

Written Discourse Across Cultures II: The Teaching Experiment

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1. Introduction

Building on insights provided by research in contrastive rhetoric, and integrating general pedagogic principles with applied linguistic theory, a teaching methodology for English L2 composition instruction at the university level in Japan was proposed in the first paper in this series, entitled *Written Discourse Across Cultures I: Towards an Integrated Approach to EL2 Composition Pedagogy* (Davies, 2003). This approach synthesized a number of important aspects of L2 composition pedagogy, including the concepts of language awareness, consciousness raising, and explicit classroom instruction; integrating process with product; form-focused instruction, especially in terms of models and conventions; and corrective feedback that encourages independent self-correction among students.

Based on these principles, a methodology for teaching academic writing skills to Japanese students of English was developed in which the following main elements were emphasized: (1) the identification of rhetorical features distinguishing Japanese and English, (2) the steps involved in the writing process in English (i.e., planning, outlining, writing, editing, and rewriting), (3) the description of macrostructures in English expository and argumentative writing, (4) the isolation of grammatical features such as cohesive ties functioning at lower levels of discourse, and (5) the implementation of a system for self-monitoring by students at the morphosyntactic level. The basic premise underlying these specifications is that

by stressing lower level morphosyntactic features and model sentences, current methods of teaching English composition in Japan have the wrong orientation. Sentence-level instruction is certainly not unimportant?in fact, it has to be attended to?but university students can be trained to develop a sufficient degree of learner awareness to be able to self-monitor lower level linguistic concerns, allowing teachers to focus on other aspects of writing such as the composing process and discourse level features such as organizational structure, intersentential textual relationships, and stylistic choices, which lie at the heart of Japanese EL2 students' writing difficulties.

This approach to teaching English composition skills in Japan was tested in an empirical study of student writing, which is the subject of this second paper in the series, to determine whether the implementation of the proposed teaching methodology would result in significant improvements to the academic writing skills of Japanese EL2 students. The results of this teaching experiment should provide important insights into ways in which Japanese university students can be helped to function more effectively in the international academic community in terms of their individual writing goals.

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

A total of 61 Japanese university sophomores enrolled in entry-level English composition classes at two Japanese universities participated in this experiment, although none

of the students were aware that a writing study was taking place. All of the participants were Japanese nationals specializing in English in some form (i.e., English L2 Education, English Language, and International Culture and Communication) and can be considered representative of this level of study in Japan. The students were not randomly selected, but had elected to take courses in English composition of their own accord or because they were required to do so by their university. Approximately half of the students were assigned to the experimental group (N = 31) which received instruction based on the teaching methodology outlined above; the other half constituted members of the control group (N = 30) which was taught by a professor at another university. The control group constituted a single class of students, while the experimental group was composed of two separate classes of 15 students each who were taught in exactly the same manner throughout the course (comparisons of pre- and posttest scores for the two experimental group classes displayed no significant differences).

2.2 Materials and procedures

A total of 122 essays was obtained from these students in the form of pre- and post-instruction writing samples. The pretest sample was written during the first lesson of their composition course prior to any instruction being provided, and the prompt used was "English Education in Japan," a topic of considerable public interest at present and one which is quite familiar to most students. After an initial period of brainstorming for ideas, students were given approximately 80 minutes to complete their essays. The posttest sample was of similar duration and was written in the last class of a three-month composition course as a "final essay test." At this time, students were given a choice of the following topics for which they were allowed to prepare:

- (1) Compare and contrast university life in Japan with that of another country you are familiar with.
- (2) For most of its long history, Japan has been affected in many ways by the cultures of other countries. Describe in detail the influences of other cultures on Japanese life.
- (3) Discrimination against "outsiders" of all kinds is one of the most serious issues in Japan today. Describe this problem in detail and suggest a realistic solution.

In both the pre- and post-instruction essays, students were permitted to use dictionaries freely and to prepare a short, point-form outline on the assigned topic.

During the course itself, classes for both the experimental and control groups were held once a week in 90-minute lessons for a total of approximately 12 instructional sessions. It was not possible to determine the exact nature of the instruction given the control group, although it was apparent from students' written work (i.e., the pre- and posttest samples) that they had a good deal of writing practice at the essay level during the course and were employing a rather loose introduction-body-conclusion organizational structure in their posttest compositions. Instruction for the experimental group was carefully designed to meet the goals of the teaching methodology described above. The first four lessons involved (1) an introduction to the concept of rhetoric, focusing on differences in the way written information is organized and presented in various cultures, (2) the identification of rhetorical features distinguishing Japanese and English, using writing samples in both languages, as well as graphic representations such as the steppingstone model of Japanese rhetoric, (3) instruction in the steps involved in the writing process in English (i.e., planning, outlining, writing, editing, rewriting), with particular emphasis and practice in outlining, (4) an introduction to the principal modes of reasoning (i.e., comparison and contrast, cause and effect, classification, etc.) and patterns of rhetorical organization used in English (i.e., exposition, description, narration, argumentation), (5) a description of macrostructures in English expository writing, presented in the form of a

graphic representation of the 5-paragraph expository essay model, with emphasis on the importance of the principles underlying this organizational structure at all levels of English academic writing, (6) instruction in the use of transition signals and other linking expressions in maintaining cohesion and coherence in written English, (7) advice on the importance of clearly identifying the audience and purpose of writing, and (8) presentation of a self-monitoring system that permits students to identify and analyze their writing errors at the morphosyntactic level.

No homework was required during these introductory lessons, but thereafter, students were asked to write an essay every week until the end of course, amounting to a total of four compositions, each of which was written twice. Students wrote the first draft of their essays after receiving classroom instruction dealing with rhetorical structures in English, and submitted this copy two days prior to the next lesson so that it could be proofread by the instructor and returned in class. Students were expected to correct their errors independently following the cues provided by proofreading symbols and to keep a cumulative record of their mistakes on an error assessment form provided for this purpose, which was to be turned in on the final day of class with an accompanying analysis of the types of errors that were most prominent in their writing. The same basic schedule was followed for the second draft, which was graded by the instructor and corrected by means of reformulation. All essays were required to be typed and to conform to the standard manuscript conventions of written academic English. Students were also asked to include a short, point-form outline with the first draft, and to attach these two documents to the second draft before submission.

Instruction during the essay-writing phase of this course (i.e., eight lessons) was based on an alternating "macro/micro" orientation. Macro lessons provided instruction on the principal patterns of rhetorical organization used in English, after which the students submitted the first drafts of their compositions; micro

lessons dealt with writing difficulties at the morphosyntactic level based on these homework assignments. Students often worked in small groups during the micro lessons, discussing individual problem areas and updating their error assessment forms; in addition, short mini-lessons were given by the instructor focusing on grammar and sentence structure. Macro lessons provided instruction with a top-down focus on expository writing in English, including chronological order (i.e., process writing), classification (logical division), comparison and contrast, and cause and effect (Oshima & Hogue, 1991), as well as the organization of persuasive essays (i.e., situation, problem, solution, evaluation (Connor, 1987)). Expository and persuasive writing were selected as the basis for this course because of their function in "transforming" information (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, pp. 4-5), and also because they are the writing genres in which cross-cultural differences in organization, style, and argumentation (i.e., rhetoric) are most apparent:

Composing... may be divided into writing which is, in essence, telling or retelling and writing which is transforming. Retelling signifies the sort of writing that is, to a large extent, already known to the author, such as narratives and descriptions. The planning involves recalling and reiterating. Transforming, on the other hand, signifies that sort of writing... which... involves the complex juxtaposition of many pieces of information as well as the weighing of various rhetorical options and constraints... Many sorts of what traditionally have been labelled expository and argumentative/persuasive texts... involve transforming. In most academic settings where students are learning to write, the educational system assumes that students will learn to compose with the ability to transform information.

Macro lessons were primarily designed to provide students with basic information on standard patterns of organization in expository and persuasive writing and to demonstrate how top-level superstructures can provide a useful framework in writing essays. Students were also

given prose models to study, which, as far as possible, were copies of exemplary compositions written by students from previous years, rather than textbook examples. In addition, exercises were developed that targeted lower level language structures associated with specific types of writing (e.g., process writing: the passive voice and sequence language, etc.). Thus, this approach to composition pedagogy involved a convergence of top-down and bottom-up (i.e., macro/micro) elements?the main focus of macro instruction was on organization and the language structures required to create discourse forms, whereas micro lessons stressed language at the morphosyntactic level in a context which encouraged independent self-assessment and self-correction among students. In general, the essay-writing phase of this course was quite intensive and required a high degree of commitment from both students and instructor alike.

2.2.1 Assessment

The pre- and posttest writing samples for both experimental and control groups were evaluated according to a modified ESL Composition Profile assessment scale containing five components, each focusing on a separate aspect of academic writing, with weighted, numerical band-scales provided in each category?i.e., organization, language use/grammar, content, vocabulary, and mechanics. The ESL Composition Profile is based on a "landmark publication" by Jacobs et al. (1981) which "showed that direct testing of writing does work...", and provided a compact, easily understood, and replicable system for conducting writing assessment, together with a strong research base" (Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p. 8). This assessment tool is also able to "combine stable judgments with meaningful judgments; that is, reliability with validity" (ibid., p. 7). The ESL Composition Profile has also been used in a number of other recent investigations of the writing skills of Japanese EL2 students, including Sasaki and Hirose (1996), Hirose (1998), and Fujita and Sakamoto (1998). However, the original profile stresses the importance of content,

whereas research has shown that organization is the component which requires most emphasis in the writing of Japanese EL2 students. As a result, the ESL Composition Profile was modified for the present study and a revised scoring scale was developed reflecting the importance of organization in student writing; in addition, a number of changes were made in order to clarify the descriptive criteria used in evaluating organizational ability. Modifications of this nature are supported by recent research on the transferability of a multiple-trait scoring instrument across assessment contexts (Hamp-Lyons & Henning, 1991), and are in keeping with recommendations made by other researchers in the field such as Fujita and Sakamoto (1998, p. 148):

The ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981) seems to emphasize content over organization, since Jacob's ESL Composition Profile allots 30 points to content and 20 points to organization. We would like to propose an EFL Composition Profile for Japanese students which allots 30 points to organization and 20 points to content, because rhetorical organization is assumed to be the most difficult part of writing English for Japanese students.

As a result of these modifications, student writing samples were evaluated according to the following rating scale: organization/30, language use and grammar/25, content/20, vocabulary/20, and mechanics/5. An interpretive guide of the range of possible scores (34-100) and descriptive criteria for corresponding writing characteristics were provided for the raters. The assessment of all 61 compositions was carried out by this author, but in order to verify the reliability of these evaluations, two independent raters, who were experienced EFL instructors at a British university, were asked to grade random samplings of 15 essays each (approximately one-quarter of the total) using the same assessment tool. The interrater reliability scores, as measured by the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, were $r_1 = 0.91$ and $r_2 = 0.97$, respectively,

indicating a high level of reliability in the scoring. Appendix 6 provides a detailed summary of the results of composition assessment and analysis in chart and graphic form.

2.3 Analysis

The resulting assessment scores were analyzed statistically and between-group means comparisons were carried out on pretest-posttest scores at all component levels. The pretest and posttest scores of the experimental and control groups were compared using a t-test to determine if any pre-existing differences existed between the two groups, and the posttest scores of both groups were compared in a similar manner. The pre- and posttest scores of the experimental group were then compared using a matched-pair t-test, as well as the pre- and posttest scores of the control group. Statistical comparisons between experimental and control groups at each component level were also carried out by means of MANOVA.

3. Results

The results of the statistical analysis of the pretest scores for the experimental and control groups show that there was no significant difference between the groups prior to the commencement of instruction. As Table 1 indicates, the mean scores for both groups were in a very similar range, with grades averaging approximately 50%, a situation which also illustrates one of the main problems in using this profile. Since the lowest grade possible is 34, the scores of students with poor writing ability tend to cluster at the lower end of the scale, making it difficult to differentiate between individuals at this level.

As Table 2 shows, the posttest mean scores for the experimental and control groups were 88.68 and 59.93, respectively, indicating a difference of 28.75, which a t-test revealed was significant. Table 3 illustrates pre- and posttest mean scores and the resulting gain scores for both groups in terms of the criteria used in the

assessment scale, and MANOVA confirmed significant differences between the groups at all component levels. Gain scores for the experimental group were strong in all categories, but particularly in terms of organization, where an increase of 12.65 was reported, and although there were moderate gains in control group scores in some categories, organizational ability showed little improvement, with an increase of only 1.40.

The results of the statistical analysis of pre- and posttest scores for both the experimental and control groups are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. Table 4 reveals a considerable improvement in the writing of the experimental group students as a result of three months of instruction, with an overall gain score of 37.49. A matched-pair t-test confirmed that this difference was significant. Differences in the standard deviation values also show a narrowing in the range of the scores, indicating that the posttest results were clustered closely around the mean and signifying that most of the participants had been rated highly on their final writing sample. Table 4 shows a moderate improvement in control group results, with a total gain score of 10.23.

4. Discussion

The results of this study are very encouraging. The statistical evidence shows that all of the students who participated in the experimental group made exceptional progress in the development of their academic writing skills at all levels of assessment, with aggregate scores on the posttest writing sample ranging from a low of 80 to a high of 96. These data suggest that a highly structured, integrated writing program with a primary focus on organizational structure, but which also includes a concomitant emphasis on the writing process, especially the steps of outlining and rewriting, as well as a commitment to encouraging self-correction and autonomy at lower levels of language use, can result in considerable improvements in student writing ability within a relatively short period of time. These results are in keeping with

research in reading comprehension which suggests that teaching students about top-level rhetorical structure through the use of macrostructures, and how to signal this organization by means of linguistic devices such as signposting and linking expressions, as well as providing students with regular writing practice using different text structures on a variety of appropriate topics, can be highly beneficial. This proposed pedagogy is also in accord with research in cognitive science, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition which offers important insights into the nature of the writing process and suggests that explicit classroom instruction which promotes language awareness and consciousness raising can facilitate noticing among students, and that teaching text structure apart from content by providing explicit instruction on the function of forms in discourse, allows students to focus their attention on generating the information they need to fill these forms, freeing them to concentrate on other components of writing. The use of graphic images and symbols to represent these forms, as well as furnishing students with prose models which exemplify the text structures being taught, can be particularly effective in the L2 classroom where students may have difficulty comprehending more complex metalinguistic explanations. The statistical evidence obtained from this study strongly suggests that instruction which focuses primarily on top-level rhetorical structure will not only result in improvements to students' organizational skills but will also have a positive ancillary effect on each of the other components of writing, including language use and grammar, content, vocabulary, and mechanics.

The data obtained from the control group indicates that students made relatively limited progress in their academic writing, with overall gain scores increasing by 10.23 and grades ranging from a low of 51 to a high of 71, suggesting that considerably more improvement is possible. Although the exact nature of the classroom instruction this group received was unavailable, pre- and posttest writing samples indicate that the students were

generally writing longer compositions by the end of the course and that they had developed more confidence in expressing their ideas, many of which were inventive and informative. However, they continued to compose in a manner which was both highly personal and overly digressive, structuring their essays in a loose introduction-body-conclusion pattern indicative of the kind of flexible approach to discourse structure that is advocated by the proponents of rhetorical pluralism (e.g., Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996). A gain score of 1.40 for organization in the control group suggests that perhaps this component of students' writing should be attended to in a more structured fashion.

A number of limitations are also apparent in this teaching experiment, arising mainly from a disparity between the goals of academic research and the needs of actual classroom practice. For instance, although some researchers do not allow students to utilize a dictionaries during composition tests, their use was actively encouraged in the present study and was part of the writing test instructions provided to students in both the experimental and control groups. Furthermore, there is an evident discrepancy in the way that the pre- and posttest writing samples were obtained in this investigation. The pretest essays were written by students on the first day of class to provide the instructor with a sample of their writing, whereas the posttest compositions were written as a final essay test, a writing context that had far more important consequences for the students. In addition, the amount of time spent in preparing ideas prior to writing the pretest essays was necessarily limited because it occurred in the classroom, while students writing the posttest compositions were given the week between classes to prepare and to draft an outline of their ideas. From a purely research perspective, this kind of discrepancy may be untenable, but in terms of actual classroom practice, the principal goal of instruction is to encourage students to develop effective writing tools and habits that will sustain them throughout their academic careers?from this point of view, as an instructor, it is

important to "test what you teach." In other words, if students are taught that using a dictionary and taking the time to prepare an outline are an integral part of being a good writer, they should not be denied access to these tools because of a conflict with research goals. Taking these factors into consideration, the prompt used for the pretest essay, "English Education in Japan," was selected because it is a topic that is frequently discussed these days in Japan both in and out of the classroom; therefore, most students have a substantial knowledge base to draw from in writing on this subject. On the other hand, the topics

chosen for the posttest essay were much more challenging and required preparation time for students. In an entry-level EL2 composition course, allowing students time to access information and to consider their rhetorical choices was considered appropriate. Finally, it should be pointed out that these conditions applied equally to both the experimental and control groups, and that perceived advantages in posttest writing circumstances seemed to have little appreciable effect on control group assessment scores.

Table 1: Pretest Scores for Experimental and Control Groups

| Statistic | Experimental Group Pretest Scores | Control Group Pretest Scores | Mean Difference | tobs |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|------|
| <i>N</i> | 31 | 30 | | |
| <i>Mean</i> | 51.19 | 49.7 | 1.49 | 0.57 |
| <i>SD</i> | 11.57 | 8.84 | | |

* $p < .01$, $df = 56$

Table 2: Posttest Scores for Experimental and Control Groups

| Statistic | Experimental Group Pretest Scores | Control Group Pretest Scores | Mean Difference | tobs |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------|
| <i>N</i> | 31 | 30 | | |
| <i>Mean</i> | 88.68 | 59.93 | 28.75 | 21.24* |
| <i>SD</i> | 4.18 | 6.16 | | |

* $p < .01$, $df = 51$

Table 3: Mean Scores by Component

| | Pretest: M (SD) | Posttest: M (SD) | Gain Scores |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|
| Experimental Group | | | |
| Organization/30 | 15.39 (2.36) | 28.03 (1.33) | 12.65 |
| Language Use/Grammar/25 | 11.94 (4.20) | 20.74 (2.03) | 8.81 |
| Content/20 | 10.65 (2.71) | 17.45 (1.29) | 6.81 |
| Vocabulary/20 | 10.81 (2.80) | 17.61 (1.02) | 6.81 |
| Mechanics/5 | 2.42 (0.56) | 4.84 (0.45) | 2.42 |
| Control Group | | | |
| Organization/30 | 15.63 (2.01) | 17.03 (1.56) | 1.40 |
| Language Use/Grammar/25 | 11.53 (3.07) | 13.27 (2.61) | 1.73 |
| Content/20 | 10.00 (2.15) | 12.83 (1.88) | 2.83 |
| Vocabulary/20 | 10.17 (2.13) | 13.67 (1.60) | 3.50 |
| Mechanics/5 | 2.37 (0.56) | 3.13 (0.68) | 0.77 |

Table 4: Pre- and Posttest Scores for the Experimental Group

| Statistic | Experimental Group Pretest Scores | Experimental Group Pretest Scores | Mean Difference | tobs |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------|
| <i>N</i> | 31 | 31 | | |
| <i>Mean</i> | 88.68 | 51.19 | 37.49 | 18.82* |
| <i>SD</i> | 4.18 | 11.57 | | |

* $p < .01$, $df = 30$

Table 5: Pre- and Posttest Scores for the Control Group

| Statistic | Experimental Group Pretest Scores | Control Group Posttest Scores | Mean Difference | tobs |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| <i>N</i> | 30 | 30 | | |
| <i>Mean</i> | 59.93 | 49.7 | 10.23 | 5.57* |
| <i>SD</i> | 6.16 | 8.84 | | |

* $p < .01$, $df = 29$

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