

Article

Pens up: Teaching writing from the top down

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1. Introduction

A small group of lower-intermediate level Japanese high school students that I met with once a week on Saturday nights at a small language school did not seem to have written more than a paragraph or two for any given English language assignment in their six years of studying the subject. Although I saw evidence that they had exposure to a number of 'coordinators' and 'subordinators,' and had some successes in using them, it seems they had never been asked to put together an extended piece of written discourse, nor to consider a second language text from the top down. Rather it is likely that nearly all of their writing efforts have focused on local encoding, i.e., on form over meaning, and on a segmented, bottom-up approach. One reason for this might be for the "widespread assumption that atomistic activities should come first and holistic ones second" (Cook 1989: 83) among teachers in schools my students have attended. Consequently, students might have been guided into 'losing sight of the forest for the trees.'

Here I hope to present findings that add evidence in contradiction to a 'pieces first' assumption: one group of lower intermediate students able to produce a rather lengthy, meaningful, and coherent text, in cooperation with each other, while perhaps viewing their (real world) project from the top-down. (It might also be possible that the authenticity inherent in this writing project, as described below, helped to motivate students to go beyond what they were used to producing, both qualitatively and quantitatively.)

It is hoped that the task my learners worked on in some sense exemplifies what Dyer (1996) recommends as "a process/product task-based approach to writing instruction" (p. 312) featuring "high levels of student interaction concerning specific, structured, problem-solving activities, and tasks with clear objectives; multiple drafts and peer revision are a part of the classroom activity" (p. 314).

To ensure that 'high level of student interaction,' as well as fostering a sense of student ownership in their writing, I mostly limited my 'teacher feedback' to general observations and questions that reflected discourse level concerns. Thus, importantly, the changes that students made from draft to draft were largely the product of their own thinking (see section 3.5 p. 21 for further discussion of feedback given).

This project then, was in essence an attempt to get students away from spending most of their writing and redrafting time focusing on grammatical and lexical level concerns, or what Keh (1990) refers to as the "surface, mechanical errors, usually referred to as 'lower order concerns'" (p. 296), and first and foremost into the "development of ideas, organization, and the overall focus of what they were writing" (ibid. p. 296).

This paper has been divided into two parts. The first describes the writing activity and materials used. The second comments on the activity, and includes examples of drafts students have produced in the course of carrying out the assignment, and also justifies the materials and methodology used.

The commentary might, at first glance, seem to be rather artificially segmented into separate discussions of the various levels of discourse students must attend to all at once. As Cook (1989) reminds us, "a top-down approach to language regards all levels of language as a whole, working together" (p. 82). Yet evidence confirming or disconfirming students' successful attendance to any particular level (e.g., audience) while simultaneously attending to meaning and not getting lost in the proverbial 'forest' of local concerns might be found by looking selectively at the drafts students produce. This is what I have tried to do here. Even so, there is bound to be some overlap of discussion, since "all levels relate to and interact with all others" (Cook 1989: 86). When that overlap occurs in the following discussions, the reader should then be reminded of how complicated the writing process really is, as well as realizing the shortcomings of any model describing it (the discourse model followed here is suggested by Cook's (1989) top-down hierarchy (p. 80)).

2. Materials, Methods, and Learners

Learners: A small group of Japanese high school junior and senior year girls interested in sports in general, and the Sydney Olympiad in particular.

(It should be noted here that after the first two lessons, the number of students decreased from five to three—the seniors, Ai and Fumika, withdrew from the class to give themselves more time to study for university entrance examinations. Consequently, they left first drafts for the juniors in the class to develop further and/or incorporate into their own writing.)

Group Task: To collaborate in writing an argument in support of Osaka Japan's 2008 Summer Olympic bid. This was submitted to the Japan National Olympic Committee for possible use on their official English language website (Osaka 2008 Olympic Bid Committee, 2000).

Materials and Resources: Information regarding the audience: the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee (International Olympic Committee, 2000), the selection process and timetable (presented orally and on board), a list of other candidate cities (The

2008 Olympic Bid Information Site, 2000), students' ideas for arguing the case, additional arguments drawn from the Japanese National Committee's website (Osaka 2008 Olympic Bid Committee, 2000), another city's website bid for examination (Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee, 2000), writing maxims and composing questions (see Appendix A), an alphabetically listed word bank consisting of Winter's (1977a, in Holland and Lewis 1997: 32) 'Vocabulary 1, 2, and 3,' and a peer review/redrafting worksheet (see Appendix B). All authentic materials, where practical, were reproduced for students in their original web page forms, thus following a recommendation for authenticity made in Cook (1989: 102), as well as perhaps helping to convince the students of the authenticity of the writing task before them (one student, Ai, did ask me, "Are these [handouts] real, or did you make?").

Method: Top-down consideration of texts and focus on meaning throughout the drafting/redrafting process (after Cook's (1989: 80) hierarchical table), cooperative group work featuring peer reviews/conferences with occasional teacher input, the use of authentic materials, and the presentation to students of real world goals.

2.1 Lesson Plan (stretching over an open number of lessons)

1. Students introduced to task and goal; 'brainstorm' issues to be argued, information received and discussed, Istanbul's argument examined (Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee, 2000; also see Appendix E), and the writing process discussed.
2. Students select areas to write on.
3. Students write first drafts of their individual pieces; student-teacher conferencing; redrafting.
4. Students read, assemble and combine individual drafts, cutting and pasting, repeatedly redrafting, working towards constructing a single draft. Peer review worksheets introduced. Peer conferencing with some teacher input.
5. Final draft produced and submitted to the Japanese National Olympic Committee.

2.2 Justification of goals

It should be noted here that the Japanese National Olympic Committee's website (Osaka 2008 Olympic Bid Committee, 2000) featured an existing English language text. However, its argument, perhaps due to a direct translation from the Japanese, maintained Japanese structural patterns (Kobayashi 1984b), namely "indirect (inductive) strategies going from evidence to conclusion" (Silva 1993: 665), or what Kobayashi (1984b) terms a "Specific-to-General" (p. 737) rhetorical pattern. (This was explained to students without showing them the actual text.) Therefore, one could claim that a replacement text might be preferred, or at least be easier to read, by an international audience.

This task was chosen to meet students' intrinsic interest in sports in general, and the re-

cent Olympic games held in Sydney in particular, but also to present learners with an authentic writing task with (potentially) real readers and real world consequences. Such a task might come close to 'closing the gap' between classroom activities on the one hand, and the world outside the classroom on the other. It also thus far seems to be a more motivating activity than a more traditional assignment might be.

As for the text type chosen, Martin (1985, in Nunan 1991) argues that text types such as arguments "encourage the development of critical thinking skills which in turn encourage individuals to explore and challenge social reality" (p. 87). Since these students were all university bound, practice in constructing an argument in English might have furthered such critical thinking.

3. Results and Discussion

Following the rather commonsensical observation that writers must be given time to write, every lesson (save the first) consisted of little more than writing time and student conferencing, with a minimum of teacher input. Zamel (1987) cites studies that demonstrate the good effects on student writing when in the classroom learners "are acknowledged, given numerous opportunities to write, and [can] become participants in a community of writers" (p. 707).

3.1 On the issue of outlining

I used the student's brainstormed list and the list I provided (see Appendices C and D) as a sort of outline to focus students on the particular arguments to be covered within the whole. Zamel (1983b) suggests that "rather than asking them to construct neatly developed outlines, our students should be encouraged to work with preliminary and tentative lists and notes" (p. 181). It has also been more recently argued that some form of outlines may have a place in the L2 writing process, and particularly in argumentation (see Hall 1990).

Students each picked one argument to start writing on. This sectioning of the project into manageable pieces is not to be confused with "splitting communication into levels" (Cook 1989: 83, my italics), which typifies a 'bottom-up approach' (ibid.). Here all levels of discourse might still be considered at once. However, taking all levels of discourse into consideration at once, as Cook (1989) suggests, might be a struggle and even "disconcerting" (ibid. p. 83) for L2 students, but is nevertheless advised if communication is to be successful (Cook 1989, Holland and Lewis 1997).

3.2 Focus on the audience and the writer

I told students that the nine members on the Executive Board were the people they would

be addressing as they were writing, because these are the people who will choose which city is awarded the games. Thus students were made aware of their target readership's "office, status, and role" (Cook 1989: 89).

On later examining Ai's first draft however, it became obvious that this information was not enough. She wrote:

The people of Osaka are the most friendly people in Japan.

Firstly, they use an unique language which is much different from a public language. It is more cheerful. I know most foreigners can't understand Japanese, but they can not a little feel this cheerfulness. And it will also make them cheerful.

Secondly, they are sociable people. So if you are faced with some troubles in Japan, like losing your way or looking for a station, please ask the local people. They will help you.

Anyway, the people in Osaka are so friendly. If the 2008 Olympic games will be held in Osaka, audience can enjoy not only games but people's warm heart!!

Ai's use of 'you' in the third paragraph and 'audience' in the fourth seemed to indicate that beyond 'office, status, and role,' a grasp of the broad concerns facing the Executive Board would also be helpful, namely, that everyone will be involved in the games, and not just the Executive Board themselves (Ai's 'you'), nor just the 'audience.' Also, it is doubtful whether many audiences would find it agreeable to be directly referred to as 'foreigners,' since the term, used among an exclusive group of interlocutors, might usually, in an English speaking community at least, refer to a (non-present) third party (unless of course the speaker/writer is being thoughtless, ignorant, or is intentionally in a Western cultural context trying to be rude, excluding, or provocative). All this I explained to students (though as the student drafts below will reveal, 'foreigners' wasn't always eliminated).

Ai's first draft also suggests that her role as writer might have to be clarified. Her use of the first person singular in the second paragraph clearly indicates that she believes she is writing as a private person rather than, quite literally, on behalf of the nation's Olympic hopes. And an unclear idea of the writer's assumed identity is indicated by Ai's repeated use of "they" when the pronoun means 'the people of Osaka,' since this unadvisedly distances the writer from the city being argued for.

Asking students to attend to their audience and their relationship to it, apart from focusing on the matters discussed above, appears to be indirectly focusing students' attention on meaning. This would stand to reason, since when a writer is thinking about his/her target audience, s/he is not only thinking about how to put the message, but what to say (and what not to say).

3.3 Focus on discourse type, structure, and function

The text of Istanbul's website argument (Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee, 2000; also see Appendix E), is an example of the argument type of discourse and its accompanying discourse structure (Cook 1989: 80). Presenting it to students, we briefly examined it for its subordinating structure, and noted how its title helped the reader anticipate the structure, and the type of the whole piece. Cook (1989) notes that "[one] way in which discourse type can be recognized is by title" (p. 103).

We then looked at the first of Istanbul's reasons:

"Istanbul gives true meaning to the symbolism of the Olympic rings. It is the only city linking two continents and providing a virtual re-enactment of the coming together of Europe and Asia. Istanbul's logo and the theme "meeting of continents" deliberately emphasize the ultimate goal of the Olympic Movement; bringing athletes together from around the globe to create an enduring legacy of peace and harmony in the world"

(Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee, 2000; also see Appendix E).

I asked them what question that first sentence raised in their minds. "What 'true meaning'?" Fumika volunteered. It was an appropriate question. I then showed them how the subsequent sentence(s) answered that very question. An 'assertion explanation' discourse pattern [but see Holland and Lewis 1997: 30-31] was thus discovered. Nunan (1991) argues that "the claim that...modelling constricts learner's creative freedom remains to be demonstrated. Creativity, and creative freedom can only exist within certain boundaries and conventions if communication is to be effective" (p. 88).

I also asked students what they thought a written 'argument' was. After an appropriate wait-time, wherein students didn't respond, I wrote two definitions taken from a dictionary: "a process of reasoning; series of reasons," and "discourse intended to persuade" (Webster's College Dictionary, 1991). (The former definition seems to refer to a particular 'discourse structure,' the latter with a 'discourse function' (Cook, 1989)).

The students were then introduced to two styles of written argument: one, that of most academic work, is typically cautious and hedging, using words like 'might' and 'maybe;' the other, used, for instance, in business, is more assertive and perhaps more affirmative. Cook (1989) points out that in a discourse approach to writing, "there is no such thing as neutral style and therefore that stylistic choice and range need developing from the earliest stages" (p. 114). Students identified their argument as falling into the 'assertive' category. Later, during the writing of her first draft, Fumika asked if her use of 'will' was appropriate (see Fumika's draft, section 3.4, p. 13, fifth paragraph). (It was.) This is an example of top-level considerations affecting local lexical choices, and shows that at least one of the stu-

dents was assessing her written work from the top down.

One might argue that Ai's first draft (see above, p. 7-8) is structured in a general specific pattern. However, as I proposed for Istanbul's argument (see above, p. 9-10), an 'assertion explanation' pattern might be a more exact description here. Such a designation might also be more 'user-friendly' in that it appears, to this writer, to be a more intuitive description. Ai's piece then moves from assertion to first explanation, to second explanation, to reassertion and conclusion.

During the fourth class meeting, Chiho and Shoko worked rather unsuccessfully on integrating into Ai's piece a relevant element in one of Fumika's first drafts one sentence mentioning the friendliness of the local shop owners (where they inserted it, it broke the 'flow' of Ai's piece). Then Chiho took the resultant text home and brought her work back the next week. Here Chiho's additions (her own writing and that of Fumika's) are shown in italics; deletions are reinserted and 'struck through' for comparison's sake:

The people of Osaka are the most friendly people in Japan.

Firstly, they use an unique language which is much different from a public language. It is more cheerful. † We know most foreigners people who don't live in Japan can't understand Japanese, but they can not a little feel this cheerfulness. And it will also make them cheerful.

Secondly, they are sociable people. They have a sense of humor. People in other cities can speak to them light-heartedly. So if you are one is faced with some troubles in Japan, like losing your way or looking for a station, please one can ask the local people: They will help you. , and one will be able to solve the problem.

The shop staff is also so nice that visitors can buy something so easily even though visitors can't speak Japanese. People not only in Osaka but all over the country will help visitors.

There is a helpful thing to communicate with people in different countries. It is a gesture what is called body language.

People in the world think that most Japanese are shy. It is true. But people in Osaka are not as shy as people in other cities in Japan. People's in Osaka expressions are abundant. They will manage to tell visitors what they want to.

The most important thing is people's mind. To try to communicate with people in different countries will help people to do that. People in Osaka have this important mind.

Anyway, the people in Osaka are so friendly. If the 2008 Olympic games will be held in Osaka, audiences can enjoy not only games but people's warm heart!!

Here Chiho has paid attention to matters of audience (e.g., her deletions of 'you' and 'for-

igners'), and has also worked on bettering the structure of the discourse by expanding on an otherwise stand-alone assertion that gives no further explanation: the sentence in the third paragraph beginning, 'Secondly....'

In the last paragraph, a too-casual style signaled by 'Anyway' is eliminated.

3.4 Focus on cohesion

Crewe (1990), who focuses on argumentation in 'ESL undergraduate writing,' notes that "the misuse of logical connectives is an almost universal feature of ESL students' writing" (p. 317). Fumika's text seems to bear this observation out (connectives are shown in bold):

Osaka is the biggest city which is multinational and multicultural community in Japan.

In fact, many foreigners visit Osaka or make their living in here.

That's why there are multinational shops in Osaka. For example, Asia Pacific Trade Center (ATC for short) which is cooperate with over 100 foreign companies has been already opened. So, many foreigners can buy anything what they want to buy or eat every time and everywhere in Osaka, like ATC.

Besides, the Japanese who lives in Osaka is so friendly that many foreigners can communicate with them and other people around the world.

As a result, when the athlete who come from all over the world come and stay in Osaka for Olympic, they will be able to feel comfortable, like their own countries mentally.

For this reason, environment of Osaka is the best city for athletes.

It comes to food, foods of Osaka are tasty and uniquely. So that Osaka is also the city which is famous for many kinds of foods. For instance, Oonomiyaki and Takoyaki (tako means octopus) are very famous.

What is more, the shop staff who sells these foods is so nice that visitors can buy it so easily. They talk in Osaka dialect which is more friendly than any other dialect in Japan.

Not only food but also character of Osaka is very suitable for athletes.

It seems that at least partly as a result of being supplied with Winter's "vocabulary of connection" (Holland and Lewis 1997: 32), Fumika's first draft features a general overuse and at least four misuses of items on Winter's (1977a, in Holland and Lewis 1997) list: 'Vocabulary 1' subordinator 'So that,' and 'Vocabulary 2' coordinators 'In fact,' 'Besides,' and 'For this reason.' (Out of the thirteen different connectives highlighted above, Fumika also employs two more not on Winter's list: 'that's why' and '[when] it comes to.')

(1990) observes the "misconception students hold about the use of logical connectives, which is 'the more, the better'" (p. 320). Crewe (1990) goes on to argue that:

"Most studies of the use of logical connectives indicate that the readability and coherence of a text are not necessarily improved by the presence of cohesive ties (see, for example, Hartnett, 1986: 151, and Mosenthal and Tierney, 1984: 240)"

and that

"poor writing can be instantly improved by their elimination (see Hartnett 1986: 144). Where there is an absence of connectives, the logical steps can in most cases be supplied by the reader from his or her own expectations and predictions within the text, together with knowledge of the world and experience of other similar kinds of argumentation."
(p. 317)

The implied suggestion here is that readers may tolerate having to work at piecing together meaning (where a "deep logicity" (Crewe 1990: 320) exists but is not explicitly signaled). Taking a more middle ground, Holland and Lewis (1997) argue that "relationships are much easier to grasp in written text if there are some explicit signals to aid interpretation" (p. 33, my italics). Zamel (1983a) would agree:

Teachers need to bear in mind, however, that, important as these links are, learning when not to use them is as important as learning when to do so. In other words, students need to be taught that the excessive use of linking devices, one for almost every sentence, can lead to prose that sounds both artificial and mechanical. As Raimes (1979) put it, when the emphasis is placed on these overt markers rather than the ideas communicated, the 'glue' rather than the message 'stands out'. (p. 27-8)

Here the 'glue' certainly seems to stand out in Fumika's text. But that said, it could be argued that while the overuse or misuse of connectives is not to be desired in a final draft, presenting Winter's entire list as a 'word bank,' as I did, might allow students to test hypotheses, as Fumika appears to have done. So long as students are approaching the text from the top down, and the 'word bank' is successfully presented as an aid to writing rather than an ends, danger that such 'vocabulary of connection' would come to be seen by students as an integral, even central part of the lesson might be minimized.

However, Crewe (1990), whether intentionally or not, appears to be approaching texts from the bottom up initially identifying the misuse and overuse of cohesive ties as a focal

problem to be remedied on the level of lexis. It could therefore be argued that Crewe's (1990) recommendation to initially forbid the use of most logical connectives, whereby students would be "forced to come to terms with a small, relatively discrete, subset of the original long list" (p. 321) might indeed lead students to give foremost consideration to even those few connectives allowed, thus (perhaps) eclipsing any meaningful task at hand. This is not to mention the frustration or decrease in self-esteem that students might experience by being told, in effect, that 'You can't use that yet.'

The student data below, however, seems to reinforce the suggestion that there is an alternative to Crewe's (1990) approach. Rather than immediately pointing to local lexical choices as (adversely) affecting the understanding of larger units of discourse, it might be better, at least in the early stages of drafting, to maintain a top-down point of view where the focus remains primarily on the ideas communicated. The appropriateness or desirability of the ideas being grouped together in the first place can then be considered, thus potentially saving time and energy.

This is apparently what Chiho did. Her rewrite of Fumika's text during the fifth class meeting demonstrates how some textual problems at Cook's (1989) level of cohesion can disappear if higher level discourse concerns are maintained during the redrafting process. Thus the number of problems that might potentially (yet unnecessarily) be pointed out to students by the teacher (or by students during peer review) can decrease, making everyone's job easier. Here is Fumika's text as rewritten by Chiho (Chiho's additions are shown in italics; deleted parts of Fumika's original text are reinserted and struck-through to illustrate my point):

Osaka is comfortable city for people in the world. Osaka is the biggest city which is multinational and multicultural community in Japan.

In fact, many foreigners visit Osaka or make their living in here.

That's why there are multinational shops in Osaka. For example, Asia Pacific Trade Center (ATC for short) which is cooperate with over 100 foreign companies has been already opened. So many foreigners can buy anything what they want to buy or eat every time and everywhere in Osaka, like ATC.

Besides, the Japanese who lives in Osaka is so friendly that many foreigners can communicate with them and other people around the world.

As a result, when the athlete who come from all over the world come and stay in Osaka for Olympic, they will be able to feel comfortable, like their own countries mentally.

For this reason, environment of Osaka is the best city for athletes.

It comes to food, when people leave their own countries, because of the difference of

food many of them can't feel at home. But in Osaka many people in the world are living. For this reason, multinational culture is developing in Osaka. There are many types of restaurant, Italian, French, Chinese, Indian, and so on. So visitors can eat foods that they are used to. And they're feel comfortable. But it is not only the variety of food. There are Japanese traditional food in Osaka. Foods of Osaka are tasty and uniquely. So that Osaka is also the city which is famous for many kinds of foods. For instance, Oconomiyaki and Takoyaki (tako means octopus) are very famous.

~~What is more, the shop staff who sells these foods is so nice that visitors can buy it so easily. They talk in Osaka dialect which is more friendly than any other dialect in Japan.~~

~~Not only food but also character of Osaka is very suitable for athletes.~~

As pointed out above, there were perhaps four misused connectives in Fumika's first draft, as well as a general overuse, but after Chiho's reworking of the text (she was apparently attending to meaning and top-down considerations rather than to the isolated business of connectives), only two of Fumika's misused connectives remain.

3.5 Focus on lexis

Though students had initially divided up the task into workable sections or topics to cover (see Appendices C and D), their writing often overlapped or strayed onto other areas or arguments. Part of this stemmed from a confusion or lack of focus, but other incursions were plausibly defended by students as strengthening or otherwise filling out their main arguments. For instance, I questioned Shoko on how the issue of transportation related to her topic of Osaka's experience in hosting other international events. Here is her first draft:

Experience Hosting Other International Events

They held Osaka Expo in 1970, and the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in 1990.

And we are going to hold World Cup of Soccer in Japan 2002.

These events are developing traffic service. It takes about three hours by Sinkansen from Tokyo to Osaka.

There are many hotels and inns in Osaka and big cities nearby, like Kyoto and Kobe. A lot of foreigners live in Kobe. Kyoto is a very old city.

She insisted the two topics were related, and she successfully explained to me how. I therefore encouraged her to continue to develop her idea of connection on paper. One draft later Shoko, who has great difficulty getting anything to paper, managed to clarify her idea

of connection and at the same time cut references to hotels and other cities:

The city held Osaka Expo in 1970, and the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in 1990.

And we are going to hold World Cup of Soccer in Japan, 2002.

As a result, the infrastructure of Osaka is already world class and people in Osaka are used to hosting a lot of Japanese and foreigners.

Of course that last sentence is in need of separation into two separate points. Shoko attempted to deal with this in her next draft, while at the same time merging her argument with elements from another student's work. Shoko then decided to join Chiho in conference, and together they produced another draft. Here is where they left off at the end of class:

Experience hosting other international events brought the world class infrastructure to Osaka.

People in Osaka are used to hosting not only a lot of Japanese but also foreigners.

Because the city held Osaka Expo in 1970, the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in 1990.

And in Japan, we are going to hold World Cup of Soccer 2002.

The main development by these is traffic systems.

Osaka has subways, highways, railways and big International airport.

For example, If you get on subways you can go anywhere you want to go. subways are very convenient

Osaka has highways too, and most of them leads Osaka.

Japanese railways get to the station on time.

These students, and Shoko in particular, lack a knowledge of a wide range of lexical choices in their productive vocabulary, yet they employed a somewhat sophisticated (if imperfect) discourse pattern. Knowing Shoko's intended meaning from earlier conferencing, it is clear to me that "The main development by these is traffic systems" completes a 'cause consequence' "logical sequence relation" (Winter 1996, in Holland and Lewis 1997: 30) with "Experience hosting other international events brought the world class infrastructure to Osaka," because, as she explained to me, her first point was to list Osaka's experience. Her mention of 'infrastructure' in the first sentence is merely her premature attempt to connect cause to consequence.

'Cause consequence' is a larger discourse structure used to relate two otherwise inde-

pendent 'general → specific' sequences. This neatly illustrates Holland and Lewis's (1997) point that "a number of... [discourse] patterns may occur within one text, either in sequence or embedded one within another" (p. 27). McCarthy (1991: 159) makes much the same point.

Without the earlier conference I had with Shoko during the second lesson, I might have misunderstood the structure she envisioned (see earlier discussion of Shoko's insistence). This demonstrates the value of face-to-face teacher-learner conferencing featuring negotiation of meaning, as discussed in Goldstein and Conrad (1990).

At times, through my guidance and unsolicited input in class, I found it necessary to steer students clear of getting too bogged down on local encoding. McCarthy (1991) notes that "learners whose overall competence was poor often got trapped in the difficulties of local encoding at the expense of larger discourse management... [even to the extent that] all sense of overall planning has been abandoned" (p. 161-2). However, this appears not to have ultimately happened with my learners, despite the fact that they were indeed struggling with encoding meaning. They appeared to maintain a focus on the overall organization of the text. In addition, students might have been approaching the text above from the top down, as evidenced by the developing and assembling of ideas rather than a mere preoccupation with lexis and grammar. The text above seems to demonstrate this → a poor encoding result yet a good start at overall discourse patterning. This suggests that Shoko and Chiho have maintained a grasp of larger discourse concerns notwithstanding their obvious lexical and grammatical difficulties at the local level.

3.6 Focus on grammar

While it might have been tempting to show Shoko some useful connectives, correct her grammar, and be done with it, this probably would not solve her larger problem of being able to fluently express herself on paper. Indeed it might aggravate it. Zamel (1983b) reminds us that to take control of a learner's writing in such a way "gives students the impression that what they wanted to say is less relevant than the teacher's expectations about how they should have said it" (p. 181). That is to say, meaning might be devalued. So rather than take that course, a continued exposure to a top-down approach to writing, which consistently highlights meaning, might eventually aid Shoko in finding her written 'voice.'

In support of an approach that largely leaves grammatical concerns for later drafts, Chenoweth (1987) conducted an informal survey of her students. She observed that they

"did not say that grammar was their biggest problem in writing. They said that, just as when writing in their native language, expressing their meaning was what troubled them the most" (p. 28).

She goes on to recommend that

"teachers should concentrate on this more fundamental level, leaving grammatical problems for later drafts, when the meaning that the student wants to express has been adequately dealt with" (ibid.).

This I have done, and because the student's drafting is still at a relatively early stage, there has been little or no mention of grammar in this paper.

4. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that my pre-intermediate students were fully capable of approaching the writing of a text from the top down. Their drafts reflect a consideration of their relationship as writers to their audience, progress in the development of their argument (discourse type), a concern for how best to persuade (discourse function), and work done on how best to present it (discourse structure). The more local considerations of grammar and particularly lexis are also being struggled with by students in the course of dealing with those larger discourse level concerns.

Although the state of the writing project was still far from a final draft at the time of this writing, there appeared to be emerging a relatively extensive piece of coherent, top-down produced writing that might not have been possible had the task been approached from the bottom up. And though Chenoweth (1987) observes that "for most of our students, getting them to rewrite a particular paper more than two or three times leads to diminishing returns" (p. 27), this did not happen here. A possible reason for this, apart from employing a top-down methodology, might be the authenticity of the project, which may be motivating students in a way that more typical 'class work' might not.

Though it is probable that no valid generalizations to other groups of pre-intermediate students can be made here (due to the small number of students in this study), the findings nevertheless encourage me to continue teaching writing from the top down in future writing classes.

In her report on currently favored methodologies for the teaching of L2 writing, Dyer (1996) concludes that "clearly defined writing tasks with specific objectives result in the most significant gains in student writing" (p. 315). It is hoped this writing task contributed positively to my student's L2 competence.

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APPENDIX A

"Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking."
-- Peter Elbow [1973, in Brown (1994: 322)]

Never forget who your audience is.

Help your readers in predicting what will likely come next.

[McCarthy, 1991: 169]

Writers usually believe they are finished many times before they really are.

CHECK LIST:

Is there only one audience for this piece?

Are the parts well connected?

Is it easy to follow?

Is it easy to understand?

Do you like it?

APPENDIX B

Peer Review Worksheet

Examine carefully a piece of writing written by another student.

1. Circle what you think is not needed or should be moved elsewhere.
2. Underline what is not clear.
3. Questions:

Is the language used appropriate to the audience?

Where does more need to be said?

Where does it go off the point?

How can the writer strengthen this argument?