

Improving Second-Year Ghanaian University Student Teachers' Paragraph Writing Skills

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Abstract

Enhancing paragraph writing skills among second-year Ghanaian university student-teachers is essential for their academic and professional growth. Proficient academic writing demands mastery of cognitive processes involved in transforming ideas into coherent written discourse. Challenges such as grammatical errors, organisational deficiencies, and content generation issues are prevalent among student-teachers. This proposed study seeks to develop and implement a pragmatic paragraph writing model tailored specifically to the needs of second-year student-teachers in a Ghanaian university. The model integrates structured classroom teaching with a comprehensive guide aimed at simplifying the paragraph writing process and enhancing students' writing proficiency. Employing the pragmatic paradigm, the study employs a sequential exploratory mixed methods design. Action research guides the iterative development and refinement of the paragraph writing model. Pre- and post-intervention tests and semi-structured interview qualitatively measures errors, knowledge, challenges, and improvements in students' paragraph writing skills. Additionally, questionnaires quantitatively explore students' knowledge, perceptions, and experiences with the model, providing insights into its effectiveness and usability. The significance of this study lies in its potential to address gaps in writing instruction within Ghanaian teacher education programmes. By equipping student-teachers with essential writing skills in their academic journey, the study aims to enhance their ability to communicate effectively in educational contexts. The development of a practical paragraph writing model aims to empower educators with a structured approach to teaching writing skills, fostering academic excellence among student-teachers, hence improving their paragraph writing skills.

Keywords

Paragraph Writing Model, Paragraph Writing, Academic Writing, Student-Teachers, Ghanaian Universities, Writing Skills Development, Pedagogical Strategies, Teacher Education, Classroom Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential skill that students must develop for both academic success and personal growth (Graham et al., 2020). Effective writing demands extensive knowledge and profound cognitive processes to craft words, sentences, and paragraphs while adhering to the principles of English grammar. This involves using correct grammar, selecting appropriate vocabulary, employing proper punctuation, and organising information coherently (Ratnaningsih, 2020). Engaging in writing enhances students' English proficiency and fosters critical thinking, playing an important role in both professional and personal development. However, many students face significant challenges in composing scientific writing, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). In a second or foreign language, writing is particularly difficult due to the need to produce syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable, and culturally appropriate written work (Alsamadani, 2018). This complexity is compounded by the necessity of balancing multiple elements such as content, organisation, grammar, purpose, target audience, vocabulary, and mechanics (Ramasamy & Aziz, 2018).

University-level academic writing demands a scientific approach characterised by intricate formatting and style requirements. One critical aspect that demands particular focus is the organisation of ideas into well-structured paragraphs. Effective communication in writing hinges on the ability to craft coherent and cohesive paragraphs as mastery of paragraph writing extends to essays and other writing assignments. Hussen (2015) highlights the importance of honing paragraph writing skills, which transcend the mere construction of sentences, phrases, or individual words. A well-structured paragraph consists of a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence that brings the paragraph's sentences together (Raudatus, 2020). A such, the attainment of a well-structured paragraph hinges on the judicious selection of a topic sentence, an art that students should master to arrange their information logically. The sentences within a paragraph must have a clear and cohesive structure, with unity and coherence being essential attributes. The importance of paragraph writing is emphasised by its role as a fundamental unit of academic writing. Effective paragraph construction is a prerequisite for composing coherent essays and research papers. Hyland (2013) emphasises that university activities are fundamentally rooted in specialised forms of academic literacy. Addressing writing issues among university students is crucial to ensuring their academic success (Jurianto et al., 2015).

From personal observations and discussions with colleagues in the teaching industry, it is evident that many students struggle with paragraphing skills, leading to weak academic performance. As a practicing academic instructor, I have identified weak paragraph skills as a significant factor contributing to students' poor academic outcomes. Teaching and assessing students across various educational levels in Ghana, I have noticed a lack of conceptual understanding of paragraphing. This requires improving students' understanding of the concept and helping them improve their writing performance. Discussions with colleagues confirm that students' weaknesses in paragraph construction are a major challenge in academic writing.

Among second-year students at the Department of Basic Education, University of Education, Winneba, a persistent issue is the lack of fundamental competence in crafting effective paragraphs. Many students struggle with paragraph organisation, formulation of clear topic sentences, provision of supporting details, and seamless transitions. These deficiencies negatively impact the overall credibility of their writing. The challenges of writing paragraphs have been extensively studied, but most research focus on non-Ghanaian students (Hussen, 2015; Al-Zahrani, 2018; Wati, 2023). Research on Ghanaian students has primarily concentrated on theoretical aspects without offering practical strategies to aid students in overcoming writing challenges (Owusu, 2020; Sarfo-Adu, 2015). This study therefore aims to explore strategies and interventions to develop a model for improving paragraph writing among second-year university student-teachers in Ghana. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common errors in second-year university student teachers' paragraph writing?
2. What challenges do second-year university student-teachers encounter in writing paragraphs?
3. How do strategies/approaches assist second-year university student-teachers in improving their paragraph writing skills?
4. How does the practical paragraph improvement model enhance second-year university student-teachers' paragraph writing skills?

This study holds several benefits for students and stakeholders in education. It aims to enhance the understanding of paragraph writing and the skills required to write effective paragraphs among Ghanaian second-year university student-teachers. Improved writing skills contribute to students' overall academic performance and understanding of course contents. Additionally, the study's findings will inform lecturers and tutors about students' difficulties in academic writing, enabling them to tailor their instructions effectively. The development of paragraph improvement strategies will address gaps in writing instruction and provide practical tools for students and educators. The study's findings will also inform policy formulation in the education sector, particularly in curriculum design and the development of educational materials. Finally, the study will add to the body of literature on paragraph writing and provide insights into effective writing training for tertiary students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Writing

Academic writing is any formal written work created in a learning environment, commonly used by students, instructors, and researchers to produce papers, arguments, or other forms of writing that serve public aims (Valdes, 2019). Characteristics of academic writing include evidence-based reasoning, careful word choice, logical arrangement, and an impersonal tone (Johnson, 2016). It is developed to demonstrate harmonised meaning regarding complex procedures or designs within a field of expertise, much like specialised dialects in other fields such as law or medicine (Brodhacker, 2016). Academic writing differs from informal writing in its layout and the use of specific and accurate words and phrases to convey ideas effectively (Johnson, 2016). Academic writing plays a crucial role in students' ability to express themselves and advance in higher education and forms an integral part of most English curricula due to its role in students' academic success.

Challenges in Students' Academic Writing

The challenges students face in academic writing have been the subject of extensive research. Studies have identified that students struggle primarily with syntactic issues, such as connecting ideas coherently, semantic challenges including effectively expressing their ideas, and composing well-structured sentences with vocabulary deficits as the most common issue, followed by difficulties with writing mechanics and grammar (Junaid & Santaria, 2022). Students also face common challenges, particularly with grammar comprehension, punctuation, and capitalization (Yulianti, 2018).

Concept of Paragraph

A paragraph is a group of closely related sentences expressing a single idea, with one key topic (Wali & Madani, 2020) that usually begins with a new line and combines sentences to explain, illustrate, or give historical context to a subject (Sarfo-Adu, 2015). Azimi (2022) further explains that paragraph writing involves selecting appropriate facts and linguistic elements to communicate a single idea, often structured as a unit of sentences. Messuri (2016) describes paragraphs as groups of related sentences that enhance the reader's comprehension, earning the term "macro-punctuation." Alsmari (2019) states that a typical paragraph consists of five to eight sentences focused on a single main idea, culminating in a final sentence that restates the primary concept. Man (2023) outlines a standard paragraph structure: an introduction with a clear topic sentence, a body with supporting details, and a conclusion summarising the relationships between the information presented.

Hussen (2015) highlights the importance of organisation in paragraph writing, where thoughts and sentences must revolve around the central idea for coherence. In view of this, Sarfo-Adu (2015) proposes six principles for an ideal paragraph structure: building on preceding sentences, using parallel construction, indicating the subject prominently, maintaining consecutive flow, ensuring unity, and balancing principal and subordinate statements.

Structural Parts of a Paragraph

According to Owusu (2020), a paragraph consists of three basic components: the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. The topic sentence is typically the first sentence, stating the central idea (Messuri, 2016) and though not always the first, is crucial for understanding the paragraph's facts (Azimi, 2022). A good topic sentence helps develop strong paragraphs by being clear and descriptive (Siddiqui, 2020) while supporting sentences develop the body of a paragraph by providing details, reasons, examples, statistics, or quotes (Azimi, 2022). These sentences directly support the topic sentence with arguments, facts, and evidence (Wali & Madani, 2020) and offer explanations and evidence related to the main concept, enhancing the paragraph's clarity (Messuri, 2016; Siddiqui, 2020). A concluding sentence provides closure, summarising or restating the paragraph's key ideas (Messuri, 2016; Wali & Madani, 2020) and serves as a signifier of the paragraph's completeness, often uniquely restating the topic sentence (Azimi, 2022).

Internal Elements of a Paragraph

Unity, coherence, cohesion, completeness, and adequacy are identified as the internal elements of a paragraph but this classification varies among scholars. Unity in a paragraph suggests all sentences contribute to a single main idea in support of the topic sentence, avoiding digressions (Wali & Madani, 2020) and helping readers comprehend the writer's ideas (Owusu, 2020). Coherence on the other hand, relates to the logical flow of ideas within a paragraph often progressing from general to specific or following a chronological order (Messuri, 2016) enhanced by effective use of transitions and clear pronoun references (Wali & Madani, 2020). Cohesion involves the grammatical and lexical connections that unify a text (Halliday & Hassan, 1976) with cohesive markers such as subordination, coordination, connectors, definite articles, personal pronouns, and demonstrative pronouns linking sentences within a paragraph (Wali & Madani, 2020). According to Messuri (2016), a paragraph can be cohesive but not coherent if it fails to develop a central idea adequately. Hence, adequacy in a paragraph entails providing sufficient relevant details to support the main idea (Hacker & Sommers, 2011) with sentences elaborating on the topic sentence, avoiding brevity that leads to underdevelopment. A complete paragraph therefore includes an introductory sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence ensuring all aspects of the topic are addressed, avoiding unanswered questions and enhancing the paragraph's effectiveness (Bailey, 2014).

A well-written paragraph is therefore structured with unity, coherence, cohesion, adequacy, and completeness consisting of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence, each serving a distinct purpose.

Paragraph Writing Challenges

In the Ghanaian context, studies by Sarfo-Adu (2015) and Owusu (2020) revealed that tertiary students face significant challenges in writing paragraphs. Sarfo-Adu found a high incidence of one-sentence paragraphs with irregular indentations and errors in concluding sentences and coherence while Owusu observed frequent errors in these areas among Ghanaian university students. Al-Zahrani (2018) highlighted difficulties in crafting supporting sentences, concluding sentences, and topic sentences, with a significant deficiency in using appropriate transitions to connect supporting sentences while Azimi (2022) found mechanics as students' weakness and Pane and Sanchez (2023) revealed key challenges including identifying topics, grammar errors, vocabulary issues, brainstorming, concluding paragraphs, punctuation, translation, coherence, and language usage. Research on paragraph writing challenges highlights common difficulties related to grammatical correctness, coherence, and unity.

Studies on Paragraph Errors

Several recent studies have identified a variety of errors in student writing, highlighting issues in paragraph unity, development, and coherence (Siddiqui et al., 2023), as well as grammar, lexical semantics, and mechanics (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). Other common errors include tense, spelling, singular/plural forms, prepositions, word order, and fragments (Man, 2023). Additionally, errors in recognition and arrangement, including grammar, capitalisation, spelling, punctuation, formatting, handwriting, and coherence, were noted by Al-Ghabra and Najim (2019). Latifah and Hani (2017) identified morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical errors, while Ramendra et al. (2022) reported issues related to grammar, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. Errors in omission, addition, misformation, and misordering were also documented by Wati (2023). Although these studies, among several others, explored paragraph errors, they did not provide targeted interventions.

Paragraph Writing Improvement Strategies

Toh and Lim (2017) evaluated the STAR model's impact on enhancing argumentative writing skills among secondary school students in Singapore, finding it effective in improving students' ability to organise arguments effectively. Similarly, dian and Tavakoli (2011) focused on the STAR model's effects on Iranian EFL learners and found that students in the experimental group, taught using the STAR model, achieved significantly higher writing quality and coherence compared to the control group. Yee and Kim (2018) investigated the "PEEL" (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) model's impact on the writing skills of EFL students, demonstrating improved writing quality and organisational coherence. Strømso and Vøllestad (2017) compared the PEEL and TEEL models in enhancing the paragraph writing skills of 9th-grade students in Norway, concluding that the TEEL model slightly outperformed PEEL. Ahmad and Hossain (2018) explored the Hamburger model's effectiveness in improving ESL learners' writing skills in Bangladesh, showing significant improvements and practical applicability. In a study by Langer and Applebee (1987), the IWRITE model (Interest, Write, Review, Edit, Turn in, Evaluate) was employed to enhance middle school students' writing skills. Their findings indicated that the experimental group exposed to the IWRITE model demonstrated enhanced writing quality and increased use of revision strategies, highlighting the model's effectiveness in improving student writing outcomes. Collectively, these studies provide valuable insights into the impact of different paragraph writing models on students' writing skills across diverse educational contexts, emphasising the importance of selecting appropriate instructional models to cater to specific student needs and learning environments, thereby enhancing writing quality and coherence.

Beyond paragraph writing models, several interventions have been explored to address challenges related to paragraph composition. Lestari and Nurhamdah (2019) employed paraphrasing techniques in improving paragraph writing skills among second-grade students while Hamid (2022) used picture composition to enhance paragraph writing skills and revealing substantial improvements in students' writing post-intervention scores. Alsmari (2019) explored Edmodo, a Web 2.0 tool, to augment paragraph writing skills among EFL students with significant improvements in the experimental group and Situngkir et al. (2020) adopted a process writing approach to improve paragraph writing skills among senior high school students in Indonesia, demonstrating that both individual and collaborative process approaches significantly enhanced students' paragraph writing skills. These studies provide empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of varied instructional approaches and interventions and emphasise the diverse strategies educators can employ to address specific challenges in paragraph writing among students.

In summary, while the majority of research on academic writing in Ghana has focused on broader domains such as language errors and cohesion, there remains a notable gap in dedicated studies specifically addressing paragraph composition. Most studies have highlighted significant challenges faced by students in constructing effective paragraphs, deepening the need for targeted interventions and instructional strategies tailored to enhance paragraph writing skills among students. This is the goal the current study hopes to achieve in the Ghanaian context, especially among second-year student teachers.

METHODOLOGY

In present educational research, enhancing writing proficiency among student-teachers remains a critical endeavor for most language research. The current study is anchored in a pragmatic philosophical paradigm, emphasising consequential actions and outcomes (Creswell, 2018; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This worldview guides the research design, approach, and methodology chosen to second-year Ghanaian university student-teachers' paragraph writing skills. The pragmatic paradigm is chosen for its problem-centered approach and flexibility in integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2014) with a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. This methodological choice is driven by the need to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of paragraph writing difficulties faced by student-teachers (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The study employs a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, integrating qualitative data collection in the initial phase to inform the subsequent quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). This design facilitates an exploration of the factors influencing paragraph writing skills, crucial for developing targeted interventions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Action research serves as the foundational design framework, enabling collaborative problem-solving and iterative intervention development (Mertler, 2019). This cyclical process of diagnosis, intervention planning, implementation, and evaluation is instrumental in refining a paragraph writing improvement model tailored to student-teachers' needs (McNiff & Whitehead, 2018). This process is presented in the following diagram.

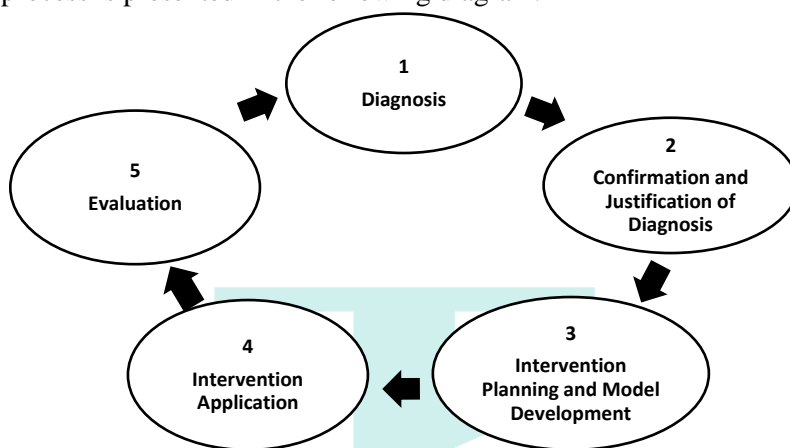


Fig. 1 Phases of action research on improving second-year university students' paragraph writing skills

Study Phases

The study will be structured into pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention phases. During the pre-intervention phase, diagnostic tools such as pre-tests, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires will be used to assess writing skills and identify challenges (Dustman et al., 2014). The intervention phase implements targeted teaching strategies over six weeks to address identified issues (Johnson, 2012) while the post-intervention assessments will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the model in improving paragraph writing proficiency (Hensen, 2013). The integration of pragmatism with mixed-methods and action research methodologies facilitates a holistic exploration of paragraph writing challenges among student-teachers. By combining quantitative data on writing proficiency with qualitative insights into student perceptions and experiences, the study generates comprehensive findings essential for developing effective educational interventions (Clark et al., 2020).

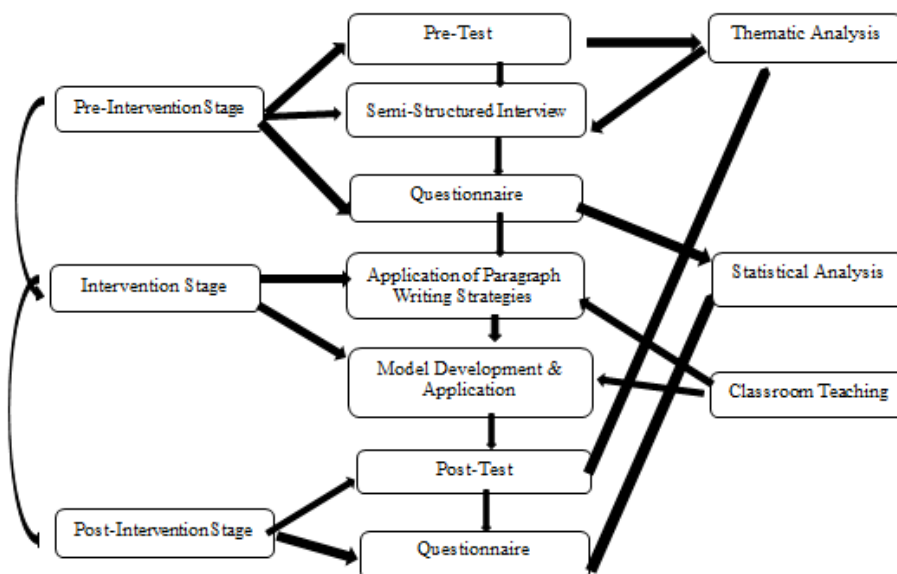


Fig. 2 Research Design Procedure on improving second-year university students' paragraph writing skills

Research Site

The study will be conducted within the Effutu Municipality of the Central Region of Ghana, specifically at the North Campus of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). UEW is renowned for its focus on teacher education, hosting satellite sites including Ajumako and Winneba, with the latter comprising three main campuses: South, Central, and North. The selection of the North Campus as the research site is based on its accessibility and familiarity, crucial for obtaining comprehensive data given the researcher's affiliation with this campus. The population under study consists of 286 second-year student-teachers specialising in Upper Primary Education within the Department of Basic Education at the School of Education and Life-Long Learning (SELL), UEW. The target group totaled 59 students chosen due to the purposes of convenience, accessibility and the scope of the study's objectives (Hair et al., 2016).

Sampling procedures encompass both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure comprehensive data collection. An intact class approach will be used for the quantitative phase, specifically targeting a single intact class of 59 students from the Upper Primary specialism class for pre- and post-intervention assessments (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling complements this by selecting students for semi-structured interviews based on their willingness, ensuring diverse perspectives on paragraph writing challenges and strategies (Babbie, 2016). Homogeneous sampling will be employed within the intact class to delve deeper into specific characteristics and experiences shared among students, aiding in a focused exploration of paragraph writing skills (Elmusharaf et al., 2016). Additionally, convenience sampling which facilitates practical data collection from students based on accessibility and logistical feasibility, given the study's time and resource constraints (Babbie, 2016) will be employed.

The study shall employ three primary instruments: tests, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires, each tailored to gather specific data on paragraph writing proficiency and challenges. Tests will be administered pre- and post-intervention to assess students' paragraph writing abilities, with structured questions aimed at eliciting coherent and organised responses (Kane & Bridgeman, 2017). Semi-structured interviews provide qualitative insights into students' perceptions and experiences with paragraph writing, offering flexibility to explore diverse viewpoints and variations in their responses (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Questionnaires, structured with Likert scales, will complement these methods by quantifying student perspectives on intervention effectiveness and preferred strategies for improving paragraph writing skills.

Data collection will be unfolded across three distinct phases: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. During the pre-intervention phase, students will complete an initial test, interview, and questionnaires, providing baseline data on their paragraph writing proficiency and identifying key challenges. Intervention activities will span six weeks, incorporating structured teaching sessions and a to-be-developed paragraph writing model focusing on paragraph writing components tailored to address identified challenges. Post-intervention assessments shall include a follow-up test to determine improvement in writing skills and a questionnaire to evaluate student perceptions of the model. This will serve as intervention effectiveness and its impact on students' writing abilities. Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations will be paramount, with informed consent to be obtained from all participants, and measures to be taken to ensure confidentiality and data security.

Data analysis in this study involves a comprehensive approach integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the challenges in paragraph writing among second-year student teachers. The analysis process will follow specific steps to ensure thorough exploration and interpretation of the collected data. Thematic analysis is employed to uncover patterns and themes within qualitative data gathered through interviews and written essays. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the analysis proceeded through key steps such as familiarization, coding, theme development, theme definition and naming, and reporting.

Textual and Structural Analyses will be employed. Simple counts will be conducted to analyse the number of sentences per paragraph, providing a basic measure of paragraph structure. Adapting concepts from Lautamatti (1987), Topical Structure Analysis (TSA) examines the thematic progression and coherence within students' paragraphs. It focuses on identifying topical subjects to understand how ideas are developed across the text. Drawing from Arya (2020), textual analysis will be employed to interpret and understand the coherence, cohesion, and completeness of students' written paragraphs. This method highlights how students organise and convey their ideas through language and structure.

Following Corder's (1974) error analysis model, errors in students' paragraphs will be systematically collected, identified, described, explained, and evaluated. This process aims to pinpoint recurring mistakes informing targeted interventions to improve writing skills. This model of error analysis is further presented in the following diagram.

Quantitative data, collected through questionnaires will undergo statistical analysis to quantify the prevalence of challenges and effectiveness of intervention strategies as follows:

- Frequency Analysis: Identifies the occurrence of specific challenges and strategies.
- Percentage Analysis: Provides insights into the distribution and prevalence of identified issues.
- Mean Calculation: Determines the average effectiveness of the paragraph improvement model, serving as a measure of central tendency.
- Standard Deviation: Assesses the variability or consistency of results across different students, offering insights into intervention effectiveness.

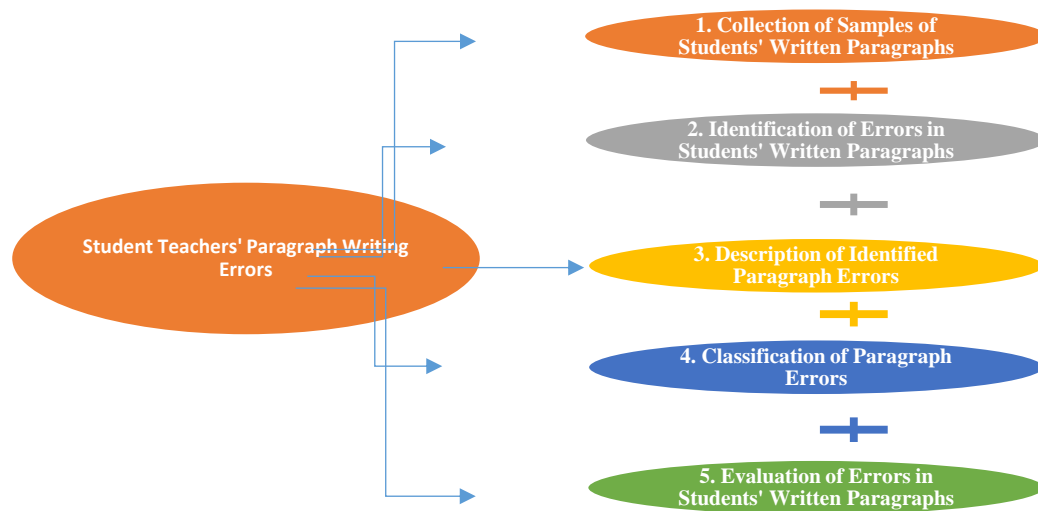


Fig. 3 Student Teachers' Paragraph Writing Error Analysis Procedure

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting research, particularly when involving human participants. This study on enhancing paragraph writing skills among second-year student-teachers will adhere to established ethical principles to safeguard participants' rights and ensure the integrity of the research process.

Ethical clearance will be initially sought from the Research Ethics Social Sciences Committee of the University of Venda. Subsequently, permission will be obtained from the University of Education, Winneba's Basic Education Department, to conduct research involving its student-teachers. This procedural step ensures that the study is conducted with proper authorisation and per institutional guidelines (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A comprehensive consent form will be administered to all participants. This form details the study's purpose, objectives, potential risks, benefits, and participants' rights. It will be administered transparently, with the researcher verbally explaining its contents to ensure understanding. Participants will be allowed to ask questions and clarify any concerns before voluntarily providing their consent (Fouka & Mantzourou, 2011). The consent process aims to inform participants about the research's scope, procedures, and their rights to voluntary participation and assure participants of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty, emphasising voluntary involvement and protecting their autonomy (Head, 2020).

Steps will be taken to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. Personal identifiers such as names, religion, gender, and ethnicity will be excluded from data collection to minimise bias and ensure participant privacy. Data collected from questionnaires, pre/post-tests, and interviews will be securely stored and accessible only to authorised members of the research team, thereby maintaining confidentiality (Fouka & Mantzourou, 2011). The research instruments and intervention activities will be designed to avoid any form of physical, emotional, or psychological harm to participants. Questionnaires and interviews will be structured to gather data without invasive or sensitive inquiries, ensuring a respectful research environment (Kour, 2014). To maintain research integrity, rigorous methods will be employed in data analysis and reporting. All data will be analysed objectively, without bias or prejudice, to accurately reflect the findings and uphold the credibility of the study (Kour, 2014).

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