

Global Text Structure and EFL Composition Quality : An Exploratory Study PartIII

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Global Text Structure and EFL Composition Quality: An Exploratory Study — Part III —

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This paper is a continuation of the previous two papers (Kohro, 2004) and (Kohro, 2006). The former paper situated the present study in L2 writing studies, discussed the necessity and appropriateness of this study, and generated its research questions in the final section. The latter one portrayed its research procedure including data analysis. The present paper presents its research findings and discusses what these findings imply while deliberating pedagogical implications for L2 writing. In the final section, future directions for the study are discussed, together with its problems to be overcome.

At the onset, the research questions for the present study are reiterated below for readers' reminder:

1. Is global text structure correlated with the overall quality in L2 compositions?
2. Is global text structure correlated with the overall quality in L1 compositions?
3. Is the quality of L2 composition correlated with that of L1 composition?

¹ This paper is the final part of the whole study, covering its results, discussion, and conclusion.

sition?

4. Are variables, including L2 proficiency, L1 writing ability, meta-knowledge on writing, educational background and composing process, correlated with the quality of L2 compositions.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

There are a few points to be noted with respect to the descriptive statistics of the variables for the analysis (See Table 1). The first point is the subjects' TOEFL scores. Their mean score achieved right after their entrance was 385.5, which may not be high enough for college freshmen. The researcher selected the freshmen for the study, who had just entered the college, so that the influence of English writing education at college could be minimal. This is because L2 composition education in college could influence the way they compose. However, this subject selection could have produced a by-product — the relatively low mean score. Also, the comparatively high *SD* shows that their English proficiency was quite varied. The second point is fairly low scores in educational backgrounds in Japanese and English composition, which were the number of items that they marked as 'learned' in composition classes both in Japanese and English before they entered the college. There were 12 items for Japanese composition and 13 for English. This fact may reflect that educational emphases in high school English composition had not been placed on composing, and that the subjects had not been trained to compose even in Japanese. The third point is the time taken for the two compositions. As is expected, the subjects took over twice as much time

in writing English as they took in writing Japanese. Considering the fact that this was the first time they composed in English, it is quite understandable. The next point is the fairly high mean score for the metaknowledge test with a small *SD* score. It was quite probable that the true-false format for the test contributed to the high score. Finally, the scores for composing process (here, revision) before, in, and after composing were quite low, with 6 points out of 21 in Japanese composition and 7.2 out of 20 in English composition. This fact should be closely related to the second point mentioned above, that is, their lack of training in composing in both languages.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Med.</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Mean</i>
TOEFL	385.5	387	32.9	7.6	
Meta-know.	38.4	39	3.7	0.9	
J comp. score	34.5	34.5	6.6	1.5	
E comp. score	32.6	32	7.8	1.8	
J structure	13.6	13.5	2.1	0.5	
E structure	12.7	12	3.4	0.8	
J background	4	4	2.1	0.5	
E background	3.7	4	1.7	0.4	
J revision	6	4	4.3	1	
E revision	7.2	7	3.9	0.9	
J time	1.6	1	1.3	0.3	
E time	3.4	3	2.2	0.5	

N = 19

T-tests

The following results from the *t*-tests between Japanese PEN compositions and English ones indicate that there was no statistically significant

difference between the means of the pairs investigated, except for one variable, time spent for the compositions.

Table 2. T-test Results between Japanese and English

	<i>J. Mean (SD)</i>	<i>E. Mean (SD)</i>	<i>t-value</i>
Comp. score	34.5 (1.5)	32.6 (1.8)	0.82
Global text str.	13.6 (2.1)	12.7 (3.4)	0.97
Background	4.0 (2.1)	3.7 (1.7)	0.5
Revision	6.0 (4.3)	7.2 (3.9)	-0.87
Time spent	1.6 (1.3)	3.4 (2.2)	-3.00**

$N = 19$, ** $p < .01$

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 shows the results of the correlation analysis between variables with respect to L1 and L2 PENs written by the subjects.

High levels of correlation were detected between the following pairs: 1) Japanese composition score and Japanese structure; 2) English composition score and English structure; and 3) Japanese revision and English revision. It is noteworthy, concerning 1) and 2), that ratings of clarity of narrative structure are highly correlated with composition evaluation scores not only in L1 but also in L2. In other words, compositions with clear PEN structures correlate highly with high composition quality in L1 and L2. As for the third point, it can be assumed that students who had acquired ability required in composing in L1 were able to transfer such strategies into L2. In addition, for some reason, the number of items checked as 'done' in participants' process of revising Japanese compositions, not English ones, correlate highly with that of English compositions.

Moderate levels of correlation were found between the following

pairs: 1) Japanese revisions and time spent on the Japanese compositions; 2) English composition scores and time spent on Japanese compositions and on English compositions; 3) English structure and time spent on English compositions; 4) Japanese composition background and English composition background; 5) English revision and time spent on Japanese compositions; and 6) TOEFL and Japanese composition scores / Japanese composition background (negative correlation). As for 1) and 2), it is quite understandable that careful revision needs time and compositions with more revisions using more time tend to get higher scores, although there is no clue to understanding the relationship between English composition scores and time spent on Japanese compositions. Point 3) reflects the fact that writers who spent more time were inclined to provide clear global structure in their compositions. Point 4) could be interpreted as a fact showing that those who had had more training in L1 composition were likely to be more educated in L2 composition, but it could simply mean that competent students remembered what they learned more, and vice versa in both compositions. It is impossible for the researcher to assume probable explanations for the relationships observed in 5) and 6), as is often the case with a correlation analysis like this.

Among the points without any correlation, two should be noted. The first point is that TOEFL scores were correlated neither with English composition scores nor with English structure evaluation scores, which is different from the results in earlier studies. Relatively low English proficiency of the participants might be related to this fact. Secondly, there was no correlation between L1 structures and L2 structures. It could be possible that L1 writers were not able to transfer their PEN structures in L1 into L2 compositions for some reason. Here again, the

participants' relatively low English proficiency may have influenced this fact.

In relation to this point, Table 4 illustrates the patterns of transfer in terms of PEN structure observed in two versions of compositions. The two versions of compositions were divided into the following three categories: those with very clear PEN features, fairly clear PEN features, and unclear PEN features, depending on the evaluation scores. That is, scores over 0.5 *SD* points higher than the mean are labeled as 'very clear,' those under 0.5 *SD* points lower than the mean as 'unclear,' and those in the middle as 'fair'. Using these categories, their transfer patterns were portrayed, but no special concentration on a particular pattern was observed. However, the following two subjects showed interesting patterns: Pattern (1) in Negative Patterns and Pattern (6) in Positive Patterns. The former, who ranked 4th in TOEFL, was not able to transfer her clear PEN structure in Japanese into English, but the latter, who ranked 1st in TOEFL, was able to transfer the clear structure in Japanese into English successfully. Thus, English proficiency may not be the only factor that can explain their success or failure in their transfer.

Table 3. Inter-correlations between Variables Concerning PEN Compositions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	—											
2	.35	—										
3	.48*	.33	—									
4	.17	.06	.30	—								
5	.24	.32	.77***	-.06	—							
6	.09	-.03	.37	.83***	.10	—						
7	-.46*	-.32	-.31	-.18	-.24	-.13	—					
8	-.04	-.08	-.13	-.04	-.17	-.06	.68***	—				
9	-.14	.20	-.28	.14	-.33	-.01	-.01	.02	—			
10	.07	.34	-.15	.32	-.29	.01	-.13	.17	.73**	—		
11	-.08	-.06	-.22	.47*	-.40	.26	.08	.31	.57**	.47*	—	
12	-.01	-.13	.11	.61***	-.26	.52*	.25	.39	.09	.15	.43	—

$N=19$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .02$, *** $p < .01$

Each number represents the following variables:

1. TOEFL 2. Metaknowledge 3. Japanese Comp. Score 4. English Comp. Score
5. Japanese Structure 6. English Structure 7. Japanese Comp. Background
8. English Comp. Background 9. Japanese Revisions 10. English Revisions
11. Time spent on J. Comp. 12. Time spent on E. Comp.

Table 4. Patterns of PEN structure transfer

<u>Negative Patterns</u>	
(1) Very clear PEN features in L1 but unclear in L2	1
(2) Very clear PEN features in L1 but fair in L2	2
(3) Unclear PEN features in L1 but very clear in L2	2
(4) Unclear PEN features in L1 but fair in L2	3
(5) Fairly clear PEN features in L1 but unclear in L2	3
<u>Positive Patterns</u>	
(6) Very Clear PEN features in both L1 and L2	1
(7) Fairly clear PEN features in both L1 and L2	3
(8) Fairly clear PEN features in L1 and very clear in L2	3
(9) Unclear PEN features in both L1 and L2	1

$N=19$

Discussion

On the basis of the results obtained from the resent study, an attempt will be made to make a rough portrayal of what Japanese college freshmen English majors in the present study were like in terms of the points concerning L2 writing, how they composed personal experience narratives in English, how successful they were in transferring their discorsal features in L1 into L2, and how they could write an acceptable English composition.

The research questions need to be deliberated here so that componential factors for the portrayal may be identified.

1. Is global text structure correlated with the overall quality in L2 compositions?

The data obtained from the present study illustrates that global text structure in personal experience narrative compositions is highly correlated with composition quality in L2 compositions. This fact could reflect the fact that the raters tended to evaluate those with clear global text structure highly, although the fact does not ensure a definite causal relationship between the two. Similar findings on top-level discourse structures were reported in L2 composition studies such as Kubota (1998) and Connor (1987). For example, Connor (1987)'s study on argumentative essays revealed that compositions with higher evaluations tended to follow a specific organization pattern across the languages investigated. Also, when viewed from the aspect of L2 reading, the fact was confirmed in such studies as Carrell (1984, 1985) that clear top-level rhetorical structures facilitated readers' text comprehension. This fact may have

contributed to high evaluations of compositions with clear PEN structures in the present study as well. The finding from the present study seems to correspond to findings in these studies.

2. Is global text structure correlated with the overall quality in L1 compositions?

The same result as above was confirmed in L1 compositions as well: that is, L1 compositions with clear global text structure were inclined to be highly evaluated, as in the case of Martin & Rothery's (1987) example. It is noteworthy that compositions with clear global text structure tend to receive higher evaluations regardless of the language where writers compose. However, there was an interesting finding in relation to the global structures observed in the two versions of PEN written by the same writer. It was revealed that there was no correlation between the mean score of global structure evaluation in L1 composition and that in L2 composition. In other words, the freshmen English majors were not able to transfer effectively what they had learned in L1 with respect to global text structure into L2. It is probable that their English proficiency played a key role in their successful transfer, as shown by the fact that the best student in terms of English proficiency was able to transfer her clear global text structure into L2. In any case, further study is needed in order to identify factors influencing successful or unsuccessful transfer of global text structure.

The fact that a clear global structure influences the quality of writing both in L1 and L2 seems to have a significant pedagogical implication. That is, students' composition quality can be improved substantially if appropriate training for providing a clear global structure is implement-

ed. This fact can be confirmed in a quasi-experimental classroom study taking a semester or longer.

3. Is the quality of L2 composition correlated with that of L1 composition?

The result obtained from the present study shows that the quality of L2 composition is not correlated with that of L1 composition. In previous studies such as Hirose & Sasaki (1994) and Sasaki & Hirose (1996), L1 writing ability was portrayed as one of the influential factors determining the quality of L2 composition. However, in the present study, effective writers in L1 were not always skillful in L2 composition, and vice versa. In such studies as mentioned above, the subjects had had much higher English proficiency than those in the present study. This fact may have caused the different results. When subjects with varying English proficiency are employed, different results may be obtained in relation to this point.

4. Are variables, including L2 proficiency, L1 writing ability, meta-knowledge on writing, educational background and composing process, correlated with the quality of L2 compositions.

As in the case of L2 proficiency and L1 writing ability, no meaningful correlation was detected between such variables as L2 composition quality, metaknowledge, educational background and the composing process. As noted above, potential problems in collecting data on such variables may be the reason. True-false questions about metaknowledge may not have worked effectively in predicting the subjects' knowledge on L2 writing. Also, the questionnaires employed were too simple to describe their educational backgrounds and composing process. If interviews or

think-aloud protocol analysis had been employed in the present study, a clearer image of their educational background and writing process would have been portrayed, influencing the results substantially.

Summary and Conclusion

Recent contrastive studies between L1 and L2 compositions have depicted transfer of discursal features, employing a within-subject design and taking variables affecting L2 compositions into account. In accordance with this research direction, the present study attempted to portray how college freshmen at a Japanese college transferred discursal features in L1 represented by global text structure into L2 compositions. It also tried to clarify the relationships between the clarity of global text structure, the composition quality and other variables claimed to affect L2 composition, using a correlational analysis. The results revealed that clarity of global text structures in personal experience narratives was highly correlated with composition quality in both L1 and L2 compositions, but that clarity of global structure in L1 was not correlated with that in L2. It was also made clear that the quality of L1 composition was not correlated with that of L2. It was assumed that writers in L1 were not able to transfer L1 global text structures into L2 compositions for some reason including relatively low English proficiency.

The present study is exploratory in nature and cannot generate any conclusive remarks on the research findings but it might provide some future research topics and directions. The following points could be argued on the basis of the results of the present study.

The first point is that the PEN textual features, which were claimed

to be present in oral narratives by native speakers and L1 compositions, are evident in L1 and L2 PEN compositions written by Japanese college students. PENs are fundamental and universal in many cultures, putting memories in order while providing meanings to each event and the whole personal history. Thus, similar findings could be detected in compositions in other L2s as well which are written by students in other cultures. It is worth investigating this point in that such PEN structures as discussed in the present study could be universal both in oral and written narratives in any languages.

Secondly, a clear PEN structure tends to be observed in highly rated compositions in both L1 and L2, although the fact does not ensure even a causal relationship between the two. If this fact can be confirmed in further studies, it can lead to a critical pedagogical contribution. That is, the quality of students' L2 compositions can be enhanced substantially by instructing them to provide a clear global text structure in composing, as observed in the highly rated PEN compositions in the present study. This could be true of other modes or genres such as argumentative compositions. In this sense as well, further studies with similar research foci are necessary in other modes or genres which are more frequently instructed and desired in college English writing than PENs.

The third point is that L1 writers did not transfer their clear PEN structures in L1 compositions into L2 compositions. The researcher selected freshmen for the present study so that the influence of L2 writing education in college on their transfer of global text structure could be minimal, but their English proficiency was not high enough. It may be possible that the subjects were not able to transfer the PEN structure for such a reason as their relatively low English proficiency, as suggested by

Kamimura (1996) that there might be a threshold level of English proficiency at which composing in English is similar to that in Japanese. It is assumed that participants with different levels of English proficiency could produce totally different results.

Furthermore, the present study, which is basically a text analytic study, has attempted to include variables affecting L2 writing, but it lacks a perspective of writing as a social construction. Also, facts obtained from a correlation analysis on the basis of marks in questionnaires, tests and analytic ratings must be supplemented by qualitative text analyses, investigations of the actual writing process, and detailed surveys of learners' backgrounds.

Finally, the present study should be conducted, focusing on other levels of text structure such as topical structure and cohesive device as well. Thus, the whole phenomenon of discursual transfer on different textual levels in L2 would be clearer.

Unlike the pedagogical orientation in the process approach, where formal features were less emphatic and composing freely was encouraged, sensitivity to and knowledge of formal text features on the global discourse level have been more emphasized in the recent L2 writing education (Jones, 1997; Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2003). The present study may have provided supporting findings for the legitimacy of such pedagogical directions.

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