

Unique Perspectives on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Writing in Japan

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Introduction

Writing is oft considered a tool of communication. The written form can be read by others, analyzed, commented, revised and edited. It is the personal voice of the writer and has the power to convey accurate ideas, thoughts or opinions.

When teaching writing, educators must be cautious in allowing students to complete freedom of expression. When the expectation is writing in a foreign language (English), why not offer students perspectives from Japan, rather than Inner Circle or predominately English-speaking countries? As authors Tomaš, Kostka, & Mott-Smith (2013) state “for some students, learning to write in English involves a process of cultural and identity change” (p.3), teachers may see increased interest in language learning if students are actively focused on writing, rather than forcing a change of identity. This essay seeks to suggest several unique perspectives in writing paragraphs for EFL learners in Japan.

Hamburgers are American; sushi is Japanese

Beyond the sentence, the basic format for most writing is the paragraph. English paragraphs follow a standard style: topic sentence, details and examples, and a concluding statement or transition, which may lead to further paragraphs. Such a lengthy list seems daunting for most EFL learners in Japan; the task is further complicated by the knowledge that for most Japanese children, formal essay writing *in one's native tongue* is not taught!

How can EFL educators encourage students to write and share their voice? A view from experts is helpful: “Students are empowered to find their own voices...when the material they are studying is relevant and connected to their lives” (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Epstein, 1995; Ropers-Huilman, 2003; in Wang, et al., 2011, p.134).

In most Western classrooms, the paragraph is introduced as a hamburger. The top bun is a representation of the topic sentence; the lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and hamburger are the writer’s ideas, details and examples; the bottom bun is the conclusion or transition. The image is quite strong and may make students’ mouths water in anticipation of putting pens to paper. However, from the Japanese eye, the hamburger is an American food – greasy, fattening, and unhealthy. Such an image is likely to be unappealing to EFL students in Japan. A fresh perspective is needed.

Figure 1: The hamburger model for paragraph writing

Name _____ Date _____ Class Period _____

BLT Paragraph Sandwich

Directions: Use this bacon, lettuce, and tomato graphic to write a paragraph containing 5-8 sentences

Topic Sentence

Supporting Detail #1

Supporting Detail #2

Supporting Detail #3

Concluding Sentence

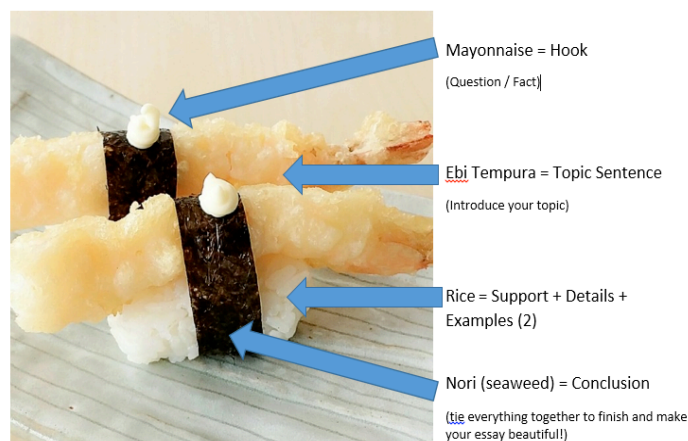
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In Japan, numerous tasty dishes exist: *udon* (thick, white noodles), *soba* (buckwheat noodles), *nikku jyaga* (meat stewed in a broth with vegetables). Students may be more motivated to write when the image presented is a Japanese one. To introduce the English paragraph to Japanese university students, the author selected *ebi-ten sushi* (tempura fried shrimp on vinegared rice) as a model.

Mayonnaise was chosen as the first element (creating a ‘hook’ for locking in your reader); the shrimp was assigned the role of topic sentence; the rice represented supporting ideas and examples; the *nori* (seaweed) would tie the paragraph together as the conclusion.

Figure 2: The Japanese model paragraph format – sushi



Students responded well to the idea of sushi as a model. As sushi is a food item unique to Japan, it appealed to most students who had tried it or knew it. A discussion of which sushi is one’s favorite also spurred students into creating a class atmosphere which was jovial. Writing in a foreign language became pleasant, rather than stressful.

For lifelong learners of English in Japan, consider one’s immediate environment. What item in your kitchen is uniquely Japanese? Could that object be a model for your writing? Does the item provoke more discussion and ideas? Now put those thoughts to paper; however, before doing so, readers may wish to consider one further point...

Outlines are American; manga is Japanese

Before writing, teachers often stress the need for preparation. Note-taking and outline creation are taught in hopes that students will formulate ideas in a more structured way. For Western learners, outlines are very simplistic: a series of lines in a column, or a series of connected bubbles. Each line or bubble represents

certain elements: the overall theme or topic of the paragraph, ideas to support the theme, and examples.

Figure 3: A typical mind map for outline writing

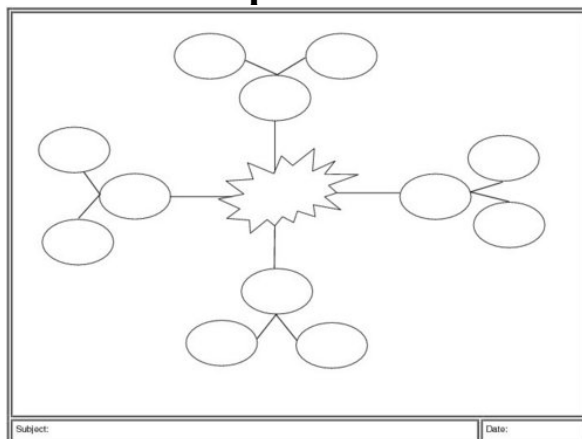






Image courtesy of <http://www.mymindmap.net/>

For Japanese students, the image above is quite complex; it is extremely difficult to understand which elements should be included in each bubble and more importantly, which key words in English to write. Surely a simpler, user-friendly format must be available for Japanese EFL writers.

In Japan, the one printed source from which all have had exposure is *manga*. *Manga* is often laid out in a four-boxed format; each box contains a specific element of the story. The author had an idea: why not utilize the *manga* format as an outline? Each box included a small photo and visual reminders of the content to be written. To assist further, the author included questions to stimulate students' ideas and keep written work on task; examples, which related to the overall theme of a popular item were: "Who made it?" "Your experience (with that popular item)" "Good or bad?" and "When was it popular?"

Figure 4: The *manga* outline

<p>3rd Paragraph: Topic sentence Who made it? When was it made? Where was it made?</p>			<p>Introduction: Hook Topic sentence (your idea)</p>
3		1	
<p>Conclusion: Topic sentence Your experience? Good or bad? OR Popular now? Why?</p>			<p>2nd Paragraph: Topic sentence What is it? When popular? Popular with who? Where? Tell me more.</p>
4		2	

At end, students were allowed to cut out the *manga* boxes and arrange them in numerical order, from one to four, in an ascending – descending pattern, or submit the outline in whole, as seen above.

While lifelong learners of English may be classified as mature students, most Japanese people can recall a *manga* which impact their lives. Even today, there are numerous *manga* which touch on issues in Japanese society; many more have transitioned to television dramas or films. As an EFL learner in Japan, think about *manga* in your life. Was there a certain story which affected your thinking? What elements of the story mattered most? Could those be written in English? If you chose to write a *manga* in English, what main plot elements would you include?

Conclusion

As English continues to become useful in Japanese society - as a means of global communication (Koike, 2006, p.103), or for promoting increased tourism -- lifelong learners of English as a foreign language should explore the idea of writing to convey thoughts, ideas and cultures, unique to Japan. Japanese students

should not be forced to follow the typical writing tools seen in Inner Circle English countries (America, Canada, Australia, the UK); instead, by examining the environment, Japanese learners may feel more comfortable and energized to write when the perspective is reflected through a Japanese lens. Now, taking one's *fude* firmly in hand, let us write and share with other English speakers in the world!

References:

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Bio

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