Research on a teaching method of paragraph making

Nobuyo Unagami[1]

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the effects of a teaching method of writing with a focus on two kinds of feedback; written corrections and direct discussion with each student.   With the number of errors (articles, prepositions and verbs) as the criteria, I looked into the changes of students' writing abilities.   As a result, some improvements could be acknowledged, and what kind of feedback was more effective differed depending on whether the errors were articles, prepositions or verbs.   I would like to show the effects at the end of this paper.

Keywords: essay writing, paragraph making, feedback

1. Introduction - the procedure of this study

The aim of this study is to discuss the points that students in a college of Industrial Technology keep in mind when they write abstracts or essays in English and a teaching method that makes students conscious of paragraph writing and the development of essays as well as English grammar.   As a procedure of this study, I first explained to the students about paragraph making.   Then 26 students in a college of Industrial Technology were assigned several topics of writing, and after most students finished submitting the respective assignments, I explained the points to be improved to all the students individually or at the same time.

2. The method of this study

(1) The instructions for writing a paragraph

The method of this study was my instructions, writing practice, and a total review of the feedback such as written corrections and discussions.   As for the instructions, the first instruction was (1) paragraph writing; the structure of one paragraph, which consists of a first (topic) sentence, body sentences and a concluding sentence; then the rule of one topic in one paragraph and a consistency of the topic.   In each class, I took some parts from a textbook, *From Paragraph to Essay* as apt examples.   (2) was instructions for essay writing, and as a practice, students were to write about one topic in one paragraph.

In the first class, students wrote a self-introduction paragraph in English.   As one pattern, I instructed them to write the first sentence like "Let me introduce myself" and "My name is ~" and the

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[1] Monozukuri Department, TMCIT

last sentence like "Thank you for listening", imagining they were making presentations. As for the other sentences between the first and the last sentence, I told them to write freely.   Most of them wrote about their hobbies, their home towns, the route of their commute and their school lives.   This time, the number of words was not limited, and when I collected their writings and counted the words, they ranged from about 20 words to about 80 words.   The writing of students who wrote no more than 20 words gave me the impression of lacking adequate content.   Comparing them with the paragraphs of about 80 words, I have to conclude there was an obvious difference in their enthusiasm.   As this was a simple task and students didn't have to write complicated things, I collected their writings at the end of the class.   I thought this task would not show much difference between the writings.   None the less, they showed their confusion between gerund and infinitive and the mistaken use of "a", the indefinite article like "play a guitar".   So as early as the first class, the difference between their individual competence of writing was found.   Taking different students' abilities of English into consideration, in the second class I explained the structure of one paragraph, citing a part of the text, *From Paragraph to Essay*.

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?
A **paragraph is** a group of sentences that has one central idea.   The paragraph is a basic unit of written English.   It can be complete by itself, or it can be part of an essay or a chapter in a book.   Even if you are reading or writing longer texts, it is useful to understand paragraphs, because paragraphs and essays are organized in similar ways.   What you will learn about paragraphs will be useful in reading and writing essays.
You might think of the relationship among sentences, paragraphs, and essays or chapters in this way.   A sentence is made up of related words.   A paragraph is made up of related sentences.   An essay or chapter is made up of related paragraphs.   A book is made up of related essays or chapters. (1)

Avoiding giving them excessive information and confusing them when they actually wrote, I concentrated on the essential points and taught them only those points.   As shown in the following citation, what should be emphasized here is that one paragraph consists of "introduction", "discussion" and "conclusion" and each sentence must not be irrelevant to the previous sentence and the following sentence.

As most Japanese students are not good at working on English tasks willingly, I chose an example, which students could imitate easily and showed them a framework of writing, the development.   I also cited one part of the above mentioned text, a short essay, "The Effect of Motor Vehicles".

Paragraph A
The Effects of Motor Vehicles
[1]The widespread use of motor vehicles has had a great influence on the daily lives of

Americans.　[2]Some of these effects have been good.　[3]Motor vehicles allow Americans to be mobile.　[4]Before they were widely available, traveling even a few miles was difficult.　[5]Today, traveling hundreds of miles is not unusual.　[6]Motor vehicles also make more consumer goods available.　[7]They allow raw materials to be transported to factories and finished goods to be transported to consumers all over the country.　[8]Unfortunately, motor vehicles have also had some bad effects.　[9]They have caused pollution problems in many cities.　[10]In addition, many thousands of American die every year in accidents.　[11]With these effects, motor vehicles have influenced the lives of all Americans. (3)

Each sentence is numbered from 1 to 11 at the beginning.　I pointed out that 1 is the "introduction" and 11 is the "conclusion".　The words "influence" and "Americans" in sentence "1" are slightly changed but repeated respectively as "have influenced" and "all Americans."

And I told them to write a paragraph, emphasizing the connection between the first sentence and the last sentence even though it is not necessary to repeat quite the same words.

The development of the "discussion" in the example cited from the text is easy to grasp: in sequence, motor vehicles' good points and bad points are mentioned together with concrete examples.　The students were assigned a similar task: to choose one means of transportation among "train" "bus" and "bicycle" and write about the effects in English.　Making this task their homework and allowing them to imitate the framework of the exemplary essay, they submitted the task writings from about 50 to 130 words.　Most students chose "train" or "bicycle" as their topics and mentioned their environmentally-friendly sides.　The students who were poor at writing imitated the way of writing and development in the example.　Nevertheless, this was a task which was not beyond their abilities and as a result they seemed to find this task a good practice.

Receiving their writings of about 50 to 130 words, I could grasp their weak points such as misunderstanding the use of articles and the ill-distinction between transitive verbs and intransitive verbs.　As for this task, I wrote down the corrections and the reasons why these parts were errors directly on their papers and returned them to the students.

(2) Instructions for writing an essay

(2-1) Practice of writing an essay which consists of two to three paragraphs

Then we proceeded to the next stage.　This time I also cited another example in *From Paragraph to Essay* and instructed them to keep the structure of the paragraph in mind and write 2 to 3 paragraphs about their experience on their topics.

Exercise 1

Read the following paragraphs and answer the questions.

Paragraph A

A Visit to the Ocean

[1]One of my happiest memories is my first vacation at the beach.   [2]I was about ten years old, and I had never seen the ocean before.   [3]When I caught my first glimpse of it, I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.   [4]My family and I spent a week there on the California coast, going to the beach every day.   [5]Sometimes I went swimming in the surf.   [6]Sometimes I walked along the beach, looking for pretty rocks and shells, which became my treasured possessions.   [7]Sometimes I just sat on the beach, watching the endless waves rolling up onto the sand.   [8]I've been to the ocean many times since then, but I will always remember the first time.   [9]I also like the mountains. (12)

Analysis Questions

1. _____: sentence(s) in the introduction
2. _____: sentence(s) in the discussion
3. _____: sentence(s) in the conclusion
4. _____: sentence that doesn't belong (13)

In this essay "A Visit to the Ocean", "One of my happiest memories", sentence 1 is the "introduction", which leads to the "conclusion", sentence 11; "I will always remember the first time."   Following the text's intentions, I also pointed out that when a sentence like sentence 9, "doesn't belong" is included in a paragraph, the whole paragraph lacks consistency.   And I told them that a paragraph itself is a small unit and a series of paragraphs make an essay.   This example mostly enumerated the writer's experiences, so students did not have difficulties in following the pattern.   However, I recommended the students to write about their experience related to the educational curriculum in this college of industrial technology like an "internship".   The reason is that to write about experiences typical of a college of industrial technology is assumed to be more significant than just to write about a trip.   None the less, judging from the writing of some students who were not confident in writing in English, I permitted them to write about their past travels or other experiences in their daily lives if writing about an internship was so hard.   Actually some of the students wrote about their travels or just going out on the weekend, but the majority wrote about their internships.   They earnestly described going to companies or universities, being given some jobs, observing its employees' working and how their own skills acquired in this college could be useful for jobs in their respective places.

After the submission, I counted the number of words in each of their writings.   The numbers ranged from about 50 to 170 words.   As the exemplary essay enumerated one's experiences, the students followed the pattern and wrote like, "On the first day, I looked at the faculty".   "On the second day, I was given a job like this…".   It did not seem difficult for them to illustrate their experiences and conclude by writing something connected to the first sentence and what meaning this experience had to them.   This is not to say that this task was not adequate, and with this kind of topic the students'

writings will not be too short.　On the other hand, the longer they were (the more difficult the topic was), the more errors of expression they had.　The errors were as follows: the confusion between usages of "visit" as a "noun" or "verb" and the tense changing from past to present in the middle.

　　As for this task, they were required not only to write in English but to make a presentation in English.　Therefore, before they delivered the presentations, each of them took turns reading their writing in front of me.　They were to make their presentation by memory as a rule, but when they practiced in front of me, they were allowed to look at their manuscripts and read them aloud.　While reading, they themselves found some errors or realized from my suggestions how to correct them.　Some students glanced at the manuscripts and could not finish their presentations completely by memory. However, while preparing, they themselves tried to make their expressions more effective.

(2-2) Practice of writing an essay with one's specialty as the topic

　　Then we proceeded to the third stage; "Instructions for writing essays" and "Practice of writing essays with their specialty as the theme".　As the final task of this class, the students were assigned writing essays on their specialties in the fields of engineering.　This time, I also cited an exemplary essay to refer to from *From Paragraph to Essay*; "The Ethnic Groups of Malaysia".

<center>The Ethnic Groups of Malaysia</center>

　　(1)　　[1]The eleven million citizens of West Malaysia (the part of Malaysia on the Asian mainland) can be divided into three major ethnic groups.　[2]In order to understand Malaysia, it is necessary to understand these groups.　[3]I will discuss each of these groups here.

　　(2)　[4]The Malays are the first group.　[5]They are the largest of the three groups.　[6]Six million people in West Malaysia are Malay.　[7]The Malays founded a kingdom in what is now Malaysia in the 14th century, but they were dominated by first the Portuguese and later the Dutch and the British.　[8]The native language of the Malays is Bahasa Malaysia, which is the official language of the country and also the language of education.　[9]Almost all Malays are Muslims, and if you travel through Malaysia, you will see many mosques.　[10]Today, the Malays dominate the government, though not the economy.

　　(3)　　[11]The second ethnic group is the Chinese.　[12]There are about four million ethnic Chinese in West Malaysia.　[13]It is the ethnic Chinese who dominate the economy, a fact that sometimes causes resentment among other groups.　[14]Many Chinese people came to Malaysia originally in the 1800s to work in the tin mines.　[15]Being hard-working people, they have done well in Malaysia.　[16]Most ethnic Chinese are Buddhist, and most of them speak Chinese.

　　(4)　　[17]The third major ethnic group in West Malaysia is the Indian community. [18]There are about a million people of Indian descent there.　[19]Their ancestors originally came to Malaysia to work on rubber plantations.　[20]Even today the majority of rubber plantation

workers are Indian.   21They speak Tamil and are mainly Hindu.

(5)   22The relationship among these three groups have been good at times and bad at times.   23Before World War II, they existed separately, with little cultural interchange. 24After the disruption of the war, this balance was changed, and there were many problems. 25Gradually, more peaceful relations developed, but these are still fragile.   26The future of the country depends on the ability of these three groups to work together. (104)

The first paragraph itself becomes the "introduction", and the last paragraph plays the role of the "conclusion".   At this stage where they worked on this task, they were strongly conscious of writing in the way connecting the beginning with the last part.   However, I suggested to them another concrete pattern about this task; the first paragraph rightly refers to what their specialties are and their intentions of describing its academic aspect, its practical aspect and its prospect for the future in order to show its importance.   And in the next three paragraphs, respectively one paragraph for the academic aspect, its practical aspect and the prospect for the future are to be discussed.   And in the last paragraph, from the three aspects, the importance is described as "shown".   As for this task, some students felt very reluctant and believed it was beyond their abilities.   Nevertheless, we started from writing the structure of the paragraphs in Japanese and they gradually thought and wrote about them on their own initiative.   Translating the note-like Japanese draft into the English version, they seldom diverged from their development and could keep the development consistent.   Compared with the essays about their internship (based on the example, "A Visit to the Ocean"), we could increase the number of feedback types and interactions such as corrections and talking with each of the students. Even outside the class, I was asked to give instructions on their writings and some students were enthusiastic and requested more exact expressions.

At the stage where the students finished their English drafts, I suggested that if possible, they should refer to the preceding studies of their specialties in the second paragraph of the academic aspect. I explained that this kind of essay would be more persuasive if they could write about what points they could explore, bearing the preceding studies in mind.   The final manuscripts were to be submitted by them later, but their English drafts ranged from about 20 words to about 450 words (the longest one).

This time, at the stage where they finished their drafts, each student read his writing in front of me. There were a number of words difficult to pronounce, and as for the explanatory parts of robots and computer systems, we checked the consistency of the contents.   Assuming that this last task would be long enough to be called an essay, I did not make it a rule to make their presentation completely from memory.   In the presentations of writings based on "A Visit to the Ocean", I made one of the students ask a question to the presenter in English and the presenter answer in English.   And this time I also set up a time for questions and answers just after each one's presentation.   I informed them of some patterned questions, picked up one student at the end of the presentation and the student questioned and the presenter answered in English.   On the day of the presentation, the copies of their manuscripts were distributed.   The final versions of the manuscripts had few errors.

(3) Method of analysis

      Here I would like to report the method of analysis.　I had taught the students how to write in English by assigning them four tasks.　From the beginning, errors like diverging from a single topic were scarcely found and at the stage of writing the final task, no students wrote irrelevant sentences or expressions in their writings.　As a certain degree of accomplishment about the consistency and the development was acknowledged, I attempted to evaluate the results by checking the ratio of expressional improvement from the numbers of grammatical errors.

      I refer to a teaching method in a joint article by John Bitchener, "The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing".

> Contributing to is research base, the study reported in this article investigated whether the type of feedback (direct, explicit written feedback and student-researcher 5 minute individual conferences; direct, explicit written feedback only; no corrective feedback) given to 53 adult migrant students on three types of error (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) resulted in improved accuracy in new pieces of writing over a 12 week period. (191)

To sum up, I focused on the influences of two types of feedback; written feedback and individual discussion and the usages of articles, prepositions and verbs.　As for verbs, different from John Bitchener's method, I did not pick up only the errors of tense but examined other kinds of errors.　With the number of the errors as the criteria, I looked into the improvement of their abilities of writing in English.

3. The results and considerations of this study

      Here I would like to comment on the changes of the numbers of errors.　The first point to investigate is the errors of articles.　To write a short paragraph of "self-introduction" some students made errors.　This is because students did not know the usage of not only articles but also nouns, especially the distinction between countable nouns and uncountable ones.　To decrease these kinds of errors, they needed to keep in mind the distinction between the indefinite article and definite article and the point that a countable noun needs an indefinite article in the singular form.　In the second task, "The effects of ~ (some vehicle)", more errors of articles were found in their writings.　Actually the number of errors involving articles was the highest in the second writings.　In this task, students had to use countable nouns like "bicycle", "train" and "car" without being conscious of the distinction between the indefinite and definite articles.　Even in some writings of short length, there were many errors of articles.　However, to explain to them which article to use is not so difficult and after a few feedbacks, in the third task the number of articles' errors decreased.　The following shows the changes of the

quantities of errors and the ratios of the errors per 30 words. The average number of errors in the second task is the highest and in the third and fourth tasks, they decreased. In order to decrease the errors of articles, written feedback such as writing the reason why their usages were mistakes were effective. The students themselves became more aware of their habits caused from thinking in Japanese first and just translating what they thought into English without considering the Japanese nuances. I sometimes explained the basic usage to all of them but written feedback was more effective.

Here I would like to proceed to "The errors of verbs and prepositions and the changes of the numbers". The above-mentioned John Bitchener's joint article focuses on the past simple tense of verbs. But in the first and second tasks I assigned to them, "Self-introduction" and "The effects of ~(some vehicle)", no other than the present tense was used by most students. So I looked into the usage of verbs from a wide angle. And more than half of the prepositional errors were the errors of prepositions which follow verbs.

To decrease the number of errors related to the usage of verbs, a combination of written feedback, discussion with each student and instructions to avoid confusion between transitive verbs and intransitive ones and between the active voice and the passive voice showed favorable results.

The errors of prepositions also resulted from the confusion between transitive verbs and intransitive ones. As for adverbial phrases, my direct instructions of not placing a preposition whose meaning overlaps an adverb before the word, directly changed their mistaken ideas of prepositions. The following shows the changes of verbs' and prepositions' errors.

Articles (/ 30 words)

①	②	③	④
0.61	1.15	0.88	0.38

Verbs   (/ 30 words)

①	②	③	④
0.51	0.76	0.88	0.52

Prepositions (/ 30 words)

①	②	③	④
0.27	0.38	0.51	0.25

① The first task; "Self-introduction"   ② The second task; "The Effects of ~"
③ The third task; "A Visit to ~"   ④ The fourth task: "One's specialty"

I started the individual conference at the stage of the third task and this had a good effect on their writings of the fourth topic, "one's specialty" and their writings improved in comparison with the

writings of the third topic.

Not only individual conferences but repetitive instructions of the same usage led to the decrease of simple errors such as "lack of subject" and "choice of inadequate subject; "it" instead of "I".   As for verbs and prepositions, the combined instructions of written feedback and individual conferences led to better results.   To sum up, through a series of instructions, I reached the conclusion that in order to improve students' writing abilities and enhance their enthusiasm and motivation, it is fruitful for an instructor to assign students tasks suitable to their abilities and give them individual guidance like preparations for presentations sharing the contents with other students as well as written corrective advice as feedback.

The earliest idea for this paper is based on my presentation at the 36th Annual Convention of KATE (Kantokoshinetsu Association of Teachers of English) at Kyoai Gakuen College in Gunma on the 18th of August, 2012.

Works Cited

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