

Teaching Standard German Text Types to Japanese Students: Design of a Composition Course

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The teaching of writing has often been neglected in favour of oral skills. However, research in L2 writing suggests that text production should be taught from the beginning stages of L2 learning. This article outlines a course concept designed for students of German in Japan. The course combines product and process-oriented teaching methods. The combination of these two approaches should enable students to write texts that are not only culturally appropriate, but in which they can also express their own ideas. By focussing on student difficulties, the aim of the composition course is to build up writing competence and to test the effectiveness of the methods employed.

Textsortentraining für japanische Deutschlernende: Schreiben ist im Fremdsprachenunterricht häufig zugunsten der Förderung der mündlichen Ausdrucksfähigkeit vernachlässigt worden. Erkenntnisse der Schreibforschung legen jedoch nahe, bereits ab der Grundstufe mit der Vermittlung zielsprachlicher Schreibfertigkeiten und Textsorten zu beginnen. Der vorliegende Artikel beschreibt das Konzept eines Schreibkurses für japanische Deutschlernende, das Produkt und Prozess orientierte Verfahren der Schreibdidaktik miteinander verbindet. Dieser Ansatz soll die Lernenden befähigen, zielsprachlich angemessene Texte zu schreiben, in denen sie auch ihre eigenen Ausdruckswünsche entfalten können. Ziel des Textsortentrainings ist es, die Schwierigkeiten der Lernenden beim Erwerb von Schreibkompetenz zu ermitteln und die dazu eingesetzten Methoden hinsichtlich ihrer Effektivität zu testen.

日本人学生のためのドイツ語の書き方の練習:ライティングコースが目指すものの日本のドイツ語授業においてライティングは、口頭伝達能力の養成に比べ疎かにされやすい。しかし第二外国語のライティングに関する最近の研究によると、表現技法は初期段階で指導されるべきという示唆もある。本稿ではドイツ語を第二外国語とする学習者対象の指導について考察を行い、「産出指向」と「過程指向」という2アプローチを統合する方法を提案する。それを通じ学習者が物事・世界を多様な文化に即して捉えようとするのみでなく、自分の考えを積極的に表現できるようになることが期待される。その際、学習困難性に焦点を当て、そこから「書く能力」向上のための方法を探り、それらの効果に関して検証することも試みる。

The reason for developing a composition course for German as a Foreign Language (GFL) students in Japan stems from complaints frequently voiced by students as well as teachers on the difficulties of acquiring or teaching writing skills in German. The second language (L2) texts written by the students usually appear awkward to native speakers, because they do not follow the formal and linguistic requirements of German text norms. The purpose of the composition course outlined here is to develop teaching concepts and materials, as yet unavailable, for Japanese GFL students and to contribute to the improvement of L2 writing skills. The data collected throughout the composition course consisted of interviews with the students, observations of student difficulties when writing in L2, and an analysis of texts produced during the course.

Research in L2 writing suggests teaching L2 text types at the beginner level so that students are able to build writing competence step by step (Eßer, 1997; Hufeisen, 2000). The concept outlined below is an attempt to put these demands into practice. It allows for a slow progression and combines product and process-oriented teaching methods, which should enable the students to write texts that are both culturally appropriate and in which students can express their own ideas.

The theoretical framework on which the composition course is based, as well as the context of German teaching in Japan will be discussed in the following section of the paper. Following that, the course structure and contents, composed of 10 different standard text types, is presented. Particular emphasis is placed on the didactic approach employed throughout composition training, which will be dealt with in the final section. This consists of three steps: *reading*, *reflecting*, and *writing*. The key element is, however, the L1 and L2 texts through comparison of which the students should become aware of differing text patterns in their native and the target language. In order to be accepted as representative of a certain text type, the text must display certain formal, structural, and stylistic characteristics that constitute the text pattern.

GFL Writing in Japan: Theory and Practice

The teaching of GFL writing in Japan has, to some extent, been neglected. Overall, the improvement of oral skills is given priority. Writing primarily serves as an instrument to test listening and reading comprehension and the acquisition of lexical or grammatical knowledge. At the beginners' level,

writing tasks include the composition of sentences within a given structural framework or the translation of short texts. Seldom are students asked to compose their own texts. Even advanced students who have mastered a large vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures are not able to write an adequate German text, because they are not taught how. Text composition or writing as a skill to produce texts such as essays, letters, or diaries is not explicitly taught at most institutions (Yamaki, 2003).

However, teaching writing skills may improve the other skills (reading, listening, and speaking), enabling students to acquire more comprehensive communicative skills. Writing can be used as an effective tool to generate thoughts, to structure ideas, and to solve problems (Eigler, 1990; Rico, 1984). Finally, the knowledge of cultural differences between text and writing norms may reduce inter-cultural misunderstandings in written communication.

The following aims are envisioned in the design of the composition course:

- to reveal differences between German and Japanese textual norms
- to gain insight into the writing difficulties of Japanese GFL students
- to employ different teaching methods in order to improve GFL writing skills

The course design presented here is based on contrastive textlinguistics (Clyne 1987, 1993; Kaplan, 1987) and research in L2 writing instruction (Kast, 2001; Portmann, 1991). There are three different approaches employed to teach writing: directive, product, and process-oriented instructional strategies.

In Japan, the directive approach is frequently used in foreign language instruction. It is more or less reproductive and directed towards the training of useful expressions and grammatical structures isolated from a context. The students are assumed to transfer this knowledge when they later write their own texts.

Product-oriented approaches, based on textlinguistic studies, aim at enabling students to write texts according to formal requirements by raising awareness of L1 and L2 differences of text types and norms. Methods used in product-oriented approaches include the analysis of model texts, the comparison of authentic L1 and L2 texts, and the instruction of expressions frequently used in a given text type.

Process-oriented approaches, on the other hand, do not focus on the text, but on the process of composition and the writer himself. Their aim is to reduce writer's block, to stimulate the writer's creativity, and to support him in expressing what he wants to say. For this purpose the writing process is divided into the subtasks of planning, structuring, formulating, and revising, which facilitate this cognitively challenging task (Hayes & Flower, 1980). The composition course outlined below makes use of all three approaches depending on the aim of the individual task at hand.

Structure and Contents of the Composition Course

The composition course described below was carried out in 2004 at Matsuyama University. It comprised 28 sessions of 90 minutes each and was delivered over a whole academic year. The course is part of an elective German course offered

for second, third, and fourth-year students. Since Matsuyama University offers German classes as elective general education units and not as a major discipline, the level of the students is comparatively low—they have received between 40 and 120 hours of German tuition prior to the training. Some of the students have previously mastered level 3 or 4 of the German Language Proficiency Test (*dokken*) or participated in off-campus German language courses, such as the German summer course in Prien (Germany) or the *Interuni-Seminar*. The Interuni-Seminar is a 4 to 5 day German workshop organised by the Goethe-Institute. Its aim is to engage students intensively with German culture and language, and it gives teachers the opportunity to exchange ideas and teaching concepts. Due to the different levels of the students, they require training in the use of dictionaries and grammar books at the beginning of the course.

The contents of the composition course consist of ten frequently used German text types, each of which constitutes a unit of two to three sessions. The text types presented were selected according to their length, their grammatical complexity, and their relevance to GFL students in Japan. In the first semester, rather short text types were introduced, such as notes, invitations, greeting cards, recipes, and advertisements. In the second semester, longer and more complicated text types were introduced, such as post cards, diary entries, private letters, Curriculum Vitae, and semi-official letters. All of these text types show a certain textual pattern, which consists of formal, structural, and linguistic characteristics, and they are more or less standardised. While Curriculum Vitae and letters, for instance, must follow formal requirements in order to be accepted as a

representation of their text type, notes and diary entries are more flexible.

The contents covered in the model texts and writing tasks were designed to relate to the experiences and interests of GFL students in Japan. Experience has shown that the authenticity of a writing task motivates students and, in due course, allows transfer of acquired text composition knowledge to a real application. Examples of the writing tasks employed in the composition course were:

- a postcard from a short trip during *Golden Week*
- an invitation to a university party
- small class notes

Methods used in the Composition Course

Writing, and L2 writing in particular, is known as a complex task that demands patience and high cognitive skills, because lexical, grammatical, and textual knowledge have to be coordinated (Yamaki, 2003). Therefore different didactic approaches and techniques are used in the composition course to enhance the performance of this task, such as:

- a choice of different classroom interaction forms (mainly pair and group activities) in order to prevent the monotonous and lonesome task of writing
- an additional use of audio and visual media (such as maps, pictures, and tapes) in order to allow learning on different channels

- an additional training of reading, listening, and speaking tasks in order to allow a transfer to other skills

The didactic progression used in the instruction of each text type follows the following three steps (1) *Reading* (2) *Reflecting*, and (3) *Writing*, as explained below.



Figure 1. Didactic Progression

Reading

At the start of each unit the students read one or more German model text. These stereotypical texts are simplified and contain typical expressions, lexical items, and grammatical structures. In order to support reading comprehension, pictures, videos, or other audio-visual media are used.

After the reading, elementary grammatical structures, for example the use of past tense in text types such as post cards and diaries, are extrapolated from the model texts. By means of an inductive approach, the students are asked to find these structures themselves and determine their function. In order to allow them to transfer this knowledge when they write their own texts afterwards, these structures are used in short, separate exercises.

Most German textbooks produced in Japan only present model texts that are usually followed by a writing task requiring the students to write a similar text. However, the receptive comprehension of a model text does not ensure the students will produce such a text themselves when they are taught how to “compose” a text in the target language. Instead, the students should reflect on the composition criteria of L2 text patterns *before* they write their own texts in the target language.

Reflecting

The inclusion of a phase in which a textual pattern is reflected upon is based on the realisation that text patterns are culturally located. We acquire our knowledge of textual patterns in our L1 writing education, which enables us to be implicitly aware of text structures and their composition criteria. However, since textual patterns differ between languages, we tend to transfer our knowledge of L1 textual patterns when writing in a foreign language. This transfer involves structural, formal, stylistic, and linguistic dimensions. Therefore, studies in L2 writing demand ways to explicitly make the students aware of target language text patterns (Eßer, 1997; Hufeisen 2000).

Since for most Japanese students, German is already the second foreign language after English, we may expect a transfer of textual pattern knowledge acquired during English instruction. In the composition course, some structural and lexical transfer mistakes indicative of an English source have been observed. However, this is outside the scope of this paper, but provides grounds for further research.

In order to prevent the students from simply transferring their culturally coined textual pattern knowledge, the

composition course makes them explicitly aware of the differences between L1 and L2 text patterns. Since most of the students at Japanese universities share the same L1, comparisons between native and target language prove to be very effective. For this purpose, students bring authentic L1 texts of the appropriate text type to class. These are analysed according to structural and formal characteristics and compared to authentic German texts of the same type, which are provided.

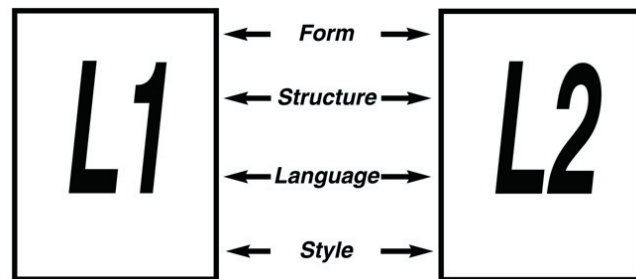


Figure 2. Comparison of Authentic L1 and L2 Texts

Based on this comparison the students are guided to create what will be referred to as a *text pattern stencil*. This text pattern stencil is a graphic representation of the L2 text pattern and displays the arrangement of its essential text parts. For example, the essential parts of a personal letter are date and place, form of greeting, introduction, main body, concluding sentence, farewell statement, and name of the writer. The function of the text pattern stencil is to serve as

a structural orientation when the students produce their own L2 texts later on. An example of a text pattern stencil of the German text type for a private letter is illustrated below:

Place and Date
Greeting
Introductory Sentence
Main Body
Concluding Sentence
Farewell Statement
Name

Figure 3. Text Pattern Stencil

As far as the linguistic and stylistic characteristics of L1 and L2 text patterns are concerned, the students are asked to set up their own vocabulary lists for each text type, which should contain frequently used expressions of the text type under review. In the case of an English letter, a vocabulary list would include expressions like *Dear ...*, *Sorry for not having written earlier ...*, *Yours ...*. As with the text pattern stencil, an inductive approach is used in which students discover typical expressions from authentic texts. Through this reflection on structural and linguistic characteristics of L1 and L2 text patterns, the students become aware of differences between native and target language norms of text composition, which is a necessary basis for being able to write an appropriate text in the target language.

According to the interviews carried out with the students after the composition course, it was confirmed that the comparison between native and target language texts was considered a necessary basis for producing texts in the target language. The students mentioned that before this explicit comparison they were actually aware of the fact that German texts differed in structure and composition from Japanese texts, but they did not know what these differences consisted of. Therefore, the creation of a text pattern stencil was generally found quite helpful, because it illustrates to the writer how to start, how to proceed and how to finish the text. The vocabulary lists provided additional incentives regarding what to write about. However, some students objected that they felt limited in their creativity by the text pattern stencil and the vocabulary lists, because the structural and lexical framework provided did not leave enough room for expressing alternative ideas.

Writing

Depending on the time available, the students write their texts in class. Short texts such as invitations, greeting cards, or advertisements that can easily be produced by using the text pattern stencil and the vocabulary list are usually written at home. Longer texts, such as letters or diary entries that require more creativity and which usually pose lexical and grammatical problems, are written in the classroom. Regardless of where the students write their texts, they are encouraged to use all L2 writing aids available. Apart from the text pattern stencil, the vocabulary lists, and other material produced in class, they are also trained in the effective use of grammar books and dictionaries.

Writing in class has the advantage that the students can finish their texts within a given time. In order to facilitate the writing of longer texts, the writing process is subdivided into smaller phases, which ensure the students do not get confused when difficulties occur. Additionally, writing simultaneously with peers motivates the students, because ideas can be exchanged and problems can be solved more easily. This motivation occurs particularly when cooperative writing is used (Faistauer, 1997). This was confirmed in the student interviews. All students agreed that writing in class is beneficial for learning how to write, firstly, because there is always somebody—either the teacher or a peer—to help when difficulties occur, and secondly, seeing and experiencing how peers organise their writing process helps to improve one's own writing strategies.

Depending on the difficulties of the individual writing phases, various writing techniques are employed. For example, if ideas or vocabulary need to be generated, the

students are asked to do a *brainstorming*. If finding a writing incentive is the objective, the students set up a *cluster*, which helps them to find their own approach to a topic and to establish links between ideas (Rico, 1984). Finally, when these ideas have to be structured in order to allow the students to create a coherent text, they produce a so-called *mind map*, which graphically displays how topics and subtopics are arranged (Buzan & Buzan, 1993).

When the texts are written the students exchange papers and proofread the texts of their peers. They mark what they do not understand, what they think is grammatically or lexically incorrect, and also what they think is done well. Since proofreading is quite a challenging task, particularly for students at this level, they receive a check list of points they should look for and questions they should answer. For example: *Does the text contain an introductory sentence? Does the writer use expressions from the vocabulary list? etc.* After proofreading, they give each other feedback, in which they orally express their praise and criticism. This reader feedback helps the writer to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of his text. After peer feedback, the students revise their texts at home and submit them to the teacher for final correction and evaluation. This teacher evaluation will form the basis of a final discussion on the text type under review.

The student interviews revealed that peer revision in class was considered an effective tool to improve writing skills. The students mentioned that at first they felt very strange adopting the teacher's role, but since all the other students had to do the same, they became more confident. Apart from this, some students said that before they experienced peer

revision in class they did not believe that they are able to revise texts written in German, and that this experience gave them more confidence to revise their own texts.

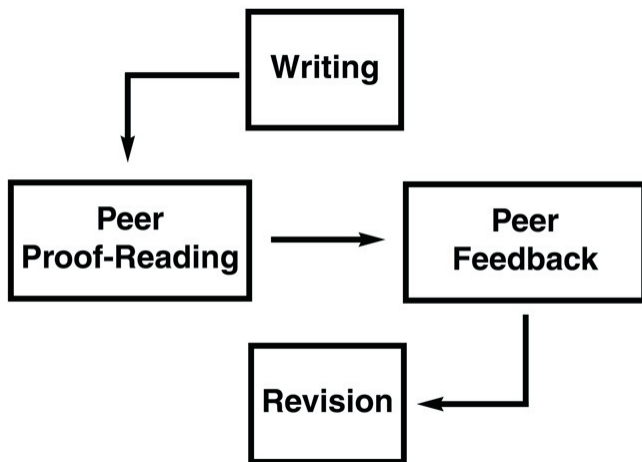


Figure 4. Writing and Revision Process

Conclusion

The preliminary conclusions drawn after the completion of the course are based on observations of the students in class, informal interviews, and insights gained from the correction of their texts. A few of the strengths and weaknesses of the composition course outlined in this paper are highlighted below.

As the texts written by students show, teaching text composition to students with only a basic knowledge of German is possible, yet time-consuming. The experience of having written an entire text in the target language usually motivates the students. They gain confidence in their writing skills, becoming more aware of text structures and norms, which helps them to develop strategies to analyse and produce texts. In this regard, the text pattern stencil and the lists of expressions set up by the students themselves proved to be very effective. The students wrote texts that were in line with the formal and stylistic requirements of German text norms.

However, it must be mentioned that the texts produced also displayed the huge disparity between the students' desire to express something and their linguistic competence to do so. The grammatical and lexical gaps that became apparent are indicative of the difficulty of teaching writing to students at this level. Apart from some individual variations, the texts written generally resembled the model texts due to these gaps. The students rarely expressed their own ideas. This may well be due to the stress on formal requirements in the course design.

A further problematic issue was the analysis of the authentic texts. They were not only difficult on the lexical-grammatical level, but also on the content level, because they usually require context knowledge shared between the writer and the intended reader. Additionally, handwritten texts are often hard to decipher, particularly for students whose native language is not based on the alphabet.

It has still to be determined whether the time and effort spent on the teaching of text composition to students with

only basic L2 skills is worthwhile. The methods, content, and materials employed in the training will be subjected to a critical revision, and the course will be held again next year. In order to analyse to what extent the students can improve their writing skills, the next delivery of the course will be evaluated and accompanied by a pre and post-test design.

Currently, there are different initiatives in Japan to promote the teaching of GFL writing, for example, the newspaper project developed at Hokkaido University, which is currently carried out at many universities nationwide (Kühn, 2003). In addition to that, in 2005 a writing contest will be held as one of many projects of the upcoming Germany-in-Japan-Year. To support teachers in preparing their students for this contest, didactic material for teaching GFL writing to Japanese students was developed (Balmus, Harting, Weber, & Yamaki, 2004). It is anticipated that these initiatives will also stimulate more research in the teaching of GFL writing.

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