

Paragraph Writing in English for First Year University Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline one of my topics in my paragraph writing classes. This paper will go through each step of the class. A single topic takes two ninety-minute classes to teach. The seven steps are as follows. 1. Check the previous topic's homework. 2. Introduce the new topic. 3. Dictate the new topic with notes, grammar and cultural explanations. 4. Translation. 5. "Scrambled" sentences. 6. Comprehension questions. 7. Practice paragraph writing and English puzzles (Homework).

Each topic is broken down to two classes. Steps one through four are taught on the first class (Example Topic 4A) and Steps five through seven are taught on the second day (Example 4B). Following is an example of each step.

Before starting a new topic I collect all of the students' homework from the previous topic. The homework is checked outside of class and returned with notes and one-on-one consultation three times a semester. This occurs on what I call "notebook check day". As there are fifteen classes per semester, the schedule works out to be two topics (or four classes) and then notebook check day, which is every fifth class or in other

words the fifth, tenth and fifteenth class of each semester.

Step Two:

This step is the introduction of the new topics, for the purpose of this paper I will use a topic titled "Sister's Graduation in the US". During the introduction I discuss the culture of the topic and introduce new words, expressions and key grammar points. Over the past twenty years of using this method, I have found the students are far more interested and ready for the lesson when the topics have been properly introduced. This school of thought holds especially true for students who are in an English department or doing some sort of international studies courses. To some degree, the paragraph writing teaching points become almost incidental in that the students are as interested in the cultural aspect as they are the writing and grammar points.

Step Three:

This step is pure dictation. Each topic is comprised of fifteen sentences in the form of a conversation between two speakers (Speakers "A" and "B"). Following is the dictation for "Sister Graduation in the US".

1: A1: Guess what.

2: B1: I don't know. Tell me.

3: A2: My sister's graduation is coming up?

4: B2: She's graduating in May? In Japan? I don't get it.

5: A3: No, not in Japan. She's graduating in the States.

6: B3: Huh. America has a different school year than we do?

7: A4: American schools start in the fall and finish in May.

8: B4: So, what about June, July and August?

9: A5: That's when they have summer vacation.

10: B5: Three months off!! Talk about being lucky.

11: A6: No doubt. Anyway, my mom and I are going to her graduation.

12: B6: That's really cool. But I heard the tickets are really expensive.

13: A7: Tell me about it; especially for short-notice reservations.

14: B7: Well, make sure you bring back a nice souvenir.

15: A8: Don't worry. I got something in mind for you.

When dictating the students write down each line as I read them, which is usually repeated two or three times depending on the sentence. After each line, when I am satisfied that most of the students have made an effort to write as much as they can catch, I write the sentence on the board. As it can be seen in the topic above certain words are underlined. These words are then explained and students make notations in the blank column on the right side of the page. During this time I walk around the classroom glancing at the students' notebooks to see if they are absorbing the dictation and explanations.

Step Four:

After the dictation and explanations are finished, in groups, the students translate the topic to Japanese (or whatever the students' native language might be). Then, depending on time, the students practice the conversation in pairs. As a reward,

any student who can recite the whole passage from memory, will receive extra credit and is allowed to leave class five minutes early. However, this rarely happens because steps one through four usually take up the entire class.

Day Two—Step Five:

At the beginning of the second class (Day two, class B), I go over the topic once again by having the students stand and repeat after me using gestures and emphasis when needed both for motivation and as a tool for memorization. After that they have five to ten minutes to review the topic and memorize as much as possible, which is then followed by "scrambled" sentences. During this point in the lesson, the students "unscramble" each sentence based on a hand-out as seen below for this paper's example topic.

1: what Guess

2: know Tell don't I me

3: graduating is coming sister's My up?

4: in Japan? get She's don't graduating May? It I In

5: the She's not No, in States graduating Japan

6: than we do? school Huh different America a year has

7: the in start schools American fall finish May and in

8: and June, August? about So, July what

9: have when they summer vacation
That's

10: Talk lucky months about being Three
off!

11: my are No I her mom to Anyway, and
doubt graduation going

12: the heard really expensive cool I
tickets But That's are really

13: Tell about notice especially it; short
for me reservations

14: souvenir sure nice back bring make
you a Well,

15: you in worry for got I mind Don't
something

After about ten minutes, I stop the students and have them check their answer in groups without looking at their notebooks. Finally, using a red pen, I instruct the students to open their notebooks and check their answers one more time.

Step Six:

For this step, I want to evaluate how well the students understand the topic. This is done by using comprehension questions. The students are asked to answer ten questions using one or two complete sentences as well as underlining where they found the answers in the topic. Here are the comprehension questions for this topic.

What is "A's" news?
When is the special event?

Where is she going to graduate?
When does the school year start and end in Japan?

When does the school year start and end in the US?

How long is summer vacation in America?

Who is "A" going to the graduation with?
What do "A" and "B" say about short notice airline tickets?

What is "B's" request?
What is the most interesting thing about this lesson?

This step serves three purposes. First is to practice writing. The second purpose is for me to gauge the depth of their understanding and comprehension. Finally, question number ten helps me to proactively reshape the lesson for the following school year. A lot has changed since 1999 when I first started teaching paragraph writing therefore question ten has proven to be especially valuable.

Step Seven and English Puzzles/Games Homework:

Finally, the last step is the most important of all the steps. As homework, the students are assigned to write three to five paragraphs explaining the topic. This step includes both expressing their opinions on the grammar, new expressions and cultural aspects as well as paraphrasing the conversation using a different tense assigned for each topic. Along with the final homework I hand-out puzzles based on the topic, new expressions and the cultural components. An example of this can be seen below.

GRES TAHW
I DNO'IT ETG TI
KEAM SERU
NO DUTOB
HOOSCL REAY
VUNROESI
TLLE AE
MURMES
CINVATAO
GATBAINURO
SI GINOCM PU

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Conclusion

In conclusion, this method of teaching paragraph writing has shown to be very effective for me over the past twenty years. Although I mainly use it in my university classes, I found that to a lesser degree, it can be used for high level high schools classes as well. Each topic does take a great deal of time to prepare. However, once the material has been written it can be used again year after year with only minor tweaks. Furthermore, it should be noted that when composing material for the type of class, it is both beneficial for the students and the teacher to write topics that coincide with current holidays/events as well existing trends for young adults. In following this simple template, teacher will find that the normally mundane class of paragraph writing can be exciting and fruitful.