



Teaching second language writing: Purpose, competences, rhetorical modes, genres and structure

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Teaching second language writing: Purpose, competences, rhetorical modes, genres and structure

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Abstract

This paper focuses on ways for the second language writing instructor to deconstruct the nature of L2 writing. The paper commences with an initial consideration of the purpose for why any of us write, in our L1, before moving on to relate Canale and Swain's (1980) four suggested communicative competences to L2 writing. Regarding the type of writing undertaken, the nine suggested rhetorical modes are then explained in relation to the teaching of L2 writing, before narrowing this down to four typical writing genres which feature heavily in the teaching of L2 writing. The fifth and final aspect noted herein is structure.

本稿では、L2 ライティングの本質を分析するという観点から L2 ライティング指導について考えていく。まず最初に L1 におけるライティングの目的を検討し、Canale & Swain (1980) のコミュニケーション能力を構成する 4 つの要素を L2 ライティングと関連つけて考察する。次に、ライティングの目的に合わせて一般的に活用されている 9 つのレトリックモードを紹介した上で、L2 ライティング指導によく見られる 4 つのジャンル別ライティングを具体的に取り上げる。最後に、テキスト構造について述べ、本稿をまとめる。

Keywords: second language writing, genres, rhetorical modes

The present paper suggests that for teachers responsible for teaching second language writing, particularly academic writing, a clear awareness of these five aspects of writing is helpful - (1) purpose; (2) communicative competences; (3) rhetorical modes; (4) typical writing genres; and (5) structure. In gaining a clearer understanding of these five aspects of writing, the writing teacher will be better equipped to plan a systematic writing syllabus, to create suitable classroom materials, and to assess student progress and learning effectively.

1. Writing purpose - six issues to consider

When people write, what do they write about? Further, assuming no void, who is this supposedly for? Before looking more at writing in the second language (L2) classroom, it is helpful to take a step back and think about writing itself, and the writing that we do in L1 in our real lives. Writing in 'real' life means not staged required writing, not an L2 type undertaken with

no obvious readership or purpose beyond ‘because the teacher told us to’, but the writing we naturally undertake for our jobs, in our pastimes, and in making, maintaining (and ending!) friendships and relationships.

When we write in our first language, among the main issues that we consider are:

1. What should I be writing about here?
2. Why do I have to write this?
3. Who is this for - who will read what I write?
4. Where can I get information to write in a more informed way?
5. What understanding does the reader already have of this topic?
6. How should I format and structure the writing?

(For some of us who work in international settings, the question of: ‘Which language should I write in?’ may arise, but this is for a future paper)

Using these question prompts in turn provides a means of deconstructing the purpose of writing. Two examples of my own from the last year are provided in Appendix A. One is connected with a hobby, and one is related to one aspect of my job responsibilities, which is hiring. Looking at the two examples, it is easy to see that the reasons for writing differ hugely, and this impacts the approach to the actual writing content. Perhaps you, the reader, may like to try this with two to three different examples of your own writing chosen from over the past year. I suggest that this is a useful undertaking for any writing teacher about his or herself - to elucidate regarding purposes and the types of ‘real world’ (compared with the ‘imagined faux-reality’ of the classroom, perhaps) writing in our first language. We can see more clearly what writing ‘is’ for us, why we do it, and who it is for. The writing teacher will then have clearer thinking categorise types of writing, in terms of what and why - relating to purpose, motivation and audience.

2. Four ‘communicative competences’ and L2 writing

To be an effective communicator, Canale and Swain (1980) suggested that a language learner needs to become proficient across four elements. These four suggested language areas (‘Competences’) are respectively: Grammatical, Strategic, Sociolinguistic and Discourse Competence. These are considered in turn below, particularly in relation to the present context - the teaching of writing at tertiary level in Japan.

1. Grammatical Competence

Due to the top-down pressure on high school language teaching of the national Center Test (*sentā shiken*) (National Center for University Entrance Examination, 2022) language teaching in Japanese high schools has traditionally been focused more on a grammar-translation (*‘bunpō-yakudoku’*) methodology (Gorsuch, 1998; Hino, 2002), also termed the ‘reading method’ (Januzzi, 1994). A common complaint has often been that this heavy focus on morphology and syntax is not in supporting communicative ability but rather in its stead.

The Japanese government’s education ministry has finally changed the entrance test to something more practical, with *kyōtsū tesuto* (National Center for University Entrance Examination, 2022) replacing the Center Test from the 2020 academic year. The new tests show a significant and welcome shift toward being more communicative in content. The test features activities that are overtly communicative, with fewer based on pure grammar (morphology and syntax), so we can expect, over time, to see this having a gradual washback on approaches to English teaching in high school and junior high school language classes to meet the needs of the exam.

2. *Sociolinguistic Competence*

Simply put, this is the ability to be ‘appropriate’. What is appropriate language and behaviour clearly differs greatly depending on the situation. Expanding this description, the learner needs to not just have a bank of expressions and correct grammar, but know to suitably match expressions with situations, and to do so in the appropriate register. In writing, there are extra challenges in this regard, including the need to know the appropriate format (e.g. subject, greeting, content, sign off, name) of emails, and the pertinent formulaic lexical chunks (e.g. Dear X, Thank you for your mail...I am writing regarding... Sincerely / Regards, Name).

3. *Strategic Competence*

This is the ability to fix misunderstandings and breakdowns that occur in communicative interactions. In writing terms, where a single item of writing is produced and then published for readers, this can be seen purely as a one-way interaction, with no room nor need for strategies. That said, there are many instances where writing is interactive, particularly with the rise of social networking in the last decade or so, where we can see writing having more of the characteristics of speaking - interactive, synchronous and requiring online processing - online meaning ‘at the moment’ in the older understanding of the word. Indeed such interactive writing, via texting, is indeed now often called ‘chat’. Not just these chats, but the typically directionally one-way interaction of newspaper article writing has become more two-way, with ‘below the line (abbreviated: BTL)’ responses. In *The Guardian*, one can often see the article writer responding and interacting with those commenting - above the line interacting below the line.

For the L2 setting, strategic competence has sometimes been presented as a curious raging internal dialogue, whereby the writer struggles to make sense of the task, of genre, and of content, but this seems contrived to the present author. Strategic competence, requiring repairs, is better presented via formal emails and meeting settings. For me, having taught several business courses, I have included sections on business email writing, including examples of clarification and apology emails, and then requiring students to write parallel examples.

4. *Discourse competence*

Communication, to be effective, requires not just single words or single clauses, but for these to be combined in lengthier utterances, and this is the remaining suggesting required competency. In speaking, a speaker can get by with being somewhat ‘broken’ (redolent of previous US President Trump, notable for his repetitions, breakdowns and use of simple single clauses, for discussion of which see e.g. Sedensky, 2017, compared with predecessor Obama who was able to produce online-formed spoken ‘paragraphs’), but this lack of coherence and cohesiveness is much more apparent and more problematic in writing. This poses a serious challenge for learners of L2 writing, and is a challenge for writing teachers, particularly in designated ‘academic writing’ classes. How to develop the ability of students to express ideas fully and effectively, and how to build clauses into sentences, into paragraphs, into a fully realised essay?

3. **Nine rhetorical modes for writing**

Rhetorical modes, also known as ‘modes of discourse’, are a means of classification of methods of communicating. For teachers here in Japan a twofold understanding is required, firstly regarding the rhetorical modes, and secondly, that Japanese expository style is likely to differ from that expected in typical English academic writing and there may be a degree of negative transfer (see e.g. Kubota, 1998 for discussion of this). With such clearer understanding, the

EFL writing teacher is better placed for effective planning of courses to include a range of modes, and in order to be able to effectively assist students in structuring and writing their papers, and in moving from L1 to L2 in both language and rhetorical mode.

The rhetorical modes (for example as in Anker, 2004) are listed as follows:

1. Illustration

A statement is made and this is supported by examples. The illustrative examples are used to make the argument more believable, and to show a real world example. These specific supporting reasons are used to support an argument. These would be typically used in persuasive writing.

2. Description

A person, place or object is described. The senses are used in the writing to convey something into the mind's eye of the reader.

3. Narration

The telling of a story. This requires an internal story logic, both of events and of sequence. Typically stories are told that have happened in the past. For L1 learners of English, in grammatical terms, this mostly requires use of the past simple, perhaps with some past progressive and present perfect and requires accurate use of those tenses.

4. Definition

This is to precisely define what something is for a reader. Often terms can be understood quite differently between people, and the writer offers a definition as to what a key language item means in that particular piece of writing. This is characteristic of more academic writing, typically in persuasive essays. Defining terms is typically expected in an introduction.

5. Comparison/Contrast

Comparisons look at the way two things, places, people are similar. Contrast, on the other hand (in contrast!), looks at how two things differ. Comparing and contrasting examines one thing in relation to another. One reason might be to try to decide which of the two is preferable, and for what reason(s). This is fairly common in language tests such as TOEFL for short writing tasks. Some typical topics used for compare/contrast writing (as this is known) in L2 are: living in the city versus the countryside; living at home or living on your own; high street versus shopping mall; high school versus university study. In the light of the COVID-afflicted year of 2020, we might offer online study versus in-class study as a topic that students are likely to have opinions about.

6. Cause/Effect

This is to establish why something happened or happens. Consideration is of cause, then of consequences, be they good or bad. A relationship is indicated between event and consequence. One sees this elevated into a 'genre' of paper, likely just to practice the use of this as a tool, but I suggest that this is likely best retained as one of a number of contributing rhetorical tools in the L2 learner writer's armory.

7. Division/Classification

Information is divided into categories, with a basis provided for this classification. Examples for this might be, for example looking at categories of higher education institutions in Japan, and categorising in different ways: private universities and public universities, or those that are

co-educational (typically women-only) and those that are co-educational. If looking at study abroad attitudes and language performance, a researcher may classify according to chosen study abroad destination and/or duration of study abroad study (e.g. 4 months, 6 months, or a full academic year of 9-10 months).

8. *Argumentation (Persuasive)*

This is the development of the writer's own argument, attempting to persuade the reader of a case. This is likely to include citing outside sources to situate and support. In effectively pursuing argumentation, the writer may also include the other rhetorical tools of illustration and definition, at least, in doing so. As noted prior, this is sufficiently substantive as a rhetorical mode to be elevated into a typically used writing genre.

9. *Process Analysis*

Here the writer lists stages of an action and explains how to do something. This is the rhetorical tool used in for example cookbooks or instruction manuals for new hardwares that we purchase. (This is also the language of giving directions, a topic mainstay of beginner textbooks that may now well be largely redundant with the advent of smartphone GPS maps.) Process analysis will typically feature sequencing language (such as: *firstly...next...then...finally*).

4. Genre-based approaches, and a list of 4 common genres

'Genre' as a basis for approaches to teaching writing in ESL/EFL writing stem largely from the seminal Swales (1990) work, which he situated within discussion of discourse communities, and the participants within who are likely to have shared understanding: "A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes...shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style" (p.58). More recently, Paltridge (2006) has subsequently boiled this down to the pithy, 'ways in which people get things done through their use of spoken and written discourse' (p.84). As Flowerdew (2000) notes, this genre-based approach led to the subsequent creation of a number of genre-based resources, such as those by Bhatia (1995) and Flowerdew (1993), and has frequently been used as a framework for investigating writing (e.g. Bunton, 2005; Crismore et al, 1993; Holmes, 1997). Approaches differ and have significantly diverged in how 'genre' is used (Hyland, 2003). Greater teacher awareness of writing genres can help them provide learners with the appropriate scaffolding required (Hyland, 2007; Johnstone, 2008). In a succinct review of the genre literature, Cornelius and Cotsworth (2015) discuss multiple aspects, while noting the difficulty in defining this term: 'The term genre may be difficult to explicitly define, as it is an umbrella term for the patterns of linguistic engagement undertaken in the production of specific text' (p.16).

For present purposes, a typical framework of differentiating among four genres is suggested: expository, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive. Interestingly, and the reader may initially be disturbed in noting such, this appears to exclude communicative writing, but we can take this list to be delimited to discussion only of academic writing courses and their suggested content - where students are learning to write, and write in a particular way for a particular purpose, distinct from where students are writing to learn - to improve their language skills, and/or to improve their written communicative ability. This may not be an entirely happy distinction, a little clumsy perhaps, but is one that is commonly seen in writing textbooks, and is arguably pragmatic.

1. Expository writing

This genre of writing is to 'expose' information to the reader - to explain. Typically this is found in newspapers, magazines and textbooks.

2. Descriptive writing

The purpose of this type of writing is to have the reader visualise a particular situation.

3. Narrative writing

A narrative is the telling of a happening - be it real or imagined. In more romantic terms, this is the 'telling of a story'. Typically, with us being human, the narrative will feature characters and the narrative is a telling of what these characters do, what they think (about themselves, what they do, about others...etc) and how they interact with each other and with their surroundings. The narrative may contain dialogue.

4. Persuasive Writing

Hereby, the reader has a particular viewpoint and seeks to persuade the reader in this direction. This is typically found in newspaper editorials, in advertising and in reviews. On the shopping high street, one can readily see this used by estate agents, who have developed their own persuasive cloaking jargon and style. Typically in writing classes, we also think of this as the 'argumentative' essay whereby the writer argues in favour of something or other (typical topics being, for example, single-sex v co-educational schooling, banning smoking in public places, national service).

In L1 it is likely that we use work amongst these genres, depending upon our profession and our responsibilities at any given time: and also in our non-work time writing a formal expository report for the workplace (expository), telling a funny anecdote in a pub (narrative) brought alive with descriptive colour of people and place (descriptive), and resisting the sales patter in a car showroom or of a populist politician (persuasive). For L2 learners, it is likely that there will also be an imbalance among these genres, and language courses including academic writing should ideally seek to balance exposure to and practice of the four respective genres. As teachers planning courses, designing materials, and teaching in the classrooms, it is up to us to do so.

5. Combining genres and modes

Suggested for L2 writing teachers when planning courses is a dual genre and mode approach. In Appendix B a suggested means of mapping is provided, including the four genres and the nine rhetorical modes in a checklist format. Mapping these onto the class writing tasks for the semester would ensure appropriate coverage. This is likely best achieved via a 'backward design' approach looking at the full map of genres and modes first as intended learning outcomes - look at how all respective genres and modes can be covered, and then look to design suitable practice writing tasks to enable students to gain the fuller range of writing skills.

Realistically, to include all the nine genres, with sufficient practice and repetition, this would probably need to be mapped across two years of writing classes. For a Japanese yearly academic timetable, for example, this would be once per week for thirty weeks of each academic year.

6. Specific step / move type - Structure and section content

Finally within this paper, we briefly examine a subset of genre, looking at a particular type of genre 'move', or 'step' (Swales, 2000). This pertains to the sections of written academic papers, the language used, and the content of these sections. This has been a burgeoning area of the genre literature, and teachers can choose to examine and teach in detail about, for example, experimental reports in general (Weissberg and Buker, 1990) or the structure of a conclusion (Bunton, 2005; Varaprasad, 2013).

Not all teachers assigned to teach writing are either necessarily expert writing teachers already, or accomplished and regular writers themselves - as such, an examination of the genre literature in this area will be of likely help for a number of teachers in firstly educating themselves as to appropriate structure and typical content. This area of the writing literature also indicates problem areas that students have, and areas where teachers can particularly focus their attention to best help students. We provide guidance of structure, of transition between moves within the structure, and content of the respective established moves.

Final words

Teaching writing can be challenging for teachers. Writing teachers may have many questions that they ask themselves: What is the purpose of this task? What type of writing is indicated here for students, in the syllabus presented to me by university administration staff? What should we be doing for this academic and language level of students? Am I doing this to develop their language (writing to learn) or to develop their writing, and to what extent of each? What should this paper contain - what aspects of rhetoric should this paper contain? How to structure?

The purpose of the present paper has been to offer a series of starter heuristic tools to help teachers think about aspects of writing - initially of their own writing in the first part as a starter, leading into what they may ask of their L2 writing students. The five aspects offer multiple angles for looking at L2 writing. The focus here has been more on 'academic' writing, and it has been deliberately largely delimited to this.

Finally, I would strongly encourage L2 writing teachers to try to include the range of genres and of rhetorical modes within those four typical genres. It can be useful for L2 writing teachers to make their own checklists to ensure all is covered. In doing so, and in teaching across these multiple aspects of writing as discussed herein, truly students will be developing their writing, and they will raise their communicative competences expressed through their L2 writing.

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Appendix A

Why write? (1): TV series review of Queen's Gambit (Netflix, 2020)

#	Question	Information
1	What should I be writing about here?	A review of the new Netflix series, 'Queen's Gambit'.
2	Why do I have to write this?	I did not have to write. But I volunteered to write some book reviews for National Chess Society Japan. I thought writing a review of the hit series would also be of interest to members. There is no financial payment.
3	Who is this for - who will read what I write?	This is for chess players in Japan. Specifically, for members of the national federation, who receive the bi-monthly newsletter. Written in English, for Japanese readers. Typically, chess players in Japan are very well-educated (most of the top players are Tokyo University alumni) and have very high level English skills, but I still needed to be aware of my language level. Perhaps this is better considered as how (language of communication) I wrote rather than what I wrote (content).
4	Where can I get information to write in a more informed way?	I read other reviews, I read information about the making of the series, and about the actors.
5	What understanding does the reader already have of what I will write about?	I also needed to be aware that readers would be of varying chess level - to offer content across an understanding level range. I would be writing for relatively low-level players as well as for international-level peers. Further, some would have watched, some may have heard of the show but not watched, while some would not have the series at all. There is a need to balance - to engage and inform, but one should not give away key story details as spoilers.
6	How should I format and structure the writing?	Many years ago at university I wrote music reviews. I have written a number of book reviews, mostly of chess books, but also of academic books. This was my first review of a TV series, so I looked at other examples of the genre for typical structure, content, and length.

Why write? (2): In-house checklist for interviews and hiring

#	Question	Information
1	What should I be writing about here?	Everything necessary for a prospective new hire - necessary from the employer side (me, us) and for the prospective new hire - the interviewee.
2	Why do I have to write this?	I was not directed to write this, and did not really 'have to'. But the motivation was for myself and colleagues to be more organised and professional in managing interviews and managing ourselves in interviews. So - to help me, and to help colleagues interviewing with me to do a better, cleaner job.
3	Who is this for - who will read what I write?	I wrote this for myself and for colleagues who conduct interviews. This is a subset of the English department.
4	Where can I get information to write in a more informed way?	There was no previous document. I wrote this based on noting what colleagues ask, what admin staff need and from observing and learning. This was checked with colleagues - teaching staff and admin staff.
5	What understanding does the reader already have of what I will write about?	Newer colleagues may not be familiar with the details. More senior staff will be more familiar, but may not have everything to hand in terms of exactly what is required. This document was intended as a crib sheet for senior staff and information for newer staff.
6	How should I format and structure the writing?	There is no format that one must follow for an 'unofficial' internal document. But for accessibility and quick ease of reference I considered that it should be short, well-spaced and clear - easy to quickly jump into for key info. It needed to be accessible enough that a teacher could look in the ten minutes between a class and an interview and glean all the necessary information in that time.

Appendix B

Syllabus map of task, genre and rhetorical mode for a writing class, for a 15-week university semester

#	Writing task	Genre				Rhetorical mode - likely or expected
		Expository	Descriptive	Narrative	Persuasive	1-9 mode checklist
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						

Key

Numbers of rhetorical modes to insert in table:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Illustration | 6 Cause / Effect |
| 2 Description | 7 Division / Classification |
| 3 Narration | 8 Argumentation (Persuasive) |
| 4 Persuasive | 9 Process Analysis |
| 5 Comparison / Contrast | |

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