AN ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH OPENING PARAGRAPHS WRITTEN BY JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS*

Keiko Hirose

Aichi Prefectural University

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that writing opening paragraphs is difficult. They are generally recognized as being "crucial to the success of their texts" (Arrington & Rose, 1987, p. 306). It is because of this important role that "students who are unable to write effective introductions on essay examinations often experience academic failure in universities in the United States" (Scarcella, 1984, p. 671). Given the difficulty of writing introductions, it is natural that non-native writers of English with limited proficiency and experience would be less than adept at producing this part.

What are successful openings in essay or research paper writing? Kane (1983) identifies the functions of the beginning paragraph as follows: "announcing and limiting the subject, indicating the plan of the paper, engaging the reader's attention, and establishing an appropriate tone and

point of view" (p. 57). Among these functions, he considers announcing and limiting the subject to be the most essential. Adopting a similar viewpoint, Scarcella (1984) discusses those devices employed for attention–getting and those for clarifying the subject.

A more specific model of introduction writing named "create a research space" is proposed by Swales (1987). In this model, he claims that there is the need for a gap to be established in order to create the space for the present research. The model constitutes the following four steps: generalization, description of previous research, gap indication, and announcement of present research (p. 59). In fact, this model matches the functions mentioned above, because it attempts to engage readers' attention to a gap and then clarifies the subject of paper. Thus, the paragraphs which serve such roles as clarifying the subject can be considered successful opening paragraphs.

In addition to the functions to be fulfilled, the length of the paragraphs also counts. It can be of any length and is not confined to one paragraph. However, Scarcella (1984) observes that given the same task, non-native English writers wrote significantly longer introductions than native English-speaking students. This suggests that the former underestimate readers' knowledge of the subject and present unnecessary background information (p. 683). The length relates to how much and what kind of information is presented, which reflects to what extent the writer takes the readers' expectations into account. It is, therefore, the (intended) readers who perceive whether the opening paragraphs are successful or not.

The introduction is a relatively well-studied field (see Swales 1987 for a review of literature), whereas investigation into non-native English writers' introductions is less extensive. Swales (1990) reports on the data he collected after his four-step model was taught to postgraduate engineering students. Despite having received such special instruction, students still wrote

unsatisfactory introductions with deficiencies in lexis and paraphrase.

This is a descriptive study to identify patterns in the opening paragraphs written by Japanese students of English. First, the present study aims to describe and generalize how opening paragraphs function in relation to the whole body. Every first paragraph as the opening paragraph was analyzed, even when the functions of introduction were regarded as missing. Following Kane (1983) and Scarcella (1984), I took a perspective that at least the function of "clarifying the subject" must be fulfilled. After several un-successful paragraph types were identified, I tried to examine the problems attached to them. Second, this study attempts to locate the characteristic strategies used in the opening paragraphs. Finally, I discuss the implications for writing instruction.

METHOD

1. Subjects
A total of 22 students were selected as subjects from a sample of 50 students enrolled in a "British and American society" course taught by an American sociology professor at a private university in Nagoya in 1988. These students, who were British and American majors in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, chose the same essay question from among the four

Table 1. Results of Michigan Test

	M	*Ranges*	*SD*
Listening	80	63-96	7
Grammar, Vocabulary, Reading	76	66-90	6
Totals	156	134-185	12

options given by the professor. They all took the listening and grammar, vocabulary, and reading sections of the *Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency*. (See Table 1 for the means, ranges and standard deviations of their scores.) This group of students, including several returnees from America, could be considered high intermediate to advanced Japanese learners of English.

About 68% of the subjects received scores between 73 and 87 in Listening, whereas the same percentage gained those from 70 to 82 in Grammar, Vocabulary, and Reading. Moreover, the correlation between the listening and the other part was found to be 0.65, statistically significant at the .01 level. Accordingly, the students were considered to be of similar proficiency level with regard to their English ability.

As for their educational background on English writing, they took one ninety-minute 'English Composition' class in their freshman-year and they were taking another one when they wrote the papers. They were taught paragraph formation, but it is not clear how they studied it or which textbooks they used in these classes. It is known that they were not systematically trained to write papers in English.

2. Data

The data were research papers written for an academic course, not for a class of English composition. They were take-home essay examinations and most of them were actually typewritten. The students answered the following assignment prompt:

> Japanese education is structured very differently from American education. In the U.S., students tend to work less in high school and more in college. American teenagers are rather carefree and do not work very hard. How do you feel about the Japanese educational

> system? Do you feel that Japanese high school students work too hard?
> What kind of education would you like for your own children?

Unlike a research paper there was no need for the students to indicate a gap because the gap was already established through the prompt.

Since indentation was properly made, the opening paragraph of each paper was easily identified. The mean number of words per opening paragraph was found to be 100.18 (SD = 58.77). The average number of sentences was 7 (SD = 4.34), and the average sentence length was 15.1 words (SD = 4.44).

3. Analysis

In order to investigate whether the opening paragraph functions as an introduction to the rest of the paper, it was decided to first find the organizing sentence(s) (Harris 1990) from the opening paragraphs. The organizing sentences are such sentences as help the reader to organize his/her expectations about what comes next in the text. Since those in the opening paragraphs are the first organizing sentence(s) in the paper, they are likely to serve as the global organizer of what the paper is concerned about. The sentences which clarify the subject, or engage readers' attention, or indicate an organizational framework were considered good candidates for the organizing sentences.[1] The whole paper was then read in order to examine the relation between the identified organizing sentence(s) and arguments in the rest of the paper.

Furthermore, feedback from the intended reader (viz., the American professor to whom the students wrote papers) was also taken into consideration, because comments on the opening paragraphs were most often made voluntarily by the professor, who did not know that this researcher was going to analyze the opening paragraphs. In fact, 59% (13 out of 22) students received comments such as "You need an opening paragraph which

introduces the theme of the paper." In other words, the function of introduction was considered missing from the viewpoint of the American professor. Only one student received the comment "good," whereas eight students (36.4%) were given no comments on the opening paragraphs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Five types of opening paragraphs

Analysis of the 22 opening paragraphs revealed that they were subsumed into five categories. Interrater reliability on this categorization (i.e., to which category each paragraph pertains) was tested with an experienced applied linguist. There was 90.9 percent agreement and as to the discrepancy found in the two data, we arrived at an agreement on them after discussion. Following are descriptions of each type, followed by some examples.

Type 1 (18.2%) Organizing sentences were not identified and functions of introduction were considered missing: therefore no direction was set to the readers to follow. Instead there was a lot of information packed into one paragraph and readers were at a loss why too much information was given by the writer in the first place. The following paragraph is a case in point:

> It is said that it is difficult to promote the next level school. So in elementary school day's, we study to enter first-class junior high school and in junior high school day's we study to enter first-class high school and in high school day's, we study to enter first-class university or college. Recently I consider what in the world I have been studying hard. We had studied Japanese, Mathematics, Science, Social studies, English. We have to study Japanese. Japanese is our mother tongue. But I don't study Japanese but English now. I think ability of my

Japanese isn't perfect at all. When I look back upon studying Japanese, I have a question on it. We can talk Japanese conversation, but many Japanese are poor at writing Japanese composition or Chinese characters. Why is that? The reason is developed mass media and Telephone. In short the center of our lives is speaking and hearing. (S22).

Type 2 (13.6%) In Type 2, just one sentence was given before the arguments started. The opening paragraph constituted one introductory sentence and the first argument; therefore the opening paragraph was relatively long. The one sentence, without choice, worked as the organizing sentence, but too little information was provided through it. It functioned as the local organizer, which worked for a smaller size of unit such as one paragraph, rather than that of global organizer. It was, accordingly, too weak for the organizing sentence in the opening paragraph. The following paragraph had the comment from the professor: "It could start with an opening paragraph that introduces the argument of the whole paper." (The italicized parts from the next paragraph onward were regarded as organizing sentences.)

Today's educational system in Japan surely has got many serious problems, which may even do harm on its students. First, it has been putting too much emphasis on the entrance examination of university/ college. Most of the high schools in Japan have been and still are competing with one another for the number of the students who go on to the famous universities, like Tokyo University, Kyoto University, and so on. People regard that entering such universities, or only passing the exams of such schools, is the goal of the students' study. Japan is known to be a typical academic-career-overestimating society, and children are being forced by the whole surroundings to work hard to live a good life. Everybody studies to get a better academic back-

ground, not to get various knowledge. (S8)

On reading the first sentence, no reader would be ready to follow the arguments of the paper yet. The one introductory sentence puts too much demand on the readers and does not prepare them to establish their expectations of the whole paper.

Type 3 (9.1%) Type 3 opening paragraphs mismatched the rest of the papers. The topic presented by the organizing sentences was apparently misleading, because the rest of the paper did not discuss it; therefore, the reader's expectations were not consistent with the text. The following opening paragraph is an example of this type.

> *Japanese educational system is very different from American educational system.* There is no child who does not go to school in Japan. Our constitution declares that it is parents' duty that they let their children go to school. Japanese educational system has been making remarkable progress and a lot of young people go to the universities after graduating from their high schools. *I think that Japanese students grasp the meaning of university and studies differently from American students.* (S10)

The first and the last sentences stated the differences between Japanese and American educational systems. The readers' attention is drawn to these sentences and readers' expectations are likely to be built from them. However, it turned out to be the case that the writer did not make a comparison at all in the paper. In fact, the American professor commented: "The last sentence of your opening paragraph implies that the paper will be a comparison of American and Japanese education - but it is not." Therefore, Type 3 opening

paragraphs failed to serve both attention-getting and clarifying functions. Readers' attention was drawn to a totally different topic and clarification of the argument was not made after all.

Type 4 (45.5%) The organizing sentence(s) identified the topic, but they were not specific enough. They served to draw the readers' attention to a topic but did not clarify the argument of the paper sufficiently so that the subject-limitation function was missing from the opening paragraph. The following short paragraph is a typical example.

> The Japanese educational system is different from the American educational system. *What are the characteristics of the Japanese educational system?* (S19)

As proposed, the writer discussed the characteristics, but more specifically she did so by giving a critique of the system in four ways. The readers' expectations would have been too broad. However, the degree of specification desirable may differ from reader to reader. The next example was considered as Type 4 by the writer and co-rater.

> 1971 and 1979 — Do you know what happened in these years? In 1971, the deviation value index of the perceived level of educational institutions, was introduced in first stage of the national examinations (kyoutsuichiji). *Though these two years are not well known to Japanese, I think these two years changed Japanese education. I mean the deviation value is the worst point of Japanese education.* (S1)

The writer of this paragraph presumably attempted to draw the reader's

attention to the two years, 1971 and 1979, by the use of an interrogative in the first sentence. Doing this was important for the writer, because her point was the introduction of the standard deviation system changed the Japanese educational system for the worse. From this paragraph, the readers would have expected the writer to discuss how devastating an influence the introduction had exerted on the Japanese educational system. The writer actually discussed it. However, the professor commented as follows:

> You really need an opening paragraph which introduces the reader to the theme of your paper. Basically, as I understand it, your argument is that the introduction of the "deviation value" has caused 4 major problems (1)... (2)... (3)... (4)... You should make it clear early in the paper that you are going to describe four ways in which the deviation value has distorted the Japanese educational system.

If this degree of limitation of the subject is generally expected from professional English readers, this should be definitely taught to non-native Japanese writers.

Type 5 (13.6%) The functions of introduction were fulfilled in Type 5 opening paragraphs. The following paragraph is the only one which receives a positive comment from the American professor.

> As everyone knows, the Japanese educational system after the World War 2 is based on that of the United States (what we call the 6-3-3 system). And both our systems are seemingly quite similar. In spite of such similarities, however, there seems to be a fundamental difference over our education, that is, students' attitudes toward studying. Generally speaking, Japanese students study hard in high

school and less in college, while in the United States, students enjoy their high school life and don't study very hard in high school but study hard in college. *What makes such a difference and which system is more desirable?* Well, let's see the reasons first. (S14)

Although there was an obvious intrusion of the spoken style into the last sentence, the student established her topic clearly in an interrogative form so that the readers could easily expect the subsequent discussion in the paper, and their expectations were satisfied. Another student, after writing her U.S. experiences, finished with the following sentence: "So I think I have a pretty good idea on how the Japanese education is structured differently from the one in the U.S." (S11) and the paper was a comparison of the two educational systems. One other student presented her main point followed by the organizational framework such as "In the following paragraphs, I want to explain what are the reasons, and what kind of education I would like to give to my children" (S13) and proceeded to argue along this line.

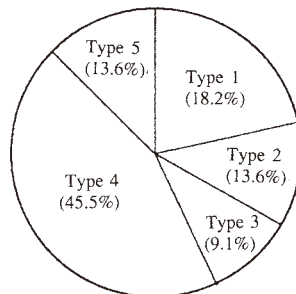Figure 1 shows the percentage of the five categories.

Fig. 1. 5 Types of Opening Paragraphs

All except Type 5 were unsuccessful opening paragraphs for different reasons. It is hard for any reader to establish expectations from Type 1.

Type 2 also has problems, because the expectations would not work at a global level. The paper with Type 3 went against the readers' expectations. In all 40.9% of the subjects resorted to Types 1, 2 and 3. The percentage might have been higher if they had been less experienced writers of a lower English proficiency group.[2]

It is likely that the students who wrote these three types were not aware of the functions and how crucial they were; presumably owing to their limited experience of writing a paper in English. One possibility is that either they were not taught the functions or could not transfer explicit knowledge to real experience of paper writing. There is also the possibility that their opening paragraphs in English represented the counterpart in Japanese; the students, who were not much experienced writers in Japanese paper writing, transferred Japanese essay (zuihitsu) style to English writing. It is generally assumed that the introductory part of Japanese essays are not necessarily related to the main body. This is why Hinds (1990), for example, finds a mismatch between the opening statement and the concluding remark in Vox Populi, Vox Dei (Tensei Jingo); more specifically, between "an episode of a fee for asking the way in a tourist area" and "statement that lack of consideration for others can lead to increased railway fares and taxes" (p. 92). To what extent relatively loose relation between the introductory part and the rest, from the viewpoint of English-speaking readers, is acceptable in Japanese writing other than essays (zuihitsu) is another issue to be considered. Research paper writing in Japanese requires much closer connection.

Nevertheless, those who chose Type 4, the largest group in our data, at least realized the function of announcing the subject. How much limitation of the subject is satisfactory to the English-speaking professional readers is another important issue. With the question raised in the previous paragraph, this spurs us to explore English-speaking readers' as well as Japanese readers' perception of the opening paragraphs. Given the same paragraph of Type 4,

they might react differently.

It is, however, easier for any reader to form expectations about the whole paper if such an explicit overview as "The paper is about four major problems of the Japanese educational system" followed by the short summarization of the four is given at the outset. Johns (1986) indicates that inexperienced writers, at least, can take advantage of these explicit statements to organize their paper (p. 254). They should be encouraged to specify the subject through these statements.

2. Some characteristic features in opening paragraphs
(1) Attention-getting by the use of interrogatives

As observed above, the clarifying function was not adequately fulfilled in the opening paragraphs except Type 5. In contrast, the attention-getting function was served to some extent. According to Scarcella (1984), attention-getting devices in the introduction include cataphoric reference, interrogatives, direct assertions, structural repetition, short abrupt elements, sentence-initial adverb + verb sequence, and historical context. Interrogatives were most frequently adopted by the Japanese writers: More than half of the students (54.6%) used interrogatives in the opening paragraphs.

The interrogatives the students resorted to seem to fall into three types. First, interrogatives such as "Have you ever heard about the suicide of the teenagers?" (S2) and "Do you know the news that the 14-year old boy killed his family?" (S16) try to grab the readers' attention to sensational incidents, probably expecting negative answers from the readers. Essentially belonging to the spoken language, this might represent journalistic, especially sensational, type of English. The abrupt intrusion of "expressive" (or emotional) style into the "informative" context of paper seems to be out of place.

The second type of interrogatives is the questions which are answered by the writer in the following sentence(s). For instance, "Why do we study

so hard? To pass the entrance examination at university." (S20) and "Why is that? The reason is developed mass media and Telephone." (S22) Student 1 also included a question of this category (see the quoted paragraph above). Third, the question raised by the interrogatives is the topic of paper (see S14 for an example). This type of interrogatives is regarded as an effective way of introducing the topic of paper by many composition textbooks.

Type 1, characterized as "You know what?" and Type 2 "Let me answer this question for you" questions, both of which are not actually asking the readers for response, might be regarded as unsophisticated devices for moving a discourse forward (P. McCagg, personal communication, May 27, 1991). The effective use of interrogatives is made when they are incorporated in the text in a skillful way, not when the whole text starts with a sensational question. Attempts were made to draw the readers' attention to a topic, but not necessarily done successfully.[3]

It may be interesting to think of what motivated the students to use questions. They might use questions in the same way when they write in their first language and transfer the habit when writing in English. There is also the possibility that they have studied the use of questions as a means of introducing a topic in the opening paragraphs. Or as pointed out above, conversational devices such as question-answer pairs might be one of the simplest strategies for immature writers. In fact, these types of questions are effectively used in spoken discourse. If the students were exposed to these questions, this popular use might have been transferred to the written discourse.[4] Since mixing style of speaking with that of writing is often observed even in Japanese composition written by Japanese students, this explanation may be a good justification for this strategy.

(2) Use of the known information

A tragedy of a 14-year-old boy killing his family members was men-

tioned in the opening paragraphs by two students. While surprising information of this kind was presented to the American reader, apparently known information also appeared in the opening paragraphs. In fact, four out of seven students who started their papers with a comparative perspective stated that in the U.S., students worked less in high school and more in college, whereas in Japan students worked more in high school and less in college. This was exactly what the professor described in the prompt.

Using the prompt information in the opening paragraph is not a successful attempt to raise the readers' expectations because it is already known to the reader before reading the text. Reading the known information only does not motivate the readers to read further. The common knowledge could be a simple trigger for an inexperienced writer to start writing. Inexperienced English-speaking writers also cling to this strategy. Illustrating one of his favorite opening sentences "There are two sexes in the world – male and female," Crew (1987) claims that "amateurs offer as a discovery what any thinking person would have guessed already" (p. 349). It is difficult to write general (known) information; more specifically, judgment on what, how much, and how to present requires much consideration on the writer's side.

(3) The use of the first pronoun "I"

Another characteristic feature also recognized was the use of "I" in the organizing sentences. In fact, 40.9% of the students stated their positions using it. Examples of this are:

> I think that the education in Japan doesn't have the pure spirit of learning or studying. (S3)
>
> I want to think about the system of Japan. (S4)
>
> I am going to write about some of the problems education in Japan I feel has had. (S6)

I wonder why this kind of tendency can be seen. (S15)

As for the Japanese educational system, I have a positive opinion although it is criticized frequently. (S17)

I recognize many problems which should be solved in Japanese educational system. (S21)

Since the students were expected to give their personal opinions on the Japanese educational system, the use of first person pronoun is not a surprising finding. However, this entails that the seemingly easy task of expressing their own opinions is not at all easy because the writers are required to integrate subjective information into the objective context of research paper.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING WRITING

The students in this study were expected to write in response to a given prompt. Although it might be a case in the U.S. that "most writing for academic classes is in response to a specific assignment or prompt" (Johns, 1986, p. 253), Japanese university students are generally not accustomed to answering a prompt, not to mention writing a paper in English. Not surprisingly, given the same prompt, 18.2% of a different group of 22 Japanese university freshmen (a lower proficiency group than the subject group) listed respective answers to each question of the prompt instead of producing a composition. In order to prepare a paper of this type, students need to realize what the prompt tells them to do. As Johns (1986) argues, they should have experience with deconstructing (decoding) prompts, which would help them to understand better "the directions of the writer of the prompt regarding aims, strategies, and content" (p. 254).

Secondly, consciousness-raising of the functions in introductions is crucial in a writing course. It may be instructive to give students opportunities

to read poor introductions as well as effective ones. For example, given misleading introductions, they are likely to form expectations, which are not satisfied in the end. Making prediction exercises from introductions also help them to become conscious of functions.

Thirdly, if English-speaking readers are generally found to prefer the specification of the subject, Japanese students have to be instructed to give as explicit an overview as possible in the opening paragraphs.

Fourthly, we should encourage students to write their introduction after they have made an outline or have written the whole body. They should reread the whole paper to check whether introduction matches the rest of paper and, if necessary, revise it. Only presenting them a list of devices to fulfill functions such as rhetorical questions, statistics or dramatic information does not guarantee students' successful use of them.

Those opening paragraphs such as Types 1, 2 and 3 do not help readers to form expectations about the whole paper, which makes them difficult to follow arguments. It can be concluded that these paragraphs reflect a writer-based writing process. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to have the intended reader in mind when writing.

Lastly, although the role of the opening paragraphs has been discussed and emphasized in this paper, it is not the only section which requires attention. The success of the whole paper derives from many other factors such as overall organization or content of arguments.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to describe the opening paragraphs written by Japanese university students. A majority (86.4%) of relatively advanced students did not write successful opening paragraphs for several reasons. The problems of unsuccessful paragraphs were examined in terms of the

expected functions in English. This study suggests a direction of further study which examines, given a similar prompt, what type of opening paragraphs Japanese students choose in Japanese paper writing. Moreover, this should be supplemented by research which elucidates how the Japanese readers perceive them, especially those types considered inappropriate in English. It may then be possible to make comparisons between English-speaking and Japanese-speaking readers' perception and expectations of the opening paragraphs.

With regard to the second question, the study found three characteristic features: (1) interrogatives (2) known information (3) the first pronoun "I." Research needs to examine whether these features are mere reflection of Japanese writing or not. It is hoped that the suggestions made in this article may assist students in the writing of successful opening paragraphs.

Notes

1. The possibility that the following paragraphs included such sentences was also checked. One of the essays was revealed to have such an organizing sentence at the beginning of the second paragraph, and this sentence was regarded for the purpose of this paper as a part of the opening paragraph.
2. It might be illuminating if an examination is made not only of the relationship between students' choice of opening paragraphs and their English proficiency levels, but also of the relationship between the choice and the grade each paper was awarded.
3. It is therefore misleading to count the number of interrogatives mechanically as a device of attention-getting. Simple counting of other devices such as structural repetition or paraphrase has the same problem.
4. In fact, it has been pointed out to the writer by several experienced teachers of English that the use of such questions sound typical of speech produced by the Japanese university students who belong to ESS (English Speaking Society).

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