


8-2012

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## eCommons Citation

Kalan, Amir, "Essay Writing Instructional Lexicon and Semantic Confusion" (2012). *English Faculty Publications*. 100.  
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# ESSAY WRITING INSTRUCTIONAL LEXICON AND SEMANTIC CONFUSION

By Amir Kalan

“Introduction,” “body,” and “conclusion” are the most accessible words in the instructional lexicon for ESL writing teachers when they want to describe the structure of a typical five-paragraph persuasive or argumentative essay or its shorter variations for standardized tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. They are frequently employed to refer to the three tiers of the hamburger essay in textbooks, on classroom boards, and in YouTube tutorials. Not surprisingly, English learners also might give you the same words if asked what the main components of an essay are. Like ESL teachers, students usually use the same terms or their equivalents in their own languages to describe the skeleton of an essay.

However, I have learned from bitter experience that although ESL teachers and learners might use the same words to begin, develop, and end an essay, they usually refer to completely different concepts. As a result, I have disciplined myself to be extremely cautious when I address English learners and talk about the “introduction,” the “body,” and the “conclusion” of an essay. In fact I tell my students that in English essay writing the introduction is *not* actually an introduction, the conclusion is *not* a real conclusion, and the body of the essay is *not* what you have in mind at all. I beg them not to assume that we understand each other.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding caused by presuppositions, my students and I explore our understandings of the essay from scratch. Afterwards, we label different parts of the essay together to make certain that we mean the same. I strongly believe that redefining the essay writing jargon with the students is neither a luxury nor a fancy experiment; it is one of the most important steps in the lesson plan.

English teachers tend to lean on established instructional terminology. In writing in English as a second language, for instance, it would not be considered wise to coin new terms to replace “paragraph,” “thesis statement,” “topic sentence,” and “supporting details.” Besides being extremely convenient to use, the current terms are a part of a universal language used by almost all ESL teachers and textbooks, and learners. More importantly, students are likely to use the same words in their own languages. Using a word shared by the student’s first language, we can comfortably build upon the students’ prior knowledge.

Ironically, the very sense of convenience we feel, when using English writing terminology, can cause a lot of misunderstanding. Sometimes although the teacher and the student use the same words, they may not exactly mean the same thing.

Think of the very word “paragraph,” which is shared by most of Indo-European and Germanic languages and which is in my experience understood immediately by the students from the East too. The definition of “paragraph” as a body of written language woven together around one single idea is peculiar to Anglo-American culture. The Italians and the Spanish do not mind including more than one idea in their paragraphs. Neither do the Arabs, the Persians, and the Turks, who did not historically divide their writing into paragraphs. Paragraphing is in fact what they borrowed from the West through scientific paper writing because of the dominance of Western scientific institutions after the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Selin, 1997; Saheb Jami, 1998).

Similarly, in Far Eastern writing, for instance in the Japanese rhetorical strategy “return to baseline theme,” the main idea of an essay is not broken down to topic sentences that are distributed in paragraphs in a linear way. The thesis occasionally appears in the essay where it is surrounded by seemingly unrelated new ideas with the writer avoiding an explicit description of the relationship between these elements (Mulvey, 1992).

This marked difference between an English paragraph and a non-English paragraph has made me highly sceptical of my students’ head-nodding when I talk about the “paragraph,” and, in the same manner, when I discuss the introductory paragraph, the central paragraphs, and the concluding paragraph in an essay.

I am sceptical because I do not wish to complicate the process of teaching writing to students who already have strong views of writing even more with semantic confusion. Research shows that students carry preconceptions about the subjects they are learning (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). Moreover, students tend to hold on to their views even after being exposed to alternative explanations of the same phenomena or merely slightly modify them (Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, 1987). That is why I tend to clarify the fact that the English “introduction,” the “body,” and the “conclusion” may have very little in common with the non-English “introduction,” “body,” and “conclusion.”

In second language acquisition research, the examination of different rhetorical patterns in different cultures, which can seriously challenge the process of learning to write in new language, is referred to as “contrastive rhetoric” (Kaplan, 1966). According to contrastive rhetoricians the characteristics of the “paragraph” differ between two different rhetorical cultures. Since the 1960s, when discussions about contrastive rhetoric started, the conversation has taken different forms. Most researchers in this area, however, seem to agree that a conscious attempt to explain the differences between English rhetorical traditions and those of English learners is crucial (Connor, 2002).

When I teach the “introduction,” I emphasise over and over again that an introduction to an English essay is not an introduction to the main discussion. It is indeed the main

discussion itself. It is your main idea. It is a thesis (Fowler & Aaron, 1998, p. 58). My Italian students taught me that the “introduction” in a *tema* was a lengthy historical account of the topic in question. They also told me they thought narrowing down their ideas to one single thesis expressed clearly in the introduction was a rather uncomfortable practice for them.

My students from the Middle East did not mind quoting poetry in the introduction of their *maghaleh*. More importantly, they seriously avoided stating the thesis at the beginning of their essays. It might show somewhere towards the end or might not be mentioned at all and be left to the reader to find it between the lines. Likewise, in the Korean *supil* the writer is not obliged to address the main idea of the essay immediately at the beginning. The introduction also can be a complicated combination of abstract ideas tightly or not very tightly connected.

Some non-native speakers of English thus may not consider an English essay’s introduction a real introduction. Writers with non-Anglo-American rhetorical backgrounds might consider the English “introduction” an abrupt statement of the whole point of the essay unimaginatively stated right at the beginning of the conversation. For non-native writers and readers of English, English essays are headless, introductionless. I have learned from frequent failures that I am better off teaching my students not to write an “introduction” and start their English essays with what they want to say, their thesis.

The process of teaching the “body,” or how to “develop” the thesis is not less complicated either. As long as central paragraphs are concerned, the golden rule of English writing is “examples” (Bailey & Powell, 1988, p. 8). This rule did not come into existence by accident. English essay writing is the outcome of complicated historical, cultural, and economic developments over the past three centuries (Berlin, 1984) .

Roughly speaking, the certainty by which we dictate our ESL learners to support their topic sentences comes from the rivalry between English empiricism and French rationalism. The English empiricists, such as Francis Bacon and David Hume, solidified the position of inductive reasoning, or putting forth particular examples as proof, as the basis of human understanding (Russell, 1961). This gave the growth of empirical sciences a momentum which led to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution also gave the English speaking world the economic and political supremacy which, among other developments, established English essay writing as the dominant form of writing in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Nonetheless, although English essay writing has had a profound impact on scientific writing all over the world, it has not necessarily changed other writing traditions in other cultures. If you ask your French students to develop a thesis in the body of their essays, they tend to use abstract deductive reasoning rather than exemplify the idea. Your Italian students are likely to use elaborate rhetorical devices as a means of persuasion. The Persians are more easily convinced when the thesis is revisited in poetry or metaphorical language than when they face examples or figures. Chinese development of the thesis at times takes the form of stating the thesis over and over again with a twist or from a different angle.

Thus, although both you and your students might use the word “body” to talk about developing a thesis, what you have in mind might be completely different to what comes to their mind. I suggest that in order to minimize misunderstanding, we should avoid using “body” or replace it with an expression that clarifies what the “body” in an English essay means. I believe “we start with an ‘introduction’ then we move on to the ‘body’” would create chronic misunderstanding. Instead, I usually say, “‘state your claim at the beginning’ and ‘give examples immediately after that’”

“Conclusion” is also as misleading. In English essay writing, when you conclude your piece, you do not reach a conclusion in a syllogistic manner. Your conclusion is practically a restatement of your claim rather than the outcome of an arrangement of premises (Fowler & Aaron, 1998, p. 58). The outcome is already stated at the very beginning. The “conclusion” in the English essay is in fact a repetition of the “introduction,” or rather the restated thesis or the central point of the essay

In a lot of non-English writing traditions, essays are open-ended. In some there is more than one conclusion. In a lot of them, however, if there is one conclusion, meaning “result” of the discussion, it is mentioned only and only at the end of the passage and never at the beginning. In some of these traditions, the element of suspense is valued highly. The writer must not give away the ultimate wisdom of the text and the reader should become hungry enough to devour it. In some other writing traditions, reading the passage is a journey that both the writer and the reader take together; accordingly, the reader patiently follows the arguments and eventually will gain the resultant knowledge.

Thus, the essay writing teacher’s “conclusion,” may not necessarily be the “conclusion” the language learner has in mind. And why risk if there is the slightest possibility of misunderstanding? Through a gradual metamorphosis of my instructional language over a decade of teaching essay writing to international students, I have replaced the “introduction,” the “body,” and the “conclusion” with “your single main idea clearly stated at the beginning,” “examples, statistics, expert opinions,” and “again your single main idea.” These are indeed familiar expressions for ESL teachers too, yet they usually come after as the second step. I suggest we should use them right from the beginning in order to avoid semantic confusion.

Measures of this kind will help students realize that the English essay is a rhetorical tradition with unique characteristics. It is important for English learners to understand this so that they consciously see the shift in rhetorical paradigms when they start English essay writing. Such an approach will also breed respect for students’ rhetorical literacy in their native languages. In other words, it will help the students regard the English essay as a new literacy that can interact with their own knowledge of written language in a positive way rather than a corrector of the literacy they must have dearly gained all through their life (Cummins, 2006).

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Amir Kalan is a Master of Teaching student at OISE/ University of Toronto. He is currently working on a research project focusing on academic writing in English as a second language in a Canadian context. As a practitioner, he has taught ESL and EFL to adult professionals in Canada and abroad for fifteen years. Before coming to Canada, he also taught English to secondary school students at the Italian School of Tehran, Iran for eight years.