

An Investigation on the Application of Topic Sentences in Senior One's English Compositions—A Case Study of *X* Senior School in Leshan City in China

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The topic sentence, playing a guiding and restricting role in the development and organization of the paragraphs, conveys the central idea of the authors' writing plan. Using the topic sentence in English writing is in line with westerners' straightforward thinking habits and expressions. It can also help Chinese English learners organize their language and express their viewpoints more clearly and orderly. In China, researchers mainly focus on the use of topic sentences among college students, while there are few studies on the use of topic sentences of senior high school students, and fewer empirical studies have conducted on them. Through consulting, it was found that many senior students misuse topic sentences, such as not using topic sentences, placing topic sentences in inappropriate positions, using incomplete topic sentences, and failing to play a leading role in the use of topic sentences. Based on the problems found above, the author investigated the use of topic sentences about English writing among the Senior One students' in senior high schools.

Keywords: Senior One students, English compositions, the topic sentence, applied research

Introduction

This study focuses on the application of topic sentences in Senior One students' compositions. Topic sentences developed in a rounder way at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At that period, topic sentences were suggested to be used in a paragraph, which should include the main idea, and should be developed into a unified and coherent paragraph. In the middle of the 20th century, topic sentences appeared in the writing textbooks as a repetition of theoretical views (D'Angelo, 1986). He believes that topic sentence is a valuable rhetorical strategy in some types of writing, because it can not only help the writer organize his ideas, but also help the readers keep up with the logical development of the writer's ideas (D'Angelo, 1986).

Around the late 20th century, domestic scholars began to focus English topic sentences. Pang Tongxin and Chen Guibin (1998) took the lead in the research of writing training from topic sentences to paragraphs, explaining the constitution of paragraphs: topic sentences, supporting sentences, and conclusion sentences (pp.

Acknowledgement: This paper is one of the research results of project in Sichuan Provincial Department of Education: The Connection Between Normal Universities and Basic Education from the Perspective of Core Competencies (Sichuan Education Letter [2017] 336).

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117-118). Li Zhixue (2000) was the first domestic researcher to study the misuse of topic sentences in students' English compositions (pp. 85-87). Liu Donghong (2013) conducted a study on the influence of closed topic and open topic on the generalization ability of English learners' topic sentences (pp. 71-75). It investigated the use of topic sentences and thesis statements in senior high school students' English writing.

In this study, 34 students from Class 7, Grade 1 in *X* Senior School were selected as the research subjects. The data were collected by means of observation, questionnaire, interview, and test. The following three research questions are set to explore the influence of the topic sentence teaching in Senior One's English compositions:

1. Are the elements of topic sentences complete?
2. How is the realization degree of dominating function of topic sentences?
3. What is the relationship between the integrity and dominance of topic sentences?

The Importance of English Topic Sentences

A topic sentence is the main component of a paragraph, belonging to paragraph writing and situated at the discourse level. Its related knowledge also includes the definitions, elements, requirements, development, and the organization of development sentences.

The Functions of Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is such a sentence that conveys the writers' writing plan as well as the main idea of the paragraph. A topic sentence (for a paragraph) and a thesis statement (for an essay) express the writer's main point (Anker, 2009, p. 58). Miller and Pessoa (2016) held a more detailed and comprehensive point, "Usually in the initial position in a paragraph, the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph, limiting the topic to one specific area to be discussed through the use of controlling ideas" (p. 4). Similarly speaking, Reinking and Osten (2017, p. 86) mentioned that "the topic sentence states the main idea of a paragraph". That is, there is a close relationship between the topic sentences of paragraphs and the thesis statement of an essay. To sum up, McCarthy et al. (2008, pp. 647-657) listed some characteristics about the topic sentence: The subject or main topic of a paragraph, appears at the beginning of the paragraph, which is supported and interpreted by other sentences in the paragraph, and appears in the expository article. Furthermore, the topic sentence is the main component of a paragraph, which restricts and guides the development of the structure and semantics of a paragraph, belonging to the discourse level, not the general sentence level.

Elements of the Topic Sentence

The topic sentence has two elements to express the main point of a paragraph, the *topic* and the *limiting or controlling statement*. The former is the object or center of the statement in the paragraph, while the latter is the limitation of the scope of the topic to be discussed, conveying the meaning of the topic sentence. Wang Hongxiao (2003, p. 90) thought that the English topic sentence consists of topic and limiting statement. Weng Yiming and Chen Lanfang (2008, p. 25) agreed that the topic sentence is composed of the topic and the more important controlling idea. The latter explains or talks about the former at a range. Anker (2009, p. 58) expressed the similar viewpoint by using a formula, *topic sentence* = *narrowed topic* + *main point/position*. In short, it is the condition of a good topic sentence that it needs not only a topic to be talked or discussed, but also a statement containing controlling words or phrases (key words or phrases) to limit the topic, so that it is talked in a certain scope. That is, the topic sentence embraces the topic to be talked and the controlling statement concerning and limiting the topic.

The Development of the Topic Sentence

A good topic sentence in a paragraph can achieve twice the result with half the effort. The topic sentence carries the central ideas of a paragraph. Nevertheless, if only the main points are stated without the explanation of examples, facts, reports, and data, such a paragraph without detailed materials cannot be fully developed, namely, a topic cannot be explained clearly to the readers. As for the supporting materials of the topic sentence, Arnaudet and Barrett (1981, p. 21) claimed that there are such ways that can develop and clarify a topic sentence, like examples, details, anecdotes, facts, and statistics. Anker (2009) used a term support to generalize these materials or ways that "Support is the collection of examples, facts, or evidence that shows, explains, or proves your main point" (p. 72). Reinking and Osten (2017, p. 90) came up with, the details supplied can include facts, figures, observations, steps, lists, examples, and personal experiences.

The Requirements of Senior One Students' English Writing

Time-Limited Writing Test

Writing test without any guide or hint by teachers is a direct means to reflect students' English abilities as well as their writing plan. Namely, students' English paragraph writing can show the elements of the topic sentence and the dominating function of the topic sentence, and can be directly obtained through the students' written composition. The English writing in senior high school, or the examination content is almost practical writing with almost 100 words and at most four natural paragraphs within 25 minutes. Some students will also add topic sentences in the first or last paragraph, so there are at most two or three topic sentences in their composition. The assignment of the topic sentence is based on the elements contained in the topic sentence. One viewpoint is given to the topic words, and another viewpoint is for the central idea about the topic words. The total score is two points. If there is a discrepancy, the score will be deducted. Similarly, the realization of the dominating function of the topic sentence is also from two aspects: the expansion mode and the semantic relevance. One point will be added for one aspect, and two points will be added for both aspects. Points will be deducted according to the discretion if it does not conform to the requirements, and no point will be added if there is no expected content.

The Appraisal Criteria of English Writing Test

The types of statistical data include the actual quantity of topic sentences, the hypothetical quantity of topic sentences, the elements of topic sentences, the assignment of topic sentences, the expansion mode, semantic correlation, and the assignment of dominating function. The hypothetical quantity of topic sentences is set according to the paragraph layout of students' compositions. Generally, the first and last paragraphs are introduction and summary. In principle, these two places have fewer topic sentences. The main part of reference is the main body of an article, namely, the second paragraph and the third paragraph. According to the main contents and the main points of writing, if there is only a paragraph, which talks about the same aspect and is argumentative content, then it is reasonable to say that there should be one topic sentence. If there are two paragraphs, and the discussion is different, then it is determined that there should be two topic sentences.

The Results of the Students' Use of Topic Sentences

The Statistical Data of the Students' Use of Topic Sentences

There are 34 students participating in the English composition test, but the actually collected compositions are 29. The compositions were selected as the analysis materials.

Table 1

The Statistical Data of the Students' Use of Topic Sentences

Items	Test (%)
The actual quantity of the topic sentence	34
The ideal quantity of the topic sentence	46
The assignment of the topic sentence	58
The ideal value of the topic sentence	92
The ideal value of the topic sentence	62.5
The assignment of the dominating function	60
The ideal value of the dominating function	92
The ideal value of the dominating function	65.2

As it is shown in Table 1 above, the ratio between the value of the topic sentence and the ideal value indicates the integrity of the elements of the topic sentence.

The Major Finding About the Students' Use of Topic Sentences

In the composition, five students did not write the topic sentence. According to the main points of the composition and the students' paragraph layout and general idea, it can be concluded that the ideal quantity of the topic sentence should be 46 in the 29 compositions. The students have written 34 topic sentences in total, of which 24 sentences have complete elements. According to the topic and controlling idea of the topic sentence, 34 actually-written topic sentences and 46 ideal topic sentences are assigned value respectively. Among the statistical data, 62.5% of compositions have the ideal value of the topic sentence, and 65.2% of them have the ideal value of the dominating function. Furthermore, the realization of students' dominating function, including semantic and structural aspects, is relatively high. The more complete the elements of the topic sentence are, the higher the realization degree of the dominating function is. Most of the students in the composition test have a relatively good awareness of the topic sentence and have a positive attitude on the topic sentence, relatively using topic sentences well in writing. Shortly speaking, the explanation of the topic sentence in the middle school is involved.

Conclusion

The three research questions, which focus on the complete elements of topic sentences, the realization degree of dominating function of topic sentences, and the relationship between the integrity and dominance of topic sentences, are set to explore the influence of the topic sentence teaching on Senior One students' English writing.

The research shows that senior school students with comparatively good English proficiency use relatively complete topic sentence elements. Generally, the realization of the dominating function of the topic sentences, a significant correlation between the completeness of the elements of the topic sentence and the dominating degree written by students, is relatively high. That is, the more complete the elements of the topic sentence are, the higher the dominating degree is.

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