



Challenges Faced by Second Language Learners in Writing Paragraphs at Secondary Schools: Teachers' Perspectives in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

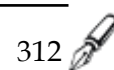
This paper investigates challenges South African secondary school second-language (L2) learners face in paragraph writing and identifies effective pedagogical solutions, as perceived by their teachers. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 12 in-service English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers from the public secondary schools in a selected district of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Participant demographics included teachers with 3 to 18 years of teaching experience, representing rural-area school contexts. The research instruments comprised a semi-structured interview protocol (schedule) with questions aligned with the study's objectives. Data analysis employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model, involving verbatim transcription, inductive coding, and iterative theme refinement to identify patterns related to writing challenges and pedagogical strategies. Findings reveal internal factors (limited linguistic competence, poor planning, low confidence) and external factors (time constraints, few writing opportunities) as key difficulties. Specific challenges include constructing topic sentences, ensuring cohesion and coherence, and applying grammar. Effective strategies identified include explicit instruction on paragraph structure, process-oriented approaches, blended learning tools, and formative feedback. The study concludes that improving L2 paragraph writing requires a shift from product-focused evaluation to a scaffolded, process-oriented, technology-enhanced approach.



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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex and cognitively demanding skill, and for learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), writing academic texts can be particularly challenging. One essential element of academic writing is the paragraph. Paragraph writing requires students to show their ability to develop ideas, organize them logically, and use correct grammar and mechanics (Alghamdy, 2023). Mastering the skill of paragraph writing is an indispensable aspect of the student's academic success, as well as their effective and appropriate communication in both professional and social contexts. The literature background, including studies conducted with L2 learners at different educational levels and from diverse educational backgrounds and backgrounds, has repeatedly established that such learners struggle to write organized, cohesive, and coherent paragraphs (Ahmed, 2025; Haidari & Zada, 2025). However, despite its significance, paragraph writing remains a persistent weakness for most L2 learners. Their teachers often report that they write incomplete paragraphs that lack clear topic sentences, do not logically organize supporting information, contain various grammar and technical errors, and present other related

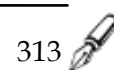


problems. Such difficulties negatively impact students' overall writing development and performance. The issue has been extensively and well researched in the literature, yet it remains important to continue examining it, particularly in relation to classroom practitioners' perspectives on the reasons for it and their beliefs about the instructional approaches they find most effective in helping their students develop the targeted skills.

The literature review is structured around the two research objectives, synthesizing findings from recent studies to provide a contextual understanding of the current research. There are factors that lead to spelling challenges as follows: Teachers' observations about L2 paragraph writing cross-cut in terms of similar themes around learners' language limitations and instructional and systemic constraints in South African and other L2 learning settings. In both EFAL and EFL contexts, teachers often point to restricted vocabulary, weak grammatical control, and orthographic problems (capitalization, spelling, word spacing, omission, and substitution errors) as central obstacles to producing coherent and well-developed paragraphs (Ahmed, 2025; Zitha, 2024). Learners frequently struggle to generate and organize ideas, to formulate accurate sentences, and to link topics, supporting and concluding sentences, resulting in paragraphs with poor cohesion and coherence (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Ahmed, 2025). Teachers also attribute difficulties to poor prior English background and limited exposure to extended writing, which constrains familiarity with paragraph structure and genre conventions (Msuya & Abdala, 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025).

At the classroom level, large classes, time constraints, and an overloaded curriculum also limit opportunities for guided drafting, feedback, and revision, so learners receive fragmented guidance on "points" rather than holistic paragraph organization (Khatri & Khadka, 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). In South African EFAL contexts, teachers further identify their limited pedagogical content knowledge of writing and inadequate in-service support as factors that underpin the quality and consistency of writing instruction (Hlabisa et al., 2023; Dlamini et al., 2024). Finally, teachers report low learner motivation, lack of confidence, and anxiety about grammar and vocabulary as effective barriers that lead learners to avoid writing or to engage minimally in planning and revising paragraphs, thereby reinforcing persistent weaknesses in L2 paragraph writing (Dao & Dan, 2024; Yunus et al., 2024).

Analyses of different studies reveal a convergence of internal and external factors contributing to L2 learners' difficulties in paragraph writing. Language deficiencies seem to hold a lot of internal value. Research shows that language limitations constitute a major barrier, impeding learners from expressing their ideas fully and leading to concise, underdeveloped paragraphs (Ahmed, 2025; Alamri & Yaseen, 2021; Haidari & Zada, 2025). Grammatical faults, particularly in verb tense, sentence structure, and syntactical accuracy, further underdetermine clarity and coherence (Ahmed et al., 2024; Alghamdy, 2023). Furthermore, a lack of metacognitive and rhetorical awareness is frequently observed. Students sometimes encounter difficulties in understanding paragraph unity, formulating topic sentences, and logically organizing ideas, resulting in repetition and disarray (Ahmed et al., 2024; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). Psychological challenges, such as reduced self-confidence, anxiety, and lack of desire, hinder writing proficiency (Amrullah et al., 2023; Luciana et al., 2024). External educational and environmental factors also exert a significant influence. The impact of the first language (L1) on second language (L2) writing, particularly negative transfer in cognitive frameworks and grammar, is a well-documented phenomenon (Ahmed et al., 2024; Arachchi, 2025). Instructional constraints, such as large class sizes, time limitations, and a focus on product-oriented education rather than a process-oriented approach, hinder possibilities of meaningful writing practice and revision (Hidayati, 2018; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). Furthermore, inadequate comprehensive reading and exposure to exemplary texts deprives learners of implicit knowledge about text structure (Alamri & Yaseen, 2021).



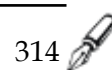
In addition to basic structural and grammatical issues, difficulties with textual cohesion and mechanical accuracy greatly reduce the paragraph's quality. Students sometimes fail to utilize appropriate cohesive devices or maintain regular verb tenses, resulting in paragraphs that appear as a collection of disjointed claims rather than a unified whole (Ahmed, 2025). The lack of linkages between paragraphs and internal cohesion is also read in a way that also affects the readability of the text. Furthermore, differences in perception of error severity may also result in a divergence between the learner's and instructor's goals, thereby also affecting the targeted improvement.

Research about Arab English foreign learners showed that learners perceived spelling errors as their primary mechanical difficulty in paragraph writing. On the other hand, their instructors showed that pupils perceived punctuation (e.g., the wrong use of commas and periods) as the primary factor that affects the clarity of meaning in paragraph construction ("Arab EFL Students' and Instructors' Perceptions of Errors," 2024). This perceptual disjunction shows that learners may be interested in only correcting surface spelling errors without paying attention to other vital syntactic and rhetorical punctuation standards that help organize ideas inside and between sentences in a paragraph. It is also regularly reported in the literature that emotional and motivational factors present internal barriers to writing development. A lack of self-confidence and heightened anxiety could also hinder learners and, in turn, lead them to avoid writing tasks or produce a limited amount of work in order not to make errors (Amrullah et al., 2023; Lucia et al., 2024). This is also increased by the common perception of students that English is "difficult" to learn, and as a result, students are demotivated, and this low level of motivation has a negative impact on the learner's writing process. A disengaged student is less likely to put effort into some of the pre-writing activities, such as planning and brainstorming, which are critical to writing a coherent paragraph. Arachchige (2025) notes that as a matter of fact, teachers generally encounter student disengagement and a lack of motivation, with students often resorting to using their first language (L1) as a cognitive crutch in dealing with L2 writing challenges. This coping strategy may also have negative effects on the development of real L2 syntactic coherence and paragraph structure.

In reviewing the existing L2 paragraph writing literature, the researcher identifies gaps in the research. A common limitation noted in several studies, including this one, is linguistic, systemic, and affective barriers. However, the focus on grammatical and mechanical aspects of paragraph writing at the expense of rhetorical and metacognitive levels still persists. On the other hand, teacher reports often point to systemic problems like large classes and restricted curriculum time. But how teachers navigate within these limits and exert agency in pedagogical decisions has not been given the empirical attention it deserves. Also, the role of affective and motivational issues is often mentioned, but their relationships with structural conditions are not always examined. It would be interesting to see how effective and motivational barriers interact with classroom contexts. Another lacuna is perceptual disjunctions between learners and teachers in terms of the seriousness of errors.

While this has been discussed in Arab EFL contexts, it is less clear what the situation is in African EFL classrooms. A final observation has to do with research design: Most studies are cross-sectional, reporting on one or more conditions at one point in time. Longitudinal or intervention studies could provide greater understanding of how students' paragraph writing develops over time with the introduction of sustained pedagogical innovations.

There are strategies to enhance paragraph writing, which are as follows: The reviewed literature foregrounds a set of diverse instructional techniques, positioning them as alternatives to traditional, teacher-centered approaches. However, the focus remains primarily on describing rather than critically evaluating these methods. Process-oriented approaches, including the Process Writing model (Ngubane et al., 2020) and collaborative strategies (Camerling, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2019), are presented as successful in promoting idea generation, peer interaction, and organizational skills. Explicit instruction in paragraph structure (Zhang, 2024) and Concept-Based Language Instruction (C-BLI) are both described as effective methods for scaffolding



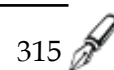
rhetorical awareness. Studies on technology-integrated and blended learning approaches (Mahmood et al., 2024) and strategy-based methods such as problem-based learning and cognitive activation (Alghamdy, 2023; Singh et al., 2020; Ulaywi, 2021) similarly report improvements in motivation and writing outcomes. Feedback and scaffolding are portrayed as essential, with studies pointing to the benefits of timely, specific, and supportive feedback (Ahmed, 2025; Raval, 2025). These findings do, however, tend to privilege idealized conditions and short-term effects, with relatively little interrogation of how these methods might work in under-resourced or systemically challenged settings.

The study has revealed several important gaps in the existing research. First, the feasibility and scalability of process-oriented, collaborative, and technology-based approaches in under-resourced EFAL contexts (e.g., overcrowded classrooms in South Africa) is not sufficiently explored. Second, the relationship between explicit structural instruction and more conceptual approaches like C-BLI remains underexplored, particularly in terms of how rhetorical awareness translates into independent writing practice.

Third, while feedback and scaffolding are widely acknowledged as important, few studies delve into their sustainability or long-term effects in the face of systemic constraints. Finally, while a variety of strategies are identified (from cognitive activation to blended learning), the literature offers few comparative or longitudinal studies that might tease out how these approaches might interact, reinforce, or potentially undermine each other in developing learners' paragraph writing competence. This gap in critical engagement with instructional methods underlines the need for context-sensitive, intervention-based research that moves beyond documenting efficacy in isolation to interrogating the durability, integration, and pedagogical adaptability of diverse instructional techniques.

This study is based on the sociocultural theory of learning, as articulated by Lev Vygotsky. The theory asserts that learning occurs as a social process, supported by cultural tools, language, and interactions with more knowledgeable individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Key concepts include the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which defines the gap between a learner's independent abilities and their potential accomplishments with support (Vygotsky, 1978), and scaffolding, the guidance used to aid this progression (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). This approach is highly relevant to L2 writing pedagogy. This approach supports collaborative writing through peer scaffolding (Yusuf, Jusoh, & Yusuf, 2019), emphasizes the importance of teacher feedback and explicit instruction (expert scaffolding), and incorporates process techniques that decompose the complex task of writing into manageable phases (Ngubane, Ntombela, & Govender, 2020). The integration of technical tools can be viewed as material mediation, a core concept of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This lens enables the analysis of specific instructional practices, such as collaborative work, blended learning, and guided planning, which serve as scaffolding to help learners transition from dependence to independence in paragraph writing.

This sociocultural perspective involves analyzing metacognition and self-regulation in writing development. Effective paragraph composition necessitates that learners integrate strategic planning, monitoring, and revision techniques. The shift from reliance on external, other-regulated scaffolding (such as teacher-generated outlines or peer evaluations) to the application of internal, self-regulated strategies (including autonomous brainstorming or coherence editing) exemplifies Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalization, in which social forms of mediation evolve into cognitive tools for the individual (as cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing paragraph writing, including explicit strategy instruction in planning and collaborative editing sessions, represent deliberate efforts to facilitate the internalization of regulatory processes (Landrieu et al., 2023). This perspective clarifies that strategies that make cognitive processes explicit and promote social collaboration, such as collaborative planning and think-aloud protocols during drafting, are generally more effective than approaches that portray writing as a solitary and unexamined task. This aligns with research



supporting the efficacy of process-oriented and collaborative methodologies (Ngubane et al., 2020; Yusuf et al., 2019).

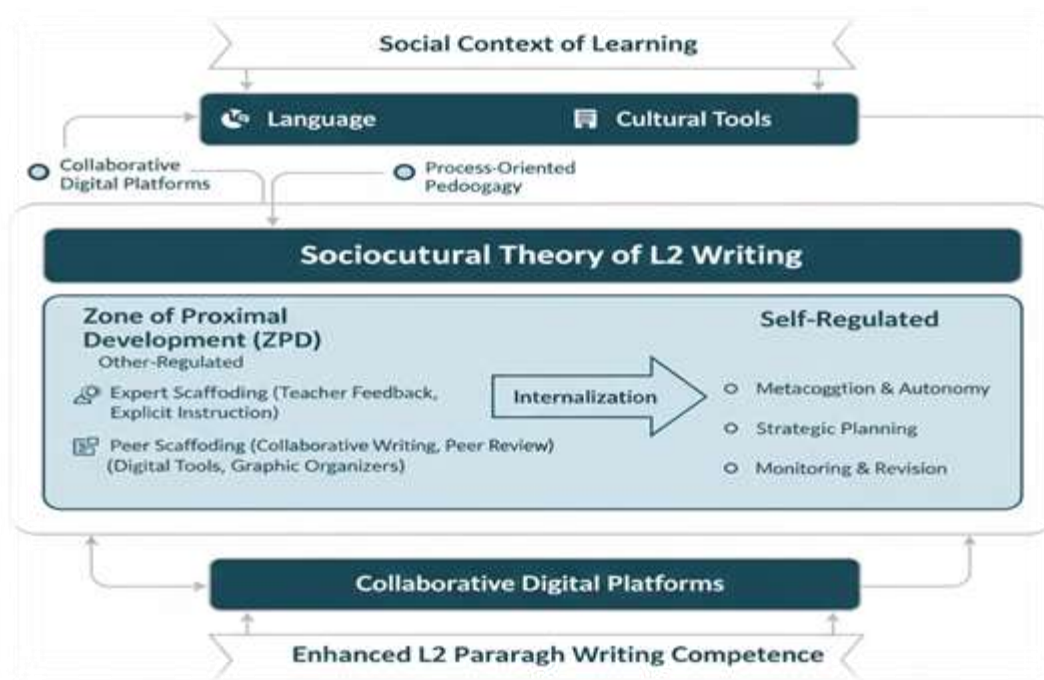


Figure 1. Summary of the theoretical framework

Source: Researcher's own illustration

The following research questions guide this study: What factors do teachers identify as leading to challenges in paragraph writing among second language learners? What strategies do teachers perceive as effective for enhancing paragraph writing skills in L2 learners?

Correspondingly, the objectives of this study are to analyze teachers' perspectives on the factors that cause difficulties in paragraph writing for L2 learners. To examine teachers' recommended and applied strategies for improving learners' paragraph writing proficiency.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research approach

The current study employed a qualitative approach to examine teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the paragraph-writing issues faced by L2 students. This choice was deeply informed by the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological research, most specifically the constructivist perspective on reality as the socially constructed product of meanings assigned to one's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach was selected for three interrelated reasons. First, the emphasis on depth rather than breadth, along with rich, detailed data collection and analysis, permits a more thorough, nuanced treatment of the complexities that influence writing instruction, which a standardized instrument could not have done justice to. Second, the integration of the views of those involved, in this case, teachers and instructors, while allowing them epistemic privilege, is essential for generating situated insights into both the problem and its resolution (Omodan, 2023). Third, phenomenology's goal of inquiring into the essence of certain phenomena as it presents itself in everyday, practical experience serves to tease out the central themes surrounding issues and strategies; this, in turn, provides the foundational knowledge that would inform the design of an interventionist follow-up study (van Manen, 2016). This method is the most informed and strategic for elucidating the "how" and "why" of the instructors' views and for generating the contextualized, descriptive data necessary to meet the objectives.



Research Design

Below is the flowchart of the research design used in this paper.

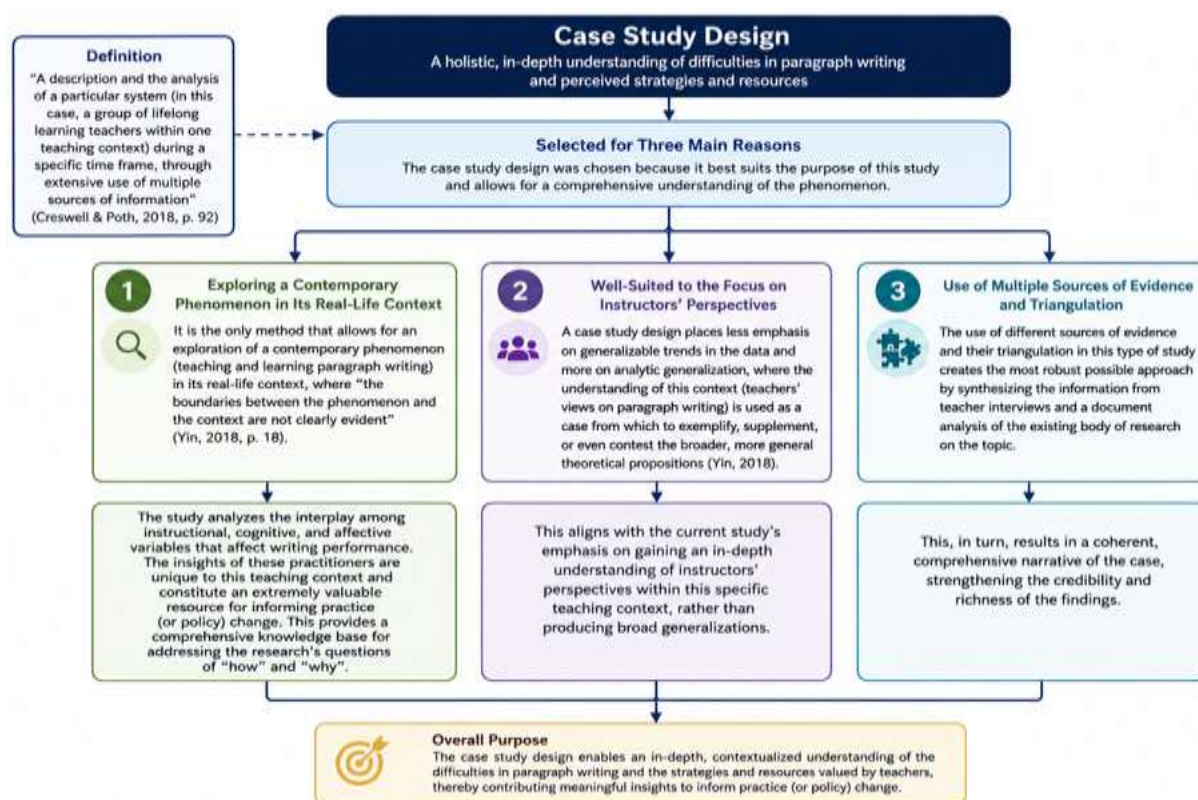


Figure 2. Researcher's own illustration of the case study research design

Sampling

The data analyzed in this study were empirical data collected from a non-probability purposive sample of 12 in-service L2 teachers. The study involved 12 in-service English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers from three public secondary schools in a selected district of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, representing rural-area school contexts. The demographic breakdown of the participants is as follows: teaching experience ranged from 3 to 18 years; gender distribution comprised 8 females and 4 males; all held at least a bachelor of education degree, with three possessing postgraduate qualifications in language teaching. Participants taught in classrooms with average class sizes of 45–60 learners and had direct, ongoing experience teaching paragraph writing to L2 learners in Grade 10–12 EFAL classrooms.

Purposive sampling is a strategy in which the researcher handpicks the study's participants, selecting them based on criteria that ensure substantial, relevant, and meaningful data on the investigation's focus (Patton, 2015). To be eligible for the sample, potential participants needed to meet two inclusion criteria: they should be in-service teachers currently teaching English as an additional language in the South African context, and they should have had direct, ongoing experience of teaching paragraph writing. This sampling method was essential for this type of qualitative case study investigation, where representativeness and the statistical properties of the sample are less important; in fact, the main consideration was to select an "information-rich" case (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

The main data collection tool utilized for the study was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen for its distinct affordance of balancing structure and flexibility, as well as its capacity to systematically meet the research goals while still allowing

participants to describe their experiences in their own words (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews with each of the 12 teachers in the sample were conducted, audio-recorded with participants' prior written informed consent, and then transcribed to ensure verbatim accuracy and completeness of the text for analysis. The interview protocol was developed and guided by a set of semi-structured questions. I used the interview protocol (schedule) with open-ended questions that aligned with the study aims and centered on three broad themes: (1) teachers' direct observations and assessments of their students' paragraph-writing abilities; (2) their insights into the factors that influence these issues; and (3) the strategies they utilized themselves (or could potentially recommend) to improve paragraph-writing skills. The use of this approach enabled a meaningful, dialogic inquiry into the case, yielding rich, detailed data for cultivating an in-depth understanding of the instructional context and the phenomenon of paragraph-writing instruction as understood by the practitioners.

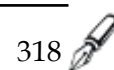
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Thematic analysis was used to discern and interpret patterns and themes in pedagogical practice. Verbatim transcripts of all the interviews were prepared, and the relevant data were extracted from the observation notes through a process of close reading. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was assured using pseudonyms.

Table 1. Presentation of Findings

Theme	Category	Key Findings (Synthesised)	Illustrative Evidence from Teachers
Theme 1: Factors Leading to Paragraph-Writing Challenges	Deficiencies in linguistic and rhetorical knowledge	Learners demonstrate limited understanding of paragraph structure, topic sentences, cohesion, grammar, and vocabulary, resulting in incoherent and underdeveloped paragraphs.	Learners "cannot identify a topic sentence" and view paragraphs as "just a group of sentences" (Teachers A, H). Persistent grammar and vocabulary errors hinder the expression of ideas (Teachers B, I).
	Poor planning and cognitive strategies	The absence of pre-writing leads to weak idea generation, repetition, poor sequencing, and a lack of coherence within paragraphs.	Learners "jump straight into the task without brainstorming" (Teacher C) and "repeat the same points" due to an inability to develop ideas (Teacher J).
	Psychological and affective factors	Low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and negative attitudes toward English reduce paragraph length, depth, and engagement.	Learners perceive English as "difficult" and keep paragraphs short due to fear of errors (Teachers G, L).
	L1 interference and limited L2 exposure	Code-switching, transfer from home language structures, and limited reading exposure negatively affect paragraph cohesion and structure.	Learners "think in their home language but write in English," causing structural confusion (Teacher D). Limited reading reduces exposure to



Theme	Category	Key Findings (Synthesised)	Illustrative Evidence from Teachers
Theme 2: Strategies for Enhancing Paragraph Writing	Explicit instruction and differentiated scaffolding	Teachers emphasise the explicit teaching of paragraph structure, using simplified models to support learners' understanding.	good models (Teacher F). Use of lower-grade textbooks to model paragraph writing before independent tasks (Teacher G).
	Institutionalising the writing process	Systematic planning and pre-writing activities significantly improve paragraph quality, coherence, and idea development.	Learners who “first plan” produce better paragraphs, while a lack of planning results in disorganisation (Teachers L, C).
	Collaborative and interactive learning	Learner challenges in idea development and sequencing point to the need for peer discussion, collaborative writing, and peer review.	Repetition of ideas due to uncertainty suggests the benefit of collaborative brainstorming (Teacher J).
	Building confidence and reducing affective barriers	Confidence-building strategies reduce anxiety and encourage learners to elaborate ideas more fully in paragraphs.	Scaffolding through simpler texts and supportive environments helps address fear and low confidence (Teachers G, L).

The findings are presented according to the two main themes derived from the research objectives. Analysis of the verbatim interview data from the 12 participating teachers reveals a complex interplay of factors that inhibit learners' paragraph-writing proficiency.

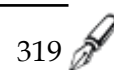
Summary of the findings

Theme 1: Causes of learners' paragraph writing problems

As shown in Table 1, various interrelated linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and contextual factors contribute to learners' challenges in paragraph writing. The teachers identified learners' inadequate understanding of paragraph structure, including a lack of a topic sentence, cohesion, and the sequencing of ideas, as a key linguistic factor contributing to their writing difficulties. The structural deficiency, coupled with recurring grammatical errors and limited vocabulary, severely impacted learners' writing ability, hindering them from expressing their ideas clearly and coherently. On the cognitive and contextual fronts, the findings showed that learners' failure to perform the necessary pre-writing activities, such as planning or brainstorming, led to underdeveloped, repetitive, and disorganized paragraphs. On the affective side, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of motivation for English contributed to learners' reluctance to expand their ideas. Additionally, teachers indicated that interference from the first language, lack of exposure to English through reading, and time-pressured assessment conditions affected their sentence construction, cohesion, and overall paragraph quality.

Theme 2: Solutions to learners' paragraph writing problems

In response to these challenges, teachers suggested multiple remedial strategies to enhance learners' paragraph-writing abilities. Foremost, they proposed to directly instruct on paragraph



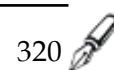
structure through differentiation scaffolding, such as simple models and examples. By doing so, the teachers could make the abstract aspects of writing more tangible and understandable to the learners. The findings also showed the need to institutionalize the writing process, especially the planning and pre-writing stages, as learners who took time to plan their writing produced more coherent, organized, and idea-rich paragraphs. On the affective and contextual fronts, peer discussion and shared writing were recommended to address learners' difficulties with generating, ordering, and self-editing ideas. On the other hand, strategies that could help build learners' confidence and reduce anxiety about making mistakes were considered critical to improving their engagement in second-language paragraph writing.

Discussion

This case presents a rich, context-specific corroboration and extension of existing L2 paragraph writing challenges and pedagogical themes (see table 1 for the findings). The participant teachers reported challenges related to various aspects of writing, including difficulty with topic sentences, logical cohesion, grammatical accuracy, and pre-writing planning. This is in line with the experiences documented in secondary and pre-university EFL classes in Sudan, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, where students encountered challenges with vocabulary, sentence construction, cohesion, and paragraph organization (Ahmed, 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Haidari & Zada, 2025). The convergence of experiences across different settings suggests that L2 paragraph writing remains a significant developmental challenge in language learning. This challenge is not due to context-specific shortcomings but to the interplay of cognitive processing and limited language proficiency (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Yunus et al., 2024).

The study identifies a web of interrelated causes spanning linguistic, cognitive-metacognitive, psychological, and socio-contextual factors that mutually reinforce one another. Limited vocabulary and unstable grammar control result in learners' creation of shorter, less coherent paragraphs with repetitive, simplistic sentence structures, as noted by Tanzanian and Indonesian researchers in language classrooms (Msuya & Abdala, 2025; Amrullah et al., 2023). These surface features of language use are then internalized and perpetuated by the resulting lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes, which discourage learners from experimenting, elaborating, or revising. This mirrors research on the impact of low confidence and anxiety on L2 writing and paragraph development (Yunus et al., 2024; Annisa & Yunita, 2025). Recast in a sociocultural perspective, these observations suggest that support from other learners within their Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a critical factor. Grounded in Vygotskian theory, South African and Tanzanian research point to scaffolding, co-writing, and acknowledgment of students' linguistic repertoires as practices that facilitate learners' ability to perform beyond their independent level (Ngubane et al., 2020; Hlabisa et al., 2023). In the current study, teacher practices such as the use of simplified models and a heavy focus on planning can be seen as context-contingent scaffolding, providing temporary structure to the task while shifting more responsibility to the learner. Supporting evidence from peer-based interventions shows that collaborative and cooperative writing can enable idea generation, sequencing, and monitoring of form, thereby supporting the joint construction of writing knowledge and strategies (Ahmed, 2025; Yusuf et al., 2019).

Pedagogical implications from the teachers' perspective align broadly with learner-centered, process-oriented approaches discussed in the L2 writing literature. The focus on differentiated scaffolding, explicit modeling of paragraph structure, and valuing of pre-writing planning reflects a shift away from exclusive product-oriented assessment to a more developmental perspective on writing. This trend is consistent with recommendations for English First Additional Language (EFAL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in South African, Vietnamese, and Tanzanian contexts (Ngubane et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Msuya & Abdala, 2025). However, a gap also surfaces in the teachers' self-reports: a more limited mention of systematic collaborative techniques, technology-mediated feedback, and automated



and blended tools, which have been shown to enhance accuracy, motivation, and engagement in paragraph writing (Ahmed, 2025; Yunus et al., 2024; Wondim et al., 2024). Similar gaps between espoused or research-supported practices and classroom realities have been associated with large class sizes, time constraints, limited resources, and insufficient professional development in writing pedagogy (Dao & Dan, 2024; Hlabisa et al., 2023). This case thus adds to the evidence that reinforces the need for teacher education in writing instruction, especially in socioculturally and linguistically diverse contexts, and for systemic resource allocation that helps teachers operationalize their understanding of high-impact strategies into consistent classroom practice (Ngubane et al., 2020; Dao & Dan, 2024).

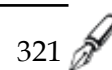
CONCLUSION

This study's fundamental finding is that South African secondary school L2 learners' paragraph writing difficulties stem not from isolated linguistic deficits but from a self-reinforcing cycle in which limited vocabulary and weak grammar erode confidence, low confidence discourages pre-writing planning, absent planning produces disjointed paragraphs, and poor outcomes deepen anxiety—trapping learners in persistent underachievement. Breaking this cycle requires simultaneous intervention at linguistic, cognitive, and affective levels, not piecemeal grammar drills or product-focused evaluations. The theoretical implication refines Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by demonstrating that the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in L2 paragraph writing is not merely cognitive but also affective and contextual; scaffolding fails if it addresses structure while ignoring fear or motivation while neglecting explicit instruction. Practically, this study compels a pedagogical reorientation from product-oriented assessment toward process-oriented, scaffolded, and collaborative writing instruction that institutionalizes planning, normalizes revision, integrates peer interaction, and delivers formative feedback on manageable learning goals. Without such systemic shifts, learner paragraphs will remain underdeveloped regardless of curriculum changes. Finally, future research must pursue longitudinal intervention studies to examine the durability of multi-pronged approaches across rural, peri-urban, and urban contexts; investigate the feasibility of technology-mediated scaffolding in under-resourced rural classrooms; explore perceptual disjunctions between teachers and learners regarding error seriousness in African EFAL settings; and examine how professional learning communities can equip teachers with pedagogical content knowledge to implement scaffolded, process-oriented writing instruction consistently. Improving L2 paragraph writing demands a coordinated, scaffolded, and learner-responsive pedagogical system—a challenge now clear in its contours and urgent in its implications.

Recommendations

Drawing on the integrated analysis of teacher-identified challenges, evidence-based strategies from the scholarly literature, and the explanatory power of sociocultural theory, the following multi-level recommendations are proposed to enhance the teaching and learning of L2 paragraph writing.

At the classroom practice and pedagogy level, teachers should adopt a scaffolded, process-oriented approach that moves beyond product-focused evaluation. This begins by institutionalizing pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, and structured planning to address learners' tendency to "jump straight into the task without thinking." Explicit mini-lessons should target paragraph unity, topic sentence construction, cohesive devices, and logical sequencing, using simplified models and think-aloud protocols to make rhetorical structures visible and tangible. Structured collaborative activities—including joint construction, peer review, and cooperative brainstorming—should be regularly incorporated to operationalize social mediation within learners' Zones of Proximal Development. Furthermore, formative feedback should focus on one or two manageable elements per writing task, delivered in a



supportive, timely manner to lower the affective filter and gradually build learner confidence as they progress from joint to independent paragraph construction.

At the curriculum and materials design level, curricula must move away from isolated, decontextualized writing tasks toward a progressive, supportive architecture that explicitly links reading to writing through rhetorical models. A clear learning progression—from sentence construction to paragraph development to multi-paragraph texts—should be mapped across grade levels. Curriculum developers should integrate mediated technology use, including digital platforms such as Google Docs for collaborative drafting, graphic organizers for planning, and blended learning tools that provide automated or teacher-mediated feedback. The explicit linkage between reading comprehension activities and paragraph writing genres (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive) should be embedded in textbooks and lesson plans, ensuring learners encounter exemplary texts before being asked to produce their own paragraphs.

At the teacher education and professional support level, investment in informed mediators is essential. Pre-service and in-service teacher training must provide hands-on pedagogical instruction in process writing, problem-based learning (PBL), and cognitive activation strategies specifically applied to paragraph writing. Professional development programs should include practical EdTech training on using digital tools for feedback, sharing, and collaboration, even within under-resourced rural contexts where mobile-friendly, low-bandwidth solutions may be most feasible. Beyond initial training, schools should establish professional learning communities (PLCs) where EFAL teachers collaboratively analyze student writing samples, share successful instructional strategies, and engage in lesson study cycles focused on writing pedagogy. This social learning structure models for teachers the collaborative behavior expected from their students and ensures that scaffolded, process-oriented writing instruction becomes a sustained, collegial practice rather than an isolated innovation.

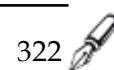
Taken together, these recommendations form an ecosystemic, multi-level structure that works vertically and horizontally. At the classroom level, scaffolded, process-oriented pedagogy emphasizing pre-writing, explicit instruction, collaborative activities, and formative feedback operationalizes social mediation within learners' ZPD. Supporting this endeavor long-term requires curriculum redesign toward progressive architectures that unite reading and writing through rhetorical models and the integration of mediated technologies. Simultaneously, teacher education must shift toward a model of "informed mediation" through hands-on training and sustained PLC support. When teachers, material developers, and institutional leaders function within this mutually reinforcing system, L2 paragraph writing instruction can transition from a product-focused, anxiety-inducing exercise to a scaffolded, confidence-building, and developmentally sound practice.

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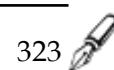
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