

One Alternative Way: Teaching text structures to a high school student

by Yuko Horiguchi

I tutor a student who just finished her first year of senior high school. When I asked her how she is taught reading in school, her answer surprised me. She said students read a passage in English and translate every single word into Japanese. More than twenty years ago I myself was taught English that way.

However, when I was an exchange student in the U.S., one of the inspiring ideas that I encountered in a writing class was the existence of text structures: Writers organize their writing in order to guide readers through their texts. According to Coulthard (1994), "Knowledge is not linear, but text is. Thus every writer is faced with the problem of how to organize and present his/her non-linear message in a comprehensible linear form" (p.7). I was delighted to discover "how to" organize writing. In Japan, however, I had never been taught about English text structures. The same holds true for my student's classes even now.

BACKGROUND

Since it was her spring homework to read part of her second year textbook, and to do the comprehension checks at the end of each section, we agreed to work on it together.

Many people criticize textbooks but practically speaking, most teachers are assigned a textbook and expected to use it. Therefore, if we do not like a textbook, we can modify it or find alternative ways to use it. Considering this, I felt it might be a good opportunity for my student and me to take a look at her school textbook (*Milestone*) from an alternative point of view. In other words, to make her aware of the existence and the patterns of text structures and help her to make use of that knowledge in her reading.

LESSONS

In the lessons, I introduced her to three text structure patterns: problem-solution (including question-answer), comparison and contrast, and narrative. I chose these because they appeared in the homework part of her textbook.

Lesson 1

To begin with, working together, we went through a familiar article from her first-year textbook, for an example of a problem-solution text. Since she already knew the content, she didn't need to struggle with the meaning but was able to pay attention to the structural flow of the entire passage. In the same lesson, we looked at some *sequencing vocabulary* such as first, second, next, then, and after and some connecting vocabulary such as and, but, because, in addition, in other words, etc. She already knew most of them so it was not a matter of understanding what each meant but of discovering their roles. Categorizing them as markers was new to her, and it was her first step towards looking at a text's structure as well as its content.

Lesson 2

Next we looked at Chapter 1 in her new textbook. This was another problem-solution text. When she read the first section, she said, "This is posing a problem." I asked how she knew and she said, "It says, 'How does misunderstanding occur?' The writer is posing a problem and is going to solve it in a later section, right?"

We took notes together, and I guided her in extracting the main points (topics and sub-topics.) She commented later that the note taking helped her notice the topics, and that the topics indicated the flow of the story.

Lesson 3

At our third meeting, we took a look at Chapter 2, which was in diary form but written from two different perspectives. As a lead-in activity, I gave her an exercise of contrasting narratives regarding the same event and had her complete a chart identifying and labeling the facts and opinions presented by each person. After my brief introduction of comparison and contrast, my student read the first section of Chapter 2. Since the diaries were written from two perspectives about the same events, I told her to decide which were the facts and which were the ideas/views of two people.

Once she started realizing what was in the text and what was expected for her to pick up, it became easier to read and she started to pay attention to the story line rather than to unfamiliar words. She also mentioned that she felt more relaxed.

Lesson 4

We proceeded to Chapter 3 "Cats vs. Dogs". Using a Venn diagram (Figure 1), I explained that in general, general ideas come at the beginning and more specific ideas come later in a text. After reading the first paragraph, she again noticed the sentence that was posing a problem. She also guessed that the article was about comparing cats and dogs.

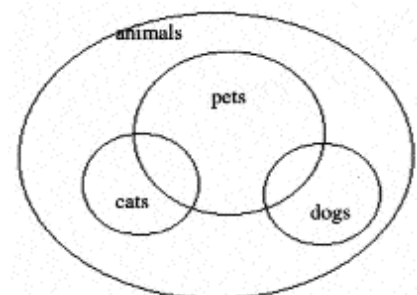


Fig.1: A Venn diagram.

Lesson 5

In the fifth lesson, we worked together on the second part of Chapter 3 taking notes together. It turned out that we discussed the whole story, which had not been my intention. Since the story ends up by saying that there are two types of people, cat-lovers and dog-lovers and that they are like cats and dogs, she commented that the conclusion was so biased and abrupt that she was not convinced by it. I agreed and at the same time was amazed with her clear opinion.

After a break we proceeded to Chapter 4, "Beatrix Potter". Since it was a narrative of Beatrix Potter's life, I asked her to read and list the events in chronological order.

Lesson 6

We reviewed Chapter 4. I asked her to briefly summarize the story. Then, she showed me the comprehension check that was her homework. She said that she just did it by heart and that there was no problem because this new approach had made it much clearer than usual.

Next, we took a look at Chapter 5, a scientific article about monkeys and dolphins. This time, I used a chart with blanks (Figure 2) for her to fill out by herself. I asked her to focus on details as well. The story was suitable for detailed study since it reported some research with numbers, years, places, and results.

Lesson 7

When we finished Chapter 5, she

said that she hadn't really enjoyed it because she is not fond of math or natural sciences. Regardless of her preference, the comprehension check was all well done, and she did it all by heart. In other words, she had remembered the details.

We went on to look at Chapter 6. Upon reading the line "If I had known then why Grandma was coming to live with us, I would have acted very differently" in the first section, she correctly inferred without prompting that Grandma was going to die. She read it through and said it was fun to read. For her, the most interesting thing was the anticipation she had while reading to see whether her first guess was correct or not.

RESULTS

After seven sessions, she had begun to recognize topic sentences, to read between the lines, and to state her opinions on the readings. After session one she told me, "I felt that the meaning of the passage came into my head more smoothly when I read it thinking of the main flow of the story." During session three she said, "Before I tended to get stuck at words I didn't know, but now, I can follow the main flow of the story even when there are words I don't know." At session 5 she commented, "Knowing the global structure, I can guess words I'm not familiar with. It has become clearer what the author wants to say and what topics are." After the last lesson she had this to say, "Reading is fun, particularly when I know what is going on and when I'm trying to pick

up the author's intentions... I feel great when I can catch the hidden/deeper meaning of a writing. I think inside to the author 'I got you.'"

IMPLICATION and CONCLUSION

While I was teaching, I felt it was working well. In other words, she was motivated, comprehending, learning, and reacting. Her words above show that she had started to realize the importance of the structures of the texts.

Here, I would like to suggest three things. One is the need for a balance in teaching. It is said that in reading, linguistic knowledge, content knowledge, and knowledge of text structure are all used. I think we should not only spotlight grammar, but should consider all three areas while we teach.

Secondly, what I have described here is a one-on-one situation, but I think the same approach can be transferred to regular high school classrooms. There may be a large number of students in a classroom, but one can give lectures on general patterns of text structures and have students work on their own, in pairs, or in groups.

Finally, in any case, it is necessary for teachers to step out of grammar-translation mode and to take a look at the materials in the light of other possibilities, here text structures. As John Fanselow says, teachers need to open their eyes more widely and see the real world to fully activate their minds and, thus, the students' minds, even when the teaching is limited to textbooks and classrooms. It is easy to follow the same old way that seems safe. Yet, it is important to be courageous and try alternative ways.

REFERENCES

Coulthard, M. (Ed) 1994. On analyzing and evaluating written text, In M. Coulthard, (Ed) *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. London/New York: Routledge.
 Fanselow, J. 1992. *Try the Opposite*. Tokyo: The Simul Press.
 Shimada, M.(Ed). 1998. *Milestone - English Course II*. Tokyo: Keirinkan

Further readings

Connor, U. 1996. *Contrastive Rhetoric*. CUP
 McCarthy, M. 1991. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. CUP

Introduction:
 People think "human is _____ other animals."
 Some scientists think animals can _____ and _____

Experiment 1: in (place) _____ in (year) _____
 [Monkey]= name _____
 - age _____
 - cannot _____ but _____
 His biggest achievement= _____
 [Girl]=name _____
 - age _____
 Result: _____

Experiment 2: in _____ in _____
 Dolphins= _____ & _____

Fig. 2: Chart with blanks for the student to fill in.