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UDC: 811.111'276.6:371.3(075.8)

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DISTINCTION BETWEEN A PARAGRAPH AND AN ESSAY: A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING 1st-YEAR EFL STUDENTS FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH CERTIFICATION EXAMS

For EFL candidates taking international English certification exams (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge Assessment English), a significant, yet often overlooked, problem is their inexperience in distinguishing between paragraph and essay structures. This impacts writing coherence, effective detail use, and overall task fulfillment. This paper defines specific attributes of each writing form, emphasizing the importance of their accurate application for English proficiency assessments. Keywords: academic writing, coherence, EFL, essay, paragraph.

1. Introduction.

International English certification examinations play a key role in assessing global academic and professional opportunities. Success in the writing sections of these assessments requires not only language accuracy but also the ability to construct well-organized, coherent, and contextually appropriate responses. Based on frequent observations, the **research problem** addressed in this paper is the difficulty that novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writers encounter in distinguishing between the structural and functional requirements of a single paragraph and a multi-paragraph essay. This challenge often results in failure to meet the written component requirements of international examinations, particularly among students aiming for B2-C1 proficiency. This deficiency, along with other common

errors [3], critically affects the key performance criteria – specifically *Task Achievement/Response* and *Coherence and Cohesion*, –ultimately lowering final scores.

The goal of this paper is to clarify the distinction between paragraphs and essays, thus facilitating a necessary restructuring of the "writing mindset" among Ukrainian EFL students. Specifically, this conceptual shift aims to align their first-language rhetorical patterns with the Anglo-Saxon structural conventions that underlie international English certification exams. To achieve this, the **research method** involves a comparative analysis of writing tasks featured in internationally recognized English proficiency examinations, including *TOEFL* [6], *IELTS* [1; 4], and *Cambridge Assessment English* [2]. Within these frameworks, we aim to describe the specific structural and functional requirements for effective paragraph and essay construction. Based on this analysis, we propose didactic guidelines intended to enhance academic writing instruction and improve exam performance among EFL students.

2. Writing Tasks in International English Proficiency Exams.

International English proficiency exams such as *TOEFL*, *IELTS*, and *Cambridge Assessment English* assess writing skills through specific task formats and certain evaluation criteria, with all emphasizing clarity, coherence, and task completion.

TOEFL iBT includes two writing tasks: an Integrated Task, based on reading a short passage, listening to a related lecture, and writing a response integrating both sources; and an Independent Task, including writing an opinion-based essay on a given topic. *TOEFL* prioritises the academic style, coherent argumentation, and source integration [8].

IELTS Academic Writing includes Task 1, requiring the description and interpretation of visual data (graphs, charts, or diagrams), and Task 2, a discursive essay that addresses a problem or opinion. The assessment criteria include task completion, lexical choice, grammatical accuracy, coherence and cohesion [7].

Cambridge Assessment English offers level-specific examinations such as B2 First, C1 Advanced, and C2 Proficiency, each including two writing tasks. These vary in genre: essays, articles, reports, letters, or reviews, depending on the level, and emphasise the linguistic accuracy, style, organisation, and relevance to the topic. Higher levels require a more sophisticated argumentation and the register control [5].

Overall, while task types and genres differ, a common requirement across all exams is the ability to clearly organise ideas, use the appropriate language, and directly respond to the task.

3. Defining the Paragraph and the Essay.

While both paragraphs and essays are fundamental units of writing assignments, their scale, purpose, and internal organisation significantly differ. Recognising these differences is the foundation of an effective writing strategy in the examination context.

3.1. The Paragraph: A Unit of Focused Thought.

A paragraph may be defined as a self-contained unit of discourse that typically develops a single main idea. Its design emphasizes conciseness and a unified focus, following the conventions of clear and efficient written communication.

3.1.1. Cultural distinctions in thought organisation.

The organisation of written discourse apparently reflects underlying cultural patterns of cognition and rhetorical tradition. In Anglo-Saxon academic writing, for instance, a paragraph generally follows a linear or "staircase" model. In this format, the main idea is expected to be stated immediately in the topic sentence, followed by a logical chain of supporting evidence, illustrations, or analysis. Each subsequent sentence builds upon the previous one step-by-step, supporting the central thesis. This rhetorical model prioritises clarity, directness, coherence, and linear development of thought.

In contrast, Ukrainian writing often employs a more inductive or "spiral" approach. The central idea may not be stated at the outset but rather emerges gradually through broader speculation, context, historical reflection, or philosophical framing. A typical paragraph may begin with general observations or background information, with the main claim unfolding later as a culmination of this piece of discourse.

For example, while an Anglo-Saxon paragraph on environmental policy might begin with the clear assertion, "Government regulation is essential for climate change mitigation," a Ukrainian paragraph might first reflect on humanity's evolving relationship with nature before arriving at a comparable conclusion. This "rhetorical spiral" should not be viewed as a lack of structure; rather, it represents a cultural mode of constructing meaning through implication and interpretive details rather than immediacy.

Understanding this distinction is particularly important for students preparing for international English proficiency exams such as *IELTS* or *TOEFL*, as well as for those applying for exchange or mobility programmes. Ukrainian applicants need to recognise that their target settings prioritise the "staircase" paragraph model, which enables writers to meet examination requirements by confidently articulating a topic sentence and directly supporting it with relevant examples and arguments. This will enhance communicative clarity, ensuring that their ideas are accessible to an international readership, and strengthen the text structure, presenting a paragraph as a focused, cohesive unit.

Mastering this linear paragraph structure does not imply a rejection of one's native rhetorical conventions. Rather, it equips students with an additional discourse strategy, expanding their communicative competence, ability to develop a written unit potentially contributing to the broader argument, and adaptability in multilingual and multicultural academic environments.

3.1.2. Linear Paragraph Structure.

Topic Sentence. A paragraph contains a clear topic sentence, usually at the beginning, which explicitly states the central idea or argument of that specific paragraph.

Supporting Details. All subsequent sentences within the paragraph serve to elaborate, explain, provide evidence for, or exemplify the idea introduced in the topic sentence. This can include facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, or expert opinions.

Unity. A well-constructed paragraph exhibits unity; every sentence should directly relate to and support the topic sentence. Information that diverges from this central idea should be omitted or moved to another paragraph.

Cohesion. Ideas within a paragraph are linked through transition words, pronoun references, and logical connectors, ensuring a smooth flow from one sentence to the next.

A *concluding sentence* (optional) may summarize the main point of the paragraph or transition to the next, though this is not always strictly required.

Word Count and Application. Examination tasks requiring a paragraph (e.g., describing a graph in *IELTS* Academic Writing Task 1, or providing a brief explanation) demand precision and economy of words, typically adhering to stricter word limits (e.g., 50-150 words per distinct piece of writing).

3.2. The Essay: A Developed Argument.

An essay, in contrast, is a longer, more complex piece of writing that develops a *central thesis or argument* through a series of paragraphs. It is designed for the comprehensive exploration of a theme and sound argumentation.

A well-structured essay begins with a compelling *introduction* designed to immediately capture the reader's attention and broadly introduce the topic. Following this, it provides essential background information, setting the stage for the discussed issue. Normally, the introduction focuses on a clear *thesis statement*, which explicitly states the essay's main purpose or argument.

Following the introduction, the essay develops through its *body paragraphs*, each focused on a single, distinct idea that directly supports or explores the main thesis. Every body paragraph typically starts with *its own topic sentence*, which presents the central idea of the paragraph. It is followed by supporting details, concrete examples, and analysis, all ensuring the internal unity and cohesion within the paragraph. The progression of the body paragraphs should be ordered logically and coherently, moving from general concepts to specific details, from cause to effect, from a problem to its solution, or by presenting points and counterpoints, all smoothly connected by appropriate transitional devices.

Finally, the essay *concludes* in a structurally distinct paragraph restating the thesis, reinforcing the central argument, and presenting a concise summary of the main points, briefly reiterating the key ideas discussed in the body paragraphs without introducing any new information. The essay ends with a final thought or implication, which might be a broader reflection, a prediction, a recommendation, or a call to action, providing a sense of closure for the reader. When applying this structure to essay tasks in exams like *IELTS* Academic / General Writing Task 2 or *TOEFL* Independent Writing, it is important to remember that they generally require significant development, typically exceeding 250 words, allowing for a more detailed and comprehensive argument.

4. EFL Writing Instruction Focus.

The failure to distinguish between paragraph and essay writing can lead to several critical errors:

4.1. Task Misinterpretation and Under / Over-Development.

A common pitfall is writing an essay-length response when a focused paragraph is required, or conversely, attempting to condense an essay's amount of arguments into a single, bulky paragraph. As a consequence, for shorter

tasks, excessive length often indicates a lack of conciseness and focus, potentially leading to irrelevant content, while for essay tasks, a single-paragraph response will lack the required depth, development, and comprehensive argumentation, resulting in a low score for "Task Achievement."

4.2. *Insufficient Argumentation and Detail.*

An essay demands a higher level of critical thinking and detailed argumentation, while a paragraph requires focused, concise support for a single point. Consequently, failing to provide points with sufficient examples, explanations, and analysis in an essay, or on the contrary, including excessive and irrelevant detail in a paragraph, both deteriorate the overall quality of the response.

4.3. *Compromised Coherence and Cohesion.*

When ideas are inappropriately arranged (e.g., multiple different ideas in one paragraph or a single idea stretched across many thin paragraphs), the logical flow of the argument breaks down. As a result, examiners, who look for clear organisation both within and between paragraphs, will devalue disordered ideas or a lack of clear transitions and penalise the scores in the "Coherence and Cohesion" criterion.

5. *Conclusion.*

In summary, the ability to distinguish between a paragraph and an essay plays a crucial role in meeting the structural and functional expectations of international English certification exams. This distinction influences task performance at different levels, including assignment interpretation, content organisation, development, and coherence. Candidates' success often depends on their capacity to match their written output with task-specific requirements, whether constructing a concise paragraph or developing a multi-paragraph essay.

Such competence involves not only text creation but also higher-level cognitive skills, including analytical reading of assignments, targeted planning, and reflective revision. When this skill set is cultivated systematically, it contributes to communicative precision and improved task completion, enhancing overall examination outcomes.

Beyond its immediate pedagogical usage, the discussion of paragraph and essay structures suggests broader discussions of contrastive rhetoric. It foregrounds the cultural dimensions of writing conventions and supports the development of students' rhetorical adaptability in different academic contexts. Consequently, the findings presented here serve both as a practical resource for Ukrainian EFL instruction and as a contribution to the theoretical discourse on writing pedagogy and cross-cultural academic literacy.

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Note on the Use of Artificial Intelligence. This article was proofread with the assistance of GPT (OpenAI), an AI-powered language model, to support non-native English authors in enhancing written clarity. While the tool provided suggestions to improve linguistic quality, the final content was reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies.