

A comparative study of two approaches to English writing: translation and process writing

Nozomu Sonda
Yamaguchi University

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Is translation an evil method for Japanese learners because it interferes with the production of English sentences? Or can it be used effectively along with other methods of teaching English writing such as process writing? This is a comparative study of the translation and process writing methods in terms of quantity, quality, structure, and creativity of student writing. The results show that the translation group made more significant improvements in quantity and quality whereas the process writing group made more significant improvements in structure and creativity. It is suggested that the translation method is more effective with beginning to lower intermediate level learners who still need to work on the basics of writing while the process writing method is more useful for intermediate to advanced learners who are ready to work on deeper content and the logical structure of their writing. For most Japanese college students who have gone through the translation method in high school, process writing may be more effective.

和文英訳は英文を考へ出すプロセスに干渉する非効果的なライティング学習法であるか?それとも、プロセスライティングなど他の学習法と組み合わせれば、効果的な学習法でありうるか?本研究は、英文ライティング学習における翻訳アプローチとプロセスライティング・アプローチを、量・質・構造・創造性の4点において比較対照した。その結果、翻訳アプローチを用いた学習者は、量と質の両面でより有意な進歩が見られたのに対し、プロセスライティング・アプローチを用いたグループは、構造と創造性の面でより有意な進歩が見られた。初歩及び中級初歩の学習者は、まだ基本的なライティング技術を身につけようとする段階なので、前者が好ましいと思われるのに対し、中級及び上級の学習者は、より深い内容や論理的な流れや構造に取り組む準備ができていたため、後者が好ましいと思われる。翻訳アプローチをすでに通過している日本の大学生の大部分は、プロセスライティング・アプローチを通して、より効果的な成果を上げることができると考えられる。

English writing teaching methods

In general, English writing is taught using the following methods: Japanese to English translation, controlled composition (alteration, completion, questions and answers, substitution, sentence combining/expansion, dictation, guided composition), free composition/writing, paragraph writing, and process writing. According to one survey (Eigo Kyouiku Jittai Chousa Kenkyuukai, 1993), 1,560 teachers of English at Japanese universities, junior colleges, and technical colleges were asked what methods they used to teach English writing. The results showed that 32% of the teachers used exercises on syntax and expressions, 31% used Japanese to English translation, 18% used free writing/composition, and 7% used rewriting/rewording. This indicates much reliance on translation while very little on how to write a paragraph or an essay.

A study by Komuro (2001) points out some of the main advantages of the translation method for English writing: it allows one to make use of knowledge based on Japanese;

it makes it easy to correct written work or grade exams; and it allows discussions on cross-cultural differences. Uzawa (1996) also confirms that Japanese to English translation is useful in that it directs students to a frequent use of English and that translation helps to improve syntax and vocabulary.

On the other hand, translation is often regarded as an “evil” thing that interferes with smooth production of authentic English sentences. For example, Komuro (2001) points out some disadvantages of the translation method as follows: translation does not lead to direct self-expression; it does not motivate the writer to write; it is mostly limited to sentence writing; it could lead to memorization of sample sentences; it may breed dependency on Japanese; it is limited to unnatural writing situation; and it is, after all, translation, and not writing.

Moreover, according to Kaneya (1993), a heavy tendency to utilize the translation method is due to the lack of competency on the part of (Japanese) instructors in terms of writing English or teaching how to write as well as the belief that students cannot write and that writing may not lead to improvement in overall English skills.

In contrast to the translation method, the process writing method emphasizes the following aspects: brain storming (looping, clustering, free writing), drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

One obvious advantage of process writing is that it teaches learners how to write coherent, well-structured paragraphs and essays. It also stimulates learner’s creativity through brainstorming, reflection, and discussion. According to Sano’s study (1996), process writing improved students’ essay writing skills, concentration on the content helped to increase the quantity of writing, and teaching formal schema reinforces the structure of the story and production of sentences.

Differentiating the two approaches

Since the two approaches focus on different aspects of writing and have their respective advantages and disadvantages according to the levels of learners, it is natural to consider differentiating their usage.

For example, in a study by the English Writing Instruction Group (JACET Kansai Chapter, 1995), subjects were asked what they thought about when writing. The advanced students thought mainly about logical flow of the sentence (64%) and contents (46%). The intermediate students thought mainly about word choice (40%) and logical flow of the sentence (40%). Finally, the beginning students thought mainly about word spelling (36%) and word choice (28%). According to Watanabe (1997), the students trained in process writing consider contents and structure as the most important while those who are not trained regarded all items equally (content, structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation). Thus, it seems appropriate to use the translation method for beginning and lower intermediate learners, who still need to work on improving their vocabulary, grammar, basic syntax, word choice and spelling. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) as well as Uzawa (1996) also confirm that the translation method is effective with beginning writers. On the other hand, it is probably more effective to utilize the process writing method for intermediate to advanced students, who are ready to work on deeper contents, more complex structures of paragraphs and essays as well as the logical flow of their writing.

Personal experience

As for myself, I initially learned English composition mostly according to the translation method. It was not until I studied at an American university that I learned process writing. In hindsight, this combination and the order of learning activities worked out fairly well for the following reasons. First, the initial exposure to Japanese-English translation was helpful because I was still at the beginning level and did not know how to write even short English sentences. By the time I entered university, I was able to compose longer sentences and even short essays. Thus I was ready for more intensive, academic essay writing in college. Coming from the Japanese-speaking background, I am not sure if I could have learned how to write English paragraphs and essays without going through translation exercises. For this reason, I decided to conduct a study on the role of translation in learning English writing. In general, English in comparison with process writing (without translation).

My research questions were: (1) “Which is more effective for Japanese college students of English writing: J to E translation or process writing?” and (2) “Does the use of Japanese interfere with improving English writing skills?” By comparing the two approaches (one with intervention of Japanese and the other without) in terms of progress in quantity, quality, organization, and creativity, I intended to make suggestions for further improvement in English writing instruction.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were a convenient sample of 219 college students who were taking the researcher’s English Writing courses at a national university between 2002 and 2004. All the students were required to have at least 400 on the TOEIC. The course was designed to help students improve to a score of 500 or higher on TOEIC although students with the TOEIC score over 500 were allowed to take the course. Thus, most of the students’ TOEIC score ranged between 400 and low 500s with occasional high 500s and 600s. The students had a choice as to which type of writing course they wished to enroll in: the translation class or process writing class. There were 153 students in the former group (TG) and 66 students in the latter (PG).

Learning Activity

The translation group had weekly assignments on 50 words and expressions as well as 200- to 500-word paragraphs to translate from Japanese into English. A sample of the learning materials can be seen in Appendix 1. Each week, several students were asked to write down their assigned vocabulary/sentences on the chalkboard for the instructor’s commentaries. The instruction was given mostly in Japanese. The process writing group had weekly assignments on writing 250- to 400-word paragraphs. There were no translation exercises in class. The instruction was given mostly in Japanese. For samples of the students’ writing see Appendix 2.

Measurements

The quantity was measured by the amount of writing they did in a 5-minute free writing activity at the beginning or end of each class. The number of words composed was roughly counted and recorded. The quality was measured according to the grammatical precision of their mid-term and final exam essays (about 400 to 500 words). The organization was measured according to the structure (introduction, body and conclusion) of the mid-term and final essays as well as the evaluation of the thesis, topic/supporting/concluding sentences. The creativity was measured according to the originality and interest level of the essays. The overall skills were measured according to all of the above plus mechanics of the essays. All the evaluations were done by the present researcher and were qualitative except for the first one (quantity).

Results

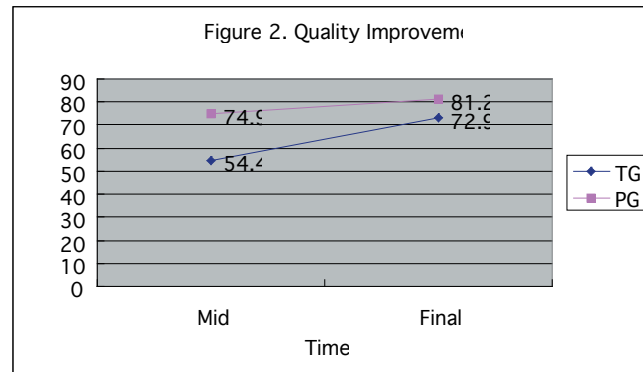
Quantitative Improvement

Both groups made significant improvement in quantity; while the TG's quantitative improvement was greater than the PG's.

Quality Improvement

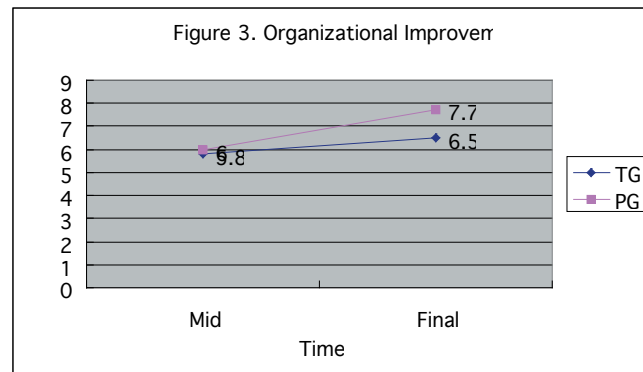
Quantity	Mid	Final
TG	4.5	6.7
PG	5.9	6.6

Both groups made significant quality improvement, while the TG made greater improvement than the PG.



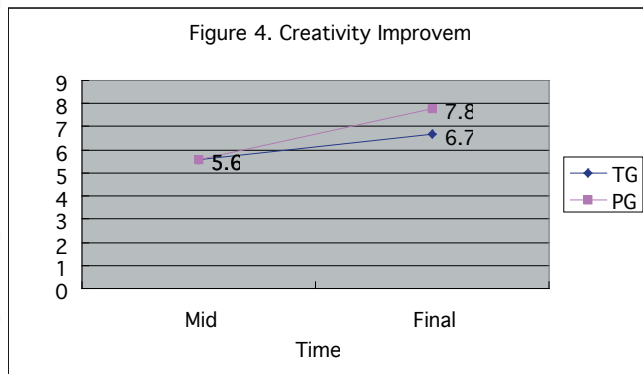
Organizational Improvement

Both groups made significant improvement in paragraph/essay organization, while the PG's organizational improvement was greater than the TG's.



Creativity Improvement

Both groups made significant improvement in creativity, while the PG's creativity improvement was greater than the TG's.



Overall observations

The students enrolled in the TG classes tended to have lower grades (TG mid-term essay grade = 54.5 and PG = 77, TG final essay = 64 and PG = 82). There were much more opportunities to explain grammar and to compare and associate Japanese and English expressions in the translation class. There were much more opportunities to discuss the organization and the method of generating ideas in the process writing courses. Most of the students did not follow complex English instructions very well; they needed clarification in Japanese. On the other hand, they followed simple English instructions very well.

Discussion

Figure 1 shows that the TG made more quantitative improvement than the PG did. This is supported by Uzawa's study (1996) that translation directs students to a frequent use of English. In a sense, translation does not require the kind of thinking that process writing requires, so the writer/translator gets to write more than they would otherwise. Likewise, Figure 2 shows that the TG made more qualitative improvement than the PG did. The quality here refers to grammatical precision. Translation exercises allowed the present instructor to give a great deal of grammatical explanations by comparing the Japanese originals and the English sentences. This is definitely one of the best advantages of the translation method. Students know what is meant in the English sentences by looking at the original Japanese sentences. The result is supported by Komuro's (2001) notion that translation allows one to make use of Japanese knowledge and by Uzawa's (1996) notion that translation helps to improve syntax and vocabulary.

In contrast, Figure 3 shows that the PG made more organizational improvement than the TG did. The main focus of the process writing is coherence and organization of the entire paragraph or the essay, so this result is not unexpected. As demonstrated by Watanabe (1997), process writing students are more concerned with structure than other aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, which clearly supports the result of this study. Furthermore, Figure 4 shows that the PG made more creativity improvement than the TG did. This is also supported by Watanabe's study (1997) that process writing students are more concerned with content than grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

According to the observations done in the study, translating helped students to gain vocabulary and useful expressions; to improve grammatical skills; to express Japanese thought and culture; and to learn to write more freely. The translation method is also effective because it allows the instructor to demonstrate how to say English expressions while referring to the same ideas in Japanese. This in turn leads to writing more accurate sentences as reflected in the above results where the TG made more significant improvement in the writing quality.

A major disadvantage of translation activities that is often pointed out is that students are translation and not writing original sentences (Komuro, 2001). Translation is also based on unnatural writing situation (*ibid.*). The results of the present study seem to confirm these notions in that the PG improved more in creativity than the TG did. Moreover, translation does not directly teach how to write paragraphs or essays in a structured and orderly ways. It, therefore, needs to be supplemented by process writing training.

Process writing, on the other hand, does not directly help improve vocabulary or grammar. Beginner students who do not know how to write even short sentences, will probably not benefit from it as much as advanced students might. This is consistent with the fact that more lower-level students in the present study enrolled in the translation course than in the process writing course (note that the overall scores of the PG in the four Figures are higher than the TG). As supported by the JACET Kansai Chapter study (1995), advanced students are more concerned with the logical flow and contents (*i.e.*, the whole) and intermediate and beginning students are more concerned with word choice

and word spelling (*i.e.*, parts), it would make most sense to conclude that the translation method would be more suited to beginning students' needs while the process writing method to more advanced students' needs.

It might be, however, needless to say that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive but only complementary. They can, therefore, be used at all levels according to learner needs. There are also other methods and forms of teaching writing such as controlled composition including alteration, completion, substitution, sentence combination /expansion, and guided composition. All these methods can be used in various combinations.

Conclusion

Implications

Translation can be an effective method for beginning to low intermediate students who still need to work on more basics of writing skills whereas process writing would be more useful for more advanced students who are ready to tackle with contents and logical structure of sentences. The results of the study favored translation in the areas of quantity and quality improvement, whereas they favored process writing in the areas of structural and creativity improvement. For beginning level students who still heavily rely on Japanese thinking, the translation method may be an effective stepping-stone to more English-based creative writing. Although almost all Japanese college students have gone through the translation method in junior and senior high schools, translation would still be effective with high beginning college students (*i.e.*, TOEIC scores of 400-

500). In contrast, more advanced students (TOEIC 500 or above) would be ready for process writing training. This was a quasi-experiment and the variables were not strictly controlled. The samples were conveniently taken. The number of participants and their background were not strictly controlled. Evaluations were done by one researcher. Future evaluation may be done, in part, using a computer program. In future studies, students' comments on each method can also be collected.

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Appendix 1 Sample materials

Vocabulary exercises in the translation group

次の単語の英語訳を書きなさい。Put the following Japanese into English.

1. 血液製剤 blood product
2. 公定歩合 interest rate
3. 累進課税 progressive taxation
4. 交際費 allowance for entertainment
5. 夫婦別姓 different surnames for married couples
6. 食べ放題のレストラン all-you-can-eat restaurant
7. 信用組合 credit association
8. 平均余命 life expectancy
9. 相撲の番付 ranking of sumo wrestlers
10. 補聴器 hearing aid
11. 盲導犬 guide dog
12. 敬語 honorific language
13. 知的所有権 intellectual property
14. 通信販売 mailing order
15. 防犯カメラ security camera
16. 実力主義社会 merit system
17. 過剰包装 excessive packaging
18. 神話 myth
19. 衣食住 clothes, food and shelter
20. 少年法 juvenile law

Sentence translation

次の日本語文を英語に直しなさい。Put the following Japanese into English.

1. 東京では様々な民族料理を食べることができます。今晚は外食して、タイ料理はいかが？
2. 私の指差す方を見てください。五重の塔が、沈む夕日を背景にして、美しく浮かび上がっています。
3. このお城の案内つきツアーは、土曜日は午前10:00に始まります。それまでは自由行動です。
4. 一般に日本人は寿司、特に握り寿司が好きです。握り寿司は、菓・砂糖・塩で味付けしたご飯を少量取り、縦長の形に整え、ネタ（薄切った生魚）をのせ、にぎったものです。
5. 地下鉄の切符は、自動販売機で販売しています。
6. 明朝6時に、モーニングコールをお願いします。
7. 帰りの航空券のリコンファームはわたしがやりましょう。
8. 私が不在の場合は守番電話にメッセージを残してください。レンタカーを使うには、国際免許が必要です。

Paragraph translation (1)

アメリカ南部の農園の場合のように、奴隷は法律によってほとんどのすべての権利を奪われてしまうこともあったが、社会によっては奴隷の地位は使用人の地位に近いところもあった。そうであったとしても、すべての奴隷がそのような幸運に恵まれたわけではなかった。運が悪い場合には、彼らは一日中鉱山で過酷な労働を強いられたのだった。

In some cases, slaves were deprived of any rights such as in plantations in southern states of America. However, there are others cases where slaves' position was close that of domestic servants. Nevertheless, not all slaves enjoyed

such fortunate circumstances. Some unfortunate souls were forced into cruel labor in mines all day.

Paragraph translation (2)

それで私は、遊びが今かなり領域が広がってきているというふうに考えまして、新しい4つの分類を考えております。それがこれでございますが、まず第一がこれは昔からの純粋な遊びと同じであります。「プレイ」という言葉に相当するものでありまして、ピアノを弾く、あるいは野球をする、ゲームをするといったようなものです。それから2番目が「みる」、これは音楽を聴く、小説を読むというものを代表させて「みる」というものでございます。この辺までは昔の遊びと大体共通しているわけですが、新しいものとして「つくる」というものをあげております。これが物をつくる楽しさで、それは現実には物ができ、場合によっては、それが売れるということになりますと、昔の純粋な遊びには入らないわけであります。

Non-translation writing (1)

Choose one of these topics and write a paragraph/a five-paragraph essay.

1. Causes or effects of immigration to a new country.
2. Causes or effects of bad health habit.
3. Causes or effects of a recent economic or political situation in your country or a country you know well.

Non-translation writing (2)

Look at the picture and describe what is happening in the scene.

Non-translation writing (3)

Describe the process of how to build a cabinet.

Appendix 2

Sample writing (TG low level)

I love history and I will think this problem from a historical point. All cities have own histories and they are all different. Yamaguchi has unique history, too. Yamaguchi communicated with many countries. In the middle of sixteenth century, one Spanish man came here. His name was Francisco Zabel. He came to increase christian from Spain. This is a historical affair because he went a little cities. This is famous not only in Japan but also in the world. We should take advantage of this. I suppose that we should make the majority like Spanish, Spanish history or geography and Spanish culture. This will be taken attention because few universitie has the majority of Spanish. And we should become sister-school with universities in Spain and invite or exchange many teachers and students. (continued with the same amount of writing)

Sample writing (TG average level)

In order to more internationalize ..., we should invite a lot of foreign teachers. Then, we can learn not only several language but also culture and traditions of abroad. The common language all over the world is to be English. If we master the English, we can talk to people from abroad. And we can directly understand English news without using dictionary. If there are many foreigners in ... University, we talk to. When we meet foreigners, we say "Hello" not speak Japanese. And I have

the idea. There are advertisement that only in Japanese. We write not only in Japanese but also English or Chinese and more. If foreigners visit ... University, English advertizement is useful. They don't lose their's way. And we need to appeal to ... University to the world. We can appeal by increasing the event. For example, we hold the Ohanami in April, foreigners may think Japan is good place to visit. So, many foreigners will visit Japan. Through the international fellowship, we can speak English slowly. This read to internationalize ... University. (end)

Sample (TG high level)

When I hear the world "internationalization", I always think language of English. To achieve internationalization, I think, to learn English is necessary and in demand. So, first, I see internationalization in University in the point of of the way of studying English. We students have to take the test called "TOEIC". And many of them are suffering from their score. If one can't get points to some degree, they have to take English class more than others. And gradually, such people will have a feeling that they can't study English no longer. Now, how can we study English with more fun? I think students should have at least one conversation class. I believe that the pocket-knowledge for the test is not helpful in the actual communication. If students have conversation class and know the fun of speaking English, they

may want to speak foreigners. (continued with almost the same amount of writing)

Sample writing (PG low level)

For me, my English writing skills is essential to express my opinion, research, condutim, experimental result when I become researcher in future. Researcher always use English in writing so that those in many country can read. Writing logic needs only grummer and word but also knowledge or expretion of formula, term, item.

Moreover, it is used in e-maling and network develop more. We will have more oppportunity to communicate with foreign people on network. I think that we can make order from more companies or network and people who make thire homepage will be more and more in future. Therefore, we will e-mail in not only Japanese but also English and other language. This is the reason why English writing skills are inportant. I might writing letter if I am make friends with foreign people. I expect to do that.

Sample writing (PG average level)

Now, Internet makes it possible to communicate with people all over the world. So, we will have many oppportunity to contact with people in English. English is more and more important language in such a world.

So, I would like to make use my English writing skills on my study and business. For example, this

skills is very useful to read a report of a certain 実験. I would like to engage in chemical study for a long time. And if given the chance to contact with the manager of a certain foreign company, this skills and the skills of speaking English makes it possible to communicate with him smoothly.

I try to study English now because I want to really come true this my aims. I hope my English skills will advance step by step.

Sample writing (PG high level)

English is one of the standard language in the world. Most of the people in the world can speak in English. So that nowadays, English has become the most important language to be learn. I have learned English since I am a little child. My daily communication will be in Malay language and English. When I grew up, although I never had a chance to go to any country in Europe or America, I can understand and speak English well. Now, I am studying at University of Japan. In Japan, there is a very few amount of people who can speak in English. I was quite shocked with this situation. For example, in TOEIC lectures which the big English examination will be held for all students, lecturers will still communicate in Japanese. But I really like the English writing lecture where students not only be teach no how to write English correctly but also students must talk in English. This lecture had improve my English a lot. (continued with more)