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Paragraphs that Communicate : Reading and Writing Paragraphs. by Hisatake Jimbo and Richard B. Murto (Tokyo, Linguaphone, 1990, 79pp. Teacher's Manual, 43pp.)

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*Paragraphs that communicate: reading and writing paragraphs.*

By Hisatake Jimbo and Richard B. Murto, Tokyo, Linguaphone, 1990, 79pp.

@ ¥1200 + *teacher's manual*, 43pp.<sup>1</sup> Review by A. P. Jenkins.

British school pupils acquire their essay writing skills from the age of eleven in a range of subjects mainly by a process of osmosis. Their teachers, operating largely on an empirical basis, nudge their pupils forward over a spectrum of composition genres and over a period of about seven years. At one end of this spectrum are the strictly defined conventions of physics and chemistry experiment reports, and the equally strict and more demanding rules governing *précis* procedure in the English class, through the varying requirements of geography, English literature, and history course essays, to the imaginative writing styles encouraged in, again, English classes, at the other end of the spectrum.

Having a British background, this reviewer encountered 'composition' within the Japanese university English department as a new subject laden with its own terminology, marked out with its own distinctive landscape, and obviously owing almost everything to the rhetoric-based composition classes widely taught in American universities.

*Paragraphs that Communicate* adds some new terminology, in part competing with terms used in other publications, but follows the well-charted contours of the terrain, while being demonstrably American in idiom and usage.

Linguaphone is a company with a long history of success in marketing its audio-method packages for foreign-language teaching. Its high-profile image leads one to expect much of a new product, in this case a composition textbook, published by its Japan branch and based on the traditional American rhetoric approach. Thus great expectations were raised when the company's flyer announced this 'upper intermediate textbook for classroom use'. As such, it would be appropriate for 'English Composition I', the required sec-

ond-year course for students studying English Language and Literature in the Colleges of Law and Letters, and Education at this university.

It is broadly similar to other composition instruction texts in that chapter by chapter it covers topic sentences, the specific details of the paragraph, time order, space order, process and direction, cause and effect, exemplification, definition, classification, and comparison and contrast. These are the basic categories of structural element and prose type shown in the table of contents which students of such a class are usually required to grapple with, and which are likely to reassure teachers as they scan the contents of any prospective text.

So what is it that might make the teacher want to adopt this text in place of another? As generations of authors stand on their predecessors' shoulders attempting to supplant earlier or rival publications available to the Japanese market, there are bound to be improvements, and this book seems able to claim some. It presents a variety of activities in each chapter which follow a standard, and thus for students a comfortably predictable, routine. These activities aiming at equipping students with the skills targeted, progress through three sets of tasks: recognition (of which more later), to guided writing, to original writing tasks. These fall within a wider initial context of a short introductory explanation of the point of the chapter, an exercise based on 'Focusing on the Idea' and a longer section containing paragraphs and exercises under the heading 'Understanding the Idea'. To this reader's mind the pedagogical format appears sound.

The prescribed recognition tasks seem problematic, for they require students to hunt down or identify paragraphs of the type under consideration in books and elsewhere (including other textbooks), and then to bring them to class in photocopy form. Such an activity would certainly prove whether the student had learnt what was required, but it seems impractical. Let us assume that the class has twenty or so students and not the sixty or more found in

certain private university composition classes. Each has diligently searched with greater and lesser degrees of success and alighted upon an extract such as a 'direction paragraph' (p.39) – surely meaning geographical directions (and very hard to happen upon outside a textbook), as opposed to a 'directions paragraph' which would connote instructions of the kind easily found in a cookery book. Does the teacher try to get the students to hand in the paragraphs before class so that he (or she) can assess them? One hopes he has the time. Should he accept them in class, and will he have the time to pronounce them appropriate, and select a sample of these contextless and perhaps difficult pieces to be read out? Could he then explain the contexts blind? Let us ask some different questions! In an imperfect world what guarantee of success is there that students would be able to garner paragraphs from 'an English book, magazine or newspaper', almost certain to be of greater difficulty than this textbook's level of prose? How will the average second-year student find time for a possibly lengthy search, without becoming demoralised in the process? Is it not the role, here unfulfilled, of experienced teachers to explain the mechanics of a central feature of their teaching strategy when compiling a teacher's manual if they have the secret?

With regard to guided writing tasks, the strategy is necessarily prescriptive. Topics and in some cases topic sentences are provided and then followed by about half a dozen 'details' around which to construct a paragraph. The method is slightly heavy-handed but should reinforce the idea of standard paragraph structure. A hard-pressed teacher would be grateful for what is provided in this exercise.

When it comes to original writing tasks there are again about half a dozen choices considerably supplied. Some of these are imaginatively conceived such as 'The Time I was Embarrassed in Public' (p.25), or 'Modern man is like a computer' (p.79 and highlighting capitalization inconsistency); surely there is a lost opportunity which the reversal of 'parents' and 'children'

would salvage in 'Parents are particularly perceptive about their children' (p.17). Otherwise, the suggested topics are largely unimaginative though within the orbit of student experience. Of course, many teachers will want to allow some freedom to students to exercise their own choice.

Plainly the system adopted by the authors is the conventional one of receptive to productive, from active analysis to active composition. *En route* there are other helpful aspects to the book, e.g., the admirably clear and concise introduction to each chapter, the lists of expressions and terms appropriate to the theme of the chapter – the prepositions of place curiously omitting 'behind' presumably in favour of the less felicitous 'in back of' (p.27), the paragraphs lacking topic sentences (pp.14-15), the graphically original but logically doubtful formula

$$TS = SD^1 + SD^2 + SD^3$$

(p.13), consistently clear and good advice, for example, on the use of quotations as 'powerful examples' (p.48), and the interesting exercise on manipulation of time phrases employing the words 'before' and 'after' (p.20). One presumes that the clarity of the book and these valuable ideas and material are the fruit both of a number of years of successful teaching, and of a wide knowledge of other composition textbooks. This British reviewer with his empirical acquisition of composition techniques certainly felt his hold on the formalised American rhetoric approach strengthened by the authors' exposition.

Despite its admirable clarity, there are problems with the text. First, many of the example paragraphs are remarkably dull. There is a recurrence of the theme of returning to one's hometown, a subject not relieved by descriptions of townscapes, street directions, or the tedious old 'chestnut' about the contrast between city and suburban life. Humdrum days in the lives of bourgeois and *bourgeoise* individuals, progress in playing tennis, two types of saw, kinds of screw (as in carpentry), and recipes for everyday food do not bring the advantages of any content-based freshness to balance the heavy demands

involved in acquisition of composition techniques. Composition is not always the most popular class either with teachers or students, and any composition textbook would be well advised to make an incidental appeal through original, informative or amusing content to get this reviewer's vote. The second half of the book, however, does bring some occasional hints of spice to one's imagination, with paragraphs on scrimshaws, emigration to Australia, and the irony of today's most ecclesiastical of musical instruments, the organ, being played while Christians were devoured by lions in Rome. There must be a strong case for losing no opportunity of informing and awakening interest while instructing in technical procedures. Thus we could do with more paragraphs of the type skeltoned on page 55 and modelled on page 31 of the teacher's manual which provides, for the time that it remains true, important data in percentage form on the racial make-up of the population of the United States. While on the subject of anachronism, page 47 of this 1990 publication tells us that Japanese cars are inexpensive in the United States!

Another marginal criticism of the paragraphs is that they display a slight tendency not to 'hide the skeleton', i.e. conceal those explicit expressions which demonstrate the outline of a paragraph. An example of this tendency appears in the teacher's manual (p.27). For this reason some of the paragraphs do not read as inviting prose, and this contributes to their dullness.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the irony of so many TEFL textbooks is certainly perpetuated in this one. Books which purport to instruct students in the English language are all too often crippled by spelling mistakes, typographical errors and stylistic solecisms. Thus we find 'accomodate' (p.32) despite appearing in its correct form in the corresponding section of the teacher's manual (p.19), 'daily' (p.24), the adjectival 'everyday' where an adverbial 'every day' is intended (p.24), 'suceeding' (p.52), and 'parargraph' (p.25). We read the absolute 'sure' qualified by 'very' (p.40), a regrettable -s plural for squid, and discover clichés in abundance, 'our pride and joy' (p.29), 'straight as an arrow'

(p.32), 'frantic' as in 'his family was frantic' (p.21), and 'terrible' as in 'a terrible morning' (p.22). In formal prose contexts the omission of 'of' in 'go out the main entrance' (p.38) is a cause for sorrow, and to be lamented the misbegotten, modish and above all momentarily ambiguous tendency to omit 'the' from 'Japanese' when it means the people and not the language, here enshrined in 'Japanese welcome the New Year...' (p.78).

Thirdly, although this book is designated 'upper intermediate', it is surely an error in a Japanese classroom to expose students to a note-form prose style involving the omission of articles, a practice in some of the 'Idea in Action' sections of each chapter. Thus we have 'Prepare evening meal and bath' and 'after children retire' (p.25), and 'to left is large parking lot' (p.33), but, inconsistently, in the same section 'make the beds' and 'do the shopping' (p.25), and 'Museum is at the north end...' (p.33). Difficulties experienced by Japanese learners of English over the use of articles may be compounded for close-reading students by the use of note form, even more by its inconsistent employment. Perhaps also a little ill-advised when presenting material to second-year students is the tendency to employ less common forms of basic construction. Thus, in one paragraph there are two instances of the simple future tense appearing in the protasis of a simple conditional sentence thus: 'If you will look straight down, you'll see the old court house...' and 'Now, if you'll move your eyes [*sic*] a little..., you can see...' (p.29, no comment on the inconsistent use of contraction). The usage is correct for polite requests, but, when it is not the pedagogical point at issue, is the repeated use of a less frequent form wise in the compilation of a textbook?<sup>3</sup>

Fourthly, there is a strange mixture of language register which does not read naturally as a native speaker of English peruses the text. This unevenness or mismatch in vocabulary choice does not seem advisable when presenting material to language learners. We find a formal, even old-fashioned, expressions such as 'retire [to bed]' (p.25), journalistic slang in 'hike' (p.41), along

with the colloquial clichés already referred to, and expressions which no native speaker ought to be proud of incorporating into such a textbook such as 'emcee' for M.C., i.e. master of ceremonies (p.21). There is also the consistent appearance of the odd pair 'mother' and 'dad' as in 'Mother says that you can set your watch by Dad.' (p.24), with its Freudian implications. However widespread such usage, the more accurate pairing of 'mother and father' and 'Mom (or Mum) and Dad' should perhaps be reinforced at this level. Lastly and incidentally, there is the unidiomatic 'move your eyes' meaning to look (p.29).

The point of these criticisms is that the acquisition of formal language is a concomitant objective of the composition class. Colloquialism, by definition, along with slang and clichés, is the reserve of areas within both conversation and integrated skills classes. The dividing line ought not, in the opinion of this reviewer, to be muddled by authors of composition textbooks.

In contrast to other teacher's manuals which are often flimsily bound, on poor quality paper, and in (error-ridden) unattractive typescript fonts, this teacher's manual is supplied free, and is beautifully produced in a sturdy format, on good quality paper and in an attractive font. The appeal of the physical quality of the book does not end there: the colour of the ink and the paper are unusual and appealing, and the information is clearly and generously spaced out. Contrasting with this, the main text relies for its colour scheme on a melancholic light sepia or off-terracotta tint for its copious and varied illustrations. It is very welcome and unusual to receive a teacher's manual of this physical quality and even more so to find that it is free.

Reasons for praising and criticising the contents of the manual closely parallel those for praising and criticising the text. To take the positive points first, the level of exposition remains very concise and helpful. Terms and idioms judged to be potentially problematic for some non-native speaking teachers are treated with full comments. For example, we are usefully informed

that CD means compact disk, but that compact disc is a trademark (p.28). These, again, are probably the crystalline accretion, so to speak, of years of teaching experience and the more valuable for that. Lastly, nothing is left to chance and model paragraphs are offered as possible answers to the guided writing tasks.

The criticism that the manual does not guide the teacher through the practicalities of the recognition tasks has already been dealt with above. But there are other criticisms: the eight model paragraphs, referred to in the previous paragraph, are even more insipid than those in the main text, that on the ethnic analysis of the United States only excepted; there is a typographical error in 'alter ations' (p.43) which could confuse weaker students if the model paragraph from which this comes is distributed as a photocopy; the words 'delight' and 'delightful' (pp.35, 43), apologies for better word choices, are inappropriate, especially when used to describe a supermarket! Other clichés include 'bright and early' (p.17). There is a bizarre repetition and equally bizarre prepositions (emphasis added) in '...they are priced competitively *with* their competition. They also have as standard equipment many of the items that are optional *for* their competitors.'

Other criticisms include identification of inconsistent practice in presenting answers in which full sentences receive upper case initial letters and full stops and where phrases do not, but where these conventions break down (e.g. twice on p.42). Foreign students learning English need to meet with the highest and most consistent standards of presentation, and with standard forms of construction. In a model paragraph in a writing text, is it advisable to include elliptical sentences of the kind which only more advanced students should be encouraged to attempt? Thus on page 17 we are given a sentence with an understood main verb in: 'Maybe one for her husband as well.'

Asked whether this reviewer would adopt this book, the answer would be, 'Reluctantly, as the book stands, but certainly, if Linguaphone published a

second edition free of spelling and typographical errors, and one which substituted paragraphs showing rather more concern for content and style in place of the predominantly dull ones presently offered.' The authors and editors might advantageously take a leaf out of Linguaphone's companion volume, the revised edition of *Writing : an Intermediate Textbook for Classroom Use*.<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This book has been chosen and this review written for two reasons : first to highlight content, and language usage problems common to some other English course textbooks published in Japan; secondly, and consequently, to make a plea to such publishers to exercise a greater editorial control over the production of textbooks.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Stanford and Marie N. Smith, *Better Writing: From Paragraph to Essay*, HRW International Editions, 1986, pp.101-2.

<sup>3</sup> Conditional sentences of the kind usually termed 'type one, probable'. A.J. Thompson and A.V. Martinet, *A Practical English Grammar*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, pp.197-8, 201-2.

<sup>4</sup> Kiyoshi Hasegawa, Nancy Baxter, Laura Mayer and Max Mayer, *Writing : An Intermediate Textbook for Classroom Use*, Tokyo, Linguaphone, revised ed. 1991. This book tellingly acknowledges the 'support and encouragement' of twenty-one individuals.