

Teaching English Composition Effectively

Kiyoshi Nagamori

Abstract: This paper describes how school teachers can go “beyond the sentence” using a structurally-oriented version of sentence combining. Sentence combining is easy to add on to traditional grammar-translation lessons even from the earliest stages of writing. The natural steps of language skill development are surveyed and it is emphasized how earlier skills can be “recycled” and built upon stage by stage, all the while allowing the teacher to keep the lesson-focus narrow and under control. Students can learn to understand and use the standard expository patterns of Western thought (classification, process, cause-and-effect, and so on) at the same time as they develop language skills in an area of usage always found on English language tests.

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1 Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture guidelines demand that English teachers do more than teach sentence grammar. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture Guidelines about writing outline that the ideal teachers are meant to pursue. Guidelines request more than the sentence level from junior high school.

1. Junior High School

Objectives

- (1) To enable students to understand the speaker’s intentions when listening to English.
- (2) To enable students to talk about their own thoughts using English.
- (3) To accustom and familiarize students with reading English and to enable them to understand the writer’s intentions when reading English.
- (4) To accustom and familiarize students with writing in English and to enable them to write about their own thoughts using English.

Contents (D) Writing

Introduction should be given mainly on the following items:

- (a) To distinguish letters or symbols and write correctly with due attention to the spaces between works.
- (b) To correctly write a sentence with due attention to the connections between words.
- (c) To take notes or write one’s impressions or statements of agreement / disagreement and reasons for it with regard to what students have listened to or read.
- (d) To write about one’s thoughts and feelings with regard to issues like what has happened or what one has

experienced in everyday situations.

- (e) To write a composition with due attention to the connections between sentences so as to accurately convey one's thoughts and feelings to the reader(s). [1]

2. High School English Communication I

Objectives

To develop students' basic abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language.

Contents

- (1) D. Writing brief passages on information, ideas, etc., based on
- (2) what one has heard, read, learned and experienced.
- (3) B. Reading and writing with due attention to phrases and sentences indicating the main points, connecting phrases, etc. [2]

Reasons why writing ought to be taught in secondary schools

1. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture encourages an equal emphasis on listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
2. Writing is a necessary FUNDAMENTAL language skill. (Susser [3])
3. Writing is the natural place to teach "the logic" of Western thinking. The East is different from the West, and conceptual patterns of Western thinking are reflected in the organization of discourse. (Reid [4] D'Angelo [5])
4. Skill in writing helps students to gain listening and reading ability. (Flower and Hayes [6])
5. Writing "activates" passively-learned knowledge. Some higher cognitive functions (synthesis, analysis) develop fully with the support of written language. (Raskin & Weiser [7])
6. Writing / Reading are the most widely used forms of English. (Harklou [8])
7. Exam questions are based on written norms of English language use. (Harklou [8])

2 Who teaches writing?

—Almost everyone teaches English in Japan (but...)

- A. Sentences and Paragraphs. Writing is putting one's ideas into sentences and combining them into paragraphs. Training in vocabulary, grammar, and translation develops the first half of student's writing ability—the ability to express ideas in sentences.
- B. The second half of writing is the "discourse level" matter of combining sentences into paragraphs. It is more than likely that almost every English teacher in Japan is helping their students to master discourse level skills, and yet they just are not consciously aware of it.

- (1) These glasses are expensive, _____ please be careful with them.
a. and b. or c. but d. so
- (2) You must study harder, _____ you won't be able to pass this class.
a. so b. but c. and d. or

These are discourse level problems requiring students to consider relationships between the pairs of clauses.

3 What should writing teachers teach?

— pay attention to writing at the discourse level —

When to teach discourse –level Writing?

1. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture says that from 2nd year of junior high school, students should be working at the sentence and “passage” or discourse levels.
2. Many teachers will object that students can not write until they have an adequate vocabulary and enough skills in English grammar to express their ideas.
3. (a) Grammar and vocabulary are not “learned” if they can not be used. Writing (like speaking) is real language use. (b) Many “Usage and Grammar” questions test awareness of English written conversations. Most of the test-questions examples given below are questions about how people write English, not how they speak it.
4. Although vocabulary and grammar skills are helpful, they are not really that important when developing a student's writing skills. Researchers have found putting too much emphasis on lexical and grammar correctness hinders the student's acquisition of English (Strong [9]). And if students do not know a word, let them use a dictionary.

What to teach in the most basic classes.

Teachers should concentrate on (a) the things that are most necessary for learning how to work at the discourse level, (b) the things that are important for university entrance exams, and (c) the things that are important for students (no apostrophe needed) learning to communicate with English speakers.

1. Conjunctions.

The simplest way to put ideas together in multiple sentence units is with conjunctions. There are four major conjunctions (and, but, or, so) and two minor ones (yet and for).

- (3) John likes movies, and he also likes mystery novels.
- (4) John likes movies, but he is not interested in plays.
- (5) John likes movies, so he goes to see one or two a month.
- (6) John had better hurry, or he's going to late for the show.

2. Discourse level

As an example of a “discourse level” assignment for 2nd or 3rd junior high students, have students translate pairs of sentences. A typical translation exercise is with a single, isolated sentence;

(7) ジョンはとても忙しかった。

Instead, assign sentences in pairs and explicitly ask students to join them with an appropriate conjunction, as the following examples :

(8) ジョンはとても忙しかった。 [conj] 昨日はテレビを見なかった。

(9) English Textbook A

1. カナダでは英語とフランス語が話されています。
2. 明日私があなたにお会いすることは不可能です。
3. こちらが私が昨年ロンドンで会った男の人です。
4. あなたは勉強するのが好きではないのですね。
5. 切符を売る女の子はどこにいますか。

(10) English Textbook B

1. 私たちの家は海から遠くはありません。
2. 海岸へはバスで 10 分で行けます。
3. 先週の土曜の午後、今年初めて海岸を散歩しました。
4. 海は春の日差しを浴びてやさしそうに見えました。
5. 「春の海岸はなんて静かなんだろう」と私は思いました。

English Textbook A is much better (a) because these sentences are related and (b) because they could be made into a discourse-level sentence-combining exercise, perhaps as a paragraph. (c) If students are trained to think at the discourse level in terms of “related ideas,” they are already half way to writing coherent, organized paragraphs. (d) The goal should be to go beyond translation and get students to write their own ideas.

3. Coordination

Emphasize how conjunctions are used to combine separate ideas in coordinate structures. Contrast overly simplistic non-native English use with the coordinate adjectives:

(11) She is tall. She is tan. She is young. She is lovely.

(12) She's **tall** and **tan** and **young** and **lovely**.

Help your students become adept at using conjunctions to join all kinds of grammatical elements.

- (13) He marched in *slowly* and *proudly*. [Compound Adverbs]
- (14) *This* and *that* book are the best. [Compound Determiners]
- (15) I'd like *three* or *four* tomatoes. [Compound Quantifiers]
- (16) They're *in* and *out* of the house all day long. [Compound Prepositions]
- (17) *My mother* and *my father* are arriving soon. [Compound Noun Phrases]
- (18) We meet *in the morning* and *in the afternoon*. [Compound Preposition Phrases]
- (19) Mary *likes beans* but *does not care for tofu*. [Compound Verb Phrases]
- (20) I'm *angry at Paula* and *disappointed with Bill*. [Compound Adjective Phrases]

4. Discourse Functions

Teachers should explain the discourse functions of connectives. Explain that *and* is used to indicate the second sentence is counting the topic discussed in the first (“addition”), and in many cases *and* is used to show that the conjoined ideas occur one after another in a time sequence (“chronological order”)

- (21) John likes movies, *and* he also likes mystery novels. [Addition]
- (21) John bought a ticket *and* went inside the theater *and* sat down. [Chronological Order]

But is commonly used to indicate that the ideas in the two sentences directly oppose each other, and it is also used when the writer wants to say that the second clause includes unexpected results considering the situation described in the first clause (“Concessive”).

- (23) John likes movies, *but* he is not interested in plays. [Contrast]
- (24) John likes movies, *but* he hasn't seen one in months. [Concessive]

The conjunction *so* is used to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the two sentences (“Effect”), while *for* reserves the relation, allowing the cause to appear after the effect. (“Reason”).

- (25) John likes movies, *so* he goes to see one or two a month. [Effect]
- (26) John goes to the cinema often, *for* he really likes movies. [Reason]

The simple conjunction *or* may be used to indicate that the two sentences are alternative possibilities, and it is probably even more commonly used to say that, unless the condition stated in the first sentence is satisfied, then the consequence stated in the second sentence will occur (“Condition”)

- (27) John may go to Hakone, *or* he may go to Nikko. [Alternative]

(28) John had better hurry, **or** he's going to be late. [Condition]

5. Teaching Points

(a) Students should be introduced to writing at the discourse level and not just at the sentence level.

(b) If teachers use translation exercises, make it a discourse matter of combining two sentences with a conjunction or considering pairs of related sentences which lend themselves to treatment as discourse units.

(c) From the beginning, focus on how conjunctions are used to join coordinate elements

(d) The main discourse functions of each conjunction ought to be stressed and practiced.

(e) Perhaps most important, teachers ought to give assignments which encourage students to express their own ideas and feelings. Downplay grammar and play up the communication of ideas. Students learn to write by writing, and over-emphasis on "correctness" only interferes with the expression of ideas.

(f) If you must correct grammar, do so seriously. A favorite assignment of mine is to give a topic like "What is your favorite musician or group and why do you like them?" I then demand that students somehow use four of five specific grammar patterns and / or connectives in the paragraph that they write.

(g) The most important reason to teach writing is that when students try to express their own ideas they are no longer passive participants in a potential learning situation. Rather they become active researchers, so to speak, in the problematic business of communicating ideas in a second language. This is the cognitive "territory" in which real, long-term learning is most likely to occur.

4 What comes after the basics?

The main point of English education should be to make sure the students can actually use the material they are taught. The topics taught are restricted in many ways, but instructors should try to emphasize topics with discourse skills.

A. Paired Conjunctions.

It is often possible to replace the simple conjunctions *and* and *or* with "paired conjunctions" such as *both...and* or *neither ...nor*.

(29) John likes movies, **and** he also likes mystery novels.

→ John likes **both** movies **and** mystery novels.

→ John likes **not only** movies **but also** mystery novels.

(30) John does not like movies, **and** he does not like mystery novels.

→ John likes **neither** movies **nor** mystery novels.

→ John doesn't like **either** movies **or** mystery novels.

(31) John may go to Hakone, **or** he may go to Nikko.

→ John may go to **either** Hakone **or** Nikko.

Paired conjunctions are a favorite on English examinations, and so teachers may want to give students practice with them in sentence combining exercises. Some examples of test questions from the TOEFL are as follows.

(32) Julia speaks _____ Spanish but also French.

- a. both b. as well as c. either d. not only

(33) He bandaged the arm both tightly _____ quickly.

- a. as well as b. but also c. not only d. and also

B. It would be hard to overstate the importance of discourse-level skills on usage and grammar tests. One quick example before I move on. There is a rule that says, if there is more than one verb in a repeated compounded verb phrase, usually only the first auxiliary verb can actually be repeated (Celce-Muricia & Larsen-Freeman [10]), at least in American English:

(34) Joe can speak French, and Julia can speak French (too).

→ Joe can speak French, and Julia **can too**.

→ Joe can speak French, and *Julia **can speak too**.

→ Joe can speak French, and **so can** Julia.

→ Joe can speak French, and **so can speak** Julia

English tests often question a student's awareness of the "grammar"—actually "discourse"—rule:

(35) I have been studying English for four years, and _____.

- a. John has been, also. b. so has been being John
c. so has been John as well. d. so has John.

C. Other Pragmatic Connectives

After students have mastered the most basic of connectives, the simple conjunctions, they should be rushed on to other types of connectives. Most teachers find it easy to move on to sentence-joining words like *moreover*;

however, therefore, and otherwise. One essential point to teach is that these connectives can show exactly the same discourse relationship as simple conjunctions:

(36) *and* = *moreover* a. John likes movies, ***and*** he also likes novels.

b. John likes movies, ***moreover***, he likes novels.

(37) *but* = *however* a. John likes movies, ***but*** he is not interested in plays.

b. John likes movies; ***however***, he is not interested in plays.

(38) *so* = *therefore* a. John likes movies, ***so*** he goes to see one or two a month.

b. John likes movies; ***therefore***, he goes to see one or two a month.

(39) *or* = *otherwise* a. John had better hurry, ***or*** he's going to be late for the show.

b. John had better hurry; ***otherwise***, he's going to be late for the show.

1. Teaching.

(a) The teaching strategy which we have found most effective is to emphasize the similarities in the ways simple conjunctions and transitions (such as the above pairs) are used. If you gave a translation exercise such as the following, you could demand that students translate it twice, first using a simple conjunction and second a transition:

(40) ジョンはとても忙しかった。[trans] 昨日はテレビを見なかった。

(b) Since the goal is always to improve the students' ability to express their ideas, it is good to assign brief 5 or 6 sentence paragraphs with each lesson. A cause-and-effect paragraph topic might be "What is your favorite pet and why do you like it?" or "Which is the best J-League team and why?" I would demand that students use one or two cause-and-effect transitions in the paragraph.

2. Tests.

Most every general English grammar and usage test has at least one discourse-level question relating to the use of conjunctions or, as in the following example, the appropriate use of transitions:

(41) The weather report said there would be heavy rain; _____, we went on a picnic anyway.

a. therefore b. in addition c. otherwise d. however

D. Multiple Transitions

You should also point out that there are often several transitions which can be used in place of a simple

conjunction. For instance, several common transitions can be used to show the cause-and-effect relationship just like the simple conjunction *so* does:

- (42) a. John likes movies, ***so*** he often goes to the cinema.
b. John likes movies; ***therefore***, he often goes to the cinema.
c. John likes movies; ***consequently***, he often goes to the cinema.
d. John likes movies; ***thus***, he often goes to the cinema.
e. John likes movies; ***hence***, he often goes to the cinema.
f. John likes movies; ***as a result***, he often goes to the cinema.

I feel that it does not really matter for the purpose of teaching discourse writing that there are very delicate nuances which distinguish *therefore*, *consequently*, *thus* and *such*. At the present stage, it is more pressing to spur on new English writers in expressing ideas relevant to themselves than to drill student's and challenge instructors with such minutiae.

E. More Connectives

There are two reasons to emphasize the discourse functions served by various connectives. First it will show the similarities of pairs of sentences joined by the simple conjunction *so* with pairs of sentences joined by transitions such as *therefore* or *as a result*.

Secondly, emphasizing the similarities in the way conjunctions and transitions are used to combine sentences will make it easier for students to understand the use of new connectives. For example, after the students have mastered conjunctions and transitions, introduce them to "subordinating conjunctions" like *because* which have essentially the same discourse functions:

- (43) John likes movies, ***so*** he goes to see one or two a month.
(44) John likes movies; ***therefore***, he goes to see one or two a month.
(45) ***Because*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.

There are major grammatical differences between making (a) a "compound sentence" with conjunctions or transitions and (b) making a "complex sentence" with an adverbial clause headed by *because*. However, the grammatical details are less important than the similarities in discourse function. Even if a learner makes a grammatical mistake using one of these connectives, it is difficult to imagine that he would be misunderstood.

G. Even more connectives

Much of what Japanese students are taught is potentially useful, but extremely-high-level information about English. As you go through new "grammar" exercises on sophisticated sentence connectives, make sure that you "keep ground" and explain that these are just alternative ways of expressing the basic discourse

relations that your students have already studied and mastered. This will also help students connect otherwise discreet units of grammatical information, thereby truly expanding their English ability rather than simply adding on to it.

Because is by far the most common cause-and-effect subordinating conjunction, and most students master its use quite early. Therefore, when your lesson plan touches upon other cause-and-effect subordinating conjunctions, be sure explain that these are just alternative ways of showing the same basic discourse relationship:

- (46) ***Because*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.
- (47) ***Since*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.
- (48) ***As*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.
- (49) ***In that*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.
- (50) ***In as much as*** John likes movies, he goes to see one or two a month.

Similarly, there are a number of phrases used to express a cause-and effect discourse relationship in formal writing, and they are essentially just synonyms of *because*; examples include the following:

- (51) ***Because*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (52) ***Because of the fact that*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (53) ***Due to the fact that*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (54) ***In view of the fact that*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (55) ***Owing to the fact that*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (56) ***For the simple reason that*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.

Other sophisticated connectives (all from a rather formal style register) are based on reducing the “cause” element to prepositional phrase:

- (57) ***Because*** there could be effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (58) ***Because of*** the possible effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (59) ***Due to*** the possible effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (60) ***In view of*** the possible effects on his family, John said nothing.
- (61) ***Owing to*** the possible effects on his family, John said nothing.

Finally, one can often express the same basic discourse relationship as *so* or *because* with a participial phrase:

- (62) Joe had little experience in business, *so* he could not find a job easily.
- (63) *Because* he had little experience in business, Joe could not find a job easily.
- (64) *Having* little experience in business, Joe could not find a job easily.

It is not necessary to teach these sophisticated grammar patterns because, in our view, they can be understood and utilized only by the speakers at the most “refined” levels of language use, which is a level virtually never of any importance to a language learner. However if we must teach these points, focus on discourse function is the key.

Conclusion

(1) Firstly the single most important point that this paper tries to make is that various connectives provide language users with alternate ways of saying essentially the same thing. The most sophisticated pragmatic connective could be replaced by a simple conjunction and convey the same fundamental discourse meaning. (2) Secondly, connectives come in functional groups (e.g. those showing cause-and-effect) and can be taught as variants on a single, simple discourse pattern. While we would not encourage instructors to teach the sophisticated connectives, if they are taught (for exam purpose or other), then their teaching ought to emphasize how they are simply sophisticated (or fancy) versions of the simple conjunctions and transition.

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