

How to improve students' paragraph writing skills at the upper-intermediate level

ABSTRACT

Writing is a skill that displays a high degree of complexity as it includes critical thinking, logical development and coherence of ideas. Apart from following a number of conventions such as choosing the appropriate vocabulary and grammar structures and an adequate language register, good writing requires logically consistent ideas that are readable and understandable whatever the writer's purpose and whoever the intended audience may be. It is common observation that students focus more on the lexical and sentence levels rather than on the discourse levels. They often complain about the difficulty of the writing task and submit plain pieces of writing without making much sense to the reader about the topic discussed. Most students whose language level is intermediate and upper-intermediate, exhibit difficulties at the paragraph level and the most common errors include lack of unity and coherence, the key elements that make a paragraph read well. As a result, their ideas are ineffectively and illogically organized and this negatively affects the quality of their entire written texts. Although most of them demonstrate a good range of vocabulary when speaking, while writing they encounter difficulties in organizing their ideas and often write grammatically correct sentences but off the topic.

The paragraph is the key piece of a written text. Knowledge of paragraph construction is a prerequisite of well-developed essays, the central academic expectation. Learning how to write a paragraph can be even more challenging since it requires knowing how to write a topic sentence, using supporting details and transitional words to make sentences flow together as well as finding a strong concluding sentence. Helping students to write a successful paragraph is part of the teacher's role. Apart from employing various writing strategies and choosing a particular approach to teaching writing or a mixture of them, the quality of the teaching materials play an important role in developing writing abilities, ensuring students' active involvement in the writing instruction and promoting language learning. In addition, using stimulating teaching materials can strengthen students' motivation to write, encouraging them to take an active role

during the class. Mass-media aids in the form of print media can be successfully used during the writing classes. Mass-media aids, particularly visual ones, can be a useful tool for improving students' ability to write in English for a number of reasons. First of all, visual mass-media aids (i.e. newspapers, magazines, books) present learners a variety of written texts in authentic language. Different kinds of text such as narratives, descriptions, letters, reports and advertisements can serve as examples of writing in both form and content. Newspaper and magazine articles provide models of good writing form as far as paragraphing is concerned: topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. Secondly, by providing up-to-date language, media help students enrich their vocabulary which will be used in their writing and influence their choice of words. In addition, by exposing students to different language registers and styles their writing skills could be improved. Last but not least, the variety of subjects and topics makes these aids interesting to work with, thus increasing their motivation to write and breaking the monotony of textbook-based lessons.

The activity suggested below follows an integrated-skills approach. By integrating reading and writing, students' language learning can be improved as they construct new texts based on prior reading. The language input they gain from reading is later used in spoken and written production. The lesson is mainly focussed on the unity and coherence of a paragraph. In order to activate previous knowledge about the parts of the paragraph, a scrambled paragraph activity is designed. Students are provided several magazine and newspaper articles as material for the activity and asked to rearrange the sentences to form a meaningful paragraph. A newspaper article on the role of highschool in preparing young people for adult life provides the context for the writing activities. After answering a few comprehension questions, students are asked to give their opinion on the topic. They are presented several opinions of native speakers on the topic. As a writing activity, they are asked to join the opinions to make a coherent paragraph using appropriate linking devices. Students use a coherence checklist to self-edit and review their peers' writing.

LESSON PLAN

Teacher: Dumitrescu Roxana

Date: _____

Level: upper-intermediate

Textbook:-----

Lesson: Coherence of a paragraph

Time of the lesson: 50 minutes

Aims: - to revise the parts of the paragraph

- to focus on the cohesion of a paragraph
- to stimulate students' creativity

Learning objectives: By the end of the lesson, the students will be able to:

- form paragraphs from jumbled sentences
- skim a newspaper article for the main idea
- answer comprehension questions about a newspaper article
- express their opinion on the issues raised in a newspaper article
- use cohesive devices to write a well-developed paragraph

Skills: reading, writing

Materials: handouts, blackboard

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON

Activity 1

Aim: to activate previous knowledge

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
<p>Divide the class into small groups. Hand out an envelope to each group containing jumbled sentences (handout 1).</p> <p>Ask students to reassemble the sentences to form a meaningful paragraph.</p> <p>Discuss the answers with the class. Hand out the paragraph solution to each group.</p>	<p>Teacher-st</p> <p>Group work</p>	<p>10 min</p>

Activity 2

Aim: to read a newspaper article for the main idea-skimming

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
<p>Hand out a newspaper article about the role of high school in preparing students for real life (handout 2).</p> <p>Pre-teach difficult vocabulary from the article.</p> <p>Ask students to infer the meaning of the new words from the text.</p> <p>Ask students to skim the text for the main idea.</p> <p>Discuss the features of the style.</p>	<p>Teacher-st</p> <p>Individual work</p>	<p>5 min</p>

Activity 3

Aim: to read for detailed information-answer comprehension questions

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
Ask students to read the text again and find answers to the comprehension questions. Discuss the answers with the class.	Teacher-st Individual work	10 min

Activity 4

Aim: to express opinions about the issues raised in the newspaper article

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
Ask students to express their personal views on the role of high school in preparing students for adult life. Discuss their answers with the class.	T-st	5 min

Activity 5

Aim: to join sentences using cohesive devices to form well-developed paragraphs

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
Hand out a magazine article containing several students' opinions about the role of high school in preparing students for the future. <i>Is high school preparing you for success?</i> (handout 3) Divide the class into small groups (3 or 4 students). Ask students to join the topics using the cohesive devices they have studied to form a paragraph. Students start by deciding which topics go together to make a coherent paragraph. Each student in the group chooses one of the paragraphs they have planned and writes it up. In their groups, students study their 3 or 4	Teacher-st Individual work Group work	15 min

<p>paragraphs and work out which one is the most appropriate using coherence checklist. When the complete paragraphs have been finished, they can be put up on the board so they can be compared with other groups' versions.</p>		
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Activity 6 Evaluation

Procedure	Interaction	Timing
<p>Develop a class discussion about which versions are more coherent and easy to read. Students' receive feedback from their peers and from the teacher.</p>	T-st	5 min

HANDOUT 1

Rearrange the following sentences so as to form a meaningful paragraph:

- a. Culture shock has three to five phases, depending on which source you read.
- b. Many people associate culture shock only with extreme changes of going from one country to another, but it can also be experienced closer to home, such as when traveling from one city to another within your own country.
- c. Culture shock can be described as the feelings one experiences after leaving their familiar, home culture to live in another cultural or social environment.
- d. Even the most open-minded and culturally sensitive among us are not immune to culture shock.
- e. Also, depending on factors such as how big the cultural difference is between your home and your new location, and how long one is away from home, a person may or may not experience all the phases.

HANDOUT 2

Read the following newspaper article and complete the tasks:

The Benefits of a High School Education Now

High school is all about preparing you for the "real world". When you wonder if you will ever use the material you learn in your classes, think about the skills that you are learning not just the subject matter. Your listening, note-taking, and information processing skills will help you in so many ways when you go to college or start working on your career. Not only that, high school gives you a chance to grow up mentally, emotionally and physically. By not staying in school, you are skipping some of the most important stages in adolescence and they are the most important ones. Growing up too quickly by propelling yourself into an adult life, will set you up for a lot of disappointment and regret if you are not lucky. Taking the time to learn about the different things the world has to offer will help you decide what are the right choices for you after graduation. Without this information and time to grow up, you may start the next stage of your life lost in the shuffle.

Future Benefits of a High School Education

While it may be difficult to consider future benefits when you are going through a hard time now, it's the future that is most affected if you decide not to follow through with your education. Did you know that 60 percent of jobs in the United States require employees to have training or education beyond high school? That means if you don't finish, you will have a much harder time finding a job. If you do find a job, you can expect your salary to be lower than if you did receive a high school education. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, people who received their high school diploma or GED were 37.5 percent less likely to be unemployed than others. In addition, individuals who do not receive a diploma are more likely to require public assistance, have health problems and engage in criminal activity

(The Telegraph)

1. What is the article about?
2. How is high school preparing students for real life?
3. What are the consequences of dropping out from high school?

HANDOUT 3

Whaddya Think?

Is high school preparing you for success in the real world?

Read the following opinions about the role of high school in preparing young people for success in real world.

Decide which speakers think high school has a positive role in preparing students for the real world and which speakers do not believe in the positive influence of high school. Then join the speakers' opinions and re-write them using appropriate linking devices to form a meaningful paragraph.



Bobby, 17: No. Being in high school is not realistic enough. There should be guest speakers who have real-life experience to tell us what to expect when we graduate. Courses like drama and phys ed are a waste of taxpayers' money.



Colleen, 17: No. I haven't been taught things like economics, managing my money, etc. I think there should classes or seminars to help us out if we have questions about what's really going on in the real world.



Ali, 16: Yes. Each course in school teaches you different things depending on what you would like to do as a career. I think that these courses are a stepping-stone to a higher education.



Frances, 18: No. I think there should be more teachers who have worked in the real world instead of coming straight from university because they haven't experienced life. I think that cutting the curriculum back by a year was a bad idea because I don't feel that I will be fully prepared when I leave school.



Ruby, 15: Yes. But, if I were to make any changes to the way things are done I would make the classes a lot smaller so that the students could get the attention that they require in order to work to their full potential.



Rose-Mary, 17: Not really, because they teach you some things that you won't need to use in the real world, which to me is a waste of time. If I were to make any changes I would take out the courses that won't benefit us towards our future career goals.



Steve, 18: The one thing that I have been taught in high school is that it prepares you for the politics of business and life in general. The OACs got treated a lot better than the grade 9s by the teachers because the more time you spend in a workplace, the more respect you will gain from people.



Charlotte, 16: Yes. Careers class helped me a lot. Some people may disagree but as long as you keep up with your work it will benefit you in the end. I think more of the courses should be taught with a “hands on” approach as opposed to being taught by the textbook so much. Courses such as co-op will definitely help me to get the experience I need for later on.



Josh, 14: Yes. The classes in high school offer a variety of choices. I think that they’re doing a good job.

(Faze Magazine)

PEERS' COHERENCE CHECKLIST

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|---|-----|----|
| 1. Is there a clear topic sentence? | Yes | No |
| 2. Is the topic sentence supported with examples and details? | Yes | No |
| 3. Do all the sentences support the topic sentence? | Yes | No |
| 4. Do all the sentences flow smoothly? | Yes | No |
| 5. Are linking words and phrases used? | Yes | No |
| 6. Is there a concluding sentence? Does it begin with an appropriate end-of paragraph signal? | Yes | No |