

## Paragraph structures in English Composition

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### 〈Abstract〉

Many compositions by foreign students strike the natives as out of focus or disorganized. It may be because students lack a good grasp of the fundamentals of the English rhetoric, particularly those of paragraph. Conceptual unity and development structures of paragraph are dealt with in the main body of the paper. Other things such as logic, nature of themes, writer's stance, and his expected readership are shown to be playing crucial roles in good paragraph writing.

### 영어작문의 단락구조

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### 〈요 약〉

외국인 학생들의 영작문이 때로는 미국인, 영국인에게 훗점이없고, 구성이 제대로 되어 있지 않은듯한 인상을 주는 경우가 있다. 이것은 아마도 이들 학생들이 영어수사법의 기초를 제대로 파악하지 못했기 때문일 것이다. 특히 단락의 구조에 대한 무지에서 비롯된 것일 것이다. 본문에서는 단락의 개념적 통일성, 전개 방식을 다루고 있다. 그 밖에 논리성 주제의 본질, 작가의 입장, 예상되는 독자층과 같은 요소들이 좋은 작문을 쓰는데 아주 중요한 역할을 담당하고 있다는 점을 다루고 있다.

### I. Introduction

In *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*(1968), Wilga M. Rivers has defined writing as follows:

Traditionally, writing activities in foreign language classes have taken the form of the writing out of paradigms and grammatical exercises, dictations, translation from native language to foreign language and from foreign language to native language, and imitative and free composition.

The above quotation clearly shows there are various kinds of writing correlated with different areas of learning involved in the writing process. The crucial point, though, is that these various learning areas can be broken down into two major categories; linguistic skills and communicative skills.

Linguistic skills involve most obviously spelling, vocabulary, syntax, and especially the ways they occur as problem areas in writing. These skills cover the formal properties language as a systematic structure. Mastery of such linguistic skills cannot be

emphasized too much.

Normal linguistic behaviour, however, does not merely consist in the production of separate words, phrases, or sentences, but in their use for the creation of *discourse* (H.G. Widdowson, 1978). Communicative skills are those employed by students when engaged in *using* the linguistic skills to convey information, attitude, feeling, and others in speaking and writing. But it seems that these communicative skills have been rather neglected by teachers and students as well. This can be seen from the fact that there are a number of high school and college students who are quite unable to grasp the meaning of a discourse as a whole, while understanding every word in a sentence and every sentence in the discourse. Even on the production side, many compositions by EFL students are terribly disorganized and out of focus, lacking the coherence typically found in the good writing of the natives. A good grasp of the fundamental structures and development patterns of English paragraphs is an essential communicative skill leading to great improvements of writing.

It will be argued in this paper (i) that paragraphs are the units of a written discourse, and (ii) that they organize and develop information contents of various types of discourse in certain predictable manners.

## II. Writing as a communicative act

The fundamental function of writing is communication. In this activity, there are three main elements; (1) a writer, (2) a reader and (3) a signaling system (for example, English). Furthermore, the signaling system must be one that writers and readers are both able to use. Communication begins with writers. *They decide, for example, to impart some information in a particular way.* They

select a signal—a particular English sentence that they believe is appropriate and write it. The readers receive signal—the written sentence and take it in for storage in memory (Clark and Clark, 1977).

As this description shows, a normal communicative act involve two things simultaneously. The writer expresses a proposition of one kind or another and at the same time in expressing that proposition performs a particular illocutionary act. Evidently, then, such a communicative act is intimately bound up with the writer's intentions, the ideas he wants to convey, and his estimate of the reader's current knowledge, etc.

Furthermore, he has to have a clear idea as to the precise nature of his writing. Is he going to tell a story, give instructions, present information, describe an event, or make a pledge? Each of these activities in fact has a different structure, and he has to plan his writing to fit. Each sentence and paragraph must contribute to the discourse by conveying the right message in ways appropriate not only to his reader, but also to each type of discourse.

## III. Culture and Discourse

As mentioned above, English compositions by foreign students strike natives as illogical, unfocused, and ultimately unorganized. advanced students have already mastered syntactic structures of English, but they still demonstrate their inability to compose adequate themes, term papers, theses, etc. It is not that they do not know how to express themselves. It does not mean that they do not think, either. The thing is they organize and express their ideas in different ways from what natives are accustomed to. Foreign students' papers are out of focus maybe because they are employing a rhetoric and sequence of thought which

violate the expectations of the native readers. Kaplan (1972) has pointed out this problem as follows:

The thought patterns which speakers and readers of English appear to expect as an integral part of their communication is a sequence that is dominantly linear in its development. An English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement, and then, by a series of subdivisions of that topic statement, each supported by examples and illustrations, proceeds to develop that central idea and relate that idea to all the other ideas in the whole essay...

His assumption is that each culture, i.e., language, has its own characteristic patterns of paragraph development: English uses strategies of development different from Russian, French, Chinese, and Korean. Then he goes on to say that some Chinese and Korean students' compositions are marked by an indirect approach: the development of a paragraph turns around the subject and shows it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. He quotes the following piece of composition by a Korean student as an example:

Definitions of college education

College is an institution of an higher learning that gives degrees. All of us needed culture and education in life, if no education to us, we should to go living hell.

One of the greatest causes that while other animals have remained as they first man alone has made such rapid progress is has learned about civilization.

The improvement of the highest civilization is in order to education up-to-date.

So college education is very important thing which we don't need mention about it.

Park (1979) has made same observation. He has noted that instead of going directly to the point, Koreans tend to take up long descriptive accounts about a person or an event

in subjective terms. He quotes the following dialogue between a Korean immigrant and an American employer during an interview, which actually happened in San Francisco (He obtained the material from the Korean-English Language and Job Training Program in San Francisco):

Employer: Are you confident in performing the duties of a file clerk?

Korean: Yes, I am. I have a B. A. degree from Seoul University. My family is known to be good one, and I have been getting whatever I want from everybody.

Employer: But, have you ever worked in a filing department in any company?

Korean: Yes, I can. I can type, drive, and have a B. A. degree from the best university in Korea.

Employer: Can you order things alphabetically?

Korean: I learned English for six years in high school, comma four years at college. I used to be the best student in those days.

Such observations show the necessity of teaching English rhetoric: how a typical English paragraph is organized, what techniques of development are used, how to choose clear and straightforward words, etc.

## V. Components of a paragraph

From the very beginning, students are exposed to units that are larger than sentences, even though at first they concentrate on the smaller units such as words, phrases, and sentences. Beyond intermediate level, they should be sensitized to the entities of the paragraph and of the whole; the series of paragraphs.

Teaching them how specific paragraphs are organized, what samples of descriptions, narrations, cause and effect, comparison or contrast, chronological arrangement, argument, and so on look like, will provide them with subjects for analysis and consequently

with models to follow.

Paragraph, which is begun on a new and usually indented line, contains a unified statement of a particular point. A good expository paragraph has to have the following four elements:

(1) unity—it sticks to one, only one main idea.

(2) development—it explores the main idea explicitly and concretely.

(3) organization—it arranges sentences in an orderly way.

(4) continuity—it shows how these sentences are tied to each other and to the main idea.

Only the first two of these four elements will be dealt with in details for the rest of the paper.

### 1. Unity

A good paragraph has always a conceptual and thematic unity; it sticks to its main idea. All the sentences in the paragraph point towards one central idea or theme instead of drifting off into unrelated ideas. The following paragraph, for example, lacks this unity. Sentence (1) states the main idea, but sentences (3), (4), and (5) depart from the main idea and thus break the conceptual unity of the paragraph:

(1) In his old age my great-grandfather was a tyrant. (2) He expected everything to be done the way *he* wanted, *when* he wanted it done. (3) I have heard that he drank Jim Beam with gusto, and that he had a toddy of bourbon, lemon juice, honey, and hot water before going to bed each night. (4) In his younger days he had been a carpenter and cabinmaker. (5) I was interested especially in him because he was one-quarter Cherokee. (6) I remember that his tyranny came out in pretty direct way—"Ruth, get that boy out of here," or "Cleo, girl, don't just sit—bring me my cane."

The main idea of this paragraph, which is expressed in sentence (1), is that his great-

grandfather was a tyrant. Each sentence of the rest of the paragraph should carry its of the burden. Sentence (3), (4), and (5), however, stray from the central idea. They provide interesting tidbits as to great-grandfather's drinking habit, job, and racial background. They, however, shed no light on his tyrannic character. what is important is that students learn to include only the sort of information relevant to the main idea of a particular paragraph.

#### A. Topic Sentence

To a large extent, the decision on what to include in and exclude from a paragraph is based on the topic sentence whose functions are to state clearly the main idea of the paragraph, and to help the reader not to miss the point by explicitly spelling out the central idea.

The topic sentence can be the first sentence of a paragraph, or it can be the last one. Actually, it can go anywhere. Each decision on where to place the topic sentence, however, has a very important consequence: the patterns of development in the paragraph are determined by the position of the topic sentence. Furthermore, each different pattern reflects the writer's changing mood, attitude, thinking process, and the nature of the theme. It is the key to good writing.

#### B. Theme and Comment

Students need to know what a topic sentence is, but they also need to know something more important, i. e., how a topic sentence works. A topic sentence has two parts: first, a theme; second, something said about the theme. The second part is called a focus. A topic sentence works by introducing a theme and saying something about the theme in the focus (Bell and Cohn, 1976).

"In the focus" is the crucial qualification which merits a closer scrutiny. Excessively broad theme and vague focus make a bad

topic sentence. Students must learn to choose a limited theme and a sharp focus. Furthermore, they must be trained to use the focus to maintain the thematic unity of their paragraphs. If the focus is too vague, they are liable to deviate from the central idea and end up with shattering the unity. Let's take a look at the next three possible candidates for the topic sentence:

(1) Music is interesting and enjoyable.

(2) Folk-rock appeals mainly to the younger generation.

(3) The San Francisco sound combined the rhythm of rock-and roll with the lyrics of the folk music.

These sentences are listed in the order of the degree of the broadness of the theme and the vagueness of the focus. "Music" is the broadest of the three, with "Folk-rock" less broad and "The San Francisco sound" the least broad. "Music" is a very broad topic. It includes classical music, jazz, rock-and-roll, folk music, pop music, and etc. Which one is interesting and enjoyable? All of them? Some of them? Or only one of them? On the other hand, "The San Francisco sound" is very narrow. It is only one brand of folk-rock. Readers can easily identify the theme. It can be said that the same is true of the focus. "Interesting and enjoyable" is a very subjective focus. It is very hard to define exactly what is meant by "interesting and enjoyable. Sentence (3), however, has a very sharp focus. It is concrete. It is, therefore, very easy for the reader to understand what the writer is going to say about the theme.

### C. Writer's Stance

A term paper, a letter to a creditor, an analysis of a poem, an auditor's report, a procedure for mixing cement—all of these are written *by somebody, to somebody, and for a purpose*. Any composition is always done by a person who takes a specific writer's stance

in relation to the following three major elements:

(1) his role as a writer.

(2) his prospective reader.

(3) his theme (his point in writing the theme).

Consequently, students should be aware of the fact that they have many social roles to adopt in their daily life such as a babysitter, taxpayer, consumer, college student, etc. They should be accordingly taught to write about something always as a role-player. For example, they write about Korean economy as a taxpayer, or as a college student. The specific role adopted will help limit the range of the theme, specify and sharpen the focus.

For most topics or themes, there are also some possible readerships. On the topic of Korean economy, the readership might be one of the following: legislators considering a tax bill, married women with children, parents of college students, other college students, etc. Students must always have a clear notion of their readership.

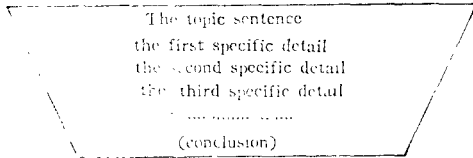
It is clear, then, that the theme is dependent on and determined by the students' roles as writers and their possible readers. If either of these two is changed, theme will probably change, too. These factors limit what kinds of theme and focus the writer will take up, and how specific or general the theme and focus will be.

## 2. Development

As mentioned earlier, the topic sentence is the most important element in a paragraph. Placing the topic sentence where it can be most easily recognized is the key to a good paragraph development. According to the placement of the topic sentence either at the beginning or at the end, the paragraph has three patterns of development.

### A. Simple deductive pattern

This pattern, which is most commonly used by experienced writers, begins with a topic sentence—that is, a highlevel generalization. Each sentence in the rest of the paragraph states specific details; these sentences are low-level generalizations. This pattern can be represented schematically as follows:

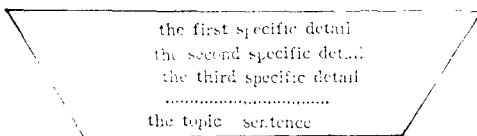


The following is an example of this simple deductive pattern:

(1) The nursing station is a hubbub of activity (topic sentence). (2) Doctors are writing new orders, and their patients' charts are scattered all over the desk (the specific detail). (3) Laboratory and X-ray technicians're explaining results of tests (the second specific detail). (4) The pharmacists bring medications and inquiries about any new orders for drugs (the third specific detail)...(n) The members of the nursing team, all with their own duties, are trying desperately to keep up with everything that is going on, which gives them little time to spend with their patients (n-lth specific detail). (n+1) This pace continues through most of the morning shift (conclusion).

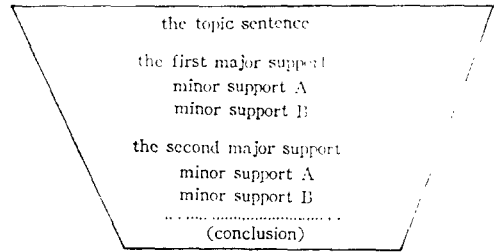
#### B. Simple inductive pattern

One basic rule for good development is "Go from the general to the specific." Occasionally, however, a writer, a writer may do exactly the opposite sometimes to retrace the steps leading to a conclusion, but more often to intrigue the reader by engrossing his attention. In this pattern, the main idea is stated in the last sentence. This pattern can be shown schematically as follows:



#### C. Complex deductive pattern

This pattern begins with a topic sentence the most general statement in the paragraph. The *major* supports develop the topic sentence; the topic sentence; they set up details that directly illustrate the topic sentence. The *major* supports, however, need statements at a lower level of generality; they need statements that are more specific. These refer directly to the major supports (Bell and Cohn, 1976). The following schema shows how it works:



The following is an analysis of the complex deductive pattern:

(1) Our fascination with sounds gives us two interesting if not important sources of English vocabulary (topic sentence). (2) The first source is onomatopoeia making up words that sound like what they mean (major support). (3) For example, the word *buzz* sounds like the action it represents (minor support A). Other onomatopoeic words are *tinkle*, *hiss*, *whirr*, *sizzle*, *slam* (minor support B). (4) Besides onomatopoeia, we also form words by reduplication—the repetition of sounds (major support). (5) Sometimes, reduplication merely produce catchy rhyming sounds, as in *honky-tonk*, *rinky-dink*, *drunk as skunk*, and *hodgepodge* (minor support A). (6) But reduplication may also intensfy the meaning of a root word; *goody-goody*, for instance, may mean "good good" (minor support B).

#### D. The strategies of developments

Once the main idea is stated in the topic sentence, it should be developed in great details in the rest of the paragraph to show

the reader exactly what is meant by the topic sentence. Students must learn to clarify, illustrate, or prove the main idea with specific statements. Some of the most often used techniques are: personal experience, definition, descriptive details either temporal or spacial, factual details, illustration, quotation, classification, and contrast, cause and effect, and reasoning, etc.

Sometimes, however, the nature of a theme dictates the choice of a strategy of development. Certain themes or subjects seem to call for certain methods of development. Tibbetts and Tibbetts(1974) give following examples:

Subject	Strategy
(1) Trying out for a play	personal experience
(2) Prejudice	definition (of the term)
(3) Nervous headache	cause and effect
(4) Becoming a dentist	process
(5) Airplane wing	analogy(comparison to bird's wings)

It is obvious that the strategies of development just discussed can be used in many possible combinations. Most paragraphs, in fact, are likely to be developed by a combination of strategies. Thus the techniques of development overlap and intertwine in a multitude of combinations. Examples and anecdotes may contain descriptive details, factual details, and definitions; facts may be used as examples: quotations may contain multiple examples. The point is that a person writes to get across his ideas to his reader in an informative, truthful, and unambiguous manner by using any of the above-mentioned combinations.

## V. Conclusion

Since writers' goal is to be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear, readers interpret what the writers say on the assumption that

they are trying to live up to the goal. Writers know that their readers make such an assumption. Indeed, writers try to live up to the goal. In other words, writers and readers are engaged in cooperative activities abiding by certain cooperative maxims(Grice, 1967).

The English rhetoric reflects such maxims. For example, the conceptual unity of a paragraph follows the maxim of relation:sentences carrying pieces of information not relevant to the topic are excluded. The three patterns of development also stick to the maxim of manner: they are the results of the writers' efforts to present their writings in a simple and clear fashion.

Consequently, the term *rhetoric* designates the process of organizing information for specific purposes and for specific types of readers by the writers. In this context, paragraph can be defined as a unit of discourse presenting an appropriate amount of information on a given topic in a relevant manner. The strategies of paragraph development are, therefore, informational clues indicating how the ideas of the paragraph relate to one another and to the main idea of the paragraph in particular.

In view of these observations, it is quite necessary to sensitize our students, especially those of the advanced level, to the English rhetoric, which employs thought patterns possibly different from ours.

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