

Japanese EFL Students' Thesis Statement Production over the Course of a Semester: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper examines both student production and instructor correction of indirect and direct thesis statements in the ESL classroom. In a longitudinal case study over the course of a semester at a Japanese university, the researcher followed four students as they completed two online essay assignments in English. Using established criteria for a thesis statement, the researcher evaluated each student's submission and determined whether or not their thesis statement could be considered valid. Results showed that students initially wrote indirect thesis statements that lacked an argument or failed to address the prompt, but that with several rounds of corrective feedback, most were able to produce valid thesis statements. In the second essay, students struggled to write direct thesis statements due to the added syntactic complexity and student-teacher misunderstandings, but by the end, half were able to produce valid thesis statements.

Keywords

Thesis Statement, English, Essay, Writing, ESL, EFL

1. Introduction

In various ESL textbooks, the thesis statement has been defined as the central argument of the typical five-paragraph essay (Wink, 2020; Ward & Gramer, 2015) and is typically the last sentence of the introduction (Moore & Cassel, 2010). If it includes the specific points to be argued in the body of the essay, it is considered a *direct* thesis statement, whereas if it only contains the topic and general position, it is considered an *indirect* thesis statement (Folse et al., 2020). Further, the thesis statement must be arguable; that is, it must allow for reasonable disagreement and not present a mere statement of fact (Tanko & Tamasi, 2008; Wink, 2020).

Alotaibi (2014) supports the primacy of the thesis statement, calling it "one of the most important elements in writing" (p. 233) and regarding it as a crucial waypoint by which readers can navigate the ensuing thought process of the writer. While most scholars accept the five-paragraph essay, fronted by the thesis statement, as the standard genre for rhetorical writing in the ESL classroom, it nonetheless has its detractors. The two main criticisms seem to be that the format is overly prescriptive and only marginally authentic. Duxbury (2008), for example, considers it somewhat oppressive, stating, "The five-paragraph essay is not an inherently incorrect form. However, it is destructive in that students are not ever allowed to discover if the form fits the meaning they seek to make" (p. 18). Additionally, Schmeer (2014) held up blog posts as examples of real-world composition and suggested that students do more of this type of practical writing instead of essay writing.

At issue with like-minded critics is often the use of deductive over inductive reasoning. In deductive reasoning, the central point comes at the beginning of the argument, as is the case with the five-paragraph essay, while with inductive

reasoning, the central point comes at the end, as in the blog posts discussed by Schneer (2014). Blog posts, however, represent only one example of inductive reasoning; there are many others—ones more germane to this article—including the argumentative writing seen in the L1 of numerous different cultures, particularly those of East Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

To better understand such cultural differences, scholars have examined contrastive rhetoric, in which the discourse norms of one culture are viewed vis-a-vis the norms of another. Contrastive rhetoric (CR) developed in the mid-1960s when linguist Robert Kaplan published a seminal paper in which he coined the term and laid out the discourse patterns of five linguistic families in simple linear sketches (Kaplan, 1966). In essence, he reasoned that the patterns of some languages, particularly English, take a direct (deductive) route through the argument, while others, such as Japanese, Arabic and Russian, take an indirect (inductive) route. As one would expect, such differences often play a role in the organizational shortcomings of ESL student essays.

2. Literature Review

Much of the literature on ESL student thesis statements has focused on CR and the tendency for students to use inductive rather than deductive reasoning. Other studies, however, have brought to light ancillary shortcomings, in particular, missing support for the thesis statement in the body paragraphs, as well as thesis statements that present vague or inarguable ideas. Also, research specific to Japanese ELLs has revealed that these students, in addition to experiencing the above issues, tend to focus on grammar to the detriment of the readability of the essay and receive feedback that is either too critical or ineffective.

2.1 Inductive Reasoning across Cultures

Alotaibi (2014) and Uba and Souidi (2020) looked at the English-language essays of students in Saudi Arabia and Oman respectively and found that the participants either omitted or delayed the thesis statement. In the former study, half of the students omitted the thesis statement while the other half placed it in the middle or conclusion, with the author noting that the result may be due to L1 interference, i.e., using Arab rhetorical conventions in the L2 essay. In the latter study, 38 percent of the students omitted the thesis statement, with the author attributing the omission more to genre unfamiliarity than cultural interference.

In Iran, Hassani (2006) contrasted essays published in Persian and English and found that the Persian essays possessed more abstract introductions that delayed or omitted the thesis statement while the English essays bore more concrete, i.e., linear, introductions that included the thesis statement at the end. “This verifies,” the author concluded, “that there is a major difference between the rhetorical conventions of the two languages” (p. 63). Khodabondev et al. (2013) reported similar findings, stating that Persian writing students unfamiliar with western rhetorical conventions delayed their thesis statements in both their L1 and L2 essays; however, after being introduced to the genre, they then wrote L1 and L2 essays deductively, suggesting that Persians find the inductive pattern to be more intuitive – the style they would default to in a pedagogical vacuum.

Japanese argumentative writing also exhibits an inductive pattern called *Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu*, which is borrowed from the traditional Chinese style of narration known as *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He*, in which the main point is not introduced until the middle of the essay (Hinds, 1983). More specifically, in *Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu* the gist of the piece comes in the *Ten*, or third stage, where the narrative jags from the previous two stages, resulting in what Miyake (1995) calls a “guessing game,” where readers are initially left to speculate what the essay is really about. Hinds (1990) calls *Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu* a “delayed introduction of purpose” and considers it “quasi-inductive” (as referenced in Kubota, 1998).

Curiously, research has shown that contemporary Chinese academic writing more often than not proceeds deductively. Liu and Furneaux (2013), for instance, in comparing the L1 essay writing of Chinese students, found that they placed the thesis statement at the beginning of the discourse. The finding flies in the face of *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-He* and indicates, according to the authors, “the dynamic nature of writing practices” while contesting “any static and essentialist view of rhetorical practice in different languages and cultures” (p. 82). This evolution may also lead to a positive transfer of L1 conventions to the L2, for as Fang, Yu and Cheng (2020) found in examining the English essays of EFL students at a Chinese university, most of the students produced a deductive style of writing.

Russian essay writing also generally lacks a deductive pattern. Petrić (2005) found, for instance, that 68 percent of Russian EFL students either omitted or delayed the thesis statement in their English essays. The author provides contrasting reasons for this, including a tendency in Slavic culture to work up to the main point while valuing “baroque” (i.e., abstract) writing, as well as the students’ lack of familiarity with the genre. However, after the students received instruction in western rhetoric, 84 percent of the ensuing essays displayed deductive reasoning, implying that the original outcome resulted more from genre unfamiliarity than L1 interference.

Research has also been conducted on the rhetorical patterns of EFL writing students from various other countries. Husin and Ariffin (2012), for instance, found that most Malaysian students employed an inductive approach in their argumentative essays, choosing to imply the thesis rather than state it. Owusu and Adade-Yeboah (2014), meanwhile, reported that 87 percent of Ghanaian business students omitted thesis statements in their essays due to genre unfamiliarity and the tendency for business writing to be streamlined and to the point. Similarly, Katiya et al. (2015), found that South African chemistry students also omitted the thesis statement due to genre unfamiliarity, suggesting that critical language and literacy skills are lacking in STEM curricula.

2.2 Lack of Thesis Support

Another issue found in EFL essays is that even when students placed a thesis statement in the introduction, the body failed to provide the necessary support. Reasons for this vary, but research indicates that it is primarily due to a combination of underdeveloped critical thinking skills (Katiya et al., 2015; Anunurrahman et al., 2017; Uba & Souidi, 2020), genre unfamiliarity (Fang, Yu, & Cheng, 2020; Miller & Pessoa, 2016) and linguistic limitations (Amiri & Puteh, 2017; Setyowati, 2016). As for why students lack critical thinking skills, Katiya et al. (2015) stated that post-secondary students who choose a science-focused curriculum may simply not be exposed to enough rhetorical material. That is, if learners are continually reminded of the virtues of objectivity and neutrality, as science students are, they might have difficulty suddenly expressing an opinion and supporting it. Regarding genre unfamiliarity, Fang, Yu and Cheng (2020) found that inexperienced essay writers were able to support their thesis statement with a body paragraph that contained an appropriate topic sentence, but that the rest of the paragraph failed to support the topic sentence, suggesting that the students struggled more with essay structure than critical thinking. Third, in discussing linguistic difficulties, Amiri and Puteh (2017) found that Iranian student essays failed to support the thesis in part because the students “developed meaningless sentences,” while Setyowati (2016) reported that when students struggled to understand a short story in English, their accompanying argumentative essays lacked pertinent support, as well as a firm grasp of the narrative.

2.3 Errors within the Thesis Statement

To this point, the discussion has addressed the thesis statement in the context of the rest of the essay. However, in isolation, the thesis can suffer from rhetorical weaknesses, as well, such as being too vague (Miller & Pessoa, 2016; Wijaya, 2017) or being a mere statement of fact (Ferreira, 2007; Owusu & Adade-Yeboah, 2014). Regarding reasons for the former, in many cases the writer lacks the topical knowledge to make a strong assertion. Miller and Pessoa (2016), for instance, examined EFL student essays on complex political philosophies, such as Hammurabi’s Code and Machiavellian principles, and found many of the thesis statements to be non-committal. The authors suggested that topic intricacy hampered the overall quality of the essays, adding, “Subject-area knowledge generally precedes control over genre form” (p. 871). Wijaya (2017) similarly addressed the tautological reasoning of students’ thesis statements on the legality of marijuana and prostitution and concluded, “students’ topical knowledge greatly influenced their ability in narrowing the focus of discussion in their thesis statement” (n.p.). As for statements of fact, both Ferreira (2007) and Owusu and Adade-Yeboah (2014) found that students presented theses that at first glance appeared to be arguable, but in fact were not, attributing the shortcoming primarily to genre unfamiliarity. As solutions, Ferreira proposed that teachers sufficiently model essays during the pre-writing stage while Owusu and Adade-Yeboah suggested that universities provide adequate essay writing assessments across the curricula.

EFL students also make grammatical errors in their thesis statement, and one of the most commonly-reported mistakes is the use of modals (Anunurrahman, 2017; Hadiani, 2013), which is understandable since writers often rely on words like “should,” “must,” and “may” to argue the main points of an essay. A second commonly reported error is faulty parallelism. Hadiani (2013), for instance, found that students either omitted or failed to fully conjugate sets of verbs while Katiya et al. (2015) noted that in one quasi-thesis statement the writer had linked two disparate clauses. While the former study did not report any reader confusion due to the mistakes, the latter did, suggesting that teachers ought to encourage students to look beyond just discrete point errors when checking their work.

2.4 Additional Japanese Thesis Statement Issues

Aside from making many of the above errors, Japanese ESL writers face additional hurdles related to production and feedback. Kubota (1998) and McKinley (2013), for instance, noted that Japanese students are often so preoccupied with form that they overlook the organization of the essay, and because they lack the requisite linguistic skills, they rely on dictionaries and software to produce every sentence of the essay. The result is that the prose often appears stilted and artificial. Regarding peer feedback, Rinnert and Kobayashi (2001) found that while most Japanese students are capable of asking broad questions on the content of classmates’ essays, their ability to identify and edit rhetorical and structural

errors is often lacking. “This lack of sophistication,” they add, “may explain why some teachers have reservations about the effectiveness of peer feedback” (p. 202). Regarding instructor feedback, the researchers observed that Japanese EFL instructors tended to be much more critical of students’ essay writing than native English-speaking instructors. For instance, thesis statements considered problematic to Japanese instructors would otherwise be acceptable to native English-speaking instructors.

2.4.1 Instrument

The four students’ thesis statements were evaluated using criteria presented by Wink (2020), Moore and Cassel (2010), and Folse et al. (2020). Specifically, an indirect thesis statement must: (1) include a topic and arguable statement (“controlling idea”), (2) represent the main idea of the paper, (3) be a single, complete sentence, (4) be the final sentence of the introduction. A direct thesis statement, meanwhile, must possess the above criteria as well as the main points to be argued in the body of the paper.

2.4.2 The Course

The course was a 15-week integrated skills course called Introduction to Social Sciences II that met in person twice a week for 90 minutes each class. Prior to the course, most students had never heard of the thesis statement, and an informal survey revealed that none were familiar with English essay structure. The semester prior, they had taken Introduction to Social Sciences I and had learned how to write a single argumentative paragraph containing a topic sentence, support and concluding sentence. The present course included two major essay-writing assignments that were completed in four steps each. After each step, the students received written feedback from the instructor.

2.4.3 Participants

The participants, four first-year students in the College of Foreign Studies at Kansai Gaidai, were selected based on their early struggles with the thesis statement as well as the likelihood that they would complete all of the assignments in this study. Two of them, Nanaho and Kirari, are female, and the other two, Shota and Koji, are male.

2.4.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What rhetorical and grammatical errors do Japanese students make when constructing the thesis statement?
- 2) How does corrective feedback help or hinder Japanese students during the revision of their thesis statements?

3. Methodology

3.1 First Essay

Before the first essay, students were instructed on the elements of the five-paragraph essay, with particular attention being given to the introduction. After the instructor explained and modeled the hook, background and thesis statement of the introduction, students watched a brief tutorial for ESL writers that reinforced this information.

The prompt for the first essay was: *What is one of the riskiest things that you’ve ever done? Explain the action and why it was risky.*

Because this was the students’ first attempt at essay writing, the instructor asked the students to produce an indirect thesis statement. That is, they were not required to include explicit reasons why the action was risky in the thesis statement. Instead, they only had to mention the action and the fact that it was extremely risky.

1.1: After brainstorming and completing an outline, students submitted their introduction via Blackboard by entering the three sections (hook, background, and thesis statement) in separate text boxes.

1.2: After receiving feedback primarily on the organization of their introductions, students submitted revised introductions and completed body paragraphs in separate text boxes.

1.3: After receiving grammatical and organizational feedback on the introduction and body paragraphs, students uploaded the first draft of their completed essay.

1.4: After receiving grammatical and organizational feedback on their completed essays, the students submitted the second and final draft of their essays.

3.2 Second Essay

Before the second essay, the teacher reviewed the conventions of the English language essay, and then modeled the brainstorming, outlining and writing of the introduction.

The prompt for the essay was: *Should Kansai Gaidai advertise at Koshien Stadium? Why or why not?*

Note: Koshien Stadium is a famous baseball stadium in Osaka, Japan. It is the home of the Hanshin Tigers of the

Japanese Professional League as well as the venue of the semiannual Japanese high school baseball tournament. Kansai Gaidai has, in the past, advertised at the stadium and students were shown a photo of the signage.

For this essay, students were required to write a direct thesis statement. Consequently, when modeling the introduction, the instructor demonstrated parallelism, pointing out its importance to the cohesion and readability of the essay.

2.1: After completing an outline, students uploaded the following items in separate text boxes: hook, background, three reasons, and direct thesis statement.

2.2: After students received primarily organizational feedback, they submitted draft one of their essays.

2.3: After receiving organizational and grammatical feedback, students submitted draft two of their essays.

2.4: After receiving organizational and grammatical feedback, students submitted the final draft of their essays.

4. Results

4.1 Nanaho: First Essay

For 1.1, Nanaho wrote the thesis statement in three sentences:

And on the day of the exam, I went to the college alone. But I got lost on the way. It was the most dangerous event for me.

Additionally, her controlling idea, that the event was “dangerous,” does not fully address the prompt, which asked the students to discuss the biggest risk they had taken. The thesis, then, is somewhat implied. She received the following feedback: *Thesis statement must only be one sentence, and it must mention a risk that you took, so re-write.*

For 1.2, while Nanaho revised the thesis statement so it was only one sentence, she continued to avoid addressing the prompt: *It was the most dangerous thing that I lost my way and was almost late for the exam.*

It’s possible that she equated “danger” with “risk,” but while risk involves human agency, danger may not. Consequently, she received the following feedback: *Re-write. What's "it"? ... All thesis statements must have the same basic controlling idea (claim) – that what you did was risky. So, you must mention the word “risk” here.*

For 1.3, the first draft of the essay, Nanaho correctly placed the thesis statement at the end of the introduction. She also changed the order of the clauses but did not amend her controlling idea: *I lost my way and was almost late for the exam, and it was the most dangerous thing.*

At this point in the process, the instructor allowed the sentence with its faulty controlling idea to stand. He did, however, provide an explicit correction, adding “I’ve ever done” to the end of the sentence to imply that it was her decision to do the dangerous thing.

For 1.4, Nanaho added the explicit correction, making no other revisions, so her final thesis statement read: *I lost my way and was almost late for the exam, and it was the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done.*

In conclusion, by writing “it was the most dangerous thing,” Nanaho didn’t quite address the prompt but nonetheless created an arguable statement and therefore produced a valid indirect thesis statement.

4.2 Kirari: First Essay

For 1.1, Kirari did not write what could be considered a thesis statement, instead providing five sentences of background information:

Do you know what deer like? It is Shika-sembei. They sell for visitors to interact with deer. So, i bought them. Then, many deers ran vigorously around me.

Her thesis statement is vaguely implied, however, and in a correctly written introduction it would come immediately after what she had written. She received the following feedback: *This is not a thesis statement. The thesis statement is one sentence that includes your topic (feeding deer?) and controlling idea (doing this was a big risk?).*

For 1.2, Kirari revised her thesis statement so that it was one sentence and contained both a topic and controlling idea: *One of the biggest risks I have ever taken was that I was attacked by deers, when I fed them.*

However, the controlling idea is problematic in that, similar to Nanaho, she does not convey human agency, only that she was attacked by deer. Thus, the risk is still implied. At this point, the instructor provided an explicit correction, giving her the sentence structure that would convey human agency: *Change to: One of the biggest risks I have ever taken was feeding wild deer.*

For 1.3 and 1.4, Kirari used the sentence provided in the above feedback and placed it at the end of the introduction for both drafts of her essay. As a result, she did not receive any feedback. Thus, her final thesis statement was: *One of the biggest risks I have ever taken was feeding wild deer.*

To conclude, with the instructor’s explicit correction she was able to produce a valid indirect thesis statement.

4.3 Shota: First Essay

For 1.1, Shota provided what he believed to be the thesis statement, but in fact only included the topic – his decision to climb Mt. Fuji:

I had finally decided to climb Mt. Fuji with my father because it is the highest mountain in Japan.

Similar to Kirari and Nanaho, his controlling idea is implied since portions of the sentence, such as “had finally decided” and “highest mountain in Japan” suggest that there was significant risk involved. Unlike Kirari and Nanaho, however, he included the necessary human agency, indicating that he both understood the assignment and the meaning of the word “risk.”

He received the following feedback: *The thesis statement always has two things: topic and controlling idea. You have the topic, deciding to climb Mt. Fuji with your father, but you're missing the controlling idea, that this was a very risky decision. Re-write.*

For 1.2, Shota submitted an amended thesis statement that included both the topic and controlling idea: *However, I finally decided to climb Mt. Fuji with my father, and this was one of the riskiest decision I have ever made.*

He received the following feedback: *Good.* The instructor chose not to comment on the discrete point errors, such as “riskiest,” as grammatical accuracy would be assessed with the first full draft.

For 1.3, Shota fixed the grammatical errors on his own and correctly placed the following thesis statement at the end of the introduction: *However, I finally decided to climb Mt. Fuji with my father, and that was one of the riskiest decisions I have ever made.*

As the student had mentioned Mt. Fuji at the end of the previous sentence, he received explicit correction to replace “Mt. Fuji” with “it”.

For 1.4, Shota curiously deleted “Mt. Fuji” rather than replace it with “it,” rendering the thesis statement slightly more awkward. Thus, his final thesis statement was: *However, I finally decided to climb with my father, and that was one of the riskiest decisions I have ever made.*

Out of context, the sentence suggests that climbing in general was a risky decision. However, as the student had mentioned Mt. Fuji in previous sentences, it was clear that he meant that climbing Mt. Fuji was a risky decision. Ultimately, then, he was able to produce a sentence that met the requirements of an indirect thesis statement.

4.4 Koji: First Essay

For 1.1, Koji submitted two sentences that cannot be considered a thesis statement, either explicit or implied:

Do I have to change my university for my future or keep studying English for KGU? I decided to keep studying English for KGU.

He received the following feedback: *Your topic is deciding to keep studying English for KGU. However, you're missing your controlling idea – that this was the riskiest thing you've ever done. ... Also, the thesis statement is always ONE sentence.*

For 1.2, Koji revised the excerpt so that it contained the controlling idea but continued to include two sentences: *Do I have to study math for national university or study English hard for KGU? I decided to study English hard for KGU, and this decision was one of the most reckless and riskiest decisions all my life.*

Since the second sentence could be considered a proper thesis statement, the first sentence became superfluous. The instructor made the following comments: *Delete first sentence. The thesis must be one sentence only.*

For 1.3, Koji deleted the superfluous sentence and provided the following thesis statement at the end of the introduction: *I decided to study English hard for KGU, and this decision was one of the most reckless and riskiest decisions all my life.*

The instructor overlooked the awkward use of “decisions all my life” and instead focused on essay cohesion, instructing Koji to “*add a transition.*”

For 1.4, Koji added a coordinating conjunction at the beginning of the sentence, rendering it a fragment, and thus diminishing the quality of the writing. Consequently, his final thesis was: *So I decided to study English hard for KGU, and this decision was one of the most reckless and riskiest decisions all my life.*

In summary, Koji’s sentence in 1.3 met the criteria for an indirect thesis statement. However, his final submission constituted a fragment and thus cannot be considered a valid thesis statement.

4.5 Nanaho: Second Essay

For 2.1, Nanaho submitted the following thesis statement:

I agree that spending money on Koshien is a wise investment, as advertising in Koshien is an effective way to in-

crease name recognition.

It contains the topic (“spending money on Koshien”) and controlling idea (“is a wise investment”), but she only included one of the three reasons. However, because she had provided the three reasons in a separate text box of the same submission, the instructor understood that she grasped the assignment as a whole. Consequently, she received the following feedback: *Re-write: you must include all three reasons in one sentence.*

For 2.2, Nanaho revised her thesis statement so that it contained what appeared to be two main points:

I agree that spending money on Koshien is a wise investment because Koshien is a famous stadium near the university, and the baseball stadium sign boards are more noticeable than other sports.

The points, however, were somewhat lacking in salience. For example, Koshien Stadium may be a famous stadium, but how does this fact support the claim that investing in advertising there is a good idea. She correctly placed the thesis statement at the end of the introduction and received the following feedback: *Re-write so that your three points are clear.*

For 2.3, Nanaho edited her thesis statement by parsing out the same information into three quasi-identifiable reasons:

I agree that spending money on Koshien is a wise investment because Koshien is famous and close to the university, and it stands out more than other sports sign boards.

However, it was only in the ensuing draft that the instructor understood that “famous and close to the university” constituted two reasons, not one, so he provided the following feedback: *Your 3 points are unclear.*

For 2.4, Nanaho did not make any revisions to her thesis statement. The instructor, now aware that “famous and close to the university” constituted two reasons, provided an explicit correction on her paper, replacing “and” with a comma and roughly serializing the three reasons.

Nonetheless, despite the minor readability issue, Nanaho’s sentence met the criteria of a direct thesis statement.

4.6 Kirari: Second Essay

For 2.1, Kirari provided a thesis statement with a controlling idea that roughly summarized the three main points she had provided in separate text boxes:

Kansai Gaidai should advertise at Koshien, because baseball games that take place there is visible to many people.

It is possible that she did not realize that the thesis statement required her to provide the three reasons, and in keeping with the practice of focusing on organization, the instructor overlooked the grammatical errors and provided the following feedback: *Re-write; this sentence must contain the three main points from above.*

For 2.2, Kirari provided the three main points, but she did so in five sentences and without any ostensible attempt to work the information into the fewest number of sentences:

I think that spending money to advertise at Koshien Stadium is smart investing. I have three reasons. First, more people will know about KGU through advertising. Second, advertising can easily and simply give information about KGU to high school students and so on. Finally, one sign has a big impact, so it will be a big cost reduction.

Additionally, her introduction was missing the hook and nearly all background information. She received the following feedback: *This must be one sentence.*

Though the instructor suspected that Kirari, in fact, did not know how to serialize her three points in a single sentence, he refrained from providing a lengthier comment or explicit correction because not only had the class analyzed a direct thesis, but the instructor had modeled writing one on two occasions. Also, he had impressed on students to take initiative and contact him if there was something that they didn’t understand, and several students had done so.

For 2.3, Kirari regressed further. Her introduction still lacked a hook and most background information, and she swung in the other direction by shortening the thesis statement to:

I think that spending money to advertise at Koshien Stadium is smart investing.

Additionally, the thesis statement was placed as the third to last sentence in the introduction. These miscues, combined with other structural errors throughout the essay, suggested that Kirari lacked the focus to produce a high-quality essay. The instructor refrained from commenting specifically on the thesis statement and instead remarked on the introduction as a whole: *Poor introduction. Missing background information and main points.*

For 2.4, Kirari used the same thesis statement as above but positioned it as the second sentence in the introduction. The remaining three sentences, however, could roughly be considered a hook and background information since she included a quote about advertising and then introduced the topic, moving from general to specific. Consequently, the instructor, expecting, but not finding, an ensuing thesis statement, provided a short comment: *Missing thesis statement.* It was only in post hoc analysis that the instructor realized that the thesis had been included in the submission.

In sum, because Kirari’s thesis statement lacked her three main points and was positioned in the middle of the introduction, it cannot be considered a valid direct thesis statement.

4.7 Shota: Second Essay

For 2.1, Shota included all the required elements of a direct thesis statement:

I think that Kansai Gaidai should advertise at Koshien Stadium each year because there are mainly three advantages for Kansai Gaidai by spending money at Koshien Stadium in terms of development of Koshien Stadium's service, improvement of Koshien Stadium's facility and encouragement of applicants for admission.

Unfortunately, he misunderstood the assignment and rather than argue how Kansai Gaidai's advertisement would benefit the university, he argued how it would benefit Koshien Stadium. The instructor ignored syntactical errors and provided the following feedback: *Basically, good. Nice long sentence. However, you must change your points. This essay is about how advertising helps KGU, not Koshien Stadium.*

For 2.2, Shota revised his thesis statement so that it properly addressed the prompt and correctly placed it at the end of the introduction:

I think that Kansai Gaidai should advertise at Koshien Stadium each year because there are mainly three advantages for Kansai Gaidai by spending money at Koshien Stadium when it comes to increasing applicants for admission and for teacher and even employment rate.

However, it contained cohesion and readability issues. First, there's redundancy in "should advertise" vis-à-vis "advantages ... by spending money," and second, the absence of parallelism in his controlling idea renders his three points unclear.

The instructor provided both explicit corrections and directive feedback. To improve cohesion, he jotted the conjunctive adverb "Further" at the beginning of the sentence and replaced "advertise" with "continue advertising." In addressing syntactical weaknesses, he highlighted the sentence from "because" onwards and wrote: *Re-write. Simplify.*

With his brief comment, the instructor was giving Shota wide latitude to correct the sentence as he saw fit despite concerns whether he possessed the necessary metalinguistic skills to do so. In a dedicated writing course, the instructor perhaps would have provided more detailed feedback, but in an integrated skills course he notated in a more cursory manner. Thus, while he hoped for perfection, the instructor realistically only expected modest improvement.

For 2.3, Shota, perhaps confused over what the instructor meant by "simplify," deleted the three points in his controlling idea and submitted an indirect thesis statement instead:

I think that Kansai Gaidai should advertise at Koshien Stadium each year because there are several advantages for Kansai Gaidai.

The attempt may also represent a certain hedging – submitting a safe yet insufficient sentence rather than a lengthier one that could only make the problem worse. Students were receiving grades for each submission, and it is possible that Shota felt comfortable losing points on the thesis statement knowing that he would make them up in other parts of the paper. Indeed, he performed well overall on the assignment. He received the following feedback: *Unacceptable. Must state 3 reasons.*

For 2.4, Shota improved his thesis statement by making the explicit corrections and reinstating his three points in a more coherent way. There also appeared to be an attempt at parallelism:

I think that Kansai Gaidai should advertise at Koshien Stadium each year because there are several advantages for Kansai Gaidai in that it will be able to encourage the number of applicants for admission and teaching positions and the rate of employment.

However, issues with repetition and readability persisted, and since this was the final draft, the instructor simply drew a line through "there are several advantages for Kansai Gaidai in that" while highlighting "encourage the number of applicants for admission and teaching positions and the rate of employment" and jotting: *Better. More clear. But meaning awkward.*

In conclusion, Shota's sentence, despite some readability issues, met the requirements of a direct thesis statement.

4.8 Koji: Second Essay

For 2.1, Koji submitted the following:

Koshien Stadium is one of the most famous stadia in Japan, so KGU should take advantage of its popularity.

He did not directly address the prompt, which was to say whether or not the university should advertise at Koshien Stadium. Instead, he offered a more oblique stance – that the university should "take advantage" of the stadium. More importantly, however, he omitted his three main reasons and, as a result, received the following feedback: *Weak; thesis must contain your three reasons why.*

For 2.2, Koji submitted a thesis statement at the end of the introduction that now directly addressed the prompt and contained two of his main points:

Consequently, KGU should make advertisements in Koshien Stadium because Koshien Stadium is one of the most famous places in Japan and KGU can get benefits from advertising in Koshien Stadium.

Despite the tautological reasoning (he argues that one of the benefits is getting benefits), the instructor focused on the missing main points and wrote: *Must mention your three points*

For 2.3 and 2.4, Koji made no further changes. It is possible that, like Shota, he had decided to hedge his grade, that is, take the safe, if lower, score on his paper rather than spend time and effort to produce a less correct thesis statement that would lose him even more points. Consequently, for 2.3 and 2.4, the instructor wrote, “*Missing 3 clear points. I only see 2,*” and “*Did not fix,*” respectively.

In sum, Koji stood pat on his sentence despite directives to improve it and therefore did not produce a valid direct thesis statement.

5. Discussion

By the end of the first essay, three of the four students were able to produce a valid indirect thesis statement. Only Koji was unable to do so since he created a sentence fragment in his final draft, but his example met the requirements of a thesis statement in every other way. At the beginning, the most common error was that none of the students adequately addressed the prompt, with their thesis statements either being implied or omitted altogether. During the revision process, the instructor focused on these organizational errors first and moved on to grammatical ones as he saw fit. Regarding feedback type, the instructor provided mostly didactic comments and directives, along with a few explicit corrections. There appeared to be few misunderstandings, and the feedback seemed to significantly help – as opposed to interfere with – student progress.

By the end of the second essay, in contrast, only two of the four students were able to produce a valid direct thesis statement. That students were less successful at producing a direct thesis statement, with its added complexity, comes as little surprise. Students were being asked not only to include the three main points of their argument, but to distill them into short phrases that would fit into a single sentence. Concepts like serialization and parallelism, though reviewed and modeled for the assignment, appeared to be a bit beyond their grasp and resulted in thesis statements that either omitted or obscured the main points. The instructor provided the same types of feedback as in the first essay, but to more varied effect, due in part to apparent confusion between student and teacher. With Nanaho, for instance, the instructor repeatedly asked her to include the three points in her thesis statement despite them having been there all along. With Kirari, the instructor provided directives which resulted in her either submitting multiple sentences with all of her main points or one sentence with none of them. Similarly, Shota deleted the three points in his thesis statement after being instructed to “simplify.” Simply put, instructor feedback at times appeared ineffectual.

Somewhat surprisingly, the instructor made few form-focused comments or suggestions across the two assignments. Certainly, grammatical errors existed, but overall, he left them to the students to detect and correct. The reason for this may lie in that he had determined to address organizational errors before grammatical ones, and since many students required the full four drafts to produce a well-organized thesis statement, he simply ran out of time.

One of the issues that occurred in both of the assignments was that students failed to address the prompt, behavior that may have cultural underpinnings. If a thesis statement with a clear stance constitutes deductive reasoning, then perhaps one with only an oblique reference to the stance represents inductive reasoning, a rhetorical pattern favored by the Japanese. For instance, in the first essay, none of the students initially wrote thesis statements in which they gave their opinion on the biggest risk that they had taken. Nanaho and Kirari, the two females, instead discussed incidents that *happened* to them, while Shota and Koji, the two males, discussed their decisions but neglected to mention that they were risky. Early in the second essay, however, all of the students except Koji employed deductive reasoning, suggesting that they had become more aware of the rhetorical conventions of English essay writing. Even Koji, in his second attempt, fixed his thesis statement so that it addressed the prompt and provided a clear opinion about advertising at Koshien Stadium.

A second cultural reason for failing to address the prompt may have to do with attitudes toward risk. In the first essay, after the teacher had introduced the prompt and modeled the outline, he asked students to brainstorm the topic, i.e., come up with a significant risk they had taken. In the course of the 15-minute activity, while all of the males had been able to recall an instance, a handful of female students could not. In fact, they had solicited help from the teacher because they simply could not think of a time they had taken a risk – *any* risk. The question, then, is whether they indeed had never taken a risk, which seems unlikely, or that they had, but did not want to admit as much to themselves or others.

The answer may lie in the fact that Japanese society values uncertainty avoidance – that is, shying away from scenarios in which the outcome is uncertain (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994), and since risk involves great uncertainty, it would

make sense for Japanese to avoid it whenever possible. In Japanese culture, such avoidance may also mark a Japanese female as being a good citizen – someone who is responsible, considerate, and self-reliant – and thus be a source of pride (Lebra, 1985). Why, then, would a Japanese woman want to *admit* to taking a risk? In fact, they could probably proudly come up with hundreds of instances in which they hadn't taken one, and in the extreme argue they had *never* taken one! This is probably what the women in the present study would have preferred to write about. This is all speculative, however, and future researchers may want to observe how gender roles affect rhetorical writing patterns, especially in East Asian countries.

Another reason why the students neglected to address the prompt in the first essay may be that they did not quite understand the meaning of the word “risk,” that it indicates human agency. Though the instructor had explained the prompt and modeled the thesis statement, perhaps he should have spent more time defining and providing examples of risk. Nonetheless, students could have made use of their translators or dictionaries and gotten a clear understanding of the word if they had wanted to.

Finally, on a few occasions, students refrained from fixing errors despite being asked to do so. With Nanaho's second essay, confusion clearly played a role as she was asked to add information that she had already provided. However, with Kirari and Koji's second essays, the reasons appear less clear. Kirari re-wrote her introduction but made no changes to the flawed thesis statement while Koji twice stood pat with his incomplete attempt. Could these inactions be attributed to confusion alone? In neither case did the instructor issue a clear directive, such as, “Add three main points to your thesis statement,” but merely wrote that the points were “missing.” It is feasible that the students did not feel they needed to take any action if they did not receive a directive.

Another possible reason is that the students were practicing “grade hedging,” in which they accepted a loss of points for inaction but avoided a potentially greater loss by making a flawed sentence even worse. In the background of these assignments stood the grading, and the students, with other courses and assignments to tend to, had likely apportioned an amount of time to spend on each assignment along with an acceptable grade range for their efforts. One of the weaknesses of graded process writing is that it does not encourage hypothesis testing, where the student tries out new (and often incorrect) ways of expressing themselves. Rather, the instructor always wants to see *improvement* over previous drafts, so the students tend to play it safe and submit work that is only cautiously and incrementally different.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the progress of four Japanese students, Nanaho, Kirari, Shota and Koji, as they produced thesis statements for two essays over the course of a semester. In their first attempt, none of the students could formulate an indirect thesis statement that met the criteria established by Wink (2020) and Moore and Cassel (2010). Initial errors included writing more than one sentence and omitting an arguable statement. Whether the omissions were due to cultural interference, specifically the use of inductive reasoning as favored in Japan, remains to be seen, and is beyond the scope of this paper, but research shows that East Asian students tend to delay the thesis statement when writing in their L1. By the fourth iteration, and with the aid of teacher feedback, however, three of the four students were able to write a proper thesis statement. Analysis of the feedback reveals that the instructor focused on organizational errors before grammatical ones, which, while instilling in students the prescriptive nature of the thesis statement, nonetheless resulted in some grammatical errors going unfixed. The instructor, however, was hesitant to dedicate any more than four passes to the assignment for fear of monotony setting in. Further, in an integrated skills course, the reality is that sometimes the instructor must simply move on.

In their second essay, only one student, Shota, could produce a proper direct thesis statement on the first attempt. His submission, however, failed to address the prompt and he was instructed to do a substantive re-write. Common errors found in the early iterations included writing more than one sentence and omitting the three main points of the essay. Students struggled to find that “happy medium” in which they supplied all of the required information, but in a single sentence. Shota and Kirari in particular yo-yoed between writing thesis statements that were essentially too long and too short. One improvement over the first essay was that all of the students provided an arguable statement on the first pass, suggesting that they had picked up on both the prescriptive nature and deductive reasoning inherent in essay writing. However, by the end of the assignment, only half of them were able to produce a correct direct thesis statement, with two students standing pat on insufficient examples for reasons that remain unclear. However, it is possible that they had employed grade hedging, a practice by which a student ignores a teacher's directive so that they avoid making a flawed sentence even worse.

Additionally, as with the first essay, the instructor's feedback focused on organizational errors over grammatical ones. Indeed, he found few errors with items such as tense and subject-verb agreement, and instead made edits for the sake of cohesion. That said, some feedback illustrated the confusion that can exist between teacher and student, especially when

addressing serialization. Nanaho, for example, was told to add a main point that she had already included. In short, when a direct thesis statement lacks parallel structure, it may appear to be missing one or more of its main points, and instructors should keep this in mind when assigning this type of essay.

Finally, while numerous studies exist on contrastive rhetoric in ESL writing, future research may want to examine some of the ancillary issues presented in this paper, such as whether gender influences one's use of inductive or deductive rhetorical patterns, or whether students stand pat on flawed writing to lock in an acceptable, if diminished, grade.

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