a consistent pattern of linguistic and structural challenges in the academic writing of vocational students. Across the data, students demonstrate persistent weaknesses in constructing clear and well-focused topic sentences, leading to paragraphs that lack unified direction and conceptual control. Idea development is frequently illogical, fragmented, or abruptly shifting, indicating limited understanding of coherent paragraph organization. Cohesion problems are widespread, especially in the misuse, overuse, or illogical sequencing of conjunctions and transitional markers, which disrupt the flow of arguments and

obscure intended meanings. Grammatical deficiencies—including incorrect verb forms, subject–verb disagreement, missing articles, faulty syntax, and semantic inaccuracy—further impede clarity and reduce the readability of student texts. These linguistic issues are compounded by external factors such as limited writing practice, predominantly theoretical instruction, insufficient lecturer feedback, and weak reading habits. Collectively, these findings underscore that the academic writing difficulties of vocational students are multidimensional, involving both linguistic competence and literacy practices, and therefore require comprehensive instructional interventions. Next, this discussion also connects the research findings to paragraph writing theory, discourse analysis approaches, and the learning context at vocational colleges.

3.1. Ability to Formulate Topic Sentences

The research findings indicate that most students are unable to formulate topic sentences that are clear, focused, and in line with the paragraph's purpose. This situation is evident in the many paragraphs that begin with overly general sentences or even jump straight into details without first stating the main idea. As a result, readers have difficulty understanding the direction of the idea from the outset, and the paragraph loses its primary function as a focused unit of thought. This situation indicates a gap between students' writing skills and the demands of academic writing, which require clarity and coherence of ideas.

This weakness can be explained through theoretical perspectives on the function of topic sentences in paragraph writing. According to paragraph writing theory, the topic sentence serves as the central idea that directs the entire paragraph. Oshima and Hogue (1999) emphasized that a good topic sentence must be able to guide supporting sentences and maintain coherence of ideas so that the paragraph is structured coherently and coherently. However, the results of this study indicate that many students are unable to apply this principle effectively. They tend to place random information at the beginning of the paragraph without considering the logical relationships between sentences, resulting in a blurred flow of thought and a loss of coherence in the paragraph.

Furthermore, this unclear topic sentence appears differently in each type of paragraph analyzed. In narrative paragraphs, for example, students often begin their writing with a specific event without determining the focus of the story they wish to convey. In descriptive paragraphs, topic sentences tend to be general definitions that do not specifically describe an object or situation. Meanwhile, in argumentative paragraphs, although opinions are stated, they are not explicitly formulated as claims requiring supporting reasons and evidence. This difference in error forms indicates that problems in formulating topic sentences are fundamental and widespread across various types of writing.

Considering these findings, it can be concluded that students do not yet understand the structural function of topic sentences as the primary driver of idea development in paragraphs. This inability not only affects writing clarity but also impacts the ability to think logically, analytically, and systematically, which are the foundation of academic writing. Therefore, explicit learning is needed that emphasizes recognizing the characteristics, patterns, and strategies for writing topic sentences in a focused manner. Through repeated practice and constructive feedback from lecturers, students are expected to be able to produce paragraphs that are focused, coherent, and aligned with the academic demands of vocational education.

3.2. Paragraph Structure and Development

Students' weaknesses in formulating topic sentences directly impact the weak structure of paragraph development. Data analysis shows that some paragraphs lack a logical connection between the topic sentence and supporting sentences. Many sentences within paragraphs stand alone without supporting the main idea. In paragraph theory, the structure of idea development

can be chronological, spatial, cause-and-effect, general-to-specific, or specific-to-general. However, research findings indicate that students rarely use development patterns consistently. In argumentative paragraphs, for example, students express an opinion, then provide examples, but these examples are not explained or linked back to the main idea. The lack of directed idea development results in paragraphs that are shallow, unsystematic, and lack coherence. This emphasizes the need for students to learn materials that provide models of ideal paragraphs along with structural analysis so they can see how ideas develop gradually and logically.

3.3. Cohesion and Coherence

One of the dominant findings in this study was weak cohesion (continuity of form) and coherence (continuity of meaning). Cohesion includes the use of conjunctions, references, substitutions, and controlled repetition. Coherence relates to the order of ideas, so that a paragraph feels fluid. Students in this study frequently demonstrated inappropriate use of conjunctions, which weakened the cohesion of their paragraphs. Common errors included the repetitive use of *and* in contexts that required a cause-and-effect conjunction, the placement of *because* in sentences that did not express a reason, and the use of contrastive conjunctions such as *however* or *but* when the relationship between ideas was actually explanatory rather than contrastive. These patterns indicate that many students have not yet mastered the functional distinctions between different types of conjunctions, resulting in unclear logical connections within their writing.

These errors indicate that students do not yet understand the logical function of conjunctions. This causes paragraphs to become mechanical and not flow naturally. Argumentative paragraphs exhibit this problem most often, because this type of paragraph requires a strong logical connection between claims, reasons, and support. Furthermore, there is a disorganization of ideas that makes paragraphs incoherent. Students often switch topics without adequate transitions or mix two main ideas in a single paragraph. This condition supports previous research that cohesion and coherence are the most difficult aspects of writing skills, especially for non-language students.

3.4. Grammar and Sentence Structure

The grammar analysis reveals that students continue to experience difficulties in several fundamental areas, including incomplete use of subject–predicate–object (SPO) patterns, the production of run-on or overly extended sentences, inappropriate use of pronouns, and frequent morphological errors involving affixes such as *me-*, *di-*, and *-kan*. In addition, many students demonstrated confusing or incorrect use of punctuation. These errors not only hinder readability but also obscure the clarity of the ideas being expressed. In academic writing, strong sentence structure is essential, as it forms the foundation for producing well-organized and meaningful paragraphs. The higher error rates observed among students from engineering and other vocational majors suggest that they are less accustomed to writing in formal academic contexts and have limited exposure to structured writing practices. This underscores the importance of instructional approaches that integrate paragraph writing with functional grammar to strengthen students' overall academic literacy.

3.5. Research Implications for Teaching Material Development

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of paragraph writing teaching materials in vocational higher education institutions, particularly in the context of Kupang State Polytechnic. Students' weaknesses in formulating topic sentences, maintaining paragraph cohesion, and applying grammar indicate an urgent need for more applicable, contextual, and competency-oriented teaching materials.

The Need for Skills-Based Teaching Materials, Not Just Theory

Research shows that students often receive theoretical explanations of writing rules rather than direct writing practice. As a result, they cognitively understand writing concepts but lack the skills to apply them. Therefore, teaching materials need to be designed with a skills-based approach, which places a greater emphasis on practice than theory. For example, after learning the concept of a paragraph, students are immediately asked to write a paragraph on a vocational topic such as "The Role of Technology in Civil Engineering Fieldwork" or "Accountants' Responsibilities for Financial Statements." Lecturers then provide focused feedback on paragraph structure, topic sentences, and coherence of ideas.

Developing teaching materials with a process-based writing approach

The research finding that students rarely revise indicates that writing instruction is still oriented toward the final product, not the process. Therefore, teaching materials need to guide students through the five stages of writing: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and simple publication. For example, in the prewriting stage, students create a mind map on the topic "Occupational Safety in Electrical Workshops." In the revision stage, students are asked to compare their initial draft with the revised results based on the lecturer's input. This cycle trains their awareness that writing is an iterative process that results in better quality writing.

Explicit Modules on Topic Sentences and Paragraph Structure

Research findings indicate that unclear topic sentences are the most fundamental problem in student writing. Therefore, teaching materials need to provide a dedicated module containing step-by-step explanations on how to write effective topic sentences. The module could include contrasting examples such as the following:

- Inaccurate: "Electricity is essential for life."
- Correct: "The use of electricity in an electrical engineering laboratory requires students to understand proper safety procedures."

Students are then asked to write similar topic sentences for their respective fields, making the exercise more contextual and relevant to the vocational world.

Integrating cohesion, conjunctions, and coherence into context

Many students use conjunctions incorrectly or repeatedly. Therefore, teaching materials need to present a list of conjunctions based on their logical function—for example, addition (besides, also, and), cause-and-effect (because, so that), comparison (like, similarly, as well as), and contrast (however, although). Example exercise: Students are asked to correct a paragraph that lacks cohesion, for example, by replacing "and" with "so that" to indicate a cause-and-effect relationship. This exercise can be related to technical texts, such as lab reports or field project reports.

Mini-corridor of basic grammar (grammar essentials)

Students often make basic errors in sentence structure, such as incomplete subject-predicate elements and incorrect use of affixes, , and inconsistent spelling. Therefore, teaching materials should include mini-modules on practical grammar. For example, students are asked to correct the following sentences:
• Incorrect: "The students participated in the practicum activities well because they were disciplined and understood the tools used."
• Correct: "The students participated in the practicum activities well because they were disciplined and understood the tools used."
With exercises like this, students can learn to correct errors based on real-life examples from their own writing.

Developing teaching materials based on real-life examples from the vocational world

As a vocational institution, teaching materials on writing must be contextualized to the students' areas of expertise. For example, for Accounting majors, students could write an argumentative paragraph on "Professional Ethics in Financial Auditing." For Civil Engineering majors, they could write a descriptive paragraph on "Steps for Efficient Concrete Casting." Meanwhile, Electrical Engineering students could write a narrative paragraph on "First Experience Operating an Automatic Control Panel." With this approach, students realize that academic writing skills are also useful in their professional work.

Providing a clear and consistent assessment rubric

Students often don't know the assessment criteria for their writing. Therefore, teaching materials need to include a simple rubric outlining the aspects being assessed, such as clarity of topic sentences, idea development, cohesion, and language accuracy. For example, the rubric could take the form of a three-level scale: Good, Adequate, and Needs Improvement. For example:
• Good: The topic sentence is clear and focused.
• Adequate: The topic sentence is present but lacks specificity.
• Needs Improvement: No topic sentence is visible.
With this rubric, students can assess their own writing before being corrected by the lecturer.

Designing teaching materials based on self-learning

Limited face-to-face class time requires students to study independently outside of class hours. Therefore, teaching materials need to provide supporting materials such as short writing exercises with answer keys, annotated paragraph examples (which include explanatory notes for each sentence), and reflection sheets to assess personal writing difficulties. For example, students could be asked to observe a sample paragraph with a note such as "the topic sentence is placed at the beginning of the paragraph because it serves to introduce the main idea." This type of exercise builds metacognitive awareness of the writing process.

Integration of feedback components (feedback-oriented materials)

Because feedback is an essential part of writing instruction, teaching materials should include a paragraph correction sheet format or peer-review sheet. For example, students

exchange paragraphs and assess them based on three aspects: topic sentences, cohesion, and grammar. The lecturer then reviews the corrections to ensure the accuracy of the assessment. This process encourages students to be more reflective and improves their self-editing skills.

Implications for the course curriculum

All components of the teaching materials need to be aligned with the learning outcomes of the Indonesian Language course at the Kupang State Polytechnic. These outcomes include students' ability to write paragraphs that are coherent, effective, and relevant to their respective vocational fields. Therefore, the curriculum needs to provide space for structured writing practice—for example, weekly paragraph writing assignments with lecturer feedback, as well as a final project in the form of a vocational mini-essay. In this way, academic writing instruction not only meets academic demands but also equips students with the literacy skills needed in the workplace.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the paragraph writing skills of second-semester students in three departments at Kupang State Polytechnic have not yet reached the expected academic standards. Students still have difficulty formulating topic sentences, maintaining paragraph cohesion and coherence, and applying correct grammar. The lack of clarity in topic sentences results in paragraphs lacking a clear direction, while weak cohesion prevents paragraphs from flowing logically. The prevalence of grammatical errors indicates that students have not yet mastered the basics of sentence structure and spelling in academic writing. Factors contributing to these weaknesses include overly theoretical learning methods, minimal writing practice, a lack of direct feedback, and poor reading habits.

This research offers broad and significant contributions to improving the quality of vocational education, particularly in enhancing the academic writing skills of students at the State Polytechnic of Kupang. Through a discourse analysis approach, the study not only identifies weaknesses in paragraph structure, topic sentences, cohesion, and grammar but also provides an empirical foundation for strengthening language learning in vocational higher education. The findings demonstrate that strong academic writing skills—reflecting critical, logical, and systematic thinking—are essential for producing high-quality final assignments. Improving these skills directly enhances the quality of students' academic work and better equips them to meet academic and professional challenges.

Furthermore, the results of this study can inform the development of more effective curricula and learning methods for Indonesian language instruction. Grounded in discourse analysis, the pedagogical implications emphasize the importance of teaching approaches that extend beyond linguistic rules toward contextual and communicative writing skills, making instruction more relevant to the needs of vocational learners. The study also contributes to efforts to enhance graduates' competencies in writing technical and scientific reports, which are crucial in professional environments where project documentation, activity reports, and technical studies require clarity, accuracy, and structured communication.

From a theoretical perspective, this research enriches the field of applied linguistics, particularly within the understudied context of vocational education, and opens new avenues for interdisciplinary inquiry that connects language, education, and vocational disciplines. Moreover, the study has the potential to increase students' confidence in academic writing and communication, helping to develop graduates who are not only technically skilled but also academically literate and capable of competing at both national and global levels. Overall, the research offers practical benefits for students and lecturers at the State Polytechnic of Kupang

and holds long-term implications for elevating the quality of vocational education and advancing academic literacy on a broader scale.

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