Teaching the Academic Body Paragraph in Content-Based Instruction

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Although most writing books intended for college-level students discuss elements and styles of a body paragraph, e.g. the topic sentence and comparison/contrast, they overlook one area that distinguishes the academic writing that many undergraduate courses expect students to be familiar with: how and where to incorporate information from class readings in body paragraphs. Based on the qualitative analyses of students' writing using the action research framework proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), this paper presents a four-step organizational scheme of academic body paragraphs, illustrates it with a student example, and provides a lesson plan for a college ESL/EFL writing class using Content-Based Instruction. Also discussed are how to write topic sentences from the thesis statement, what to avoid in topic sentences, and how to create cohesion between body paragraphs with simple, yet effective, transitional words or phrases in topic sentences.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the ultimate challenges that teachers of English to speakers of other languages face is readying students for college, a rigorous academic setting in which all four skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—play an important role in their success. Of the four skills, writing poses the greatest challenge as students are expected to follow rather rigid conventions particular to academic writing: many of my students find it difficult to believe that a thesis statement should come at the end of the introduction; some of them have a hard time applying this simple rule to their essay because they are

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the KATE 2007 International Conference, Anyang, Korea. This work was supported by the Special Research Grant of Sogang University.
accustomed to saving their main argument for the conclusion when writing in their mother tongue (e.g., Kubota, 1998). Reflecting the importance of writing in preparing for and thriving in college is the fact that many college-preparatory ESL programs focus heavily on writing instruction and that many ESL programs for matriculated college students make only writing classes a requirement for graduation.

According to Hedge (2000), methodology for teaching writing “made dramatic departures from traditional approaches” (p. 300) in the 1990s. Whole language proponents, for example, found convincing the argument by researchers like Graves (1983), Calkins (1986), and Atwell (1987) that writing instruction should focus on “the processes of writing instead of on written products” (Rigg, 1993, p. 70). With the publication of Raimes’s (1987) Exploring Through Writing: A Process Approach to ESL Composition, teaching writing in ESOL settings also started to shift its focus from getting students to imitate model essays to getting students involved in the process of writing in class. The 1990s also witnessed a continual increase in the popularity of Writing in the Disciplines (WID), whose basic framework was developed by Miller (1984), Bazerman (1988), and Myers (1990), who emphasized “students’ immersion in a disciplinary community, where they were to master academic and professional writing” (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004, p. 118). In line with WID’s tenet that writing should be learned in conjunction with subject matter is Content-Based Instruction (CBI), which began as an immersion program for teaching French to elementary school students in Canada in the 1960s (Snow, 2001) but became widespread to university-level settings in the 1990s (Crandall & Kaufman, 2002).

Thus, the major changes that the teaching of writing has undergone since the 1990s can be summarized as follows: (a) a shift from the product approach, in which students are taught to produce characteristic features of model texts accurately, to the process approach, in which students are encouraged to engage in activities such as brainstorming, cluster mapping, and freewriting1 and (b) a shift from treating writing as a separate language skill to treating it as a tool essential to acquire content knowledge in various disciplines through WID and CBI. Undoubtedly, these two shifts have made invaluable impacts on how college students, both native and ESOL, are taught to write. There is one area, however, that seems to have fallen through the cracks during these two major shifts: teaching the academic body paragraph to undergraduate students.

In an overview of recent developments in TESOL, Hinkel (2006) observes that scholars have started to emphasize the importance of explicit pedagogy in grammar and vocabulary in L2 writing instruction and that genre-based instruction, along with CBI, has become an important basis for English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Indeed, many recent research

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1 As Atkinson (2003) points out, we are now in the post-process era, and genre-based pedagogies, which offer students “explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts” (Hyland, 2003, p. 18), have been considered an alternative to process views.
studies on L2 writing can be grouped under these two categories: one dealing with local issues such as grammar and vocabulary and the other dealing with global issues such as organizational patterns in a specific genre. It is not difficult to find research articles on cohesive devices (Hinkel, 2001), coherence-creating devices (Lee, 2002), or diction for expressing authorial identity (Hyland, 2002). Nor it is difficult to find articles focusing on more global issues such as the problem-solution pattern (Flowerdew, 2000), summary writing (Kim, 2001), and contrasting rhetoric (Hirose, 2003). None of these articles, however, discuss how and where undergraduate students should incorporate information from class readings in body paragraphs.

Based on the qualitative analyses of students’ writing using the action research framework proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), this study proposes a four-step organizational scheme of academic body paragraphs in an argument paper, illustrates this organizational scheme with a student example, and provides a lesson plan for a college ESL/EFL writing class using CBI. The paper also discusses the four mistakes in topic sentences most commonly made by students, as well as ways to improve cohesion between body paragraphs by using simple, yet effective, transitional words or phrases in topic sentences.

II. THE “COOKIE-CUTTER” APPROACH AND EAP

The aforementioned shift from the product approach to the process approach is also supported by SLA research which shows that “L2 acquisition is a ‘process’ that is incompatible with teaching seen as the presentation and practice of a series of ‘products’” (Ellis, 2003, p. 29). The product approach, or the “cookie-cutter” approach, has been criticized on numerous fronts, one of which is Skehan’s (1996) argument that it perpetuates teachers’ power over students by giving teachers the control of the classroom. In a review article on current trends in the teaching of English for specific purposes, Belcher (2004) praises Swales and Feak’s (1994, 2000) “avoidance of the ‘cookie-cutter’ approach complained of by New Rhetoricians” (p. 169), citing their literature review jigsaw task which contains no single right answer but allows students to discover the organizational strategy suitable for their disciplines.

There is no question that Academic Writing for Graduate Students (Swales & Feak, 2004) and English in Today’s Research World (Swales & Feak, 2000) contain various process-oriented lessons and activities. Arguably the best writing references for graduate students and junior researchers, these two books, however, also offer product-oriented lessons and activities that can be unjustly vilified as characteristic of the “cookie-cutter” approach. For example, the overview of the research paper (Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 222)
and the structure of a conference abstract (Swales & Feak, 2000, p. 32), two lessons that students in my graduate writing class find most helpful, can be criticized as "formulaic approaches to academic discourse" (Belcher, 2004, p. 169), just as the five-paragraph essay in undergraduate writing has been.

Lodging a similar criticism is Raimes (1991), who demarcates the development of writing instruction and research between 1966 and 1991 in the following four approaches: (a) a form-dominated approach, since 1966; (b) a process approach, since 1976; (c) a content-based approach, since 1986; and (d) an EAP approach, since 1986. Raimes (1991) then argues that an EAP approach is "a return to a form-dominated approach, the difference being that now rhetorical forms, rather than grammatical forms, are presented as paradigms" (p. 412). Nevertheless, no EAP textbooks, which present "rhetorical forms" as paradigms, discuss teaching the academic body paragraph to undergraduate students.

III. THE DEFINITION OF THE ACADEMIC BODY PARAGRAPH

What, then, makes academic writing academic—more specifically, the academic writing that undergraduate students are expected to be familiar with? How does undergraduate writing differ from a five-paragraph essay in high school and from a research paper in graduate school? I argue that undergraduate writing is a hybrid between these two forms of writing. Unlike graduate students, undergraduate students are not usually expected to conduct an original research study. Rather, many undergraduate writing assignments require students to take an informed position based on what they have learned in class, i.e. facts and arguments that the experts in the field have put forth, and defend their position with appropriate support. Thus, undergraduate academic writing not only has all the components of a five-paragraph essay—i.e. an introduction with a general statement at the beginning and a thesis at the end, body paragraphs with topic sentences supported by major and minor details, and a conclusion with a restatement of the thesis at the beginning and a general statement without any new information at the end—but also contains evidence that the arguments in the essay are based on the information from the class readings and lectures, a task mostly effected by what I call "the academic body paragraph." The academic body paragraph is thus defined as a paragraph in which students are expected to incorporate information from class readings and lectures.

Needless to say, not every body paragraph in undergraduate academic writing should be organized according to the guideline suggested in this paper; in fact, only a small percentage of them should—namely, body paragraphs in papers written in response to a question based on a topic discussed in class. In content-based ESL/EFL writing classes, this type of paper is the norm rather than an exception, and in many undergraduate classes,
students are frequently asked to show their understanding of the subject matter in this type of writing.

IV. ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

1. Context of the Problem

That the academic body paragraph has thus far been given short shrift can be attributed to many sources, but one of the main problems is the inadequate discussion of body paragraphs in writing books. Although most writing books intended for college-level students do a good job in pointing out the essential elements and various styles of a body paragraph in academic writing, they overlook the most important component of the academic body paragraph: parenthetical citations. The following discussion of four books used in my college ESL writing classes from 1999 to 2006 will suffice to illustrate this observation.

Designed to help students prepare for college writing courses, Independent Writing (O'Donnell & Paiva, 1993) discusses the essentials of a paragraph—i.e. topic sentence, supporting sentences, details, logical order, logical connectors, concluding sentence, and unity and coherence—and provides the following as an example of using “appropriate and accurate statistics in your support”: “Children who use fluoride toothpaste get 72 percent fewer cavities than those who do not. Therefore, all children should use fluoride toothpaste” (p. 178). Without a parenthetical citation, i.e. the source of the statistic, however, any professor reading this passage will undoubtedly question the validity of the statistic cited in support of the argument.

Text & Thought: An Integrated Approach to College Reading & Writing (Lester & Resnick, 2003, pp. 299-300), on the other hand, provides a schematic representation of how three body paragraphs can derive from a thesis statement with three topics. However, the sample body paragraph given in the book, again with no parenthetical citations, only illustrates how major and minor details should be organized to provide coherent support to the topic sentence.

Unlike Independent Writing and Text & Thought, The New St. Martin's Handbook (Lundsford & Connors, 1999) and Rules for Writers (Hacker, 2004), two of the most popular writing references, do discuss in detail how to document sources in research papers using different conventions such as MLA and APA styles. However, in discussing how to write paragraphs, they limit their discussion to topic-sentence positions and patterns of organization—e.g. narration, description, process, definition, and comparison/contrast—examples of which contain no parenthetical citations, again neglecting to specify
when and where to incorporate sources in a paper that requires students to answer specific questions based on class readings and discussions.

2. Action Research Procedure

In order to help students better organize their body paragraphs, I devised a simple action research study following the framework proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, as cited in Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 100):

- Phase I: Develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening
- Phase II: Act to implement the plan
- Phase III: Observe the effects of action in context
- Phase IV: Reflect on these effects

Having witnessed a great number of students struggling with organizing body paragraphs, I developed a four-step guideline (discussed in section IV. Findings of the Action Research) by comparing student essays with coherent argument structure with those of lesser coherent argument structure and by holding numerous individual conferences during which my students and I discussed how to present arguments in body paragraphs (Phase I). Soon after I started teaching the four-step guideline in organizing body paragraphs (Phase II), I realized that although my students’ body paragraphs were now coherent, they lacked cohesion (Phase III), at which point I added a lesson on making effective transition between body paragraphs by providing topic sentences with simple cohesive words or phrases (Phase IV).

The students whose essays I analyzed were taking an advanced ESL class called “ESL 33C” at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Designed to help matriculated undergraduate students acquire the essential academic language skills they need in their studies at UCLA, ESL 33C is a “simulated” adjunct CBI course in which “videotapes of actual lectures by UCLA content faculty and assigned course readings provide the content base” for the course (Snow, 2001, p. 309). Each section usually consists of 20 students, of which about eight are Korean. Most of the students taking ESL 33C are transfer students from a two-year community college and have lived in the States for a few years. The action research procedure described above was implemented in the ESL 33C sections that I taught between 1999 and 2003.

3. Content and the Writing Prompt

Of the many content areas that I have taught in my CBI writing courses—e.g. biology,
political science, and psychology—social psychological concepts such as bystander apathy and obedience seem to have engaged my students the most. Rather than choosing a topic of their interest, for example, students first read a concise yet complicated synopsis of the phenomenon “bystander apathy” in the book *Insights 2: A Content-Based Approach to Academic Preparation* (Brinton, Frodesen, Holten, Jensen, & Repath-Martos, 1997), introducing them to various social psychological terms such as pluralistic ignorance, diffusion of responsibility, and social inhibition. After a thorough discussion of these terms and other aspects of the phenomenon, students then read a short narrative called “A Doctor’s Dilemma,” which serves as the situation to which they can apply what they have learned with regard to bystander apathy.

In answering the following writing prompt, students are required to use the knowledge they have gained through class readings and discussions in order to support their arguments:

James Dillard, the physician in “A Doctor’s Dilemma,” helps an accident victim despite serious reservations. Write an essay in which you apply both the definition of emergency situations and the social determinants of bystander intervention given by Latane and Darley to explain why Dr. Dillard intervened.

Depending on the level of the students and the purpose of the class, students can also be required to use at least two outside sources to support their arguments, i.e. two scholarly journal articles that they have found on the Internet or in the library. This requirement should of course be preceded by a library training session conducted by a librarian familiar with various social science databases.

V. FINDINGS OF THE ACTION RESEARCH

1. Four Most Common Mistakes in Writing Topic Sentences

Very often, I find that students also have a hard time writing topic sentences, a task that takes nothing more than putting each argument in the thesis into a sentence with an effective transition. In answering the prompt above, Student R² wrote the following thesis statement: “Having realized that the situation was an emergency and that he was qualified to help, Dr. Dillard was able to intervene because there was no pluralistic ignorance, diffusion of responsibility, and social inhibition.” From this thesis is his first topic sentence,

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² To protect their anonymity, students are represented only by the initials of their first names. All student examples come from essays written by students in my ESL 33C classes.
"The lack of pluralistic ignorance in the event allowed James Dillard to intervene," in which the part in bold rephrases the first argument in the thesis and the rest of the sentence refers specifically to the prompt. Like the thesis, a topic sentence is an argument that answers the question in the prompt; thus, what is true of a good thesis is also true of a good topic sentence.

The four most common mistakes that I have found in my students' topic sentences are summarized as follows:

1. Giving a question, e.g. *Do we need to obey the authority?*
2. Making a factual statement, e.g. *Ataturk is called the father of Turks.*
3. Starting with "for example," e.g. *For example, in Experiment 1, panhandlers made one of the following two strange requests: "Can you spare 17 cents?" or "Can you spare a quarter?"*
4. Including a parenthetical citation, e.g. *Joo-Young Chung was an innovative businessman who discovered hidden stories suggested by old stories (Gardner, 1995).*

As it should be an argument answering the question given in the prompt, a topic sentence should not be a question or a factual statement. Many factual statements, however, can effectively be turned into an argument with a *because-*clause as opinion can vary why something is considered a fact. Having written a thesis statement that answers the question directly, many students make the mistake of starting the first body paragraph with *for example* without a topic sentence. Including a parenthetical citation at the end of a topic sentence is also problematic as it can imply that the argument was made not by the student but by the cited author.

2. How to Organize the Academic Body Paragraph

After learning how to write topic sentences from the thesis statement, students then use the following guideline to develop their arguments into academic body paragraphs, incorporating ideas from the class readings or other journal articles:

1. Each body paragraph should start with a **two-part topic sentence**: one part referring specifically to the question in the prompt and the other taking on one of the arguments in the thesis statement.

2. Next, **specific evidence supporting the argument** should follow. This is where students incorporate concepts from class readings (e.g. pluralistic ignorance) into their paper with appropriate documentation.
3. Optionally, a short example illustrating the concept could follow.
4. Lastly, the relevance of the concept to the question in the prompt must be discussed.

Below is an example of a body paragraph following this organizational scheme, written by Student R. (1), (2), (3), and (4) are added before the sentences that exemplify those four steps:

(1) The lack of pluralistic ignorance in the event allowed James Dillard to intervene. (2) Pluralistic ignorance occurs when bystanders give a passive façade by which others are influenced to think that nothing is wrong (Latane & Darley, 1973). Through experiments, Latane and Darley have illustrated how the company of other people affects an individual’s reaction towards identifying an emergency. (3) For example, in one of Latane and Darley’s experiments, a group of people were sitting in a room. Smoke suddenly leaked from the vent, but nobody reacted. However, when a single individual was in the room, her reaction was instantaneous. (4) In Dillard’s case, however, he had no other passersby that could second-guess his decision to intervene. Dillard only had his friend Amy by his side, so he felt responsible for helping the man. (with minor editing)

(See Appendix for another student example of the academic body paragraph, along with the prompt and the thesis statement.)

3. Providing Effective Transition between Body Paragraphs

One unexpected fallout of having students write a series of body paragraphs according to the four-step organizational scheme above was that the whole essay sounded choppy because there was no transition between the body paragraphs. Although helping students improve cohesion in their essay is a topic worthy of another paper because various cohesive devices, ranging from a simple adverb to a full sentence, can serve as effective transitions between paragraphs, the following topic sentences (TS) in Student E’s essay “Bystanders Are Humane” illustrate the simplest way of effectively providing transition between body paragraphs:

TS 1: One important reason that led bystanders not to intervene is pluralistic ignorance.

TS 2: Fear of embarrassment is another situational factor that resulted in the failure of bystanders to intervene.

TS 3: Failure to get involved was also due in part to the diffusion of responsibility.
Having learned that the flow of her essay can be improved by adding a few words to her topic sentences, Student M revised her first topic sentence as follows (and the others in a similar fashion):

Original: Since they did not feel responsible for the situation on the bus, the other passengers did not intervene.

Revised: One of the reasons why the other passengers on the bus did not intervene was that they did not feel responsible.

As can be seen in Student M’s revised topic sentence, creating effective transition between body paragraphs most often requires rephrasing the sentence, which is also a good practice for paraphrasing, an essential skill in academic writing that must be taught in conjunction with the guideline above.

4. Teaching the Academic Body Paragraph

In order to write academic body paragraphs, students need to know not only when and where to incorporate information from their class readings but also how to incorporate and document it properly. To that end, they need to learn how to summarize, paraphrase, and quote, the three ways of incorporating other people’s ideas, and what to include in a parenthetical citation. For instance, in order to follow the APA convention, students need to learn that a page number is mandatory for a quotation, but only optional for a paraphrase, and that if the name of the author appears in the text, only the year of publication needs to be included, e.g. Celce-Murcia (2001). Students also need to be reminded of the fact that each convention follows different ways of providing the list of articles and books cited in a paper, e.g. the References page for APA and the Works Cited page for MLA. All these can be taught either before or after teaching the academic body paragraph; I usually teach them before, as shown below:

Class 1. Summary / Paraphrase
Class 2. Quotation / Parenthetical Citations / References Page
Class 3. The Academic Body Paragraph

Each class is one-and-a-half hours long, and the following lesson plan, used in conjunction with the sociology content unit in Insights 2 (Brinton et al., 1997), describes what I do in Class 3:
1. Discuss the organization of the academic body paragraph.
2. Write the following thesis statement on the board: Nobody helped the Chinese lady because of the absence of a relational wedge from her and the development of pluralistic ignorance among the bus passengers.
3. Divide the class into four groups. Two groups write a body paragraph on the first topic “the absence of a relational wedge” and the other two on the second topic “the development of pluralistic ignorance.”
4. Have all groups write their paragraphs on the board.
5. Go over the paragraphs as a class, making sure that each paragraph contains at least a two-part topic sentence, the source of the argument/concept, and the relevance of the concept.

This admittedly product-oriented lesson plan, as well as the suggested organization of the academic body paragraph described above, should not be considered a step backward in our attempt to promote a “constructivist, process-oriented theories of learning, teaching, and teacher learning” (Crandall, 2000, p. 34). Rather, it is a step in the right direction in creating a balanced, integrated approach that “incorporate[s] elements of both process and product approaches to writing” (Hedge, 2000, p. 329) as this lesson plan can be preceded by process-oriented activities such as brainstorming, cluster mapping, and freewriting and followed by individual conferences before students turn in their final drafts.

VI. CONCLUSION

By identifying its essential components, providing a student example, and discussing a lesson plan, this paper has tried to shed light on an area in undergraduate ESL/EFL writing that has been given inadequate attention: the academic body paragraph, a paragraph in which undergraduate students are expected to incorporate information from class readings. One obvious limitation of this action research study is the fact that its arguments are based solely on qualitative analyses of students’ writing and the author’s firsthand teaching experience. It goes without saying that further studies providing empirical support are needed to verify the effectiveness of the teaching suggestions made in this paper.

The teaching of writing has not been immune from “the frequent swings of the pendulum,” (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 3) which characterized the history of the development of ELT approaches: it also went from the traditional product approach to the extreme process approach. However, efforts are now being made to find an integrated, balanced approach that can best help our students. Incorporating in an otherwise process-oriented curriculum lesson plans such as how to organize the academic body paragraph outlined in
this paper can help bridge the gap between the two seemingly diametrically opposed approaches to teaching writing in this post-process era, an era that rejects "the dominance of process at the expense of other aspects of writing and writing instruction" (Matsuda, 2003, p. 78-79). Granted, writing is an art form, which usually defies an exact formulation. Teaching writing, however, is another art form, which sometimes entails an exacting set of rules not to stifle creativity but to provide direction.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

Sample Academic Body Paragraph

(Student K)

- **Prompt:** In this unit, you have read about deterrence as a means of exerting power. Some have argued that deterrence is no longer an effective foreign policy. Do you think deterrence is still an effective way for a country or individual leader to assert power? Support your position with current world events and the materials from this unit.
- **Thesis:** The United States cannot rely on military deterrence any more, even though it was an effective foreign policy during the Cold War era, because there is a lack of commitment and credibility.

(1) Lack of credibility is another serious reason that the United States was not able to prevent the terrorists from attacking. (2) The idea of military deterrence is generally linked with nuclear weapons, and because of the dreadful destructive power, the credibility to use them to punish the challenger can be easily doubted (Spiegel, 1995). (4) In the case of the September 11 attacks, nuclear weapons must have threatened even the terrorists. However, it seems that the terrorists, especially Bin Ladin, knew that the United States would not be willing to sacrifice millions of people in a nuclear war, even though they were not Americans. That is why the United States was not able to convince them that it would use nuclear weapons to punish them. (with minor editing)
Applicable levels: tertiary education
Key words: action research, academic writing, body paragraph, CBI, EAP, process approach, product approach, post-process

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Received in June 2008
Reviewed in July 2008
Revised version received in August 2008