Using a Framing Scheme to Help Teach Expository (Opinion) Writing

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Introduction

Many foreign students want or need to write academic English either for their jobs or in school. In addition to learning basic rules of English sentence structure, grammar, and the mechanics of writing, the English language student needs to better understand the organizational structure of the English paragraph/essay. After all, one cannot merely throw together words and sentences in any particular order and expect the reader to decipher its contents. This is especially true with academic writing, where students must communicate opinions and ideas clearly and of course, logically. However, as Bossaer and Pike point out, "foreign learners of English essay writing are often being taught sentence-level proficiency-building techniques in translation or they are taught complex discourse organization at the macro level" (2000, page 1). The latter approach is indeed important, as students need to understand how an English paragraph and/or essay is organized, yet a more simplistic approach to discourse formation is needed. While it's true foreign language students tackling a writing course will need to learn basic sentence skills, grammar, and vocabulary (McClelland & Marcotte, 2007, p. iii), it is just as important (and maybe more so), to teach students basic organizational skills so that they can communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively on paper. This paper was borne from the notion that students can learn to write clear, well-developed English paragraphs if given a step-by-step framing scheme that teaches basic organizational skills for an opinion paper. The purpose of this paper is to show how the labeling framework (scheme) works and to provide clear examples of paragraphs written with this approach. It is hoped that writing teachers struggling

with their own writing classes can benefit from this teaching approach.

Writing in English

As a form of communication, writing in English has always been at the top of the list of difficult endeavors. There are many reasons why writing is difficult - here are just a few: 1) It requires knowledge of the mechanics of writing (punctuation rules, spelling, capitalization, indenting, abbreviations, etc.). 2) It requires "filtering language through some sort of system ... either phonemic, structural or representative, etc." (Beare, 2015). 3) It's more formal (i.e. less casual/less idiomatic) which means the writer must often possess a fairly competent vocabulary. Depending on the topic, the vocabulary may also have to be somewhat "specialized". 4) By nature writing is non-physical. In face-to-face communication you have a speaker and listener occupying the same space and time (Lindemann, p. 14) allowing for corrections and/or clarification. For example, if one person doesn't understand, he or she can show confusion or bewilderment with a gesture or facial expression or ask for clarification if need be. In writing, however, when the reader doesn't understand the written discourse, there is no way for the writer to discern this. 5) Whereas in spoken language, false starts and stops are to be expected, writers often feel they must say everything perfectly (i.e. without mistakes). This is particularly true in a classroom setting where students are being graded.

Problems with Teaching Writing in Japan

If learning to write in English appears a daunting task, teaching it in environments where the student's L1 adheres to a different rhetorical organizational pattern than English is even more intimidating. No more is this true than with Japanese, as we see in this description of "danraku" (the Japanese paragraph):

It is doubtful that English and Japanese share the same rhetorical concepts. [ ] Japanese writers tend to place their thesis statements in the final position, and it is often difficult for native English speakers to predict the development of their writing. Though English teachers of Japanese students have tried to encourage them to write more deductively, the students' products still tend to lack focus and logical organization. Japanese students tend to write English essays with many *danraku*-like structures. As a result, their essays are often considered to lack focus and be poorly organized by native speakers of English (Kimura & Kondo, 2004, p. 8).

Kimura and Kondo's contention that paragraphs written by Japanese students are often unfocused and therefore difficult to follow is corroborated by the following example (Fig. 1) taken from the author's freshman English writing class. The students were instructed to write their opinions about social networking sites. Class time was spent discussing opinions (i.e. What is an opinion and how does an opinion differ from facts?) to help facilitate the writing process.

Fig. 1

I belong to the LINE. It is social networking site. It is very fun, but sometimes I use it too long. So I get sleepy and can't go to my class in the morning. My friends also use LINE. Sometimes we communicate with LINE for many hours. One time we used LINE for 10 hours. I was tiring. I also use Facebook. Many my friends use Facebook too. It is busy but fun. Because I can look my friends photos and videos. Some people have trouble on Facebook if their information is looked by bad people. LINE is good because I can look my friends comments soon. I like these SNS cause I meet many people. I have a friend in America.

> *We met on Facebook. She is Japanese too but she can speak English. I think SNS is good but sometimes bad.*

Grammar miscues aside, it is clear to see in this example that the author does indeed have an opinion about SNS (social networking sites): They can be fun, tiring, perhaps dangerous ("if information is looked by bad people"), and useful (for meeting people), etc. We even see that the author comes up with a thesis of sorts, at the end of the paragraph - "I think SNS is good but sometimes bad". This adheres to Kimura and Kondo's assertion that Japanese writers often place their thesis statements in the final position" (p. 8). However, the example also clearly shows a breach in the predictable structure of the English paragraph as well as a lack of organizational flow, staple requirements of the English paragraph. Instead, what we have is an assorted collection of the author's thoughts; the onus on the reader to try to make sense of the writer's intended meaning. The student seems to write down her thoughts at random, with no regard for organization or clarity. This "vagueness", flexibility, and blurred purpose in Japanese writing is explained further by Kimura and Kondo.

> The definition and functions of *danraku* are vague and the requirements for *danraku* are not clearly stated in most composition textbooks. [ ] Moreover, no book suggests the rules or requirements for *danraku*. Hence, when most Japanese write, the concepts of a topic sentence and supporting sentences do not exist. [ ] Any sentence can be included in a paragraph as far as it is related to the topic. Hence, Japanese writers do not have to follow specific rules and can flexibly make *danraku* while English writers are supposed to adhere to specific principles for a paragraph. [ ] A writer can put more than two main ideas in one *danraku* because the strict organization of a topic sentence and a supporting sentence is not required. [ ] A Japanese writer's

interest is in decorating with an emphasis on surface effects to move readers rather than that in presenting a message or information clearly. This difference further indicates that the purpose of writing is often different between the two languages. Japanese essay writers generally aim to move their readers and they are not concerned about how to clearly convey information as English writers are. Such fundamental differences in purposes of writing might affect the way in which a paragraph is organized. The difference of the purpose of each term may result in differences in paragraphs and *danraku*, which are the units of an essay or passage in both languages. (Kimura and Kondo, 2004, p. 9)

This honest assessment of the Japanese writing process underscores the difficulties English teachers must overcome if they are to teach Japanese students to write expository paragraphs in English. When we write in English, the message (what is being said about the topic), is shaped and developed by its written structure (Lindeman, 1987, p. 14). In Japanese however, we've learned that the message is most often shaped by the writer's "feelings" more or less. So, what are the implications? Can Japanese students be taught to write in a more organized and systematic way?

Since writing is a difficult task, even for native English speakers, it seems almost ludicrous to ask our Japanese students to write an English paragraph or essay on a particular topic without any kind of instruction about "how to write". Lindemann, writing about the necessity of organizational instruction, draws attention to this point when she states "Students (in writing classes) are told what to do but not how" (p. 25). Smith in Rhetoic and Composition (1990, p. 31), reiterates this sentiment by saying, "Anyone who hopes to teach children how to write must 1) demonstrate what writing does, and 2) demonstrate how to do it". To be fair, there are of course, strategies most writing teachers employ to assist the writing process. Writing textbooks are chock full

of prewriting/brainstorming strategies such as outlining, cluster mapping, listing, chart-filling, etc., where students generate ideas for a paragraph and then transfer the pertinent information to paragraph form. Unfortunately, brainstorming, while being a useful technique for generating topics and ideas, often elicits only "rambling, unfocused, or repetitive generalizations" (Lindemann, p. 77). Often what you have with brainstorming are lists of details, (the more the better?) without specificity. Brainstorming should produce useful details (Lindemann, p. 78) and enough details for students to wade through (and discard if need be). This isn't always easy as Japanese students, used to a more "feely" style of writing are often unaware of just what information is to be kept and "discarded".

Using Outlines and the Framing Scheme

In addition to various brainstorming strategies designed to enhance the writing process, outlining is a strategy employed by many good writers. Although writers (re: L1) rarely "construct elaborate outlines" (Lindemann, 1987, p. 75), outlining even informally, serves a useful purpose (p. 75). Outlining allows the writer to "discover digressions, inconsistencies, or other organizational problems" (p. 75). Emig, in her report on writing in twelfth grade explains, "Good writers appear to have more flexible, high-level plans and more self-conscious control of their planning, than poor writers" (1971, p. 44).

There is no denying the usefulness of an outline for writing, and the importance of "planning" in the writing process. An outline establishes boundaries and sets rules to writing, something Japanese students need to learn if they are to be effective English writers. Yet, outlining often still lacks the coherence (and/or logic) students need to write coherently. In other words, though an outline is, by its very nature, structured, it doesn't necessarily produce "correctly structured discourse". This is particularly true in

the opinion paragraph or essay, where the order of information (reasons and supporting details) and logical reasoning is crucial. In Figure 2 we see how an outline was used to write an opinion paragraph about cell phones.

Fig. 2

Topic Sentence: Cell phones are not needed for junior high school students.

Main Point 1 – Students may not study.

Detail 1 – Smartphones are increasing in recent years.

Detail 2 – Students like to use apps.

Main Point 2 – Many apps are available because they are free.

Detail 1 – I use apps to study English.

Detail 2 – Using too many apps loses friends.

Main Point 3 – There are endless troubles from social networking services.

Detail 1 – Leaking private information goes on especially on social networking sites.

Detail 2 – Leaking private information is serious problem.

Conclusion: There are some troubles for junior high school students cause of using cell phones.

In this example of student writing we see that there is a clearly stated topic sentence but problems with the main reasons and support. For example, while the first and third main points are valid (i.e. logical) reasons junior high school students do not need cell phones, the second main point (Many apps are available because they are free) is not. In fact, the second detail for Main Point 2 (Using too many apps loses friends), one could argue, is actually the second main point and not a detail. Detail 1 under Main Point 2 (I use apps to study English), seems to be an attempt at demonstrating one of the many apps available (Main Point 2) but it's not clear how it ties itself logically to the topic sentence. Detail 2 (students like to use apps) under Main Point 1 could fall under Main Point 1 (Students may not study) but as Main Point 2 and its details are

about apps, we see how the reader could become confused. Finally, Detail 2 (Leaking private information is serious problem) under Main Point 3 is really a restatement of Detail1 (Leaking private information goes on especially on social networking sites).

What is needed then is an organizational system that teaches students how to produce their thoughts and opinions (on paper) in a structured, but "logically connected" organizational manner. This means making sure all main points are connected to the topic sentence and making sure all details are logically connected to their respective main points. The labeling framing scheme I offer here takes outlining to another, and respectfully, more productive level. Rather than using outlining as an "unstructured probing" exercise, it serves the following four purposes:

- It helps students understand how sentences (i.e. support and details) are connected (or not connected) to the topic sentence.
- It serves as a feedback mechanism for teachers.
- It eliminates confusion which sometimes occurs when students transfer content from an outline and/or cluster map.
- Because it is already in paragraph form, it speeds up pre-writing /planning stages of the writing process (yet teaches students the organizational development skills needed to write well-developed "academic" paragraphs.

How does the labeling scheme work?
- Each sentence in the paragraph is labeled.
- Each labeled sentence has a purpose or function (It's a topic sentence, or signifies main support or a detail, a concluding sentence, etc.).
- Each labeled sentence is connected in some way to the topic sentence.
- All drafts are labeled but labels can be omitted in the final paper.

The Opinion Paragraph

Topic Sentence + Body - Main Support (details) + Conclusion

TS		

Introduction (includes topic sentence)

MS1	MS2	MS3
D1	D1	D1
D1a	D1a	D1a
D1b	D1b	D1b
D2	D2	D2
D2a	D2a	D2a
D2b	D2b	D2b

Body   (Includes main points and support/details)

CS		
CS1		

Conclusion

The Labeling Scheme

TS = Topic Sentence

MS1 = Main Support #1

D1 = 1st Detail (Directly connected to MS1)

D1a = Example, support, directly connected to D1

D1b = Example, support, directly connected to D1a

D1c/D1d/D1e, etc. (follow D1a to D1b progression)

D2 = 2nd Detail Example (Directly connected to MS1)

D2a/D2b/D2c, etc. are examples, support for MS1 and all connected

MS2 = Main Support #2

D1 = 1st Detail (Directly connected to MS2)

D1a = Example, support, directly connected to D1

D1b = Example, support, directly connected to D1a

D1c/D1d/D1e, etc. (follow D1a to D1b progression)

D2 = 2nd Detail Example (Directly connected to MS2)

D2a/D2b/D2c, etc. are examples, support for MS2 and all connected

MS3 = Main Support #3

D1 = 1st Detail (Directly connected to MS3)

D1a = Example, support, directly connected to D1

D1b = Example, support, directly connected to D1a

D1c/D1d/D1e, etc. (follow D1a to D1b progression)

D2 = 2nd Detail Example (Directly connected to MS3)

D2a/D2b/D2c, etc. are examples, support for MS3 and all connected

CS = Concluding Sentence [Main conclusion]

CS1 = Concluding sentence [Rephrasing of MS sentences]

Note: Most paragraphs the students write will not require all the labels I have shown. I have included enough labels to merely depict the sequencing or relationship between sentences (i.e. labels). The actual number of labels (i.e. MS sentences and D sentences) a student uses in a paragraph are virtually limitless, and only regulated by the amount of information a student puts forth. Students writing 150-word paragraphs will use far fewer labels. In the 169-word final draft written by a first-year Japanese student below (Fig. 3), only 13 labeled sentences were required.

[TS] [MS1] [D1] [D1a] [MS2] [D1] [D2] [D2a] [MS3] [D1]
[D1a] [CS] [CS1]

Fig. 3

Join a Band and Enjoy Life

[TS] There are several reasons why I'm glad I joined a rock band. [MS1] First, it is relaxing. [D1] When I play music in the band I forget all the problems and stress in my life. [D1a] Playing music then, is a kind of stress therapy. [MS2] Second, playing in a band is a lot of fun. [D1] In the band, we practice playing music in a studio, but we also tease each other a lot. [D2] In addition, when we play a gig, we often chat with the audience and even bring them on the stage. [D2a] There's usually a lot of laughter and it's fun for everyone. [MS3] Third, playing in a band is a great way to be creative. [D1] One of the greatest things about being in a band is writing and playing original songs. [D1a] There is no greater feeling than playing your own music in front of an audience. [CS] Life is definitely better since I joined a band. [CS1] It's great for relieving stress, it's a lot of fun, and it lets me be creative.

In figure 3 we see the student has a clear topic sentence with sound support (main reasons and details). Each detail (D sentence) is logically connected to the topic, its main supporting sentence (MS sentence) and if applicable, the sentence preceding it. To the native English reader, this paragraph is predictable in flow and allows the reader to grasp the writer's intended meaning or message. Let's look at one other example, this time a paragraph written a month later by the same student in Figure 1. The paragraph has a label for each sentence as required. The paragraph was written after three weeks (one 90-minute class per week) of instruction on the use of the labeling system.

Fig. 4

Social Networking Sites

[TS] I think SNS (social networking sites) are bad influences for us. [MS1] First, SNS are often dangerous. [D1] There are many bad sites on the Internet. [D1a] Everyone has the possibility of connecting to these bad sites because it is difficult to evaluate good sites and bad sites. [D1b] It is because bad people can hide their true identities. [D2] Moreover, SNS are dangerous because bad sites are easy to connect. [D2a] Anyone can connect to sites because the site doesn't know the true age. [MS2] Another reason SNS are bad influences is we waste a lot of time seeing social networking sites. [D1] Social networking sites are exciting and we can't stop using them. [D1a] As a result, we don't do our homework enough. [D2] In addition, when we watch SNS we go to bed late. [D2a] Because of this, our sleep time is decreased. [MS3] Finally, our oral communication skills are decreasing because we tend to use social networking sites for communication. [D1] We don't need face-to-face talking skills on SNS and we become poor in communication in society. [C] In conclusion, social networking sites are not good for us. [CS] There are many dangerous sites, they waste our time, and they decrease our communication skills. (193 words)

Again, as in figure 3, we have a paragraph with a clear topic sentence and logically connected main supporting sentences and details. The writer's intended meaning is easy to comprehend and the reader is able to follow the writer's flow of thoughts.

Conclusion

Expository (opinion) writing in English, either at the essay level or paragraph level is complex. It involves an understanding of the conventions of writing, in many cases, a competent level of vocabulary, knowledge of the mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, etc.), competency in basic grammar structure, and an understanding of the rhetorical organizational structure used in written (English) discourse. Unfortunately, Japanese students are often either taught English writing at the sentence level with a heavy emphasis on translation or they are taught writing discourse at the macro-level, often far too complex for the average student to grasp. What results is discourse deficient in logic and/or lacking in focus. Good English paragraph/essay writing requires far more systematically produced (i.e. organized) output than the more "flexible" writing style of Japanese paragraph writing (danraku). While pre-writing strategies exist to help students organize their English paragraphs (outlining, cluster mapping, listing, chart-filling, etc.), these strategies do not always help students write structurally-sound (re: logically-connected) arguments. To help students grasp a better understanding of English writing (particularly, opinion writing), I have proposed using a labeling scheme whereby each sentence in a paragraph is labeled. By utilizing the labeling system students learn how sentences are connected (or not connected) logically to the topic sentence and to other sentences within the paragraph and how English readers are able to predict the flow of development n the paragraph. Because the labeling system is already in paragraph form, it also speeds up the pre-writing/planning stages of the writing process. Finally, the labeling scheme prescribed helps eliminate confusion that often occurs when students transfer their outline content or cluster map, etc., to paragraph form.

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