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Bun or Burger: What is a Thesis Statement? A Case of Analogy Gone Awry

As the first semester of intermediate ELD literature drew to a close, my cooperating teacher and I realized that it was time to begin teaching the five-paragraph essay. During the first part of the year, as we studied *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Frankenstein*, our class had grappled with historical and literary themes of intolerance, hatred, the holocaust, invention, consequences, and individual responsibility. Students had demonstrated understanding through performances of skits, presentations of research, unit exams, and short writing assignments. But we didn't approach the traditional, much-mocked five-paragraph essay format until December. We felt that it was an important part of preparing our students for the sheltered and mainstream literature classes we are preparing them to enter. Teachers in these classes will expect them to know how to use this basic organizational structure to write about literature.

The eighteen students in our intermediate ELD literature class at Hillview High School bring a total of six different native languages to our class and come from eight different countries. Each student had very different educational opportunities before coming to our high school. One student did not know how to read and write in his native Spanish before coming to the United States four years ago. During his first few months at Hillview, the bilingual aide worked with him to teach him the alphabet. Other students came from the local junior high school where their ESL classes built on the English they had learned in their native lands. All of our students have been in the United States for between two and five years, taking ELD classes in the public schools.

At Hillview High School, our ESL students are part of a diverse ethnic minority. Out of 1,296 students currently enrolled, 54% are Caucasian, 18% Hispanic, 15% Asian, 7% Filipino, 4% African American, 2% Southeast Asian, .05% Native American, and .02% Pacific Islander. Many of them also form the economic minority at Hillview, a school located in an upper-middle class suburban neighborhood in the Silicon Valley. Some of our students work to help support their families and virtually all of them ride the city bus to school from their downtown neighborhoods.

Like many intermediate classes, our intermediate ELD literature class includes all of the ELD students who are neither beginning nor advanced. The varying range of skill levels among our students is a challenge as we plan our instruction with the goal in mind of preparing our students for mainstream English classes. Some of our students will be ready for the sheltered survey class next year, some will move to the advanced ELD literature course, and others will struggle to pass the intermediate level. In order to help them be ready for the mainstream English classes, we want them to acquire and learn to use

academically appropriate American English in a literature class. As I mentioned earlier, this includes learning to use the basic five-paragraph essay format to write about literature.

Before coming to our class, most of our students had mastered paragraph-length composition. Even at the beginning of the school year, they were aware of the importance of indenting at the beginning of a paragraph, starting it with a topic sentence, and ending it with a conclusion. We hoped that in learning the five-paragraph essay format, our students would also learn that academic writing involves a multi-step process of invention, prewriting, organizing ideas, writing, revising, and editing.

In November and December, we studied an abridged version of Mary Shelley's classic novel, *Frankenstein*. The central question for our unit focused on invention, technology, and their consequences. It read: "How are we responsible for invention and its consequences?" We assigned a research project in conjunction with the unit where each student and a partner were responsible for researching a major invention of the 20th century, making a poster and a creative presentation, and writing an essay. The essay assignment required that they give a description of the invention and discuss its advantages and disadvantages. This assignment had the five-paragraph structure deliberately built-in: introduction, 1st body paragraph describing the invention, 2nd body paragraph discussing advantages, 3rd body paragraph discussing disadvantages, and a conclusion. One day in December when our students had finished their library research and made their posters, I taught our first lesson on the five-paragraph essay. The students who had been at Mountain View High School in the beginning ELD literature class had been introduced to the five-paragraph essay the previous year. Although my cooperating teacher told me that their former teacher had used a hamburger as an analogy for the structure of the essay, I didn't originally plan my instruction around this. I felt the analogy would break down too easily and distract from what I was trying to teach. I planned instruction for that day as a combination of IRE presentation and individualized seatwork, which would allow each student to write about the invention that he/she researched as we learned the essay format. I explained the purpose of learning this essay format and reminded them of our goal to prepare for mainstream classes and pass the writing competency test. I began with a vertical list of terms on the board: introduction, thesis statement, 1st body paragraph, 2nd body paragraph, 3rd body paragraph, topic sentence, and conclusion. As I asked questions and had students help me construct definitions for the terms, we paused between each new term to give an example and allow students time to write their own thesis statements, topic sentences, and conclusions.

One student who remembered something from last year said that a thesis statement was "like a topic sentence for the whole essay." I was impressed by this definition and added to it that "it could be longer than one sentence" because it needs "to introduce the three main ideas" that the essay is about. I used the telephone to give an example. "The telephone is an invention that has changed the way we communicate in the 20th century. Although it has many advantages, it also has disadvantages." I wrote the example on the board and gave students five minutes to write their own thesis statements for their essay on the invention they had researched. We followed the same routine to define "topic sentence"

and write topic sentences for each of the body paragraphs. Although some students seemed to understand and were writing, halfway through my lesson, one student raised his hand and said, “Ms. Bennion, I don’t get it. What is a thesis statement?” At this point several others chimed in and said they weren’t sure either about thesis statements.

I asked a few more questions to find out what they didn’t understand. Several students didn’t understand the difference between a topic sentence and a thesis statement and when to use which one. So I stopped them in their work and went back to the whiteboard. I had already given definitions and examples, which I repeated, but I racked my brain for some other way to illustrate what I wanted them to learn. My mind jumped back to the hamburger analogy that my cooperating teacher had mentioned. “It’s like a hamburger,” I said as I started drawing something vaguely resembling a Big Mac on the whiteboard with my red, blue, and green markers. On the topmost red blob (representing the top bun), I dotted a few sesame seeds and asked, “If your essay is like a hamburger, then what is your introduction like?” Several hands shot up while others shouted out, “the top bun!”

“Right,” I continued, “The top bun is the first thing you sink your teeth into in a burger, just like the introduction is the first thing your reader’s eyes hit when they read your essay.”

“What do they have to find in your introduction to know what’s coming in your essay?” I asked, hoping to emphasize the importance of the thesis statement. Only a few hands went up in response to this one, so I called on Carina, who always seemed to understand. She came through again with, “Your thesis statement.”

“Good! You could think of the thesis statement like what part of the burger?” I asked, wondering what the answer was myself and hoping that the analogy wasn’t making it more confusing.

Students shouted out several different answers: “the ketchup, tomatoes, mayonnaise.” I called on students one by one and accepted them all if the student could explain why. Several students used the reasoning that “the thesis statement is an important part of the introduction, just like the ketchup, mayonnaise, or tomatoes were part of the bun in a burger.” This seemed to be stretching things a bit, but if it worked for them, I let it be and continued on with the burger analogy working well for the rest of the five-paragraph essay. The body paragraphs are like the hamburger patty and the conclusion is like the bottom bun. By the time we finished our extended discussion of the analogy, they had a little time left in class to finish writing a thesis statement and topic sentences before leaving with an assignment to write the first draft for homework.

My cooperating teacher had been out of class for a conference that day and had missed the hamburger lesson. When she returned, she was impressed by what our students had produced. Virtually every student had written an essay about his/her invention using the five-paragraph essay structure. At first I was a little disappointed to see that almost every student copied the language from my example thesis statement and sample topic sentences

and substituted the name of their invention for the word “telephone” in my example. However, as my cooperating teacher and I reflected about this, we remembered that imitation is an important part of learning a language. Usually students imitate new linguistic structures and forms before they use them creatively to express their own meaning. In *The Process of Education*, Jerome Bruner distinguishes between “specific transfer” and “nonspecific transfer.” Our students had performed specific transfer, where they applied what they had learned to “tasks that are highly similar to those [they] originally learned to perform.” We planned to spend more time on the five-paragraph essay in January with the semester final exam. This time we would work on helping students engage in nonspecific transfer. According to Bruner, nonspecific transfer entails “learning initially, not a skill but a general idea, which can then be used as a basis for recognizing subsequent problems as special cases of the idea originally mastered.” We wanted our students to be able to apply this essay format to any subject.

Since all of our students have to pass a district writing competency test to graduate from high school, we decided to administer a practice writing competency test for the semester final. The district writing competency test requires students to respond to a simple prompt by writing an organized essay in a limited amount of time. In preparing for our final, we would revisit the five-paragraph essay and help students learn how this format works for timed writing. During the week preceding the exam, we spent time in class reviewing and practicing the different steps of the writing process that they had learned in December. We practiced reading the prompt well. We practiced clustering to generate and organize ideas. We practiced writing a draft and proofreading one’s own writing using a checklist, and we practiced rewriting.

Before we worked on writing a draft, I spent some time in class reviewing and expanding on my earlier lesson with the hamburger analogy. This time more students were able to participate in the discussion and help define the different parts of the essay (introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs, topic sentences, and conclusion). Some took out their notes from the hamburger analogy lesson and referred to them. This time, I gave at least two examples for each part of the essay as we defined it together, one that I wrote and one or two from students. As I wrote their examples on the board, I pointed out that there were many different, good ways of writing thesis statements and topic sentences. I highlighted some useful words to use in the different parts of the essay. I hoped that seeing more than one example would enable them to perform nonspecific transfer and express their own ideas using the five-paragraph format instead of just copying the language of the examples. This time, the drafts they wrote out of class showed a much greater variety of language use than did their first essays. They did peer editing in class, we made comments and suggestions, and when our students rewrote their essays, we were pleased and satisfied with the results.

For the final exam, they had to use all of the steps of the writing process that we had practiced to respond to the following prompt: describe the schools and the teachers in your country. To help them with the different steps, we provided them with worksheets for clustering, self-revision, and self-editing. The self-revision worksheet asked students to

write down their thesis statement and topic sentences so that they could check to be sure that they had included them in their essays. During the exam, about six of our eighteen students raised their hands while they were working on the self-revision worksheet. When I went to their desks to respond, one by one they asked me: “Ms. Bennion, I forgot, what’s a thesis statement?” When I reminded them, they all seemed to remember and said, “Oh yeah,” and resumed writing. About six of our students wrote clearly recognizable thesis statements in their essays, but almost every student wrote an essay with five paragraphs.

As I reflect about this, I wonder if those students who raised their hands during the exam really had forgotten what a thesis statement was or if they simply hadn’t understood it well in the first place. This was their first attempt to write an essay with a thesis statement where I didn’t respond to their first draft with specific questions and feedback before they rewrote it and turned it in. In their previous essays, had they only written thesis statements because I had made helpful comments and suggestions on their first drafts? Or were they capable of writing a thesis statement without my help?

Their responses during our class IRE discussions and their previous essays indicated that they grasped the idea of the five-paragraph format. I believe the problem for many students during the semester final came primarily from one of three things. First, the hamburger analogy was an inadequate representation to use unaccompanied by other forms of representation. Secondly, students had difficulty engaging in nonspecific transfer where the applicability of the format was not obvious. And thirdly, students were learning new terminology and skills for the first time and were still in need of practice when I administered the semester final.

If a hamburger is analogous to a five-paragraph essay, does the thesis statement correspond to the bun or the burger or the wrapper or the sauce? The main problem with the hamburger analogy lesson is that it was not clear in my mind how the analogy worked before I used it to teach my students. My mind seized on it in haste without considering it carefully. Although Donald A. Norman asserts that students learn by analogy, he also explains how important it is to carefully choose our models. If we are “explaining one poorly understood topic with the aid of another poorly understood topic,” we only make learning more difficult. Norman suggests that teachers use multiple models to illustrate various points about what is being taught since each student will interpret what they are being taught differently. If I were to teach this lesson again, I would think carefully about several analogies before teaching the lesson. For the hamburger, I think I would have the thesis statement correspond to the wrapper since it is what holds the essay together just as the wrapper holds a Big Mac together. I would be prepared with other analogies in mind to aid students who don’t understand the hamburger idea.

The initial lack of clarity with the hamburger model led to later difficulties with transfer. Although students were able to perform what Bruner calls “specific transfer,” and use the new format in a setting very similar to the one in which they originally learned it, they were unable to perform “nonspecific transfer” and apply the format to a new situation. Bruner explains the importance of building a good understanding of a concept before

students will be able to perform nonspecific transfer. He writes: “. . . in order for a person to be able to recognize the applicability or inapplicability of an idea to a new situation and to broaden his learning thereby, he must have clearly in mind the general nature of the phenomenon with which he is dealing.” Although the hamburger analogy lesson was followed by other lessons on the five-paragraph essay format, some of my students never had the “general nature” of the format clearly in their minds. On the final exam, I asked them to transfer the concept of the five-paragraph essay to an entirely new context. They also had much less scaffolding on the final exam since I couldn’t give them feedback until they turned in the final draft. Without teacher feedback and commentary, worksheets alone are not adequate scaffolding. I had not given my students opportunities to develop essay writing skills independently, so by using the essay as a final exam, I removed the scaffolding too abruptly and didn’t prepare them well to perform nonspecific transfer. Were I to do this again, I would give students many opportunities to practice independent essay writing throughout the academic year before using the format for an in-class assessment. As they practiced the skill they would develop a clearer understanding of the essay format and thesis statement and become prepared for nonspecific transfer.

In addition to preparing students to perform nonspecific transfer, repeated practice is an important part of learning new terminology and skills. Norman writes about the different stages of learning that a learner goes through before new knowledge becomes efficient. He estimates “that something like five thousand hours are required to become an expert on any topic.” Based on Norman’s description of the different stages of learning, “accretion,” “structuring,” and “tuning,” my students are in the accretion stage of learning. That is to say they are working on fitting new knowledge into “already established structures.” Norman explains that this stage is followed by structuring or “the forming of the right conceptual structures.” He says that for new knowledge to become “tuned,” students need to use their knowledge by practicing.

Essay writing is a skill that my students will be practicing for the rest of the academic year. Although the semester final was an exam, it was also formative assessment. Through it, I learned that my students need to continue to work on the five-paragraph essay and specifically on writing thesis statements. As we continue to write essays, I will provide more models for students to examine and analyze. I will ask them to read example essays and identify the different parts of the essay they have studied. Bruner explains that in the sciences and mathematics, curriculum can be designed in such a way as to permit the student to discover “the generalization that lies behind a particular mathematical operation.” By examining many examples of five-paragraph essays, I hope to enable my students to discover the generalization that is behind this format. As we read model thesis statements and topic sentences together, students will recognize and understand better the characteristics of good topic sentences and thesis statements. I will continue to ask them to identify their own thesis statements and topic sentences in their essays so they can become more independent writers and be better prepared to enter mainstream English classes. I hope all of them go on to college where, as they learn new ways to organize their writing, they will move past the simple five-paragraph essay format they learned in high school.

Notes

- 1 Bruner, Jerome. The Process of Education, p. 17.
- 2 Bruner, Jerome. The Process of Education, p. 17.
- 3 Norman, Donald A. "What Goes on in the Mind of the Learner" from New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Wilbert McKeachie, Editor, pp. 44-45.
- 4 Bruner, p. 18
- 5 Norman, p. 48
- 6 Norman, pp. 46 and 48
- 7 Bruner, p. 21

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