

Alexander Bain and Paragraph-Writing Education in Japanese Universities

Kazuhisa Horiguchi

Summary

The main purpose of this paper is to criticize, for the following three reasons, a recent trend in Japanese universities where the paragraph theory is taught as if it were the sole universal way of writing, whether in English or Japanese. First, the paragraph theory was primarily established by Alexander Bain (1818–1903) and it has survived and dominated American education for only a century and a half. Second, according to some previous studies, eminent writers do not necessarily follow paragraph-writing rules when writing in English. Third, as some surveys on contrastive rhetoric suggest, each culture has its own organizational or structural pattern of writing documents. The paragraph-writing method should not be applied directly to education in writing Japanese or be imposed on Japanese students writing Japanese. When we teach English or Japanese writing in Japanese universities, the teachers should explain these situations. Explaining only prescriptive rules that are mentioned in English composition textbooks is confusing to many Japanese students.

Key Words

paragraph writing, Alexander Bain, composition, rhetoric

1 Introduction

When English writing is taught in Japanese universities, in most

cases, paragraph-writing or essay-writing courses are offered to students who have finished studying sentence-level writing. In these courses, the classroom instruction covers the so-called paragraph theory,¹ and it is normally preached as a kind of indisputable dogma. In general, Japanese university students have difficulty in learning the theory because the typical organizational structure of the paragraph and attitudes toward writing are different in English and Japanese. The theory asserts that the paragraph is one unit of a piece of writing and generally consists of several sentences. In addition, it claims that the paragraph should deal with only one subject or topic and should comprise the topic sentence at the beginning, followed by several supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence at the end. Moreover, according to the theory, the topic sentence should have only one topic and one controlling idea² (or main idea). Furthermore, the paragraph should be indicated by indentation. However, a little investigation would reveal that all forms of writing in English do not always follow these rules rigidly. As the academic abilities of Japanese students have in general been declining, an increasing number of Japanese universities are starting to establish freshman courses on writing Japanese. Several college textbooks of Japanese writing have been published for these courses, which import and recommend the American way of paragraph writing as an ideal method³. This is extremely confusing and problematic to Japanese students, since Japanese university students have acquired the Japanese way of writing in their secondary education, which is considerably different from the paragraph theory. Based on the present situation, this paper will criticize these recent trends in Japanese universities in which the paragraph theory is taught as the only absolute and indubitable method of writing, whether in English or Japanese.

2 Alexander Bain

It is generally believed among historians that Alexander Bain (1818–1903), a Scottish philosopher and professor of logic at the University of Aberdeen, was the principal founder of the paragraph theory⁴. He proposed the theory in his work: *English Composition and Rhetoric, A Manual* (First Edition, 1866). He has had a considerable influence on English language education in the United States⁵, but this fact is hardly known in Japan.⁶ The book was adopted as a textbook in American universities; it sold well and was published throughout⁷ the century and into the next. Subsequently, many followers⁸ of Alexander Bain adopted and refined the theory, with the result that to some extent it has been dogmatized and taught systematically in the United States, from elementary education to university education without interruption.

Etymologically, the term paragraph originated in English as the paragraph mark ¶, technically called a pilcrow. The term paragraph first appeared in a Latin–English dictionary (*Promptorium parvulorum*)⁹ and was then used in relation to typography or printing. The idea of the paragraph was established after the invention of typography, and it cannot date back to Aristotelian rhetoric. According to Ned A. Shearer,¹⁰ we can trace the similar definition or theory of the paragraph to Lindley Murray and Joseph Angus. However, here we will not go further into the historical details. Although Lindley Murray, in his first edition, summarized¹¹ the use of paragraph in about twenty lines, in *English Composition and Rhetoric, A Manual*, Bain devoted more than ten pages to the topic of the paragraph¹². From this historical fact, we can assert that Alexander Bain was the main founder of the paragraph theory.

In the above-mentioned book, Alexander Bain formulated six rules

or principles of the paragraph. The first rule is that “the bearing of each sentence upon what precedes shall be explicit and unmistakable.” This principle prescribes the unity of the paragraph and almost the same precept can be found in modern-day English composition textbooks. He theorized the rule in order to avoid ambiguity of references. In addition, he elucidated the first rule giving examples of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, transitions such as *therefore*, *in short*, and *in conclusion*, and the use of demonstrative pronouns or phrases. Although all these explanations seem to be modern and may be applicable to present-day classroom instruction, we should also keep in mind that he wrote the book mainly as a rhetorical guide to the interpretation of literary works, and not as a textbook of English writing. His book is confusing, because he provided too many examples of transition words or phrases with only a few model sentences, and he made contradictory remarks in some cases. For example, he explained a sequence of sentences with transitions and without transitions at the same time, and did not set up any definite criteria for judging appropriately which we should use in particular contexts. Moreover, most of the model sentences in his book were taken from literary works. Despite these deficiencies, the first rule has been passed down to the present day.

Next, his second rule states that “when several consecutive sentences iterate or illustrate the same idea, they should, as far as possible, be formed alike. This may be called the rule of Parallel Construction.” The meaning of the second rule is that once the topic word or phrase is mentioned and placed in the position of the subject of a principal clause in a sentence, the writer should maintain the position throughout the paragraph. The rule prohibits the topic from being moved to the subordinate clause. This rule

Alexander Bain and Paragraph-Writing Education in Japanese Universities Horiguchi has fallen out of use and cannot be found in modern English composition textbooks at all.

Third, he formulated his famous doctrine, which was later developed into the rhetorical concept of the topic sentence¹³:

The opening sentence, unless so constructed as to be obviously preparatory, is expected to indicate with prominence the subject of the paragraph.

This remark has definitely decided the course of modern composition rhetoric. The rule declares that unless some preparatory introductory sentences are inserted, the opening sentence of a paragraph should include the subject, the topic or the theme of a paragraph. However, it is apparent that the concept of the controlling idea, one of the indispensable elements of the topic sentence, is missing in Bain's formula. It is probable that the later development of composition rhetoric added the notion of the controlling idea, and this has favored the deductive way of writing or reasoning. As a matter of fact, some Japanese students feel reluctant to accept this type of organizational structure of the paragraph, tend to choose the inductive method of writing, and prefer that the controlling idea is placed at the end of the paragraph.

The fourth rule is redundant: "A paragraph should be consecutive, or free from dislocation." In essence, this is the same as the first rule in different words. This rule does not appear in any modern English writing textbooks.

The fifth rule is also repetitive: "The paragraph should possess unity; which implies a definite purpose, and forbids digressions and irrelevant

matter.” This rule may be regarded as quite natural. It has survived up to the present, and university students are often told to delete irrelevant sentences from a paragraph in writing exercises. However, as Alexander Bain admitted, some poets have actually used digression for rhetorical effect. For this reason, it is an exaggeration to say that this rule can be applied to all genres of writing and we should teach the rule with some reservations.

Finally, he explained his sixth rule: “as in the sentence, so in the paragraph, a due proportion should obtain between principal and subordinate statements...everything should have bulk and prominence according to its importance.” Although the rule seems obscure, the rough meaning would be that the main significant statement should be made emphatically in a paragraph, both in quantity and quality. Probably, this rule has been taken as a matter of course and it has become obsolete.

In conclusion, we should acknowledge that Alexander Bain was the originator of the six rules of the paragraph theory and the theory has had a short history of approximately 150 years. With several revisions and reservations, some of the rules, especially the first and the third, still hold today. Many successors of Alexander Bain refined the theory and passed it down to the present time. As a result, the theory has established its authority over American education. When teaching English writing and the paragraph theory in Japan, we should make some reference to these historical antecedents and educational activities in the United States.

3 Criticism of the Paragraph Theory

Although the paragraph theory is taught in a course on English paragraph writing, some Japanese students would soon doubt its

Alexander Bain and Paragraph-Writing Education in Japanese Universities Horiguchi effectiveness. After almost all Japanese university students have studied English at least for six years in secondary education, they can easily recognize many documents that do not always follow the rules of the paragraph theory. Moreover, in the United States, it is no wonder that some academic authors such as Richard Braddock have severely criticized the theory. Others justify the theory on psychological grounds or on the basis of readability studies, which have clearly influenced recently published English writing manuals or textbooks.

To begin with, Richard Braddock made a harsh criticism of the commonly accepted paragraph theory.

Teachers and textbook writers should exercise caution in making statements about the frequency with which contemporary professional writers use simple or even explicit topic sentences in expository paragraphs. It is abundantly clear that students should not be told that professional writers usually begin their paragraphs with topic sentences¹⁴.

In addition, he found that only 13% of the expository paragraphs in his research materials started with a topic sentence. Although his corpus is limited to similar popular magazines and there are some counterarguments¹⁵, we should appreciate and recognize such criticism. We should not follow the rules blindly.

Second, some scholars have given us a justification for the theory mainly on the grounds of cognitive psychology although the reality may prove to be different from the theory. For example, Frank J. D'Angelo maintains :

Readability research, then, shows the value of topic sentences in organizing paragraphs; research in schema theory demonstrates the importance of verbal schemata and macro-propositions in organizing complete texts.... What I am suggesting, however, is that if the occasion, audience, intention, and kind of discourse warrant it, then students might profitably use topic sentences...¹⁶

These academics consider it ideal to place the topic sentence at the beginning although they admit that many paragraphs have no explicit topic sentences.

Finally, these academic papers have clearly affected the recent publication of college teaching materials. For example, in *Writing: A College Handbook* (2001), we can find a model paragraph with no topic sentence. In the paragraph, the sentence at the beginning contains neither the topic nor the controlling idea, but the topic sentence can be easily inferred from the previous paragraph. In *The St Martin's Handbook* (2010), Andrea Lunsford admits the implicit statement of the writer's controlling idea. We should add these recent trends in classroom teaching.

4 Writing Japanese and Contrastive Rhetoric

As the basic scholastic abilities of the average Japanese university student have in general been decreasing, many Japanese universities are starting to establish freshman courses on writing Japanese. Some published college textbooks of Japanese writing recommend the American way of paragraph writing as an ideal unchangeable method. These present circumstances are extremely confusing and problematic, since most Japanese university students have acquired the Japanese way of writing,

Alexander Bain and Paragraph-Writing Education in Japanese Universities Horiguchi
such as the *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* method or the inductive method (the writer's main idea at the end), in high school, and these methods are considerably different from the paragraph theory, which is usually applied to writing English. We should give the students some useful results or suggestions of contrastive rhetoric analyses, such as Kaplan (1966) and Hinds (1983). Kaplan asserted that each culture has its unique rhetorical convention and we should let the students realize their unconscious tendencies in writing. Hinds insisted that the *Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu* method of Japanese writing, which was developed from the organizational pattern of Chinese poetry, contradicts the paragraph theory. Some of the studies are stereotypical or impressionistic, but we should make better use of their fruitful results.

5 Conclusion

This paper has criticized the recent situation in Japanese colleges in which the paragraph theory has often been taught dogmatically, whether in English or Japanese writing. The paragraph-writing theory was formed by Alexander Bain and it has been highly influential in American education. According to previous research, eminent writers do not necessarily follow paragraph-writing rules when writing English. As some surveys on contrastive rhetoric suggest, each culture has its own organizational pattern of writing. The paragraph-writing method should not be applied directly to education in writing Japanese. When we teach English writing or Japanese writing in Japanese universities, the teachers should explain these issues. Explaining only prescriptive rules that are mentioned in English composition textbooks is confusing to many Japanese university students.

Bibliography

- Bain, Alexander. *English Composition and Rhetoric : A Manual* Longmans 1866
- Boardman, Cynthia A. et al. *Writing to Communicate 2: Paragraphs and Essays* (Second Edition) Pearson 2008
- Braddock, Richard. "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 8 Winter 1974 p.287-302
- Connors, Robert J. *Composition-Rhetoric* University of Pittsburgh Press 1997
- D'Angelo, Frank J. "The Topic Sentence Revisited" *College Composition and Communication* Vol.37, No.4 1986 p.431-441
- Carr, Jean F. *Archives of Instruction* Southern Illinois University Press 2005
- Cheryl, Glenn et al. *The Hodges Harbrace Handbook* Wadsworth Publishing 2010
- Gaillet, Lynee ed. *Scottish Rhetoric and Its Influences* Hermagoras Press 1998
- Heffernan, James.A.W. *Writing A College Handbook* Fifth Edition W. W. Norton & Company 2001
- Hinds, John. "Contrastive rhetoric : Japanese and English" *Text - Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse*. Vol 3, Issue 2 P. 183-196
- Kaplan, Robert B. "Cultural Thought-Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" *Language Learning* 16 (1) 1966 p.1-20
- Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin's Handbook* Bedford/St. Martin's 2011
- McElroy, John G. R. *The Structure of English Prose* A.C. Armstrong & Son 1885
- Murray, Lindley. *An English Grammar* 1795 (rpt. Scholar Press 1968)
- Oshima, Yayoi et al. *Writing Japanese Expressions for University Students through Peer Activities* (in Japanese, original title: *Piade-manabu-daigakuseino-nihongo-hyogen*) Hitsuji-shobo 2005

- Alexander Bain and Paragraph-Writing Education in Japanese Universities Horiguchi
 Shearer, Ned A. "Alexander Bain and the Genesis of Paragraph Theory" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 1972
 Smith, Craig G. "Braddock Revisited: The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Academic Writing" *The Reading Matrix* Vol.8, No.1 2008
 Terasawa, Yoshio. ed. *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Etymology* (in Japanese) Kenkyusha 1997
-

(Footnotes)

- ¹ For example, we can find the explanation of the paragraph theory in The Hodges Harbrace Handbook (2010) p.429-439.
- ² Writing to Communicate 2 (2008) p.4
- ³ For example, Writing Japanese Expressions for University Students through Peer Activities (in Japanese) (2005)
- ⁴ Jean Ferguson Carr Archives of Instruction (2005) p.63-64
- ⁵ Scottish Rhetoric and its Influences (1998) p.3. Winifred Bryan Horner writes that "even during the second half of the 19th century, Bain's English Composition and Rhetoric (1886) was the most widely used textbook in American college English"
- ⁶ First, in Japan, Alexander Bain is known as a scholar of association psychology. Next, he is famous as the writer of John Stuart Mill: A Criticism With Personal Recollections (1882).
- ⁷ Robert J. Connors says in his Composition-Rhetoric (1997), "Bain was in print from 1866 through 1910...These books went through printing after printing."
- ⁸ The representative followers are William Minto, Fred Scott, and Joseph Denny.
- ⁹ The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Etymology (1997)
- ¹⁰ Ned A. Shearer "Alexander Bain and the Genesis of Paragraph Theory" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972)
- ¹¹ Lindley Murray, An English Grammar (1795) p.173-174
- ¹² Alexander Bain, English Composition and Rhetoric (1886) p.142-152
- ¹³ According to Frank J. D'Angelo(1986), the first rhetorician to call the opening sentence the topic sentence was John McElroy in his work The Structure of English Prose (1885).
- ¹⁴ Richard Braddock, "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose" Research in the Teaching of English (Winter 1974)

¹⁵ Craig G. Smith, “Braddock Revisited: The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Academic Writing” The Reading Matrix Vol.8, No.1 (2008)

¹⁶ Frank J. D'Angelo, “The Topic Sentence Revisited” College Composition and Communication Vol.37, No.4 (1986)

(ほりぐち かずひさ 本学准教授)