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## How to Teach Paragraph Writing in a Foreign Language

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### Abstract

Writing paragraphs in a foreign language is a very complex exercise, which implies not only knowledge from various fields, but also written expression abilities, as well as intellectual qualities. This exercise has many advantages: it allows the teacher and/or the students to treat all kinds of subjects, forces the students to enrich their cultural background, to improve their written expression abilities, to treat the subject in a rational way in order to obtain a logical paragraph. This work aims to present the advantages this exercise has in the professional development of future translators (1<sup>st</sup> year students studying Romanian-French/French-Romanian translation), as well as the methods they are taught to use in order to obtain coherent and cohesive paragraphs.

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### 1. Introduction: Why should future translators be taught to write paragraphs in a foreign language?

Knowing how to write a good paragraph is very important in our era as the quantity of information in each domain is huge and as we may find ourselves in the situation of presenting facts and/or expressing our opinion on certain subjects, convincing other people that we are right, by finding the best arguments, the best examples or by inventing the best scenarios. This exercise is very useful for future translators, as they have to translate source texts in the target language and they must be able to build consistent, coherent and cohesive paragraphs. But what we consider even more important is the fact that this exercise develops certain abilities, which are absolutely necessary for apprentice translators. Deslile (2010), speaking about teaching translation, explains that its object is mainly for

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students to develop “a double general competence and four basic skills to be practised at three levels”. The double competence includes, according to this author, the understanding of a source text and the re-expressing of its meaning in the target language, a competence which we have to develop during the first year writing seminar in French. That is why it is advisable for first year students in translation to study the techniques of writing good paragraphs in French. After having analysed texts, having resumed them or synthesized several texts on the same subject in the first term, in the second term they have to write paragraphs. This exercise is much more complex, because they need to have better communication skills in French and rich knowledge in the field. It is mostly helpful for those who are supposed to translate pragmatic texts, which according to Deslile (1984) “convey information without emphasising aesthetic aspects”. That is why the translator of pragmatic texts may be considered a “specialist in written communication, a language technician, a text editor” (Deslile, 1984). The translation of pragmatic texts is “an art of re-expression based on techniques of editing and on previous knowledge of the two languages” (Deslile, 1984). The translation of literary or specialized texts raises other problems, which are not treated in this paper.

## 2. What should students know about writing good paragraphs?

In “Robert (1973:1229, our translation) we find the following definition of the paragraph: “a part of a written text in prose which is characterized by a certain unity of thinking and of composition”. Students are taught from the very beginning that they have to write consistent paragraphs. They are already used to it from the previous exercises of writing an abstract or a synthesis. The big difference is that now they have to present facts or to express their own ideas in their personal way of thinking. In order to do this, they are taught that the main elements of a paragraph are the facts and the opinions. It is important for them to know the difference between these two elements. The fact is an element taken from reality, which happens at a certain place and in a certain moment. The fact is objective and beyond any discussion.

E.g. *The first Olympic Games took part for the first time in 776 BC.*

The opinion is subjective; it may be about a person or an object. Even if it is considered right by its author, the opinion is questionable.

E.g. *Nowadays the Olympic Games are influenced by politics.*

The fact and the opinion are expressed by clear and concise sentences. In many paragraphs they are combined. The opinion may result from the facts. The facts and/or the opinions must be connected clearly and logically. If this doesn't happen, the paragraph won't be coherent and it may become even meaningless. It is just a succession of remarks and it is hard to find out what it wants to prove. But, if there is a proper coordination of the facts and/or opinions, the paragraph will show clearly its author's way of thinking and it will succeed to convince the reader. It is important to know how to organise a paragraph, which techniques to use and how to use the connectors. Niquet, (1979), speaking about the importance of knowing how to write a good paragraph, shows that this exercise “has become part of many written exams in France: Bachelor's Degree, Professional exams, and admission exams at higher education institutes”. Unfortunately Romanian first year students are not familiar with the rules of writing a good paragraph, the teacher being in the position of correcting their bad habits and teaching them techniques of writing a good paragraph.

## 3. Teaching students how to write good paragraphs

Students have to know the different types of paragraphs in order to be able to choose the right one. In the written expression seminar, we use the classification of Niquet, (1983) who divides the paragraphs in three categories:

- Paragraphs which develop a fact;
- Paragraphs which develop an opinion;
- Paragraphs which answer a question.

### 3.1 Paragraphs which develop a fact

In order to develop a paragraph based on a fact, students have to make a choice between several elements which

could help to present that fact: the characters who participated at it or initiated it, the causes, the consequences, the opposition, the perspectives of the fact. In the first stage we ask our students to do the following types of exercises:

- the analysis of the paragraph to find out which elements are used in it (generally a table is used in this purpose);
- the reconstruction of the fact that is developed in the paragraph.

After that, students are asked to write paragraphs on different facts, to analyse the elements that they have used and to justify their choice.

### 3.2 Paragraphs which develop an opinion

Students have to know that “it is not enough to state an opinion, it is absolutely necessary to prove that it is right” (Cohen-Vida, 2002). In order to do that, students may use different techniques:

- to illustrate the opinion: “examples are taken from the reality, or scenarios are invented” (Niquet, 1989) which are typical for the subject of the paragraph;
- to prove that the opinion is right: arguments are used.

Taking into account the techniques used to develop an opinion into a paragraph, Guilbert Niquet (1989:28) classifies the paragraphs which develop an opinion into three categories:

- paragraphs which develop an opinion by using the example;
- paragraphs which develop an opinion by using the scenario;
- paragraphs which develop an opinion by using the arguments.

#### 3.2.1 Paragraphs which develop an opinion by using the example

The example is a real event which takes place at a certain place and in a certain moment. The characters involved are real and notorious persons. If the examples are well chosen, they will convince the reader that the author is right when he/she expresses his/her opinion. The types of exercises the students are asked to solve are:

- to analyze the examples used in different paragraphs;
- to add one or two examples to the development of a paragraph;
- to write paragraphs which develop an opinion by using two or three examples.

#### 3.2.2 Paragraphs which develop an opinion by using the scenario

The scenario is an imaginary story, having imaginary characters. Both the story and the characters try to prove that the opinion is right. Niquet (1989:28) stated that “the characters and the story must be relevant to the opinion”. The students are asked to do the following types of exercises:

- to analyze the scenarios that are used to develop different paragraphs;
- to add one or two scenarios to the development of a paragraph; to prove that the scenario is relevant;
- to write paragraphs which develop an opinion by using scenarios.

#### 3.2.3 Paragraphs which develop an opinion by using arguments

Argumentation is a reasoning, a logical sequence of ideas that demonstrate the accuracy of the opinion. This requires that the arguments used should be strong and associated so that they form a convincing whole. Since our childhood, we have used arguments whenever we want something. We use arguments without knowing it, just as

Jourdain spoke in prose, without knowing it. If we simply affirm "It is raining." this is a statement, the expression of a perceived and verifiable reality, not an argument. However, this neutral statement may be an argument when you tell someone "Do not go out now, it is raining". On the other hand, an argument has a relative value according to what we want to prove and to whom it is addressed. That is why the same argument can be utilized in argumentations of different orientations. For example, "a 4% increase in the price of milk" can be reported as simple information by a newspaper, as a proof that the employees' economic situation deteriorates by another, or an argument that proves the government's concern to improve the standard of living of the farmers, by a third. The argument can be defined as "a more or less explicit reasoning by which we do our best to persuade someone, to make him/her acquire an opinion or to modify his/her opinion, to make him/her undertake an action." (Baril, Guillet, 1992). We consider this type of paragraph very important and that is why we insist that our students know how to write an effective argumentation. The first step is to teach them the types of arguments. In our written expression seminars, we use the classification of arguments given by Baril and Guillet (1992), which we have slightly adapted for the use of our students.

Thus we classify the arguments as follows:

- analogies;
- arguments of authority;
- cause and effect relationships;
- definitions and descriptions;
- dilemmas and elimination of alternatives;
- advantages and disadvantages;
- evaluations, use of scientific, historic or statistic data;
- examples, models, illustrations, generalizations;
- syllogisms.

We won't present all these types of arguments in this paper, but we want to remark that we teach our students the definition of each one, as well as their advantages and disadvantages. They must know which is/are the best type/types of arguments to be used in specific circumstances. The strongest argument is to be established in connection with the whole argumentation, the audience being addressed. The strongest argument is sometimes not the one that is judged to have the greatest logical value, but the most unexpected one, that will surprise the readers, encourage them to read. It is not possible to separate logic and psychology of argumentation. It is important to choose the best argument, but also to develop it well, to give it the deserved importance in a certain situation.

To write a good argumentation, students should consider a few key points:

- define the objective clearly: what we want to prove, to achieve;
- adapt the argument to the recipients;
- adapt the argument to the material conditions;
- order the raw material that is available: facts, technical data, statistics, experiments;
- choose the best suited arguments to the particular situation of communication. (Cohen-Vida, 2002).

In order to write successful argumentative paragraphs, we ask our students to:

- analyze the arguments used in different paragraphs;
- add one or two arguments to the development of a paragraph;
- compare paragraphs which develop the same opinion by argumentation;
- write paragraphs which develop an opinion by using two or three arguments.

### 3.3 The paragraph which answers a question

This third type of paragraph resembles a lot the previous one. It is composed of three parts:

- the question;
- the answer to this question;
- the explanation of the answer.

The third part in fact resembles the paragraph which develops an opinion because after having answered the question, the opinion has to be developed. This paragraph can be considered as a reinforcement of the previous one, so students, after having answered the question, are asked to do the same exercises as for the paragraph developing an opinion.

#### 4. Conclusions

The paragraph writing is an exercise of intelligence, and so is the translation. In order to write a good paragraph, the subject must be “rethought” and “reformulated” and connections between different elements must be established. It implies an intra-language formulation, while the translation implies a reformulation in the target language. The paragraph writing requires an intense effort of writing and, as a result, the students’ writing skills have considerably improved. A good paragraph is obtained only after having practised a lot. The need of training is fundamental in order to acquire the ability to react properly when faced to a certain number of subjects. The work is comparable to that of translators, but also to that of musicians, dancers or athletes, who can give an impression of ease, only after having practised for long hours. Writing a good paragraph requires a good proficiency in French and a minimum of general knowledge. The language proficiency is necessary in order to be able to express the facts and the opinions in a clear, concise way. The student’s general knowledge is very important when writing a paragraph, as it is difficult to make a good paragraph when ignoring the subject matter. Documentation is very important when writing a paragraph, as well as when translating a text. In conclusion, we would emphasize the fact that, at the end of the first year, students have been able to analyze and combine facts and opinions, and to write consistent, organized and well articulated paragraphs in French. This has imposed on them a certain intellectual discipline, which is very important for a future translator.

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