

Improving Advanced Learners' Communication Skills Through Paragraph Reading and Writing

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ABSTRACT

Japanese learners of English have suffered from an inability to become competent communicators despite their large vocabulary and good grammar. This is mainly because their messages are not presented logically. To help with the learners' difficulty, the researcher utilized paragraph reading and writing. The objectives of this study are to

introduce a major problem advanced Japanese learners of English have and the approach the author has done to help the students overcome the difficulty. The participants were thirty-two university students and the topic of the writing was about Japanese culture. Their writings were evaluated with the focus on global errors. Achievements were measured when the students became aware of the English logical organization and increased their knowledge on the appropriate rhetorical form for composing messages effectively, which was important for them to communicate both in spoken and written English. Key challenges were that students had difficulty understanding the concept of “coherence” and writing coherent paragraphs.

INTRODUCTION

Although writing in the area of L2 studies has attracted the interest of many researchers, there have been few studies conducted regarding factors that enhance communication ability both in written and spoken discourse, or in other words, the common factors that help the learners communicate coherently both in speaking and in writing. With respect to this point, it has been asserted that language is one form of communication, and that therefore knowledge of commonalities and differences in communication styles between cultures is necessary for EFL students as message senders. Robert Kaplan (1966) first defined contrastive rhetoric when he sought to discover whether organizational patterns of written material vary from culture to culture. According to proponents of this theory, the style in which each culture organizes and presents written material reflects the preferences of that particular culture (Anderson, 1991; Carlson, 1988; Connor and Kaplan, 1987). Also, studies of the use of cohesion¹⁾ and coherence²⁾ devices in ESL and EFL writing indicate that those writers of English use cohesion and coherence conventions differently than native speakers do (Connor, 1984; Connor and Farmer, 1990; Hinds, 1987).

Specific differences in rhetorical organization have been examined for many non-English languages; overall organizational structures as well as the use of coherence devices. In a study of Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai writing, John Hinds (1990) found that the samples he examined had a “delayed introduction of purpose” and a quasi-inductive style that “has the undesirable effect of making the essay appear incoherent to the English-speaking readers.” Oi (2002) and Miyasone (1994, 1998) noticed that a major problem advanced Japanese learners of English had was the inability to become competent communicators despite their large vocabulary and good grammar. They pointed out that this was because the messages Japanese EFL students composed, on the oral to written continuum, were not logical without a clear main idea and coherence. According to Oi and Miyasone, Japanese who write for readers in other cultures often have problems with the identification of audience expectations. Unfortunately, many Japanese EFL students have had no practice in English in identifying the expectations of their audience with culturally different discourse style.

John Swales (1990) studied the organization and use of coherence devices in the introductions to research papers and found that teaching ESL graduate students global coherence strategies helped them compensate for difficulties at the local level. Carrell and Carson (1983) have defined schema principally in relation to reading skills.

Previously acquired knowledge is called the reader's background knowledge or schema, and there are three kinds of schema: content schema, linguistic schema, and formal (rhetorical) schema. Carrell (1984, 1987) suggests that teaching ESL readers the text structure of academic prose facilitates reading comprehension. Applying schema theory to ESL writing, she indicated that by providing necessary cultural information about the rhetorical organization of U.S. academic expository text and audience expectations of such text, teachers will make ESL writing more effective. Halliday and Hasan (1976) also claim that the expected logical flow of ideas provides ease in reader comprehension. When form is familiar, reading and writing will be relatively easy.

These previous studies confirmed that many ESL and EFL writers use different first language rhetorical patterns when writing English. The studies also suggest that knowledge of the audience's expectations by the readers is essential for coherent and effective communication. Miyasone has become interested in the effects of knowledge about the rhetorical organization on the spoken discourse as well as its effects on written discourse. She noticed that her Japanese advanced EFL students had difficulty communicating both in spoken and written English because they composed their messages neglecting English logic. She thought that it would be effective for them to have formal schema through intensive paragraph reading and writing activities in composing messages both in written and spoken languages (speech level). Closely linked to schema theory is the idea that reading and writing are integrally connected; the two skills are cognitively similar. Furthermore, both writing and speaking are interactive, and formal schema would play an integral part. Both writers and speakers have drafts of meaning in their heads as they begin. For EFL students, who have different cultural backgrounds and contrasting rhetorics (both as speakers and writers), their schemata, and so their drafts, may be inappropriate in intercultural communication settings.

THE STUDY

Purpose

On the basis of the above, the specific purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of the following point as the hypothesis of the study applying schema theory: teaching Japanese EFL students formal schema, such as the overall organization and the flow of information that native English speakers expect to read, will help them better communicate both in writing and speaking English. The concrete method was three-fold: (1) to inform students about discourse differences and audience expectations; (2) to provide practice with the imposition of appropriate patterns; and (3) to offer opportunities for practice and experience with the new schema. The study tries to clarify the achievements and challenges of the above approach taken in the study.

Participants and Procedures

The participants were 32 Japanese second-year national university students enrolled in a required "practical English course." The main objective of this course was to refine their communication skills, especially oral skills. They are science majors. Their English proficiency level is between high-intermediate and advanced level.

To help the students better communicate in writing and speaking English, six lessons in intensive paragraph reading and paragraph writing activities were taught. The goal of the activities was to write short essays consisting of three or four paragraphs, with emphasis on thesis statement, introduction, details, and conclusion, and with a further focus on fluency, discovery, and on the individual's unique development of ideas. Combination of the pattern-model-based and the process-based curriculum was employed.

Table 1 shows the time schedule for the activities.

Table 1. Time schedule for writing activities

1 st class	paragraph reading
2 nd class	paragraph writing
	1) brain storming
	2) choosing a topic among some choices related to Japanese culture and writing topic sentence
	3) organizing the idea _ teacher's feedback
3 rd class	4) writing a draft paragraph _ teacher's feedback (revision)
4 th class	5) writing a final paragraph
5 th class	essay writing _ teacher's feedback (revision)
6 th class	<u>presentation in the class (speech)</u>

Examples of topic:

- What custom is hard for international visitors to understand?
- What custom should international visitors learn?
- What is one thing you love about your culture?
- What words from your first language should visitors learn? Why?
- What is a traditional symbol of your country?
- What is a modern symbol of your country?

METHOD OF THE SURVEY

The survey was conducted through two methods: 1) students' essays were analyzed before and after the paragraph reading and paragraph writing activities, with the focus on overall organization and coherence; 2) a questionnaire was administered after the paragraph reading and paragraph writing activities. The latter was implemented to comprehend students' comments on the above activities and their communication ability in writing and speaking from the perspective of coherent communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of intensive paragraph reading and paragraph writing on improvement of Japanese EFLstudents' communication skills in written and spoken discourse; that is, whether the activities will help the students compose coherent messages and improve both their writing and speaking skills.

Achievements

The intensive paragraph reading and paragraph writing activities resulted in these achievements:

- 1) Students became aware of the logical organization of English and the expectations of native English speakers as to what they are about to read.
- 2) Students organized and developed their ideas more logically and coherently.
- 3) Students gained deeper insights and understanding of their own culture.
Some of the essays written by students are in the Appendix.

Challenges

The results also showed that students had difficulty understanding the concept of coherence and in writing coherent sentences in a paragraph, as well as writing coherent paragraphs. They could, however, easily write continuous sentences with cohesion. Through the analysis of students' essays, it was found that there were two major factors which prevented students from having coherence in their writings: 1) they depend on too many connection words, particularly conjunctions; 2) they don't use the common subjects in a paragraph, which are related to the theme and can make the paragraph unified. Moreover, six lessons are not enough for students to understand the concept of coherence and to write with coherence, which is vague and difficult compared with cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effects of paragraph reading and writing that enhance student communication ability in written and spoken discourse in terms of coherence and effectiveness. The major findings are as follows:

- 1) It is necessary to help the Japanese EFL learners be aware of logical organization in English for better communication in both writing and speaking English.
- 2) In the case of advanced learners of English, an intensive and process-based approach works well for the purpose mentioned above.
- 3) Still, teaching the learners the form of English writing has limitations. Students have difficulty bringing coherence to their writings.

Encapsulation of the foregoing sentence and readers' prospect are deeply related to the formation of coherence between sentences and in paragraphs or essays. Student ability in this area needs to be strengthened through extensive reading. Furthermore, finding a way to help students think logically and giving them such opportunities will be necessary both inside and outside of classes. And it is hoped that the study will be able to contribute to the construction of more refined EFL teaching theory in Asia.

Notes

- 1) Cohesion has been defined as the more limited term: specific words and phrases (transitions, pronouns, repetition of key words and phrases) that tie prose together and direct the reader (Connor, 1983).
- 2) Coherence is the broader-based concept: it is underlying organizational structure that makes the words and sentences in discourse unified and significant for the reader

(Tannen, 1984).

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Appendix

Students' Essays

What custom is hard for international visitors to understand?

(by E.K.)

Japanese people often use ambiguous phrases. I think it is hard for international visitors to understand this custom.

The other day when I read a correspondence column of newspaper, one of correspondences caught my eye. It was from a foreign student. According to the content, he asked his Japanese friend to go shopping together. Then his friend said "Sono hi wa chotto...." At first he couldn't figure out his friend's implication that he/she declined the invitation. It seems it was hard for him to understand that "chotto" meant declination for Japanese people.

I think Japanese people often use ambiguous phrases such as "chotto" because they don't want to hurt others when they decline invitations. Japanese people seem to value the relationship with others more than foreigners do. Thus ambiguous phrases are difficult for foreigners.

(by S.K.)

I think it is hard for international visitors to understand "Sekentei." It means appearance or reputation. That is how we appear to others and Japanese are strongly conscious of it.

Many Japanese act in the group and value cooperation or harmony with others. Therefore they tend to think that they are looked at, evaluated or rumored by others. Consequently in order to keep their reputation, they are reluctant to behave differently from the socially accepted norm. On the other hand, many of foreigners, especially the western people, value individual opinion. Thus each person has a different idea.

For the above reasons, I think "Sekentei" is unique to Japanese culture and foreign visitors might have difficulty understanding it.

(by A.U.)

There are many customs peculiar to Japan. Some of them are hard for international visitors to understand. I think Japanese "Honne" and "Tatemae" are one of the most difficult customs.

"Honne" refers to a person's real intention or motive, which the Japanese are reluctant to reveal in public. "Tatemae" refers to Japanese inclination to take a fixed course of action or follow conventional principles. It is important for Japanese people to maintain the harmony with others. Therefore, sometimes expressing a frank opinion –

especially an opposed and direct opinion – would be considered impolite to another person.

For the reasons I stated above, most Japanese use “Tatemae” for smooth communication on the nod. It would be hard for international visitors to understand, but I hope they will come to know Japanese use “Tatemae” not to tell a lie. Making a faithful relationship is the only way to get to know “Honne” each other in Japanese society.

(by M. T.)

Japanese people do not really express their feelings or what they think compared to foreign people. In Japan it is very important to behave considering what other people feel or what they want you to do. Consequently, the Japanese think it is better not to express their real feelings or opinions.

You can easily see such Japanese communication attitude if you attend the classes. In Japan, even at university levels, students rarely express their opinions or feelings. Actually it is considered to be a good thing that you keep yourself quiet during the class and get the necessary knowledge and information in one way from your teachers.

On the other hand, it is completely different in some other countries. For example, in England, where I stayed for a couple of years, students always ask their teacher questions if they have something they don’t understand. They always try to have communication with each other in order for knowing other people well and letting the others know themselves as well.

It is very important to express what you think and how you feel about something. That is the only way to express yourself, sharing with others, and have mutual understanding with people with different values. We should be more positive to communicate with other people. Otherwise, we won’t be able to survive in such an internationalized world.