

A Study of the Effect of Instruction on Freshman English Paragraph Writing

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Abstract

This article looks at the effect of instruction in the use of paragraph construction in Freshman English essay writing. The study examined paragraph structure in writing assignments. It describes some of the possible reasons for cultural and grammatical mapping of Japanese writing norms onto English. Freshman English students at Asia University wrote two essays before and after lessons reviewing paragraph use. The essays were based on the Japanese manga *Barefoot Gen*. The reading complexity of the manga was evaluated by Flesch-Kincaid readability tests. The essays were analysed using Coh-Metrix to examine differences in cohesion, readability, and structure between pre- and post-review essays. The results show that students in post-review essays wrote fewer paragraphs with higher word counts. They also used fewer personal pronouns. The study suggested that students in their post-review essays wrote in a more structured and coherent writing style, and they used a more objective writing style. It also suggested that students do not lack the cognitive ability to make the necessary adjustments to their writing style.

Introduction

According to Dyer and Friedrich, 2002, p. 203) one word for “essay” in Japanese is *zuihitsu*, translated as writing at random. Hahn (2021) translated it as “a text composed to feel spontaneous.” This seemingly random approach is observed in Twine (1984) who noted the lack of punctuation in Japanese before 1946. In Western writing norms, paragraphs are an essential part of writing construction that are often overlooked by Japanese students. For Oshima and Hogue (2006), the organization of a paragraph is usually made up of a topic sentence, one or more supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. This gives the essay coherency as readers depend strongly on punctuation for online processing of whole sentence structures (Steinhauer et al., 1999; Niikuni & Muramoto, 2014). Hinds (1983, p.183) illustrates that Kaplan (1966), who made reference to cultural thought patterns in intercultural education, identifies rhetorical structures particular to Japanese writers before going on to show the issue what he calls *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* with *ki* introducing the topic; *shoo* developing it; *ten* forming an abrupt transition or a vaguely related point and *ketsu* concluding the topic. The idea of then introducing irrelevant information by English rhetorical standards can be considered challenging for a linear and cohesive paragraph structure. English requires a topic sentence, further exposition and a concluding sentence relative to the topic with the option of providing scope for transition a subsequent paragraph.

This study was carried out over one semester at Asia University (AU) with Freshman English students. In pre-review essays, students seemed to have very little awareness of paragraph use and structure. Topic sentences were almost entirely absent and the reasoning was inductive rather than deductive (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). That is to say, that often much of the relevant information regarding the topic was not signposted until the concluding paragraphs. An intervention in the form of a review was given to students outlining some of the possible historical features in Japanese and English essay writing. It also emphasised the importance of planning, topic sentences, and the use of indented paragraphs to organise ideas. Nguyen and Gu (2013) discovered that when developing learner autonomy, planning became the most often exercised skill, followed by evaluating and monitoring, suggesting that strategy-based instruction in the form of training learners in task-specific metacognitive self-regulation improved learners’ autonomy in both learning and writing ability. The study contained a descriptive research question and two subsequent exploratory research questions:

1. Do students understand the basic rules of punctuation, specifically paragraph use, and can they use them in essay writing?

2. Is there any accounting for disparity between the essays submitted (if observed) and the typical English essay writing norms?

3. How can FE students' writing be improved in order to create more coherent and structured essays according to the required gatekeeper norms present in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks and exams?

Literature Review

Weissberg (1984, p. 485) noted that while the paragraph is an authentic feature of written English, there is evidence that the kinds of traditional rhetorical categories (such as definition, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast) commonly presented in English as a Second Language (ESL) composition textbooks do not in fact accurately describe the majority of paragraphs actually written and published in English. Cicchelli and Cho (2007) noted that teachers need to develop knowledge and skills for working with students from different backgrounds. Students were introduced to the ideas and criticisms of Kaplan in order to offer some context for possible reasons for writing essays with little attention to paragraph use.

Kaplan's Contrastive Rhetoric Model

Kaplan (1966) introduced Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) to help foreign students in the USA assimilate into the American education system. Kaplan (1987) contended that each language employs unique rhetorical devices in writing conventions. CR was also used to explain cultural difficulties in academic writing (Connor, 2002; Hinds, 1990; Hirose, 2005). Kaplan (1972) identified writing patterns rather than paragraph styles in Chinese rhetoric, the model for early Japanese writing. The idea of then introducing seemingly irrelevant information (by English rhetorical standards) was acceptable. Kimura and Kondo (2004) stated that Japanese students tend to write English essays with many danraku-like structures. Danraku, according to Kimura and Kondo (2004) can be defined as a major division (Shimura, 1998) or part of a long passage (Matsumura, 1999). This gives a Japanese writer flexibility to add any sentence related to the topic, however digressive.

Criticisms of Kaplan's model

Kaplan compared different writing styles depending on the culture each language was attached to; however, his comparison was criticized by some scholars (Connor, 1996; Noor,

2001; Stapleton, 2001). For Connor (1996), language and writing are cultural phenomena and each language has unique rhetorical conventions. At the forefront of anti-foundationalist/neo-Marxist/postcolonial critiques of culture in Kaplan's and Hinds's binary approach to culture, Kubota (1997, 1998, 1999) posits that Hinds and Kaplan had reduced all Japanese writing to an over-generalized single rhetorical structure. Kubota argued that this structure tends towards the Orientalism as discussed by Said (1978) as a binary set of opposites with Western thought, and by extension, writing, as creative, critical-thinking and rational versus Eastern (here Asian) thought of pejoratively as noncritical, passive and emotional. Traditional Japanese writing was considered inductive in its approach implying that not only is an inductive style of writing unacceptable to English gatekeeper norms but that it is also inextricably linked to the notion that the reasoning behind such choices is other and inferior. Kubota (2004) also labels Ballard and Clanchy's (1991) division of Eastern and Western academic cultures into conserving knowledge and extending knowledge as orientalist. The belief in these divisions is one of the often quoted reasons for failure of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan (Aspinall, 2003). Moreover, students' cultural backgrounds in their writing approach informs their organisation, mode of expression (Benda, 1999) and rhetorical preferences (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989). Shen (1989) concludes that having to rewire the writing style to adhere to the foreign society is an identity restructuring process.

Inductive and reductive reasoning

The Japanese traditional writing style of *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* (Hirose, 1998; Kubota, 1998) is considered an inductive style, encouraging "reader responsibility" (Hinds, 1987; Kubota, 1997; Noor, 2001). Inductive reasoning requires readers to read to the end in order to connect ideas. Deductive reasoning permits readers to absorb the gist of the paragraph from the topic sentence, although Kubota (1997) contends that good writing is good writing in either Japanese or English regardless of inductive or deductive reasoning. There are concepts which account for the use of inductive reasoning in Japanese such as *aimai* (ambiguity), *haragei* (literally, "belly art"; implicit, unspoken communication, force of personality), *kenkyo*, (the appearance of modesty) (Davies & Ikeno, 2002), and *jyū* (freedom) and *jibun no iken* (one's own opinion) Arai (2000). These reflect a lack of assertiveness in communication in order to show concern for the other and maintain harmony. These concerns may also be present in writing (Hirose, 2005).

Materials and Methods

Participants

The inclusion criteria was Freshman English (FE) students. A total of 58 students from four classes completed two writing tasks. The average number was 16 students per class. FE students from four classes were invited to participate knowing their essays would be randomly selected and analysed.

Materials

Educational Testing Service (ETS) (Educational Testing Service, 2015) is a non-profit organisation which carries out score mapping studies between its tests and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2011). It ensures reliable and precise correlations. As a writing prompt, students required a reading text at CEFR A2/B1 level. (Table 1).

Table 1.

ETS Mapping of scores used when selecting a level-appropriate reading task.

TOEIC Listening & Reading score	IELTS	CEFR level	Flesch-Kincaid readability scores and levels
785-940	3 - 4	B2	60-70 Plain English
550-780	4.5 - 6	B1	70-80 Fairly easy
225-545	6 - 7	A2	80-90 Easy

During the semester, Mainichi Weekly published an abridged English version of Keiji Nakazawa's Barefoot Gen in two instalments. The manga was selected according to the notion that culture is central to learning and that culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Barefoot Gen is full of rich language, literary devices, and imagery (Jaffe, 2013). Its readability relates to both cognition and legibility, as the text is contained in word bubbles. Selected difficult words are translated into Japanese at the foot of

the page. The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests rated the manga appropriate with scaffolding as needed at the higher end of the range (Jaffe, 2013).

Procedure

The students read the first instalment of *Barefoot Gen* and wrote an essay offering their critical perspective on the story. Masking in the first essay was used to hide the condition assignment, which was correct use of punctuation ensuring internal validity by reducing bias. After a review focusing on paragraph use, possible reasons for disparities and the importance of planning (Flower & Hayes, 1981), seven days after writing their first essay, students read the second instalment and wrote a second essay. The average word count of the first round of essays was 200. Of the total (n=58), 12 random students from each of the four classes were organized into four groups for analysis (n=48). As well as paragraph use, the writing task focused on tense, aspect, and locative expressions (Bartning et al., 2012.). The challenge of encountering difficult words and expressions beyond the syllabus and familiar words for the CEFR A2/B1 levels was considered. Costa (2013) argued for fostering self-awareness among students to help them realize the strategic cognitive tools they already possessed and how to apply these strategies in order to generate content and to plan (Sevgi, 2016). This echoes Purves (1988) who posits that apparently inappropriate writing is a feature of incorrect style rather than cognitive ability.

Review

An intervention in the form of a review involved an introduction to the idea of Contrastive Rhetoric and a simplified examination of Xing et al.'s (2008, pp. 73-75) five contrastive features which students were encouraged to consider for their second essay:

1. Inductive vs. Deductive (Presence and Placement of Thesis Statement): arguments are often delayed and statements sometimes seem unconnected in the eyes of the Western reader. In a deductive essay, the thesis statement is placed at the beginning (Cho, 1999, Megginson, 1996). The topic starts broadly and is gradually narrowed down (Schneider and Fujishima, 1995).
2. Start-Sustain-Turn-Sum vs. Introduction-Body-Conclusion (Number of Paragraphs): this style of writing is more synthetic and changeable and relies more heavily on the reader's interpretation.

3. Circular vs. Linear (Topic Sentences and Topic Changes): native speakers often interpret a lack of topic sentences or a paragraph containing too many ideas as irrelevant, illogical, or unclear.
4. Metaphorical vs. Straightforward (Use of Metaphors and Proverbs): writing sees recurring patterns of organisation and rhetorical conventions reminiscent of writing in the students' native language and culture (Connor, 1996, p. 3). English writers regard these as clichés, often encouraging students to write in their own voice using their own words.
5. Explicit Discourse Markers (Marks of Coherence and Unity): English essays use explicit discourse markers to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts (Connor, 1996). As long as ideas are flowing, it does not matter whether there is coherent form (Shen & Yao, 1999).

Table 2.

Xing et al.'s Five Features and Simplified Version

Xing et al.'s Five Features	Simplified Version
1. Inductive vs. Deductive (Presence and Placement of Thesis Statement)	1. Place the thesis statement in the first paragraph.
2. "Start-Sustain-Turn-Sum" vs. "Introduction-Body-Conclusion" (Number of Paragraphs)	2. Use three or five point essay in the form of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>Introduction</i> · <i>Body</i> · <i>Conclusion</i>
3. Circular vs. Linear (Topic Sentences and Topic Changes)	3. Use topic sentences to start each paragraph.
4. Metaphorical vs. Straightforward (Use of Metaphors and Proverbs)	4. Use metaphors if you wish. They will not be regarded as clichés.
5. Explicit Discourse Markers (Marks of Coherence and Unity)	5. Use discourse markers to signpost ideas.

Data Analysis and Results

The following results showing paragraph incidence were obtained (Table 3):

Table 3.

Paragraph Incidence showing a marked difference in paragraph use among all four groups in pre and post-review essays.

Paragraph incidence	Pre-review (n=48)	Post-review (n=48)	Difference
Group 1	3	12	+9
Group 2	4	12	+8
Group 3	1	12	+11
Group 4	6	11	+5
Total	14	47	+33

The following results using Coh-Metrix (Graesser et al., 2004) were obtained (Tables 4&5). Coh-Metrix is a system for computing computational cohesion and coherence metrics for written and spoken texts. Reliability in terms of measuring consistency and criterion validity was achieved.

Table 4.

Coh-Metrix Descriptions showing post-review essays with fewer paragraphs and higher word counts suggesting a more structured and coherent writing style.

Description	Pre-review (n=48)	Post-review (n=48)
Paragraph count, number of paragraphs	438	365
Sentence count, number of sentences	851	1154
Word count, number of words	9017	12652
Paragraph length, number of sentences in a paragraph, mean	8.342	12.805
Paragraph length, number of sentences in a paragraph, standard deviation	8.386	10.205
Sentence length, number of words, mean	42.855	43.973
Sentence length, number of words, standard deviation	25.689	25.768

Table 5.

Coh-Matrix Pronoun Incidences showing differences between pre- and post-review essays showing fewer personal pronouns and suggesting a more objective writing style.

Description	Pre-review (n=48)	Post-review (n=48)
All pronouns	310.443	263.423
First person singular	130.566	86.257
First person plural	31.641	20.218
Second person	13.873	9.94
Third person singular	67.038	70.613

The results indicate that students were impacted by the review of planning, topic sentences, and the use of indented paragraphs to organise ideas. The post-review essays showed fewer incidences of paragraphs but those paragraphs contained more sentences and higher word counts suggesting a more structured and coherent writing style with more information per paragraph. They also indicated that students were able to make choices about writing style when aware of the Japanese writing norms they may have used previously.

Discussion

Ballard and Clanchy (1984) contested that while a student is inducted into a particular discipline through lectures, discussions, and readings, the metric of the success of their acculturation is through written assignments (p. 43). Within this writing there are registers, styles and structures in academia which are globally accepted and should be adhered to (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Stern, 1992). For the first essay, students were poor at connecting ideas in each paragraph and their whole essay. This was characterized by their use of inappropriate linking words, with sentences sometimes incomprehensible by misusing or overusing linked words (Dan et al, 2018). This tentatively pointed to difficulty in segueing and transitioning from one paragraph to another. The findings show that there was a marked difference in the writing between the pre- and post-review essays. As shown in Table 3, in the pre-review essay, 14 out of 48 students used a variety of paragraph styles (numbered, indent, full block, modified block, or modified block with indent), or wrote in a completely unstructured way by mixing styles. Often, they followed no discernible method of separating ideas. As an introduction to various styles of paragraphs, and the style most commonly found in authentic materials (Tomlinson, 1998), students were asked to write using an indent

paragraph style. For the second essay, all but one of the 48 students used an indent paragraph style. The comparative analysis also showed word information differences in noun, verb, adjective, and adverb incidence as shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

It has been remarked that students simply write according to the system taught in the place where they study which are based on the local culture (Purves, 1988; Leki, 1991). In order to be transferred from Japanese to English (Matsumoto, 1995), these writing skills would need to have already been acquired before being transferred (Cumming, 1989; Jones & Tetroe, 1987). This would suggest that students may carry their writing style from high school and continue with this style in their Freshman year. When the reason for topic sentences and function of paragraphs were reviewed students were more than capable of using the required conventions.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study was limited to two essays. The students were also in their first year, having come directly from high schools and may not have studied from a textbook from one of the major ELT publishing houses which are the chief vehicles for English writing norms in Japan. Also of relevance is the question of how students may have used translation software and dictionaries for their essays. The use of discourse markers for signposting ideas in students' essays is another feature worth investigating in detail. Kaplan originally introduced CR with the aim of preparing students for an American academic setting with very little focus on creativity and imagination (Kaplan, 1966). Where the theory is currently situated is difficult to gauge as studies on colonizer and the colonized continue to challenge accepted norms (Freire, 1972; Pennycook, 1998), and varieties of English continue to expand (Kachru, 1985). As such, the area is suitable for further postcolonial critiques. From the study, the three research questions can be answered:

1. Do students understand the basic rules of punctuation, specifically paragraph use, and can they use them in essay writing? Yes, students demonstrated that, even if they were aware of the conventions of paragraph use in English, they did not follow these conventions in their first essay. However, they were easily able to adapt their writing for the second essay.
2. Is there any accounting for disparity between the essays submitted (if observed) and the typical English essay writing norms? Yes, there are socio-cultural and historical reasons associated with traditional essay writing style in Japan which may account for the disparity.

3. How can FE students' writing be improved in order to create more coherent and structured essays according to the required gatekeeper norms present in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks and exams? Currently, given the state of the international English exam system and the promotion of prescribed norms, it is useful for students to learn the accepted conventions. Students require intervention if they are unaware of these norms. Anecdotal evidence from students themselves suggests they enjoyed the predictability of the deductive reasoning paragraph structure. With students at upper-intermediate level and above, it could be a proactive project to delve into the local history of essay writing and compare and contrast norms in Japanese and English. In addition, syntactic complexity in the post-review essays indicated that students were more than capable of writing within their expected levels (Crowhurst, 1983). However, although the results appear to be statistically significant, more and larger studies are needed to confirm these findings.

Conclusion

This study examined Freshman English writing. Instruction on paragraph use had a positive outcome and the iterations were not predetermined. The writing prompt assigned to students was level-appropriate. In this study, the second task showed that paragraph construction enabled students to write more coherently, use more objective reasoning, and think clearly about the opening and closing of their essays. The higher pronoun incidence in post-review essays suggested that the use of paragraphs and reduction of personal pronouns produced a less argumentative and more objective essay-writing style. This is concomitant with the aim of English language essay writing to effectively convey information rather than to appeal to the emotions of the reader. Paragraphs as a unit of organization in English should be reviewed before students' first writing task, and features of topic sentences and supporting sentences should be explained. Communicating ideas in an encapsulated paragraph allows students to move through the essay, creating new paragraphs for each idea. Students produced more coherent writing when using paragraphs than when using numbering. Due to various Japanese writing styles of different paragraph structures and reasoning, fossilized errors with regard to paragraph use may be difficult to notice prior to assigning an essay writing task. The study concluded that Japanese mapping onto English should be periodically reviewed.

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