

Empower ESL Writing Students: Keep It Simple

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This case study started when I noticed that my ESL (English as a Second Language) students from all over the world had a hard time not only adjusting their writing/textual production to the language but also to the organizational structures of the paragraph I was presenting to them in my intermediate writing class. Considering that my students need to have a real experience with the new paragraph structure and keep applying it to their writing for our 16-week class, I tried two different interventions based on several authors who emphasize the learner-centered teaching during the spring semester of 2012 at Black Hawk College in Moline, IL. The first intervention took place on the first class day when I did not introduce the paragraph model and the terminology we would adopt. I let the student write the first assignment freely; however, in our next class, we used their own paragraph to compare to the rhetorical model I was proposing. The second intervention was about making clear and precise comments on students' drafts in order to be as clear and precise as possible to keep them following the same paragraph structure model. Results and analysis of these two interventions are presented in this case study.

How hideous, unpleasant, and annoying it is when teachers write “awk,” a question mark, or even “expand this idea” on the margins of students' paragraphs. Without any specific directions about what is not working, students normally tend to concentrate on editing aspects of correction such as misspelling or subject-verb agreement issues. Therefore, writing students become frustrated and start not enjoying writing. In an English as Second Language class, the writing process has two more obstacles: the English language itself and the diversity of academic writing concepts that students already possess. According to Siepman (2006) in his article “Academic Writing and Culture,” cultural influences in writing became more intensively studied some decades ago. Basically, Kaplan in the 1960s noticed that an English paragraph had linear development while a French paragraph presented much more digression. Also, digression often has a well-defined function in German academia: to prove theory, historical background or additional information to qualify preceding statements to “enter into polemics with another author” (Clyne, 1987, p. 227). In short, most of my ESL (English as a Second Language) students apply French, German, or other techniques to develop their ideas instead of the English convention. Personally, I had no problem accepting and even agreeing with this theory; however, I strove for a way or technique to provide my writing students awareness about these differences and equip them with tools to handle language both academically and effectively. Therefore, several authors were used to support this study.

Recent educational theories have emphasized the importance of placing students at the center of our teaching. It means when preparing our lessons, we change from “How will I teach this content?” to “How will students learn this content?” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 5). Considering my ESL writing students, I also have

to take in account what Paulo Freire (2003) stated in his well-known work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: the students already know “things they have learned in their relations with the world” (p. 63). In other words, as a teacher, I should bring the student to the center of my teaching and consider what my students already know (and apply) about academic writing since they are mostly adults. More specifically, besides using my students' own writing skills to present the content I wanted to propose to them, we together should re-invent the reality (Freire, 2003). However, to re-invent the reality, my writing students had to be guided with very clear and precise directions in order to adjust and combine previous and current knowledge. Brian Huot (2002) in his work, *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, stated, “we need to explain as clearly as possible what we mean by awk or vag and . . . relate these explanations to other interactions” (p. 131). Even though Huot's (2003) statement might seem obvious, when dealing with English learners, it means explaining and clarifying even the facets of writings that we take for granted that our students should know.

Finally, RTI (response to intervention), which consists of a system of instructions and interventions administrated to struggling readers (and consequently writers), was also adopted as theoretical support to this study more specifically some points from Fisher, Frey, and Rothenberg's (2011) work, *Implementing RTI with English Learners*. In their work, the authors proposed some practices to get effective results. Among them, I would like to highlight two: the first one is *models*, in which students “see clear demonstrations and examples of the process or skill they will learn and the product they will create” (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 135). Second is *metacognition* in which students have the opportunity to “reflect on their learning, [be] aware of how they learn, and know where they stand in their progress toward their goals” (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 135).

In conclusion, these authors inspired me to experiment with small changes in the way I was teaching writing to English learners. First, I acknowledged they were not beginners either considering language or academic skills. Second, even though they were not beginners, they needed clear and precise guidance in order to advance. The results and analysis of employing these small changes are displayed in the next sections of this case study.

Interventions

Intervention A

I have been teaching Intermediate Writing for five years. In previous semesters, on the first day of our class, students were shown the model of paragraph they were supposed to apply for the semester. We started with an example of a paragraph that followed English

standards and worked on the terminology we would be mentioning such as topic sentence, major supports, minor supports, concluding sentences, and connectors; terms that would be part of our vocabulary for 16 weeks and that many students had never heard before. I noticed that even though students seemed to understand the generic organization of a paragraph, many of them kept struggling with it for weeks. During the Spring 2012 semester and for the purposes of this case study, this introduction was not given. Students were asked to interview the classmate next to them. First, we brainstormed the possible questions we ask when we meet someone, and we created a list of questions they could use to interview their classmate. Then they had to take the information they got from the interview and put it together as a paragraph for homework. In the next class, they had to bring the first draft. The results of this first intervention are shown in Table 1, along with their analysis.

Table 1
Sample Topic Sentences—First Paragraph Assignment

Student	First draft	Final version
Student A	My partner name is ___ he is from Togo he told me that his future plans are to be a teacher, we talked about the seasons . . .	In my first day in my Writing I class, I interviewed my classmate, ___, and he told me interesting things about himself.
Student B	I interviewed ___, he said his favorite place is bagdad [<i>sic</i>]	In the first day in my Writing I class, I interviewed my classmate, ___, and he talked about three interesting things.
Student C	___ is from Mexico, and she has been living in the U.S. for two years.	On January 17 th , I started my classes at Black Hawk College, [<i>sic</i>] in my ESL class I met ___ and she told me . . .
Student D	My partner ___ from West Africa future plans is to get the best degree. His favorite pet is a rabbit . . .	My first day of school was so interesting for me because I met a person who comes from the same country that I am from and who told me interesting things about his life . . .
Student E	One of my classmate [<i>sic</i>] is ___. She is from Brazil and it's sound interesting because she said it's beautiful.	In my first day in Writing I class, I had to interview my classmate ___ and she said me [<i>sic</i>] interesting things.
Student F	___ future plans is become a nurse, her goal is get into nursing program.	In my first day in Writing I class, I had to interviewed [<i>sic</i>] my classmate, ___, and she said me [<i>sic</i>] interesting things about herself.
Student G	My partner future plans are study to finish English class and get to college to and become a teacher.	In my first day in Writing I class, I had to interview my classmate ___. And he said many interesting things.
Student H	Today the first day of school I have ___ as partner. She comes from Mexico but was born in California. She like flowers.	I interviewed ___ during my first day in Writing I class, and I realized some interesting facts about her.
Student I	My first day at school I meet one of my classmate yours name is ___	In my first day in Writing I class, I had to interview my classmate ___, and she said me interesting about herself [<i>sic</i>].
Student J	My partner classmate his name is ___ his favorit [<i>sic</i>] time is summer.	In my first class in Writing I class, I had to interview my classmate ___ and he said interesting things to me.

When students brought their first draft, considering our learner-centered conduct in which “we should include activities and experiences that will help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and understanding that each of our learning outcomes requires” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 5), instead of having the peer editing step, we edited the draft as a class. In pairs, students exchanged their drafts. Before they started proofreading, I introduced them to the paragraph structure we would adopt with a model on the screen. This practice is in complete agreement with Fisher et al. (2011), that with models, “students see clear demonstrations and examples of the process or skill they will learn and the product they will create” (p. 135). Also, they started to become familiar with the terms we would use by finding each term in the paragraph model we had. After this introduction, students had enough background to analyze their classmates’ drafts and their own as well. As I was presenting the model and terms, students themselves volunteered their writing issues because they started noticing that their draft was not matching with the model. At the end, the majority of the drafts had no topic sentence, and students understood that without a clear and well-developed topic sentence their paragraph would be a group of words without connection. Therefore, we developed a topic sentence for the class as a model (students were free to change words but not the controlling idea), and each student chose three points (major supports) to write about their classmate. Finally, students had the opportunity to go to their interviewees again and ask for an example of each point they had chosen to talk about, and then they created the minor supports for their paragraphs. To complete the process of giving them the real experience of how to write a paragraph, we worked with the concluding sentence to make sure they would not merely repeat the topic sentence.

Except for Student H, who shows an attempt to introduce his/her paragraph, without working with the paragraph model students started their paragraph without a topic sentence and presented their findings about the classmate as a sequence of sentences without connections.

When we edited the first draft as a class and worked on our topic sentence, we then grouped information that had connection to create major supports: classmates’ favorites and classmates’ goals. Then minor supports were added to each major. Afterward, we worked on the concluding sentence while emphasizing that restating the topic sentence is not literally repeating it, and being careful not to add information not discussed in the majors. It was a great experience because even though we had several issues to handle, within the following weeks of class, every single draft presented the basic structure discussed and experienced in the first class.

To conclude this part of the intervention, as a teacher I had to respect the opinions my students already had about “good” academic writing because according to Freire (2003), we cannot expect positive outcomes if we fail to respect students’ particular view of the world. After all, we had to re-invent reality together (Freire, 2003). For these reasons, during the Spring 2012 semester, the Intermediate Writing class started from the students’ view and understanding of a paragraph that stimulated their “‘perception of the previous perception’ and ‘knowledge of previous knowledge,’ decoding stimulates the appearance of a new perception and the development of a new knowledge” (Freire, 2003, p. 115). In other words, students could compare by themselves the points in their writing that were not fitting in the new model of writing I was proposing, but at the same time they felt they were completely able to adjust to the “new reality” they were being presented. In the following drafts, the topic sentences and the major supports were frequently shown in students’ writings, and they had to handle less and less with structure and more with ideas during the semester.

Intervention B

The second part of this case study embodied Huot’s (2002) suggestion of clarity and precision on our comments on our students’ drafts, Fisher et al. (2011) practices in which instructions that focus on language have to be explicit, and Freire’s (2003) *praxis* in which students had the opportunity to reflect on what they were learning and how that would affect their life in society. First, it is important to explain the writing process adopted in our class. It contains nine steps, and in the first week of class students are introduced to it. The process is as follows:

1. Give the general topic
2. Brainstorm the topic
3. Outline basic structure of the paragraph (e.g., a topic sentence, three majors with two minors or so supporting the majors, and a concluding sentence)
4. Write first draft
5. Review with peer
6. Write second draft
7. Review from teacher
8. Write third draft
9. Grade

In the intermediate level, our students start working with paragraphs. For this particular class, students have six paragraph assignments that will follow every step proposed in our writing process. At the end of the semester students start working with essays.

Simultaneously to developing paragraphs, students review some important grammar points in order to improve their sentence skills. Normally, all steps of the writing process follow nicely and with good results. While brainstorming the topic, most students volunteer to share their ideas; during outline, students loudly share their major and minor supports. However, in previous semesters, when we had the peer review step—the time in which students were paired to share their first drafts and get and give some feedback to their classmate—students became not so willing and not encouraged anymore. For that particular semester, Spring 2012, after the first experience of peer reviewing as a class, we tried to apply the same technique as much as possible. Students were paired, but they could share their judgment of proper topic sentence, effective major and minor supports, and an adequate concluding sentence. This change in approaching peer review alleviated the tension and stress on students because they were not responsible for commenting on their classmates’ writing alone anymore. They could share questions and suggestions. The peer editing as a class showed students the real concept of collaboration: each one of them knew little pieces of the puzzle that they could share toward completing the big picture.

After the peer review step, students have to turn in the second draft including the comments and suggestions in the next class as a homework assignment. I take the drafts home and review them one by one. I created different tables for each type of

paragraph students would be working on during the semesters. A sample of one of these tables is presented in Table 2.

The left column contains the points students should have in their draft paragraph; in the right column, I would write my comments and suggestions, so students could be able to fix the issues. Then, I returned the second draft along with these comments. Using these tables when reviewing my students’ second draft, I implemented Huot’s (2002) suggestion of clarity and precision, emphasizing not only language explicit instructions (Fisher et al., 2011) but also structure, applying Freire’s (2003) statement of combining previous and current knowledge in order to create a new reality. For instance, if a student’s writing had a major without a minor support, I suggested that the student write about an example in his/her family. If the topic sentence was not developed in one sentence, I suggested that the student combine majors and present them in the topic sentence, and so on, as our form contains around eight items to be discussed. In the next class, the draft and the form are returned, and students have time in class to read and ask questions about the comments. Therefore, the teacher editing on the second draft goes beyond the editing aspect; in other words, grammatical errors are pointed out, but rhetorical issues are approached with clear and specific directions on how to have them fixed.

For this case study, only students who followed all of the steps of the writing process proposed and

Table 2
Sample Form for Persuasive Paragraph Second Draft Teacher Review Comments

English standard	Objectives	Comments
Topic Sentence	“Should” included? Opinion about the topic is clear?	
First Major support—clear	a. Minor support b. Minor support Minor supports are developing first major support?	
Second Major support—clear	a. Minor support b. Minor support Minor supports are developing first major support?	
Third Major support—clear	a. Minor support b. Minor support Minor supports are developing first major support?	
Concluding sentence	Does the concluding sentence restate the topic sentence? Is the author’s opinion about the topic emphasized one more time?	
Grammar points		
Works cited		

returned all the drafts were considered. If for any reason the student skipped the drafts, his/her work was discarded. As a result, ten students out of fourteen had their paragraphs included in the research. Each student received a letter to code their work, so Students A through J are the subjects of this case study.

Tables 3 through 5 contain samples of students' writing. There are more from first assignments because after some weeks, students presented the expected structures in their paragraphs, and we started handling different styles of paragraphs such as persuasive, cause and effect, or comparison and contrast.

In the samples presented in Table 3, mainly in students A, B, and F, the theory of digression because

in many cultures writers should not present their points/thesis before some discussion about the topic. However, student I did not have a topic sentence; the student started by the first major support. After receiving the teacher review form, students figured out that a clear and well-developed topic sentence could not only provide their reader clarity towards comprehension, but it would also help them develop a coherent sequence of ideas.

Major-minor supports are presented in Table 4. Most students presented major supports; however, some did not develop them properly by using minor supports. With clear and precise comments, as we can see on Student E's assignment, however, after being given

Table 3
Samples of Topic Sentences

Student and assignment	Second draft	Comments	Third draft
Student A Fourth paragraph assignment	Divorce is the legal dissolution of marriage by agreement between both sides.	It's possible to start with a definition, but the topic sentence should have the three majors included.	Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage (Brodereck 253), and in my opinion, there are three main reasons that cause divorce: infidelity, financial problems, and immaturity.
Student B Fourth paragraph assignment	I want to introduce the reasons people travels around the world every day. I have ideas for Economic reasons, political reasons, and Educational reasons.	Your topic sentence should be one sentence containing the major supports of your point.	According to Culver, immigration happens when people leave their country and move to another in order to continue their life; however, there are three main seasons [sic] [reasons] that people move to another countries permanently: economic, politic [sic], and educational causes.
Student F Third paragraph assignment	The world of careers have [sic] many option; what are you interesting in and what will you be good at? What make your become a good chef? A chef is a person who creates food, make food look interesting, and presents the foods to the customers.	The topic sentence is not clear neither the major supports of your point. Also, a topic sentence should be one complete sentence.	The world of careers has many options, and to you [sic] choose one profession to follow, we need to figure out if we have characteristics of a good professional has; therefore, to be a good chef, a person need [sic] to have passion, be creative, and [be] intelligent.
Student I Second paragraph assignment	My son is a helpful boy because he helps me on my homework; he wash [sic] the dishes when I tell him to do it, and he did sometime his self, and he helps me cook dinner or breakfast.	The topic sentence is not clear and there are no majors supporting your point.	My son ___ is the most important person of my life, after my God; he is a wonderful blessing for me, [sic] because he is helpful, smart, and respectful for [sic] everybody.

Table 4
Samples of Major-Minor

Student and assignment	Second draft	Comments	Third draft
Student E Third paragraph assignment	She is confident to cry with me when I am sad or in troubles [<i>sic</i>]; she hides [<i>sic</i>] my secrets if I have something important to tell, and when she is with me, I feel safety.	Add a specific example of a situation in which your sister showed all or some these qualities.	Finally, she is empathetic. She cries with me when I am sad or in troubles [<i>sic</i>]; she hides my secrets if I have something important to tell, and when she is with me, I feel safety, such as when I was beginning driving, if she was with me I could drive more confident.
Student D Third paragraph assignment	He uses computer a lot; he says that it helps him keeping connected with clients. Also he says with computer, he can quickly diagnose facts and find solution he wants.	Add specific example(s) to develop this major support. Be clear how your friend applies computer to his job and how it helps his clients.	Also, he uses computer a lot because it helps him to keep connected with clients, to research for the best parts and the cheaper [<i>sic</i>], so he can also help client [<i>sic</i>] spending less money to fix their car, and computer helps him to diagnose fault quickly that helps him to save time.
Student G Second paragraph assignment	Third, he is honest man on his word. people loved him because his honesty, so he became olderman.	Explain what is to become olderman (?). Is this the word? Give examples that develop this major.	Third, he is very honest person, [<i>sic</i>] he is always men on his word [a man of one word?]; he does the right things to convince people; he inspired the young age people, so he became olderman, [alderman?] people said to him one day about being olderman of the city, [<i>sic</i>] after while he competed himself of the olderman election, and must [most] of the people voted for him, and he won the election.

direction on where to find minors that would support their majors and keep ideas developing, students could develop a better third draft. Another example is Student D, who introduced his major support in a very generic way, and even though the student offers two minor supports, he did not develop the major properly because he is not clarifying how a computer was a useful tool. After comments on the second draft, Student D was able to present minor supports that explained how a computer was a great tool for his friend's work as a mechanic. Also, Student G presented a very wordy third major support with no minor base at all. With a few clear and specific directions, Student G was able to develop his major support by including explanations

and examples of how his relative became an important person in his village for being honest. Even though these examples are still with sentence skill issues, small steps removed the rhetorical obstacles.

Students' concluding sentences are presented in Table 5. Students clearly understood that the concluding sentence should reaffirm their point presented in the topic sentence. The adjustments needed at this part of the paragraph were basically to remind them not to just repeat the words and not to add information not presented in the topic sentence. Therefore, the comments on the second draft always hit the necessity of reaffirming the point and reminding the reader of the three major supports.

Table 5
Samples of Concluding Sentences

Student and assignment	Second draft	Comments	Third draft
Student J Third paragraph assignment	In fact it is easy to be Accounting Manager, but it is hard to be a successful.	The topic sentence should be restated in your concluding sentence; include the majors and the proper concluding connector.	In conclusions, [<i>sic</i>] it is easy to be an Accounting Manager, but it is had [<i>sic</i>] [hard] to be a successful one because
Student C Fifth paragraph assignment	In conclusion, capital punishment does not bring any benefit for the society, so I believe this should be extinct.	The topic sentence and the majors discussed through the paragraph are not restated in the concluding sentence.	In conclusion, capital punishment does not bring any benefit for the society because it does not decrease crime, families are affected by the death of a member, and people should have the chance to change; therefore, I believe that death penalty should be extinct.
Student H Third paragraph assignment	In conclusion, being a teacher would helps me develop my knowledge and my communication, would makes me useful to the world, and would keeps me fresh intellectually.	The three majors expressed in the topic sentence and developed in the paragraph should be restated in the concluding sentence.	In conclusion, a good teacher needs to share his knowledge to influence his students; he needs to develop his communication skills to reach his goals and his students, and he needs to love his job to overcome the chalenges [<i>sic</i>] to come.

Analysis of the Interventions

In general, after a certain number of assignments, most students gradually became more and more familiar with the paragraph structure, and consequently, through the semester, the focus on second draft comments gradually changed more to sentence skill issues. At the beginning of the semester, unanimously language trouble was noted as the main reason students had taken that class; however, at the end of the semester, most students understood that academic writing is a process that involves many other aspects besides language skills; it involves cultural aspects that are not adjusted overnight. Therefore, as suggested by Huot (2002) and Fisher et al. (2011), receiving second draft reviews with suggestions that are as clear as possible enabled students to find ways to develop their ideas with examples or explanations in order to produce a coherent paragraph following the English rhetorical model. Also, these interventions turned effective the proposal of Fisher et al. (2011) of “creating a meaningful and challenging task in which students are engaged in work that has personal relevance or real world application” (p. 135). Most of the students aimed to attend college and pursue a

degree; they realized they needed to accommodate their knowledge to succeed.

Finally, some of these students did not enjoy writing at all, but Freire (2003) noted, “Liberation is a *praxis*: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). In other words, Freire (2003) meant that practicing brings liberation because it makes people reflect first on what and where the obstacle is and then on how to act to overcome it. These students had a very particular way to see academic English, and it was based on their previous concept from years of study in their own languages. After being introduced to a new reality, the writing process adopted in this class collaborated with their own transformation. Obviously, this particular Intermediate Writing class did not intend to solve all students’ writing problems, and not all students were able to adjust successfully; however, this class started these students’ journey towards improvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, simply changing the order in which the paragraph structure and terminology were presented to our ESL students was very beneficial to this class

since students had the visual aspect of that by comparing their own paragraph to the model proposed. They built a new knowledge on top of the one they already had. I prefer to say they adjusted their concepts of properly written material and applied the new concepts to the entire class.

Also, besides being strict about the grammar aspects, the second draft response also provided students clear orientation towards the writing quality they were expected to develop during the semester. Obviously, taking a student's second draft and reviewing it beyond the editing level demands more time and effort from teachers, but the results are worthy not only because of the effects on students' grades, but also because "empowering education is oriented to self-transformation" (Shor, 1992, p. 188), so it increased students' confidence; the majority of the students apply their learning not only to other classes they are taking, but also to their daily life activities, such as their jobs. During the semester, comments from students demonstrate that they had become critical not only about their own writing but also about native speakers'. Students came to class and talked freely about their confidence in writing e-mails and taking more challenging writing activities at work because they felt able to manage them. Several students talked about the compliments they got from co-workers or even bosses about their writing improvement. This, I truly believe, is to empower our students by making a very simple change because

we make ourselves in the world according to the way we have learned to think about society and our place in it. On the other hand, human thought, language, and action are never fully under singular control, never monolithically determined by a status quo. (Shor, 1999, "Working Through the Writing Class," para. 1)

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