Students’ Writing Practices and Their Perception of the Writing Process

ギャビン ブルックス
Gavin Brooks

While textual analysis can help teachers and researchers to understand the types of texts that students are producing when they write in English it is also important to look at how individual students write. A greater understanding of the what choices students are making in their writing and the reasons for these choices can help teachers to plan writing classes that better meet their students needs (McKay, 1993). It also allows them to provide the scaffolding necessary to help their students organize their ideas in a way that is more acceptable to native English speakers (Liu & Furneaux, 2013). This study attempts to provide some insight into what Japanese university students are doing when they write in English. It uses a series of semi-structured interviews to analyze the writing process of eight second-year L2 writing students enrolled in an academic writing course at a private university in Japan.

Key Words : Academic Writing, Second Language Writing, Writing Process, Instruction

Introduction

In Japan students who move from a high school educational environment to university level classes often have problems with the new set of expectations and demands placed upon them in their English language classes (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). Some of the most difficult classes for many of these students are their English language writing classes, especially the ones that focus on academic writing. The reason for this is that first year university students often enter these writing classes with no background in the type of writing that they will be asked to produce in the class (Miyake, 2007). While most university level classes require students to compose academic paragraphs or essays in English, most students “before they enter the tertiary level have little consistent exposure to writing demands beyond retelling… in (both their) L1 and L2, (and some) have minimal practice even with simple retelling.” (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 5) In one study, Kobayashi (2002, p. 10) found that only 43% of Japanese students “reported having received some kind of L1 writing instruction (e.g., essay organization) as compared to 98% of the American students.” This means that these students are unaware of how to write an essay in their first language (L1), let alone in English. This lack of exposure to academic writing also extends to the steps, or the process, involved in writing an essay in English.

Because of this lack of experience with the writing process students must first be taught how to write if we want them to succeed as academic writers. This involves introducing them to the genres that they will be expected to write as well as instructing them in the process that skilled writers use when writing an essay.

The Writing Process

Zamel (1976) was one of the first researchers to argue that the process that students use when they are writing in their L2 has a significant impact on how well they write. She took the view that teaching writing was more than simply teaching students a set of syntactic or discourse structures that could be reproduced at a later date. She claimed that, like L1 writers, L2 writers can also benefit from explicit instruction about the process involved in writing (Zamel, 1983). Drawing on research in the field of L1 writing this “process-based approach emphasized the view of writing as a process of developing organization as well as meaning (which involved) writing strategies, multiple drafts, and formative feedback” (Matsuda, 2003b, p. 21). Hyland (2010, p.
82) summarized the process view of writing as:

**Writing is problem-solving:** writers use invention strategies and extensive planning to resolve the rhetorical problems that each writing task presents.

**Writing is generative:** writers explore and discover ideas as they write.

**Writing is recursive:** writers constantly review and modify their texts as they write and often produce several drafts to achieve a finished product.

**Writing is collaborative:** writers benefit from focused feedback from a variety of sources.

**Writing is developmental:** writers should not be evaluated only on their final products but on their improvement.

The process approach views writing as a collection of complex phenomena that include “not only the procedural strategies for going through the writing process to generate text but also a multitude of other strategies to develop a specific schemata.” (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006, p. 285). With regards to L2 writing this involves teaching students that the writing process is recursive and starts before they actually begin to write their essay. This involves dividing writing into “three stages: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting.” (Murray, 2009, p. 2) and teaching students the importance of brainstorming and outlining before they start to write, as well as the importance of revising what they have written. It is only through mastering these steps that students will become proficient academic writers.

The **Importance of the Process Approach for Students**

The idea that writing is a process is an important one for students to understand, and it is important for them to be able to use some type of a process when they do their own writing. Studies looking at the effects that the writing process has on L2 writers has been a major focus of L2 writing research for the last thirty years (Sasaki, 2000). One of the major findings of this research is that, “as with mother-tongue composing, more skilled second-language writers tend to do more effective and extensive planning (either prior to or while composing)” (Cumming, 2001, p. 5). This means that a good writing course should provide students with “composition strategies which can be transferred across situations, helping them to brainstorm, draft, and revise, together with advice on how to structure their writing according to the demands and constraints of particular contexts” (Hyland, 2010, p. 79).

Students who are not able to see their written work as a series of steps, or who are not able to follow these steps effectively when they write, will have problems with producing academic writing in both their L1 and in their L2. Raines (1985) summarizes some of the problems that unskilled writers have with the writing process:

“They take less time to plan, and their plans are less flexible… They re-scan large segments of their work less often than skilled writers do, and when they do re-scan, it is usually more for the purpose of correcting surface-level errors… Their revising is really mostly editing; the changes they make focus on form rather than content… Once they put ideas on the page, they seldom rework them. The first draft either becomes the final draft or resembles it very closely. (p. 230)

While in recent years research in L2 writing has been moving away from a process approach to teaching writing (Matsuda, 2003a), teaching students the steps that they need to use to research and write academic essays is still important. Research has consistently shown that good writers plan more and at higher levels and that L2 writers need to be taught how to do this effectively if they are to succeed as academic writers (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

The **Connection Between L1 and L2 Writing**

Research has also demonstrated that there is a connection between the writing processes that students use in their L1 compared to the process that they use in their L2. Writing is a skill that students can transfer between their L1 and L2 so students who are able to plan and write effective essays in Japanese will be much more likely to be proficient writers in English as well. Kubota (1998) found that the quality of L2 writing among her Japanese subjects depended more on the quality of their L1 writing than on their cultural background. In other words, students who can write well in Japanese were also able to write well in English (Stapleton, 2002).

The **Importance of the Writing Process for This Study**

The aim of this study was to examine the writing practices of Japanese university students of varying levels of English proficiency that were enrolled in a second year university writing class. The goals of the research questions were to gain a greater amount of insight into:

1. The students’ actual writing practices in both...
English and their L1.
2. The steps that students follow when writing an essay.
3. The reasons students have for following those steps.

Method

Purpose of the Interview

The purpose of this study was to provide a more in-depth look into how students write and the steps that they go through when they are writing. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as it provided a means of gaining a greater understanding of what students are doing when they write. This interview format allowed the researcher to question students about the process that they used while writing and gave students a chance to expand upon the reasons behind the choices that they make when they write. In order to allow students to have more time to think about their own writing practices all the participants were provided with pre-prepared guiding questions. The interviews were semi-structured and students were also "encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136) during the interview.

Interview Questions

The interview questions covered in this paper were part of a larger study that focused on three different areas of academic writing. The other questions covered during the interview focused on both students’ L2 and L1 writing experiences and their perceptions of the similarities and differences between academic writing in English and Japanese. Students were asked about their experiences with writing at both the high school and the university level. The final part of the interview consisted of four questions that were designed to allow the students to talk about how they write, in both English and Japanese. A complete list of the questions covered in the interview can be found in Appendix A. The three questions that are relevant to this paper were:

If you are given a writing assignment in English could you explain the steps that you go through to complete this assignment.

If you are given a writing assignment in Japanese could you explain the steps that you go through to complete the assignment.

Where did you first learn how to write like this for English? For Japanese?

Participants

This interview study involved second year students who were enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a private university in Japan. All of the students would have taken at least three semesters of academic writing and, as the EAP program is a coordinated one, the students would have received the same type of writing instruction with regard to the academic writing process and types of academic genres in which they had been asked to write. The students were recruited by their writing teachers and participation in the interviews was voluntary. Of the approximately 375 students who were asked to participate in the interviews 14 students responded. Nine students were selected, of which eight participated. As the students in the EAP program are streamed according to their English language abilities three students were chosen from each of the lower, middle and upper writing classes. While all of the students who were interviewed had completed their three mandatory years of high school in Japan, three of the students had spent time studying abroad.

Procedure

The eight interviews were conducted during a three-week period in June and July 2014. 40 minutes was allotted for each of the interviews to allow enough time for the students to talk freely about their experiences and opinions regarding academic writing. The interviews were semi-structured and the students were sent a copy of the 19 questions a week before their interview. Students were asked to look through questions and make some notes to help them during the interviews. The interviews ranged from 21 to 34 minutes in length and were conducted in both English and Japanese. The interviews were recorded and those recordings were later transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed and the students answers were then grouped together according to their responses to specific questions.

Results

Students were first asked what they thought the best way to write an essay was in English. All of the students interviewed reported that they believed that it would be best to use some type of process approach to writing in English (see Table 1). The students were then asked to talk the researcher through the steps that they took to write a sample essay. All of the eight students still reported using some type of process approach in writing the sample essay. This
could have included students doing some form of pre-writing planning such as making an outline, which five of the students reported doing, as well as proofreading and checking the final draft of their essay before handing it in, which six of the students reported doing. This is not surprising given that these are the steps that the students are taught to take in their university writing classes.

Students were then asked about writing in Japanese. Only five out of the eight still said that some type of a process approach would be best. When asked to talk the researcher through the steps they took to write a sample essay in Japanese only two of the eight students reported using any type of pre-writing or proofreading and both of those students indicated that the planning stage was more important for them than the proofreading stage. One of the students reported using some type of note-cards in both English and Japanese which she then organized into groups and used to help her write her paper. The other student said that he started out searching the Internet for ideas about the topic and wrote the interesting ones down to help him when he was writing. When asked why they did not use these techniques to help them when writing in Japanese, despite the fact they reported using them in English, the most common answer was that because Japanese was their native language it was easier to imagine what they should write without planning it out first.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students were then asked if they proofread their essays before turning them in and how they did this. More students reported proofreading when writing in English than in Japanese. Only two of the eight students said that they usually did not proofread their English essays before turning them in, while five of the students said that they usually did not proofread when writing in Japanese (see Table 2). Of the students who said that they usually or always proofread their essay most, six in English and three in Japanese, said that they mainly proofread for grammatical problems. Only one of the students interviewed reported proofreading for structure, and even then she only reported checking for structure in her English writing.

Table 2. Proofreading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses were possible

When asked about peer review most of the students said that they had some experience using peer review when writing in English (see Table 3). However, few of the students thought that peer review was a useful way to improve their English writing. Of the four students that said they made changes to their essays based on the peer review process only one of those said that those changes involved fixing ideas in their essay while the other three only used the peer review process to improve their sentence level grammar. When asked about their Japanese writing only three of the students said they used some type of peer review process in Japanese. One student had a family member check her paper for both grammatical accuracy and ideas. The other two had friends check over their paper to make sure that they had not made any grammatical errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple responses were possible

The final question was about where students had first learned how to use a process based approach to their own writing (see Table 4). In the interviews six of the students said that they first learned how to write using brainstorming, outlining and proofreading in their English language classes. Of those two were introduced to this process in high school while the other four did not learn a process approach to writing until they were in university.

Table 4. Where Did You First Learn to Write Like This

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The findings of these interviews further support previous studies that Japanese students have little experience with academic writing in high school (Kobayashi, 2002; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). This seems to be true even though the Japanese Ministry of Education has mandated that all high school students should be taught academic writing.
(Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002) Because of this students need to be given more opportunities to practice the writing process in their university classes.

In order to become more effective writers students need to not only be taught how to use a process based approach to writing, they also need to understand why this approach can help them to produce better essays, both in their L1 and their L2. Studies have shown that stages of the process approach, like peer review, require a significant amount of scaffolding to be effective. However, if students are able to understand the importance of these skills, and if they are given the opportunity to use them, it will be beneficial to them both during and outside of the writing class. These skills will help them become better English writers. They will also give them more autonomy, allowing them to progress as academic writers even after they have completed their English language courses.

The interviews also emphasized how important learning to write well in English is for the students’ L1 writing. This is evident in the fact that most of the students interviewed reported that most of the writing techniques they use when writing in Japanese they first learned in their English writing classes. At a university level students are consistently required to produce academic texts for assessment purposes, both in English and in their L1. Teaching students a set of skills that allow them to improve their academic writing will help them to succeed in both their Japanese and their English language courses at the university level.

**Conclusion**

This study shows that students at a university level are still having problems with the steps involved in academic writing. This means that writing teachers will need to scaffold their writing instruction so that their students can gain a better understanding of the steps that they need to write well. This is important for the students if they are going to succeed in the English language writing class. It is also important because the instructions that students are getting in their English language classes may be laying the foundations of how these students will write in their L1 (Cummins, 2005). By giving students a better understanding of how to write academically the teachers will be helping their students to participate in both the English and the Japanese academic discourse communities. Written communication is also very important in all of the fields in which academically qualified people will participate in during their working life.

**REFERENCES**


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Part 1: Background

What type of English writing did you have to do in high school?
Did your teacher teach you how to write an English paragraph? (Even if the class was not about paragraph writing.)
What kind of writing instruction and practice did you receive in Japanese classes in high school?
At high school did you ever have to write an essay in English? In Japanese?
Outside of the EC program what type of academic writing do you have to do at KGU?
Have you ever studied how to write an essay or report in Japanese? (Even if the class was not about Essay writing.)
Have you ever studied writing outside of school? (In a Juku or at home.) If yes then where did you study writing?
Did you do short essay writing as part of your university entrance exams? If so how did you practice for this?

Part 2: Students’ Perception:

What are the main differences between academic writing in English and Japanese?
What are the similarities between academic writing in English and Japanese?
Do you think that the writing skills you have learned in Japanese help you in your EC writing classes?
Do you think that the writing skills that you learn in your EC classes will help you with your Japanese writing?
What is the most difficult thing for you when you write in English for class?
What is the most difficult thing for you when you write in Japanese for class?
Compared to the other students in your class do you think you are better at writing in English or Japanese? Why?

Part 3: Writing Strategies

If you are given a writing assignment in English could you explain the steps that you go through to complete this assignment.
If you are given a writing assignment in Japanese could you explain the steps that you go through to complete the assignment.
Do you follow the same steps for Japanese as you do for English? Why or why not?
Where did you first learn how to write like this for English? For Japanese?