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A Paragraph-First Approach to the Teaching of Academic Writing

During my career as a teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL), I have often found that the teaching and learning of academic writing leads to considerable anxiety among both instructors and students. I suspect that this anxiety is caused in part by the fact that the relationship between accuracy and fluency is often much more one-sided, or unbalanced, in academic writing than it is in other skill areas. For example, in spoken English, communicative teaching strategies allow students and teachers to focus initially on fluency while gradually developing greater accuracy in their speech. Unfortunately, this "breathing space" is not readily available with writing in the academic context because accuracy is required from the very beginning. A university admissions writing sample has to be "correct," and most standardized writing tests penalize mistakes, rewarding form more than content. Once enrolled in the university, most students will have to take mandatory composition classes where a major part of their grade will be determined by their English language accuracy. Clearly, as more students seek to study abroad (or in their own country) at English-language academic institutions, it is justifiable to evaluate how academic writing is taught in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts. I would like to offer such an evaluation in this article—and a possible way forward in academic writing instruction as well.

Sentence-level mastery: A focus on grammar

The teaching of writing, and the teaching of developmental and ESL/EFL writing in particular, has historically given priority to the sentence, often in theory and almost always in practice. In other words, the sentence is viewed as the *de facto* unit of written discourse, the basic element of written communication. It naturally follows then that the sentence should be taught first (Page 2006; Hinkel 2012; Mayville 2012). The idea is that a certain degree of sentence-level mastery must be attained before the teacher, student, and class move on to the next, secondary unit of written

discourse, the paragraph. However, in such an approach, what becomes the third, tertiary unit of written discourse, the essay itself, can be taught, if it is taught at all, only after first sentence-level and then paragraph-level mastery is achieved. The result is a stage-by-stage, sequential, essentially horizontal teaching and learning process that parallels traditional approaches to ESL/EFL grammar instruction (Thornbury 1999; Azar and Hagen 2009; Hewings 2013).

It is true that such a sentence-based strategy can eventually produce effective writing. In addition, as the traditional approach to writing instruction in many EFL schools and language programs, it is often required by school administrators and thus the curriculum, and it is expected by the students, who will also view it as safer, less threatening, and more comforting. However, this sentence-based strategy will almost inevitably, automatically, create a "grammar-first" teaching approach, an approach that in turn leads to a "grammar is writing" and "writing is grammar" teaching philosophy.

One problem with this philosophy is that if students (whether native or non-native speakers of English) do not master English grammar quickly, or ultimately, then they will not be able to proceed successfully to paragraph or essay writing. Another problem is that defining such mastery is often difficult to do. Most programs will do their best to place students into courses based on their English language proficiency, but even if a mutually agreed-upon definition of grammatical mastery is reached, multilevel classes are a reality of English language teaching, so it is unlikely that the students in any given class will all be at the same level of grammatical control. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, such a philosophy requires EFL teachers themselves to be experts in English grammar, or at least to have access to excellent, up-to-date English grammar resources, either in print or online. In many parts of the world, this grammatical expertise and resource availability may not yet be widespread.

Alternative: A paragraph-based approach

I suggest that a shift in perspective might help teachers and students address these challenges. Borrowing from scholars such as Fawcett (2013) and Kirszner and Mandell (2011), I argue that it might be more productive to view not the sentence or the essay but rather the paragraph as the basic unit of discourse, the basic element of communication in English academic writing. Such a viewpoint has the distinct advantage of allowing the teacher to proceed recursively (back and forth) instead of sequentially, as such recursiveness more accurately reflects the writing process itself. Instead of first mastering the grammar of the sentence, then the paragraph, and only then the essay, the student (at whatever level) could start with the paragraph and then move back to the sentence and forward to the essay as appropriate. After all, any paragraph is a structured collection of sentences that follows organizational principles of unity and coherence, and any essay is a structured collection of paragraphs following those same principles. To put it another way, a paragraph-based approach allows a more vertical integration of grammatical instruction as opposed to the standard horizontal integration. A paragraph-based approach is also based on an understanding that organizational control typically occurs much faster than grammatical control. In fact, it recognizes that students can still produce acceptable (readable, reasonably accurate) academic writing in English without completely mastering English grammar.

A paragraph-based approach thus assumes an organization-before-grammar philosophy. It argues that logical relationships and organizational structure can be referred to as the "grammar" of the paragraph, which should be taught before the "grammar" of the sentence. Such an approach also argues that grammatical control at the sentence level is difficult, if not impossible, unless students first gain control of the grammar of the paragraph. Either way, there are two key points to remember: (1) a well-organized paragraph (or essay) can still be understood by the reader, even if the sentence-level grammar is not mistake-free, while (2) an improperly or poorly organized paragraph (or essay) can be quite difficult for the reader to understand, even if the sentence-level grammar is nearly perfect. The teaching of sentence-level grammar is not unimportant, and is almost always necessary, but in the context of an ESL/EFL academic English writing course, it should be seen as secondary.

A more proper and useful definition of writing accuracy would focus on paragraph and essay organization.

An example: My classes

At the University of Guam, Fundamentals of English is an integrated course designed to develop all areas of English language ability. The course is taught concurrently with a complementary course that involves a further two hours of classroom instruction with a different teacher as well as at least two hours a week of independent study in the Developmental Learning Lab. Students are originally enrolled in the courses based on their scores on the university's placement exam. In practice, although students are working on all skill areas, both course and lab tend to directly emphasize academic writing, since successful completion of each is the prerequisite for entry into the university's first-year composition program.

In the Fundamentals of English classes, I still follow a fairly conventional presentation–practice–production (PPP) format with my "grammar of the paragraph" approach, first presenting or modeling the target mode of organization for the students, then practicing and analyzing its basic structure or pattern with them, and finally having them produce it with a variety of topics (Nassaji and Fotos 2011). Therefore, the first half of the semester, approximately eight weeks, emphasizes paragraph writing almost exclusively, focusing on seven modes: narration, description, exemplification (illustration), process, comparison and contrast, cause-and-effect, and persuasion. Great attention is given to the fundamentals of paragraph design and paragraph structure (topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences, unity, and coherence), with the students in particular discussing and concentrating on the logical relationships encoded in these seven modes and the transition markers used to signal those logical relationships to the reader.

For example, when we cover cause-and-effect paragraphs, we begin by reading two topic sentences, one on the extinction of the dinosaurs and the other on the lack of suitable role models for many young people in the world today, discussing how the first would lead to a paragraph focusing on causes while the second would lead to a paragraph focusing on effects. We also review useful synonyms for *causes*, like *reasons* and *factors*, and words such as *results* and *consequences*, which can be substituted for *effects*. We then examine the full paragraphs, writing a reverse or "mirror" outline (an outline written after the text, not before) to illustrate how the developmental sentences all serve to support the initial topic sentence and thus establish paragraph unity. Since a cause-and-effect paragraph usually follows some kind of logical ordering (not chronological or spatial), we also use the outline to illustrate how both paragraphs employ the least to most important pattern typical of academic writing to provide paragraph coherence.

We then study the concluding sentence of each paragraph, noting that, as is often the case, the body of each paragraph presents short-term causes or effects, while the conclusion moves to a more long-term cause or effect. Throughout this process, we identify important transitional expressions such as *yet another factor, because of,* and *results from* to show cause, and *one important effect, another result,* and *a final outcome* to show effect. To include an intermediate step before actually writing, we also do whole-class brainstorming of possible topics to ensure that students are on the right track as well as to provide topic ideas to students who might otherwise not know what to write about. Finally, the students write both kinds of paragraphs, using their chosen topics. As I remind them on several occasions, their paragraphs are primarily evaluated on structure and organization, not grammar, though I do correct, or have the students correct, major grammatical errors like comma splices, run-ons, fragments, agreement problems, and tense jumping—the random switching between past and present tense.

During the second half of the semester, the emphasis shifts to five-paragraph essay writing, with the students eventually writing a narrative, a process, and a cause-and-effect essay. Again using the PPP technique, we focus on basic essay structure and organization, with a special emphasis on thesis statements, topic sentences, transition markers, and the relevant logical relationships. Grammar instruction occurs throughout but

is based on the students' own writing, using decontextualized grammar activities or lessons only rarely, as reinforcement. There is typically not enough class time to cover all the modes, which are really just different ways of organizing content, in this essay stage of the course. But I personally prefer using narrative, process, and cause-and-effect modes because doing so also lets me introduce to the students the point-of-view distinctions between the first-person "I" writing of most narratives, the second-person "you" writing of most how-to process paragraphs and essays, and the third-person expository writing associated with a mode like cause-and-effect. An added teaching benefit is that unlike the ordering by importance in the cause-and-effect mode, the narrative and process modes are almost always ordered chronologically, a distinction that provides a useful point of comparison for the students and gives them writing experience with both ordering patterns.

In all Fundamentals of English courses, the final exit essay is always some kind of persuasive essay, which is a timed essay written in class and graded by two other course teachers, not the class instructor. These readers/graders use a standardized rubric with 11 descriptors or criteria, two of the most important being organization and logical transitions. This same rubric is used to score the initial, pre-course English placement test, so the final essay can be a valuable way of tracking and assessing student progress. Given that I focus so much on organization and transitions/logical relationships, it is perhaps unsurprising, though still gratifying, that my students almost invariably show improvement (in many cases, substantial improvement) in those two areas. However, it is both interesting and illuminating that their grammar scores tend to increase as well, despite the near absence of explicit sentence-level grammatical instruction for much of the course. The paragraph-first philosophy, specifically targeting the structure and organization of the paragraph, first in isolation, and then as part of a larger essay, can pay significant dividends.

A series of writing activities: From my class to yours

What works for one teacher in one classroom may not work for other teachers in other classrooms, but to further illustrate my point I now offer a series of writing activities that I believe could be used effectively in a variety of ESL/EFL classes. These activities should also serve to demonstrate the flexibility of a paragraph-first approach. Consider the following topic sentences, all related in some way to the topic of cell phones:

1. Yesterday I went out with a friend to buy a new cell phone.
2. Cell phones come in many colors, sizes, and types.
3. I use my cell phone in a variety of ways.
4. If you want to buy an inexpensive, quality cell phone, just follow these steps.
5. The new XXX cell phones are superior to the latest YYY cell phones.
6. The Xb cell phone is really not that much different than the previous Xa cell phone.
7. There are three main reasons why cell phones have become so popular.
8. Although cell phones have benefits, overusing them can have negative consequences.
9. It should be illegal for people to drive while using their cell phones.

First of all, after suitable review, ask the students to identify what mode (method of organization) each topic sentence is likely to generate or even require. Conversely, you could ask the same question before any review whatsoever, although in that case I would list the possible answers on the board, scrambling their order so as not to match up exactly with the order I have given here. Of course, topic sentences can often trigger more than one mode, but in these examples, Sentence 1 seems to begin some kind of story, so that would be a narrative paragraph. Sentence 2 is a basic description of current cell phones, so that would be a descriptive paragraph. Sentence 3 invites specific examples of the many ways the writer uses his or her cell phone, so that would be an exemplification (illustration) paragraph. Because of the "follow these steps" phrase and especially the pronoun "you," Sentence 4 is a topic sentence for a how-to process paragraph. In other words, after reading the subsequent paragraph, the reader should indeed be able to go out and buy a good cell phone at a decent price. Sentence 5 suggests a comparison

between two brands, but the phrase "superior to" indicates a focus on differences, so that would be a contrastive paragraph (contrastive paragraphs emphasize differences, while comparative paragraphs emphasize similarities). Sentence 6 also suggests a comparison, this time between two models of the same brand, but the phrase "not that much different than" points to a focus on similarities, so that would be a comparative paragraph. Sentence 7 is a cause-and-effect topic sentence, but the phrase "three main reasons" signals that the paragraph will discuss those reasons, or causes, with the effect, which is the widespread popularity of cell phones. Sentence 8 is a cause-and-effect topic sentence as well, but the phrase "negative consequences" signals that the paragraph will examine those consequences, or effects. Finally, although any mode can be used to make an argument (as opposed to just providing information), Sentence 9 will clearly start a persuasive paragraph, since any reader could possibly argue against the stated position that people should not be using their cell phones while driving.

The above activity has the added benefit of illustrating to students a key characteristic of what might be called academic reading—the fact that such reading is based on expectation. Each of these topic sentences will create an expectation in the reader that what will follow is the appropriate mode. If what follows Sentence 5, for example, is not some kind of contrastive paragraph, then that particular written communication will break down. That is why, as Rossen-Knill (2013) points out, teaching students the importance of reader expectation is crucial in an academic writing classroom. Violating such expectations is at times acceptable, but only if the writer is aware of what he or she is doing and why he or she is doing it. At any rate, these violations are much more typical of creative writing, and it is usually necessary to constantly remind students that academic writing is not creative writing. The two genres have much different purposes and audiences.

Composing the paragraphs

The next step is to write the paragraphs. I typically begin with narrative because most students find it somewhat easier and less intimidating than the expository modes. Starting with Sentence 1, have the students either complete the cell phone story or practice the narrative mode with a different narrative topic sentence related to shopping—or any other activity your students might have experiences with. Again, this is a good time to talk about first-person "I" writing, chronological (time) ordering, and verb tense consistency since almost all academic narrative is written in the past tense—the events in the story are, after all, already finished. However, for more advanced classes, I ask the students to write a past-tense narrative paragraph and then rewrite it in the present tense. We then discuss the different rhetorical effects of the two versions, the past tense creating a sense of distance between the reader and the story and the present tense creating more immediacy, which is why present-tense narratives are more typical of creative writing. Likewise, have the students complete the description from Sentence 2, using their own cell phone if possible, or perhaps exchanging cell phones and describing a friend's. Again, this presents a nice opportunity for discussing the spatial ordering of the descriptive mode. For instance, students could begin with the physical characteristics and then describe the features.

Finally, for Sentences 3 through 9, have the students write the appropriate paragraph. Now the students are moving into classic third-person expository writing, ordered either least to most important or most to least important (having them write both versions is also helpful). The one exception is the process paragraph from Sentence 4, which is ordered chronologically and is the only academic mode that accepts the pronoun *you*. To develop all these paragraphs, I normally work with the number three, as in three examples, three differences, three effects, and so on. A contrastive paragraph could be developed around just one difference, but the convention is to use at least three, and using more than three can get unmanageable, particularly for inexperienced writers. Please note that except perhaps for beginning English writers, each of the three differences should be developed over more than one sentence. Otherwise, the paragraphs will be too short. And, of course, as mentioned with the narrative paragraph, the paragraphs can be based on something other than a cell phone.

At this point, it is time to write essays (again, the topic can be changed as teach-

ers see fit). For brevity's sake, I will not go through all nine possibilities, but the principle is the same, and it provides another reason why I like to work with the number three when teaching expository writing. The narrative paragraph, based on Sentence 1, and the descriptive paragraph, based on Sentence 2, can both be expanded into five-paragraph essays, but as mentioned earlier I usually require a narrative essay, which lends itself more easily to such an expansion, especially for less proficient writers. Looking then at Sentence 5, "The new XXX cell phones are superior to the latest YYY cell phones," the students should now produce a contrastive paragraph with three explicit differences between the two brands, those differences demonstrating why XXX cell phones are better than YYY cell phones. A thesis statement is essentially a topic sentence for an entire essay, so Sentence 5 becomes a thesis statement for a five-paragraph essay. First, have the students write a short introductory paragraph ending with that thesis statement. Then turn the three differences between the two brands into three new topic sentences, which will be the initial sentences in the essay's three body paragraphs. For example, if the brands differ in terms of price, style, and available features, the essay's body will focus on price, style, and features, ordered from least important difference to most important difference.

Finally, have the students write a concluding paragraph that perhaps restates the thesis and leads the reader out of the essay. Since this essay is contrastive, emphasizing differences, either the introduction or conclusion can be a good place to discuss any similarities between the two brands. In my experience, this sort of paragraph-to-essay expansion, combined with any necessary sentence-level grammar instruction and vocabulary-building activities, can be applied to any of the expository topic sentences listed above.

Conclusion

The writing approach modeled here simply argues that the paragraph should be given primacy of place in ESL/EFL academic writing instruction. But no methodology is perfect, and with its emphasis on traditional forms, modes, structures, and organization, this approach does to some extent minimize content and student self-expression. Although ultimately "what you want to say" and "how you want to say it" are pretty much identical, for teaching purposes a distinction between the two can sometimes be useful. My goal at the developmental level is to get students thinking slightly less about content while focusing slightly more on form—an accuracy-over-fluency model that I believe reflects the realities of most academic and professional writing. But clearly, as students advance in their academic writing, the focus can be reversed. Once they have the vessel, so to speak, they can start thinking more about what to fill it with.

It is worth mentioning that other scholars and teachers advocate different approaches to the teaching of academic writing. Current constructivist strategies emphasize fluency and content, favoring process and student self-expression in the writing classroom over form and grammar. These strategies assume that students will write towards their own form and that grammar will be learned later, that process is more important than product (Burdick 2011). A second, related criticism of my suggested approach has been made by those writing teachers who specifically reject what they see as the formulaic, simplistic nature of the five-paragraph essay. In this view, articulated recently by Punyaratabandhu et al. (2013), the five-paragraph essay (including its embrace of transitions and logical relationships) is the classic "pre-fabricated form." Dombek and Herndon (2004) agree, arguing that starting with the formal properties of the paragraph and then moving to the five-paragraph essay and the logical relationships it incorporates can result only in recipe-writing. For Dombek and Herndon (2004), the recipes produced do not correspond to authentic writing, because in their view writers use instead what they call a periodic style, writing toward their main point and not from it.

To their credit, Dombek and Herndon (2004) are ultimately concerned with finding an alternative to the whole form/content dichotomy, a dichotomy that in its extreme version forces teachers to choose one end of the spectrum or the other, pledging their allegiance to the power of content or the resonance of form. The result is a classic either-or logical fallacy that oversimplifies teaching and

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