

Paragraph Writing Instruction for University Students

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Abstract

As the emphasis is placed on students' practical abilities in English, the communicative approach, which focuses on students' "productive abilities," has been encouraged in Japan. However, this approach has resulted in a low level of basic writing skills, which are often associated with insufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Considering the current practices of writing instruction in junior high and high school, students translate word by word, following grammatical rules. They have little experience in free writing projects in which they describe their ideas or thoughts. Even under such circumstances, paragraph writing has gained popularity at the tertiary level. It is often reported that writing paragraphs is difficult for many college students. This research was conducted as a preliminary study to serve as a foundation for building effective writing instruction. To plan, implement, and evaluate appropriate writing instruction, a needs analysis should first be performed. This study involves 83 first year and 93 second year college students. The questionnaires are aimed at examining their knowledge and experience of English writing. The data are analyzed through SPSS, providing descriptive and correlational analyses. The results reveal that most students have inadequate knowledge of sentence components, which hinders their construction of paragraphs. Moreover, most have not had any free writing experience in the course of their education. This study suggests that before writing a paragraph, students should participate in numerous free composition activities designed to involve their cognitive and social knowledge.

Keywords: Paragraph Writing, Needs Analysis, Paragraph Writing Instruction

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan emphasizes the need to enhance English language education in accordance with globalization trends. The Course of Study for English Education (the curriculum prescribed by MEXT) has been tailored to promote students' practical abilities through a communicative approach. However, recent nationwide English testing targeting 60,000 third-year junior high school students revealed that less than 30% met the English proficiency standards set by MEXT. Moreover, in the written section of the test, approximately 20% students scored zero. The use of a communicative approach has thus resulted in students having poor skills in basic reading or writing, often associated with a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge. The Benesse Corporation (2016) also reported that writing instruction is insufficient. Similarly, Kamoshita (2010) argued that students' limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge hinders their ability to form sentences that express their ideas or thoughts. The new Course of Study for English Education has been successively implemented from the elementary to high school curriculums in 2020, focusing on strengthening students' "productive abilities." The English curriculum is designed in keeping with the growing need for the written skills that are integral to international communication.

English Writing Instruction in Japan

Previous studies have reported that junior high and high school students are trained to translate English word for word, while ensuring that they follow the rules of grammar (Kobayakawa, 2011; Matsuda, 2019). Kobayakawa (2011) analyzed writing tasks in high school textbooks and found that these were mainly controlled and fill-in-the-blank translation tasks. Nakagawa (2017), who studied the features of paragraph writing tasks in Japanese senior high school English textbooks, found that they focused mainly on grammar activities. Therefore, students have limited free writing experience enabling them to describe their ideas or thoughts during the junior high or high school years. In contrast, paragraph writing has gained popularity at the tertiary level. Nakagawa (2017) reports that college writing textbooks varied from English composition at the sentence level to writing multiple paragraphs and academic essays. The gap between high school and college writing instruction thus causes serious issues: College students often report difficulties in writing paragraphs, and many students at the tertiary level lack the understanding of paragraphs or concepts of paragraph structure. They often confuse the concept of "danraku," which is defined as "a major division in a long passage" (Shinmura, 2001) and which has unclear rules or requirements, with that of "paragraph," which follows specific rules of formation. Additionally, some studies have shown that Japanese writers experience difficulty in using connectors, and revisions that include feedback often lack instructions. Therefore, it is crucial that supportive writing instructions be developed to bridge the gap between high school and college writing instruction. As Oi (2014) emphasizes, it is important to implement writing instruction that can serve as a bridge between sentence-level writing and paragraph writing.

The literature review found that university students find it difficult to write a paragraph. These students have limited knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and paragraph writing. This study presents paragraph writing instruction designed based on a needs analysis targeting students with low proficiency in a small private university.

Purpose of the Study

There are two purposes of this study. First, it presents the results of a needs analysis that formed the basis of the design of the paragraph writing instruction; and second, it describes and discusses the implementation and evaluation of the paragraph writing instruction.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in an English writing course at a four-year university that targets students aiming to work in fields of rehabilitation and welfare. Their English proficiency is considered quite low. About three-fourths of the students entered the university without taking any English exams, and the placement test confirmed that over half were underprepared. English is a required course for the first- and second-year students, which includes the content-based ESP (English for the specific purpose) approach. In this context, paragraph writing instruction is allocated to 2 sessions.

Methods

To achieve the first purpose, a survey and sentence quiz were administrated as described below.

Aims include: ① To identify students' experience and perceptions of writing and ② to identify students' knowledge of sentence and paragraph writing.

The sample included 91 first-year students and 82 second-year students.

Survey: The questionnaire was administrated in two parts. The first part consisted of 12 questions, including multiple-choice questions, items scored on a Likert scale, and open-ended questions, to gain information on students' perception and experience. The second part included a quiz designed for the recognition of sentences. Here, 12 English texts, including 4 sentences and 8 phrases, were presented to the participants. These sentences examined the students' understanding of sentences and phrases. In the survey analysis, SPSS was used to describe the numerical presentation, distributions, frequency, and correlations.

For the second purpose, the process of designing the paragraph writing instruction, instruction was implemented in two sessions, an overview of students' work and self-evaluation of the instruction.

Conclusion

The current study introduced paragraph writing instruction based on a needs analysis. The results of the needs analysis and the process of design, implementation, and evaluation of the students' product and of the instruction are described in the following section. The paper concludes with a discussion and the implications of the study.

Results of the Needs Analysis

The followed figure (Figure 1) shows students' perception of English writing.

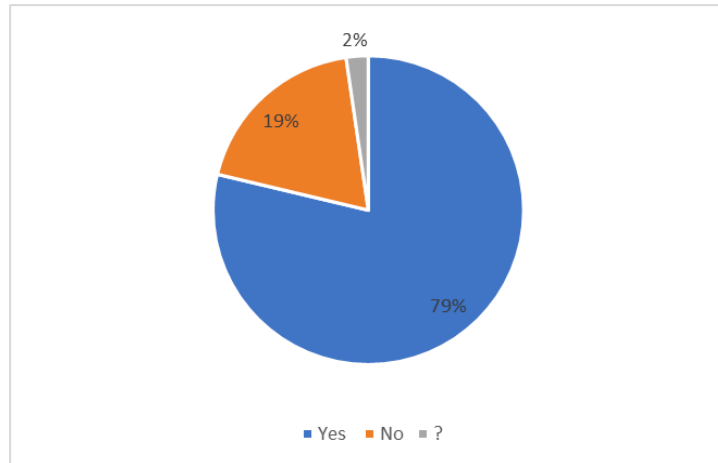


Figure 1: Aversion to Writing

Students responded to questions about any negative feelings, including being uncomfortable writing English, lacking confidence in English writing, or disliking writing. Close to 80% claim that they have such negative feelings toward English writing.

The following two charts (Figure 2) show students' experiences of free writing and paragraph writing activities.

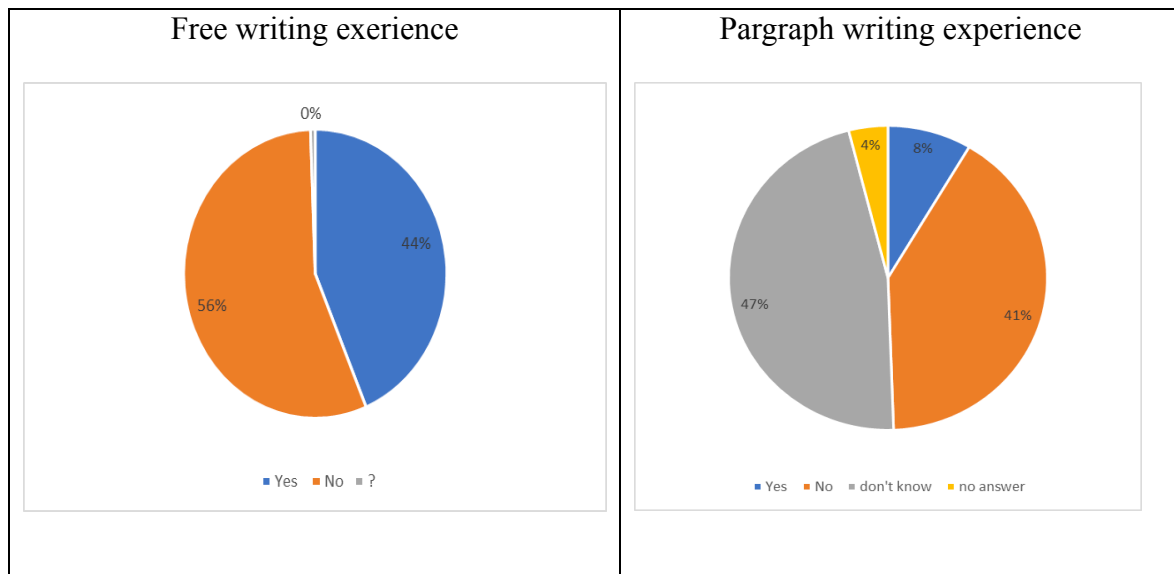


Figure 2: Students' Writing Experience

The left chart shows students' experience with free writing activities. Over half (56%) had not had experience of such activities in previous levels of education, while 44% claimed that they had free writing experience where they were required to create a sentence (instead of merely providing a translation). The second chart, regarding paragraph writing experience, shows that 8% had experience of such an activity, and 47% reported that they did not know what a paragraph was.

The following figure (Figure 3) shows students' experience of writing product feedback.

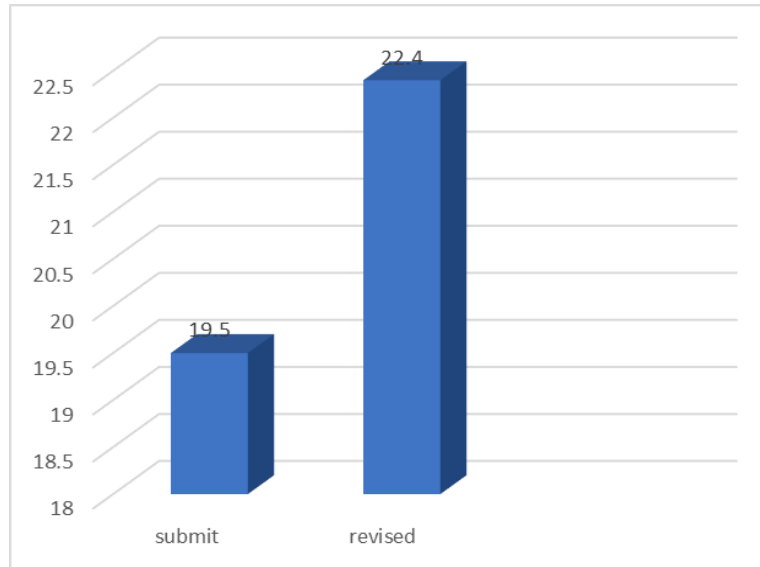


Figure: 3 Feedback

Among students who were involved in the writing activities, only 19.5% submitted their writing product to the teacher. Among them, 22.4% said they had received some sort of feedback on their writing.

The following two tables (Table 1, Table 2) show the results of correlational analysis.

		Feeling of Aversion	Experience	Correct	Incorrect
Feeling of Aversion	Pearson correlation	1	.486**	-.123	.128
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.107	.092
	<i>N</i>	174	174	173	173
Experience	Pearson correlation	.486**	1	-.131	.110
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.085	.150
	<i>N</i>	174	174	173	173
Correct	Pearson correlation	-.123	-.131	1	-.141
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.107	.085		.064
	<i>N</i>	173	173	173	173
Incorrect	Pearson correlation	.128	.110	-.141	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.092	.150	.064	
	<i>N</i>	173	173	173	173

** $p < .001$

Table 1: Correlational Analysis 1

As evidenced in Table 1, a moderate correlation ($-.486$, $p < .001$) was also found between students' aversions toward English writing and their experience of writing. When students do not have free writing or paragraph writing experience, they develop a feeling of aversion toward writing. In contrast, no correlation was found between their feelings toward writing and the sentence quiz results or between their writing experience and quiz results.

		Correct	Incorrect	Understanding of paragraph	Paragraph writing experience
Correct	Pearson correlation	1	-.141	-.134	-.065
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.064	.080	.394
	<i>N</i>	173	173	173	173
Incorrect	Pearson correlation	-.141	1	.128	.089
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.064		.094	.246
	<i>N</i>	173	173	173	173
Understanding of paragraph	Pearson correlation	-.134	.128	1	.528**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.080	.094		.000
	<i>N</i>	173	173	174	174
Paragraph writing experience	Pearson correlation	-.065	.089	.528**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.394	.246	.000	
	<i>N</i>	173	173	174	174

** p < .001

Table 2: Correlational Analysis 2

As evidenced in Table 2, a moderate correlation ($-.528, p < .001$) was found between students' understanding of a paragraph and their paragraph writing experience. However, no correlations were found between students' understanding of paragraphs and their sentence recognition quiz scores, or between their paragraph writing experience and the results of the sentence recognition quiz.

Sentence Quiz Results

In the sentence recognition quiz, students were asked to find four examples that could have a sentence structure. None of the students chose all correct answers; 12.6% chose three sentences, followed by 28.7% who chose two. Also, 75% of the students considered imperative sentences with exclamation marks to be phrases, and 91% considered one-word imperative sentences to be phrases. Moreover, 54% thought the phrase "while he was looking for her" was a sentence.

Designing Paragraph Writing Instruction

Based on the findings of the needs analysis described above, the following points were taken into account when designing the writing instruction.

1. A majority had low English proficiency and many students did not possess the knowledge of sentence structure. Therefore, the activities should include easily read paragraph examples with simple sentences. Students also need practice to create sentences. In addition, the use of PowerPoint is necessary since some low-proficiency students need to see the written forms of all English terms for a clear understanding.
2. Close to 50% of the students did not know what a paragraph is. Therefore, the instruction has to deal with the basics of paragraphs, including the structure and components of paragraph and their roles, and simultaneously teach the use of connectors.
3. Students need to explore several examples of paragraphs, as the concept is new to many of them.
4. Various kinds of exercises should be prepared to enable students to apply their new learning in practice.

5. Since they had not experienced feedback on their writing, they had little revision experience. To address this with a step-by-step approach, a check sheet that describes all requirement points should be prepared. Through pair work and the teacher's feedback, they should learn how to revise their exercises.

6. Maximizing learning within the limited hours allocated for paragraph writing instruction should be considered. Involving homework and feedback from an instructor outside the classroom should be included.

Implementation of the Instruction

The following is the implementation procedure of the paragraph writing instruction.

1st Session

1. Explain what the paragraph is. (use PowerPoint and handouts)
 - Show examples of various paragraphs
 - Explain organization
 - Explain components (topic, supporting, and concluding sentences) and their roles
 - Introduce connectors

2. Provide pre-writing activities (have students explore various kinds of exercises to construct their basic knowledge)
 - Reading sample paragraphs aloud
 - Find the components (topic, supporting, and concluding sentences) of a paragraph
 - Create a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence in example paragraphs
 - Create missing sentences to complete a paragraph
 - Sentence scrambles to complete a paragraph
 - Practice using connectors
 - Write a topic sentence for the paragraph writing topic "My summer vacation"

Homework

Students have to write a paragraph in the following manner.

1. Create the topic sentence (1 sentence)
2. Consider supporting sentences (3–4 sentences)
3. Write (a) concluding sentence(s) (1–2 sentences)
4. Organize a paragraph using connectors.
5. Think of an appropriate title for the paragraph.

Then they should make a copy of their assignment for peer review, which will be used in the second session.

2nd Session

Peer Review

Provide a check sheet for paragraph writing that students can go through following step-by-step processes to check (evaluate) a paragraph. This includes organization, components, connectors, vocabulary, and grammar

Have students read through a check sheet

Pair work for review (use the copy made for homework)

Provide scaffolding (monitor activities/provide suggestions/answer students' questions/give them feedback. etc.)

Students revise and submit the final version.

After the 2nd Session

Providing teacher's feedback

After the class, students' paragraphs were evaluated and feedback is provided.

Students' paragraphs were returned and they were encouraged to submit their revision if they wished.

Evaluation of Students' Assignments and the Writing Instruction

Students' Assignment

It seems most students could write a paragraph with every component. They followed the rules while organizing their paragraphs with all the necessary components. However, a few students faced problems with the format, beginning each sentence on a new line. A few students also had very little understanding of the connection between the topic sentence and the concluding sentence, and introduced new ideas in the last sentence. Some students were able to use appropriate connectors, while others had difficulty using them. Other points noted included 1) some use of translation software that created awkward sentences, and that 2) many students' writings were ordinal, followed similar patterns, and showed little creativity. As a result, their paragraphs were developed logically, but were not attractive.

Activities

Prewriting activities involving various kinds of exercises are believed to enhance students' understanding of the paragraph and its components and organization. Application and repeated use of their knowledge in different forms are believed to enhance their understanding.

In terms of the peer review activity, students were actively engaged in paired feedback. Reviewing others' work using a checklist allowed students to go through step-by-step reviews. They could therefore examine if their own or their partner's work fulfilled the requirement

for a paragraph. They also checked grammar and spelling, and questioned the instructor when they were not sure. Such activities can thus promote their audience awareness as well as recognition of the importance of revision.

Discussion

Designing paragraph writing instruction requires careful examination to a needs analysis to enable the instruction to match students' skills, knowledge, and previous experience. The needs analysis performed for this study revealed that most students seem to have inadequate knowledge regarding sentence components, thus making it difficult for them to distinguish between sentences and phrases. Moreover, most students had not experienced free writing earlier in their education. In terms of paragraphs, about half of the students claimed to never have heard of the word "paragraph," whereas only 8% of students had paragraph writing experience in previous educational settings. Therefore, the paragraph writing instruction first introduced the basics of the paragraph, its organization, its components, and their roles. Concurrently, students were asked to explore various kinds of paragraph samples to recognize the components and structure of paragraphs.

The sudden introduction of paragraph writing to students with low English proficiency level may not be adequate or effective in improving their writing skills. Many students may not even be able to produce sentences with which they can express their thoughts or ideas. Therefore, in pre-writing activities, sufficient opportunities should be given for students to practice producing sentences. These activities are believed to help students build the basic skills required to write sentences and gain knowledge regarding vocabulary and grammar. In such pre-writing activities, students activate their learned knowledge of sentence and paragraph building, and the application and repeated use of their knowledge in different forms are believed to enhance their understanding.

In terms of peer review activity, using a check sheet could help students go through the step-by-step reviewing process. While reviewing their works in pairs, students can also be reassured about their own production by thinking whether it meets the criteria. During this process, students also learn how to recognize readers and understand their responsibilities as writers. Careful monitoring of each group activity should also be done. Providing appropriate and effective scaffolding, including giving advice and answering individual questions, is key to improving students' writings.

Implications

Overall, the instruction seems to have yielded successful results, with most students acquiring the knowledge and skills to produce a paragraph. This paragraph writing instruction involves a step-by-step approach and a learner-centered approach. Students are actively engaged in various activities throughout the sessions. However, the following two issues arose when examining students' work. First, some students exhibited difficulty in using effective connectors that could produce better paragraphs. Therefore, introducing more activities in which students can consider and practice the appropriate and effective use of connectors should be prepared. Second, it was also found that many writings were ordinal, followed similar patterns, and showed little creativity. As a result, even though the paragraphs were developed logically, they were not attractive. Therefore, it is a critical challenge to understand how to involve students' cognitive and social knowledge in writing instruction.

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