AN ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH FEEDBACK CRITERIA FOR PARAGRAPH WRITING: IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ACADEMIC WRITING

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1. Introduction

What is an effective way of improving students' English writing skills? In a sense, it would be extremely difficult to answer this question because writing is more than the task to write down on the paper what the writer already has in his/her mind. Rather, writing is a process for the writer to discover what he/she actually knows or thinks.

However, like many other skills, in learning English writing, the "Practice makes perfect." principle seems to function well, as Zinsser (1990) states, "writing is a craft, not an art" (P.4). Since writing skills could never be acquired without actual writing practices, giving students the opportunity to write English as often as possible would be the core component of a writing class.

At the same time, teacher's feedback on the students' writing could encourage them to ameliorate their writing skills by revising it along with the feedback. Especially in an academic writing class, where the students are required to develop their ideas and thoughts logically and express them in an impersonal style, it would be extremely difficult for the students to improve their writing skills by themselves. In this sense, it can be said that feedback from the teacher could be a strong tool for the students in cultivating their writing abilities. Nevertheless, without adequate criteria, such feedback would not function effectively. In fact, as Cohen & Cavalcanti (1994) point out, "Recent survey work has suggested that there may be a misfit between written feedback teachers provide on compositions and the learners' interests, that is, between what the teachers give and what the students would like to get" (P.155). On the other hand, the practice of writing a paragraph can give beginning-and intermediate-level students the optimal basis for developing their academic writing skills. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the feedback criteria for students' paragraph writing practice in the perspective of academic writing.

2．Why paragraph writing?

From the viewpoint of teaching writing, it is lamentable that the Japanese college students have very little experience of English writing because at the junior/senior high school level they had little or no opportunities to express their own thoughts and opinions in English. In fact, writing has been a peripheral component of the English class in high school because writing activity is limited to generating English sentences by using the syntax the students have just learned or to translating short given Japanese sentences into English. This may stem from the extreme linguistic difference between English and Japanese, as Rubin & Thompson (1994) point out, "Things can be further complicated when you are trying to learn a language with an alphabet that has many unfamiliar letters" (P.111).

Under these circumstances, on the underlying assumption that giving a chance to write English sentences to the Japanese college students would allow them to improve their writing skills, a number of writing activities have been advocated: writing email, a letter, a summary, a reaction, a journal, a paragraph, an essay, etc. It is true that each of these activities has its own advantages and effectiveness to some extent for improving students' writing skills. For example, Casanave (1993) reports in her research with Japanese university students that by having the students write a journal per week for one semester, their writing skills improved to a great extent.

But in order for the Japanese university students to acquire the basic skills of writing an English academic paper in an organized way, it would be a realistic strategy to begin with the introduction of the concept of an English paragraph (e.g., the notion of a topic sentence, how to develop a paragraph, how to use transitions, etc.) through the practice of paragraph writing, for it is often the case that Japanese college students who do not know even the concept of a topic sentence write an English passage that is confusing to native speakers of English, even though most of the sentences in the passage are grammatically correct. In fact, many textbooks and workbooks on academic writing allot a number of pages on paragraph writing (e.g., Markline, Hawkins, & Isaacson, 1995; Oshima & Hogue, 1988; Oshima & Hogue, 1991). Reid & Lindstrom (1985) even assign one volume on paragraph writing in their three-volume academic writing textbook. Since the skills of paragraph writing is fundamental to writing an academic paper that aims to be clear, direct, and coherent, the practice of paragraph writing could be considered as a beneficial threshold component of teaching/learning academic writing, even though the skill of organizing a whole essay lacks in this practice.

However, it goes without saying that even though the students can learn the basic

concept of an English paragraph through the lecture and writing practice, without concrete and persuasive feedback that is based on the concrete criteria on their writing, it would be exceedingly difficult for them to improve their paragraph writing skills efficiently by themselves.

3. Viewpoints of teacher's feedback

Feedback from the teacher on the students' paragraphs could play a vital role especially in teaching academic writing, not only because teacher's feedback generally encourages the students to write positively but also because academic writing has its own criteria that may not strictly required in other writing activities such as journal writing or email writing. Therefore, in giving feedback on an academic paragraph, it would be important as well as necessary for the teacher to be aware of the criteria of his/her own feedback for revising the students' writing. Indeed, some teachers might focus on the holistic organization, while others might concentrate on grammatical mistakes.

Then, what viewpoints should be incorporated in setting up the criteria of teacher's feedback? Intrinsically speaking, such viewpoints should naturally emerge from the very nature of academic writing. In this context, Williams & Burden (1997) well epitomize what the students should do in writing at the "output stage." Namely, they point out that "At this stage learners need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings in a controlled and planned way; employ words and concepts accurately; develop an awareness of other people's reactions in order to communicate effectively"(P.177). Insofar as one of the main objectives of teaching academic writing is that the students could acquire the ability to write an English paper that is clear and coherent, clearness and coherence could be regarded as the primary viewpoints of teacher's feedback on students' paragraph, from which concrete criteria would be established.

Also, insofar as this feedback aims to cultivate students' academic writing skills, the style of the paragraph, which includes the length of the sentences and word choice, could be another viewpoint of feedback.

Finally, so long as one of the goals of teaching academic writing is to have the students become able to write a graduation thesis that they are to submit to the academia at the final stage of their study at the university, correctness should be the component of the viewpoint of establishing feedback criteria. Therefore, these following 4 viewpoints could be the basis of setting up concrete criteria of teacher's feedback on students' paragraph writing: Clearness, Coherence, Academic style, and Correctness.

4．Criteria of teacher's feedback for paragraph writing

In this section, I would like to propound the concrete criteria of teacher's feedback for the paragraphs written by the students by examining the four viewpoints I have mentioned above.

1）Criteria for clearness

It would go without saying that in academic writing, **existence of the proper topic sentence** is the essential key to the clearness of the paragraph because it is the topic sentence that clearly indicates not only what the paragraph is going to discuss but also how the paragraph is going to develop. If the topic sentence lacks, it is quite difficult for the readers to predict what the paragraph aims to tell. In fact, it can be said that in academic writing, topic sentence is the first and foremost requirement for a paragraph. Therefore, whether or not the topic sentence exists and whether or not the topic sentence is proper for the content of the paragraph can be considered as the fundamental feedback for the paragraph written by students.

Also, **existence of proper examples and reasons** to explain the writer's point should be the criteria of feedback on clearness of an academic paragraph because it is a strong tool for the writer to clarify his/her point. In reality, it is often the case that by reading the given examples the reader can well realize what the writer intends to tell. This is not the exception in academic writing, either. Actually, in the TWE test in TOEFL, all the questions require the examinees to include examples and reasons to support the writer's stance/opinions in the essay, which surely implies that examples and reasons are beneficial as well as essential for demonstrating what the writer wants to say in a persuasive way.

2）Criteria for coherence

In the first place, in giving feedback on the student's paragraph so that the paragraph can obtain coherence, i.e., proper logical development, **proper usage of paragraph development skills**, would play a vital role because the topic sentence of a paragraph requires either of the four main paragraph development skills, i.e., Listing, Time-Order, Cause-Effect, and Compare-Comparison. For example, if the paragraph is written with the topic sentence "The university admissions procedure greatly differs between the US universities and the Japanese counterparts," Compare-Comparison will naturally be employed.

At the same time, in judging whether or not logical development of the paragraph is clearly indicated, **proper usage of transitions** can be another criterion for coherence. For

example, when a writer develops his/her paragraph by supporting its topic sentence with Cause-Effect relationship, it would be effective to use transitions such as "therefore," "because," or "as a result" in order to indicate the causation. Therefore, in revising a students' paragraph, by focusing on the transitions the student has employed, the teacher can raise the student's consciousness how to demonstrate the coherence of his/her paragraph.

Finally, **integration of the sentence subjects** would be a criterion of feedback in order for the students' paragraph to gain coherence because a paragraph in which the subjects of the sentences are integrated is simply coherent. However, from my teaching experience, many Japanese college students do not pay much attention to the integration of the subjects in their paragraphs. Let me take an example from a college student's writing (the sentence subjects are italicized in boldface):

Although *both cats and dogs* are popular pets, cats are better pets than dogs. In the first place, *cats* are cleaner than dogs; *they* rarely dirty the owner's house. Also, *cats* are calm and never bark loudly at strangers. Moreover, *it* is safer to keep cats than to have dogs as pets; *they* never bite people. Finally, unlike dogs, *it* is not necessary to take cats out for a walk every day.

If all the subjects are integrated as "cats" like the revision example below, this paragraph can give the reader a coherent impression.

Although *both cats and dogs* are popular pets, cats are better pets than dogs. In the first place, *cats* are cleaner than dogs; *they* rarely dirty the owner's house. Also, *cats* are calm; *they* never bark loudly at strangers. Moreover, *cats are* safer than dogs as pets; *they* never bite people. Finally, unlike dogs, *cats* do not ask their owner to take them out for a walk every day.

3) Criteria for academic style

In academic writing impersonal style is often preferred, as a result of which direct style is preferred, and passive voice is likely to be employed. For example, from the viewpoint of academic writing, the sentence "This paper analyzes the relationship between A and B" could be more welcomed than the sentence "I will attempt to analyze the relationship between A and B in this paper." Likewise, the sentence "I set two tape-recorders on the desk in front of the teacher to record the student's pronunciation" may sound more

awkward than the sentence "In order to record the student's pronunciation, two tape-recorders were set on the desk in front of the teacher." However, Japanese college students do not seem to know the fact that it sounds awkward to native speakers of English to use both active and passive voices in a sentence. For instance, the sentence "The doctor examined the boy carefully and the operation was begun." is awkward compared with the sentence "The doctor examined the boy carefully and began the operation." Therefore, **proper usage of passive voice** could be incorporated into the feedback criteria for an academic style.

Average length of the sentences could be another criterion for style not only because the longer the average sentence length is, the more the style of the paragraph looks academic but also because in general if the writer employs various syntaxes, the average sentence length increases. In fact, Wada (1997) reports in his action research that along with the student became accustomed to writing English by revising her essay many times, the average length of the sentences increased concurrently with the increasing use of complex sentences and the decreasing use of single sentences. Then, what average sentence length can be considered proper as academic writing? Usually, the average sentence length of the English essay written by the intermediate-level college students falls into the range of between 8 and 12 words per sentence, whereas that of academic paper written by experts is around 30. Therefore, more than 15 words per sentence would be the immediate goal for college students to aim at.

Also, in order to avoid monotonous and/or boring impression to the reader, the learners of academic writing should be encouraged to use various syntaxes as often as possible. For example, it would be beneficial to suggest employing "as well as" structure to the student who always use "not only A but also B" structure. "Therefore, **variety of syntax** could be another criterion for academic style. Likewise, the frequency of **use of complex sentence** could be a criterion of academic style because a paragraph mostly composed of single sentences is far from an academic style. In this connection, I have analyzed the sentence length and the usage of complex sentence in the Section 3 of this paper and the results are as follows:

The number of the words: 362 words

The number of the sentences: 11 sentences

The average length of the sentences: 32.91 words/sentence

The number of the simple sentences: 4 (36.4%)

The number of the compound sentence: 1 (9.1%)

The number of the complex sentences: 6 (54.5%)

Finally, **word choice** may seem a peripheral component of writing so long as the meaning can be conveyed to the reader without misunderstanding. However, in academic writing, more precise expressions are respected and so-called formal vocabulary is conventionally preferred. Therefore, word choice could be incorporated into the teacher's feedback criteria on academic writing. In reality, feedback on word choice would be quite important because it is extremely difficult for college students to select the words that can precisely convey the meaning. Let me take an example:

It is good for children to keep a pet. A pet means something to play with. This can be especially important if there is only one child in a family. Also, children can learn a lot from a pet. They can learn about animals and the natural world. Children also can learn taking care of something. They cannot forget about their pet. This is an important lesson for all children.

In the underlined sentence, the word "good" is not precise enough, that is, the reader may ask, "In what sense is it good for children to keep a pet?" Since this paragraph maintains that children can learn many things by keeping a pet, the word "good" can be understood to mean "good for children's education." Therefore, this "good" should be substituted by the word "educational."

Finally, probably it would be rather rare for the Japanese college students to use English -English dictionary, and it would be much more rare for them to make use of a thesaurus. Therefore, in giving feedback on the students' writing, it would be a beneficial practice of the teacher to introduce the connotation of English vocabulary.

4) Criteria for correctness

In academic writing, **correctness at the surface-level** should be incorporated into the feedback criteria, although it is perilous to place too much emphasis on surface-level errors such as grammatical, spelling, and punctuational errors at the stage of writing the first draft. However, it is lamentable that partly because of the Japanese university entrance examinations that traditionally focus on the accuracy of spelling and grammar, Japanese students appear to pay too much attention on the surface-level errors both in their writing and at the revising stage of it. As a matter of fact, many Japanese teachers of English language seem to be more likely to focus on such surface-level errors in revising the students' writing than on its coherence and clearness.

Insofar as the fundamental goal of teaching academic writing is to cultivate the ability

to write an English paper that is clear and coherent, too much emphasis should not be placed on correctness at the surface level. However, in the reality of academia, students' essay is often judged as a 'product' not as a 'process'. Therefore, it can be beneficial for the students to be pointed out their surface-level errors.

Practically, it would be beneficial for establishing criteria for correctness to set a rough number of surface-level errors per sentence. Since more than one error per sentence on the average means that each sentence has at least one error on the whole, less than one surface-level error could be a criterion for surface-level errors.

Finally, as for punctuation, it is a lamentable fact that Japanese students have almost no opportunity to learn the rules of punctuation systematically; they have no idea of how to use comma, semi-colon, and colon correctly. Therefore, it is beneficial as well as necessary for Japanese college students to learn basic punctuation rules, and so the teacher of academic writing should allot his/her class time to introducing the punctuational rules to the students.

5. The list of feedback criteria

Based on the viewpoints of feedback discussed so far in this paper, a list of the 15 concrete criteria for the feedback from the teacher on the paragraph written by the students would emerge as follows, even though this list is not a complete one and, thus, only a model.

〈Criteria for clearness〉

1. Does this paragraph have a proper topic sentence?
2. Is the topic sentence of this paragraph a proper one?
3. Is the topic sentence of this paragraph supported by examples and reasons?
4. Are the employed examples and reasons appropriate for the topic?

〈Criteria for coherence〉

5. Is this paragraph developed by proper paragraph development skills?
6. Do the transitions clearly indicate the logical development of the paragraph?
7. Are the sentence subjects integrated?

〈Criteria for academic style〉

8. Is passive voice used in a proper way?
9. Is the average sentence length over 15 words/sentence?
10. Does the writer employ a variety of syntax?
11. Does the writer employ many complex sentences?
12. Is the word choice proper?

<Criteria for correctness>

13. Does this paragraph have grammatical errors that hinder the reader from comprehending the sentence?

14. Does this paragraph have spelling errors that hinder the reader from comprehending the sentence?

15. Does this paragraph have more than one grammatical, spelling, or punctuational error per sentence?

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to investigate concrete as well as persuasive criteria for the feedback on the paragraph written by students in the perspective of academic writing. It is true that the task of evaluating students' writing as a 'product' does not necessarily work as a beneficial tool for cultivating writing skills in the students and that focusing on the 'process' of their writing can be more beneficial in doing so. Consequently, teacher's feedback on the students' writing for revision can be a strong guide and encouragement for the students. But, as a matter of fact, no systematic criteria have been established partly because of the complicated nature of writing. The 15 criteria propounded in this paper have been derived from the viewpoints of academic writing, that is, clearness, coherence, style, and correctness. But it cannot be said at all that these criteria are the ideal criteria. Rather, this is a model that is to be revised and improved. Therefore, further research such as action researches would be required to identify to what extent this model can work as a practical guiding tool to improve students' skills of academic writing.

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