

**Paragraph Writing in an Academic Writing Class:
A New Teacher's Perspective**

Edmund Fec

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the issues faced by a teacher new to teaching academic writing at a Japanese university, such as determining what course materials to use and what areas of writing to focus on. The findings were that for a class of low intermediate to intermediate students, a focus on paragraphs rather than essays was more suitable for the ability of the students and allowed for a greater number of written assignments and re-drafts. The drawbacks of this approach were that important features of academic writing, such as researching and referencing, were not covered sufficiently. The author concludes that for future classes the best approach might be to focus on paragraphs but aim for the students to complete a longer essay as their final goal.

Keywords: academic writing

1. Introduction

For a new teacher at a university in Japan there are many challenges to be faced. In 2018, I was given the chance to work full-time as a lecturer at the university where I had been teaching part-time for 8 years previously. As a part-time teacher, I taught speaking and listening classes, but my duties now include teaching elective courses, such as English Presentation, Advanced English Communication and Academic Writing. Of these, the most difficult to prepare in advance was Academic Writing. In this paper I will talk about the problems I encountered before and during the course and then discuss the implications of what I have learned and how they can be used to help plan future courses.

2. What is Academic Writing?

Academic writing is the style of writing used at universities for essays and research papers. It is generally written in the third person, logically organized and has a formal style (Rossiter, 2004, p. xiii). The University of Leeds (n.d.) advises its students that, “Academic writing is clear, concise, focussed, structured and backed up by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader’s understanding. It has a formal tone and style, but it is not complex and does not require the use of long sentences and complicated vocabulary.” Academic writing courses are an integral part of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) studies at the tertiary level in Japan. According to Gondree & Alem (2018), “Learners of English in academic writing classes typically learn a variety of essay forms to develop improved writing skills.” (p. 171-2). These essay forms may include rhetorical styles such as narrative, descriptive, comparison or cause and effect essays (Rossiter, 2004, p. xi). The content of the academic writing courses is related to the needs and abilities of the students, so, while courses for advanced learners may focus on writing research papers, other courses may cover only paragraphs or even sentence-level writing.

This variation is reflected by the range of textbooks available for teachers of academic writing. For example, the Macmillan writing series (Zemach, Ghulldu, Islam & Brinks Lockwood, 2011) includes *Writing Paragraphs*, a book aimed at CEFR level B1 (TOEIC 350-450), *Writing Essays*, for CEFR level B2 (TOEIC 450-550) and *Writing Research Papers*, for CEFR level B2/C1 (TOEIC 550-700). Similarly, the Longman Academic Writing Series Level 2 *Paragraphs* book (Hogue, 2017) is aimed mainly at CEFR level A2, while the Level 3 *Paragraphs to Essays* (Oshima & Hogue, 2017) covers CEFR level B1.

3. Course Background

Academic Writing is an elective course at Koeki University for 2nd- to 4th-year students. It is taught as a quarterly course at the end of the second semester; there are two lessons a week for seven weeks (14 lessons in total) and the duration of each lesson is 105 minutes. Before taking the Academic Writing course, all the students must have taken a compulsory Writing class in the first semester of their 2nd year. For the 2018

Academic Writing course there were 20 regular participants, all of whom were members of the International Liberal Arts (ILA) course. Of these, 19 were 2nd-grade students and one was a 3rd-grade student.

4. Pre-course issues

Teaching Academic Writing for the first time is a daunting prospect for many teachers. They must consider what goals to set for the course (Fujioka, 2018, p.1), what kind of teaching materials to use, and whether to focus on sentences, paragraphs, essays or research reports. As Teeter (2015) says, “A central problem in teaching academic writing is making it meaningful for students.” (p. 413). Important factors in choosing the course goals and materials is the level of ability and needs of the students, but for teachers who are new to the university judging these in advance can be difficult, especially when the class is an elective one. Other factors for teachers to consider include how to assess the students’ writing (Matsuno, 2009) and what system to use for correcting written work.

For the author’s writing class, the decision was made to focus on paragraphs rather than essays. One reason for this was to allow a greater number of writing assignments than would be possible if students were required to write longer essays. The course itself is conducted over an 8-week period so the amount of time students can dedicate to homework, with only 3 or 4 days between each class, is arguably less than would be the case for a semester-based course. Another reason was the fear that essay-writing might prove difficult for some of the lower-ability students; in the case that students could cope easily with paragraphs, the course could be adapted mid-way to introduce essays.

The author decided to follow a process approach to writing in this course. This approach would involve brainstorming and freewriting to generate ideas, outlining to organize the information, and drafting and re-drafting to create and refine the written product. Peer assessment would also be included in the process to encourage students to think critically about not just the content but also the structure of the paragraphs. Indirect corrections were to be provided by the teacher for submitted work using an error coding system; in other words, mistakes would be underlined and a symbol referring to the error

type would be written by the teacher. A handout containing the correction symbols, such as “VT” for Verb Tense error or “Frag.” for fragments, was created for the students to refer to in order to help them to understand and correct their own mistakes.

In terms of assessment, it was decided that the grading for the course would be 25% for homework assignments, 25% for the first draft of the final written assignment and 50% for the final essay (paragraph) to be written from memory in the test during the final lesson. This grading system was similar to that used by previous teachers at the university, but, as will be discussed, was later amended in consultation with the students.

5. Student expectations

At the start of the course, the students were asked to write a paragraph in class about Academic Writing; the paragraph was to include what their aims for the course were and how much homework they were willing to do. This exercise was set for two reasons; first, to gauge student expectations about the class and, second, to give an idea of the students’ writing ability. Some common themes emerged from the 18 completed essays. The students, in general, were taking the course because it was compulsory for International Liberal Arts students and because they wanted to improve their writing skills. Most (11 out of 18) wrote that they wanted to write sentences; of these, three wanted to be able to write or practice “long” sentences, three mentioned “formal” sentences, and three others wrote “easy” or “easy to understand”. Two students wrote that they wanted to be able to write sentences without using a dictionary or Google Translate. Only one student mentioned writing “essays”, and one other wanted to learn how to write “Business emails”. Of the 10 students who mentioned homework, three wanted to do “a lot”, three wrote “once a week”, and three wrote up to or around an hour. One student wrote “none.”

The inference from these student writings was that the students were interested in writing sentences rather than essays. The majority of the students had taken a compulsory writing course earlier in the year in which they had to write essays, so they were not unfamiliar with essay-writing, but it seemed that essays were not an important goal for them. The reasons for this may be partly attributed to their university course requirements.

In their 3rd year, the students enter a seminar course and in their 4th year they have to complete a graduation thesis which is usually written in Japanese. As most of the Academic Writing students are in their 2nd year, they have probably not yet started to think about the need to write a long essay, and, in any case, most will not be required to write their thesis in English.

6. Course analysis

As stated previously, the course focused on paragraphs rather than essays, and took a process approach, featuring freewriting, reviewing and peer reviewing, and re-drafting. Now I will examine different components of the course in more detail.

6.1 Focus on paragraphs

One of the dilemmas for the author in the planning stage was whether to focus on paragraphs or on essays. On reflection, I feel that the decision to teach paragraph writing in this class was mainly justified for the following reasons. First, focussing on paragraphs enabled students to produce a greater quantity of written work than may have been possible if they had to write longer essays. As well as 3 graded assignments which all involved checking, peer feedback and re-drafting, students also wrote 2 other assignments which were corrected but not graded. The students therefore had ample feedback from the teacher to help them improve their writing. Due to the condensed nature of the quarterly course and the reluctance of most students to do more than an hour's homework, a focus on the shorter form of paragraphs suited the time constraints of the course and the student needs.

Second, teaching paragraphs instead of essays was arguably more suitable for the overall level of ability of the students, which can be generalized as low intermediate to intermediate, or CEFR A2 to B1. Many of the students on this course took a TOEIC IP Test a few weeks after the start of the course; the results, which ranged from 160 to 625, showed the wide range of English ability within the class. Whatever level of difficulty of content or format was chosen would clearly therefore not suit all of the students. To gauge what the students felt about the level of difficulty of the course, a survey was

conducted in the 9th lesson, in which the students were asked to give their responses to the statements: “This course is difficult for me” and “This course is too easy for me.” The results, shown below, revealed that out of 19 respondents, 9 felt that the course was *difficult* or *somewhat difficult*, and 10 that it was *easy* or *somewhat easy*. Whilst none fully agreed with the statement that the course was *too easy*, 4 said that they *somewhat agreed*.

The statements and responses were as follows (n=19):

1. This course is difficult for me. (A=1; B=8; C=6; D=4)
2. This course is too easy for me. (A=0; B=4; C=12; D=3)

Response Key:

A = そう思う (I agree); B = ややそう思う (I somewhat agree); C = ややそう思わない (I somewhat disagree); D = そう思わない (I disagree).

Having read and marked their compositions up to this point, the survey results were not a surprise to me. Although the course was obviously easy for some students, I feel that this should not be viewed too negatively; as a teacher I would much rather have the students feel that writing is easy rather than difficult, provided, of course, that their writing is improving. Also, the fact that almost half of the class found the course difficult to some degree indicates that if the level of difficulty was increased greatly many of the students would not be able to participate fully in the class.

One drawback of the focus on paragraphs was that this course did not cover researching and referencing, which are often considered important parts of an academic writing course. If the focus was on essays rather than paragraphs, it would be easier to introduce these skills and get the students to research for evidence to back up the arguments in their essays. Although most of these students will probably not need to write any further essays in English, the practice of researching and referencing would be beneficial for their graduation thesis writing, so the omission from this course of this practice could be considered a wasted opportunity to teach skills which are transferable from their L2 to their L1.

6.2 Peer reviewing

Peer feedback is a strategy used to motivate learners and improve their writing and metacognitive skills (Nguyen, 2016, p. 76). In this writing class, the students were asked to check each other's first drafts for mistakes and underline any errors they found for the original student to self-correct. They were asked to then read the draft again and write comments or suggestions for improvements. After the first two written assignments, it was observed that, on the whole, the students were able to find punctuation or spelling mistakes in their classmates' paragraphs, but were not able to provide constructive criticism on the structure or content of the essays, although some did write praise or encouragement. This suggested that the students needed greater guidance in how to give peer feedback. For the third graded assignment, the students were given a check-sheet to assist them in their peer review process which encouraged them to focus on the structural components of the essay as well as eliciting comments regarding the content. The greater amount of comments on the peer feedback forms suggests, at least, that the students read each other's work carefully, but it is difficult to assess how useful their feedback was to their partners.

6.3 Re-drafting

It is often said that good writing is re-writing (Wadden & Peterson, 2017, p. 13). Self-checking for errors is an important part of the writing process. In this course, the students were asked to read their first drafts aloud in class in order to notice any simple mistakes. Then, they were instructed to write a second draft after receiving the peer feedback mentioned above and to submit it along with their first draft. Comparisons of the first and second drafts for the first 2 graded assignments showed that the students were able to correct the mistakes noticed by themselves or their classmates, but there were only 2 instances of students making significant changes beyond the word level, one of which was due to advice from the teacher.

For the 3rd graded assignment, checklists for self-assessment and peer reviewing were given to the students. After reading their first draft aloud, they were asked to complete the checklist to see if they had included the important criteria, such as topic

sentence, concluding sentence and transitions, as well as checking for errors of punctuation and spelling. They were then asked to complete a similar check-sheet for a classmate's assignment and provide each other with their peer feedback before writing their second drafts. An analysis of the submitted first and second drafts showed a greater amount of revision than for the first two assignments. Out of 18 submitted assignments, 14 showed some editing of the first draft. Most of these revisions involved correcting spelling and punctuation, but three involved transitions, such as the use of "for example," and two showed correction of fragments. Three of the 2nd drafts showed significant alterations; one student added three extra sentences, including a topic sentence; another removed a simple list of examples and substituted a detailed description of one of the examples; the third student expanded on each of her supporting examples and nearly doubled the word count of the first draft.

6.4 Corrective Feedback

The method of Corrective Feedback (CF) planned for this course was a form of indirect CF using an error coding system. Many teaching guides encourage the use of such error coding systems (Ellis and Shintani, 2014, p. 255), but various research has indicated that direct CF is more effective (Van Beuningen, et al., 2012, in Ellis and Shintani, 2014; Chandler, 2003). In practice, the error coding system was used during the course when checking each assignment but was augmented by direct corrections when it was felt that the students would not be able to correct the errors by themselves. Mistakes involving the use of incorrect words or awkward phrases were directly corrected, whereas those of spelling, punctuation, subject/verb agreement and capitalization were not. It is the author's belief that the error coding system enabled the students to notice the kinds of errors they were making in a way that would not be possible if all their mistakes were directly corrected by the teacher. A further benefit is that, by highlighting the error types, it also facilitated the grading of the students' work by the teacher.

6.5 Assessment

A rubric sheet containing the assessment criteria was given to the students at the start of the course and discussed before the first assignment was completed. The marking was to follow an analytic rather than holistic approach as analytic marking “is easier to explain to students and may provide them with useful feedback” (Nation, 2013, p. 159). The criteria included Structure, Development of Ideas, Topic Sentence, Subject-Verb agreement and Spelling. By the end of the course, the students had completed 3 written assignments which involved re-drafting. After each of these assignments, the students received a graded assessment sheet so they could see which components of their writing were deemed weak or strong. During the course, when it became clear how many assignments could be completed before the final lesson, the final grading system was amended in consultation with the students. The reason for the change was that it was felt that basing 50% of the final grade on the result of the essay written during the final test was giving it too much weight. Therefore, it was decided that each assignment would count as 25% of the final grade and the students could choose one of their 3 completed assignments to write from memory in the final lesson, and this would also count for 25%.

7. Implications for Future Classes

The analysis of the course highlighted a number of areas which need addressing. The first of these is to conduct a more effective needs analysis so that the goals of the course are aligned with the skills the students need to acquire and their ability to acquire these skills. As an elective course open to students with a varied range of language ability, it is a difficult task to set the course requirements at an appropriate level, but a proper needs analysis could help achieve this. The second area to improve is that of self-checking and peer reviewing. In this course, students were not able to effectively review their own or their classmates’ work, although some improvement was seen when checklists for self-checking and peer feedback were introduced for the 3rd graded assignment. In future classes, checklists should be used from a much early stage and students should be taught explicitly how to check their work and how to give feedback to their classmates. Thirdly,

the corrective feedback to the students should include more direct corrections as research shows this can be more effective than indirect CF, especially for low intermediates (Ellis and Shintani, 2014, p. 279).

8. Conclusion

One quarterly course is insufficient to teach many facets of academic writing well, so decisions on what to teach have to be made which take into account not only the abilities but also the needs of all the students in the class. In this academic writing course, the focus on paragraphs was suitable for the level of ability and the needs of most of the students, but arguably was insufficient for some of the higher-level students and those wishing to write their graduation thesis in English. For these students, essay-writing, including researching and referencing, would be a more appropriate goal over the course. The focus on paragraphs allowed time in class for self-checking and peer reviewing, but the lack of specific instruction from the start of the course on how to give feedback meant that peer reviewing was not done effectively, and the small number of changes between first and second drafts suggests that students were not successful in noticing mistakes and omissions in their own work. The author would like to address these issues in future classes by changing the goals of the class to include essay-writing and by providing explicit instruction and checklists for peer feedback and self-checking.

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