

# Good Writing From a Student's Perspective

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While studies in intercultural rhetoric often benefit from large-scale textual analysis that allows for a consistent and accurate analysis of how students write, it is also necessary for teachers to understand why individual writers make the choices that they do in their compositions. A greater understanding of their students' first and second language writing backgrounds can help teachers to plan writing classes that better meet their students' needs. This qualitative study examined the writing experiences, perceptions, and practices of eight students studying English at a university in the Kansai area. This was done through a series of semi-structured interviews in which the students were asked to discuss their writing backgrounds, the writing process they use, and the rhetorical choices they make. Through these interviews it became apparent that when they enter university some Japanese students lack experience writing in an academic genre, both in Japanese and in English.

異文化間の修辞学に関する研究は、往々にして、学生が書く文章の一貫した、正確な分析を可能にする大規模なテキスト分析からの恩恵を得られるものであるが、個々の作者〔学生〕がその作文においてなぜその選択を行ったのかを、教師が理解することもまた必要である。学生たちの母国語および第二言語の作文経験をより理解することで、教師が学生たちのニーズに合った作文クラスの企画に役立てることができる。この目標を達成するために、この研究では、関西地区の大学で英語を専攻している8人の学生たちの体験、知覚そして実践についての観察・分析を行う。これは半ば段取りが決められた一連の面談を通じて行われ、そこで学生たちは、彼らの作文経験およびそのプロセスならびに彼らが取る修辞上の選択について語ることが求められる。これらの面談を通し、入学時に英語および日本語によるアカデミック形式の作文経験が不足している学生がいることが明らかになった。

**I**N JAPAN, students who move from high school to university-level classes often have problems with the new set of expectations and demands placed upon them in their university English language classes (Ushioda, 2013). This is especially true for academic writing classes, as most students find themselves struggling with a style of writing that is often completely different than what they were used to in their high school classes, if they were even taught writing at that level at all (Miyake, 2007). One reason for the problems students have in their writing classes is that university teachers have a tendency to assume that students with a certain level of proficiency in English will also have achieved a comparable level of proficiency in writing. However, this may not always be the case. While university classes require students to compose academic 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). This may be even truer in Japan where students have a much lower

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chance of receiving instructions in how to write in an academic context, even in their L1. For example, Kobayashi (2002) 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” (p. 10).

Another reason for the problems that students face in academic writing classes is that these classes can be quite demanding. The reason for this is “the importance placed on written assessments in academic courses at all levels” (Bruce, 2011, p. 118) and the fact that competence in academic writing is central to the language needs of university students. Because of this, there is a lot of pressure, on both the students and the teachers, for university students to develop as academic writers in both their L1 and L2. However, the reality may be that while Japanese students spend a considerable amount of time studying how to write in English they still have problems with English academic writing. One study done in 1989 found that fewer than 15% of Japanese students who took a mandatory writing skills entrance exam were able to achieve a passing grade on that exam (McFeely as cited in Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002).

In the past, researchers have attributed Japanese students' lack of proficiency with English language academic writing to the differences in the rhetorical structures between Japanese and English (for instance see, Hinds, 1980; Kaplan, 1966, 1967). However, researchers like Matsuda (1997), Connor (2004, 2011) and Uysal (2008) have argued that this may be too simplistic a view of what is happening. In fact, most current approaches to the field of intercultural rhetoric look at the rhetorical structures found in students' written texts from the social constructionist perspective with the perception that knowledge is socially constructed and is something that students create through their interaction with other people rather than as something emerging from a set of rhetorical patterns that are purely culturally determined (Connor, 2011). This view posits that the “writing which students do in their English classes . . . does not occur in a vacuum but rather within a layered hierarchy of interrelated

goals, purposes, and experiences” (Hyland, 2013, p. 242). In short, recently, the trend in academic research is to look at the students themselves and try to determine the goals, purposes, and experiences that they bring with them to the L2 writing classroom.

Attempts have been made to look into the types of L2 writing practices students had engaged in before entering university (Brown, 2000; Hino, 1988; Watanabe, 2006). Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002), for example, found that less than half of all Japanese high school students have experience with writing formal essays or papers. This study implied that most Japanese university students will not have prior knowledge about how to write academically and must be taught the basics of the genre before they can be expected to produce well-written papers in English. What we can see from these observations is that it is essential for EFL teachers to become aware of both their students' L1 and their L2 academic backgrounds in order to allow them to succeed in academic writing classes at the university level.

The aim of the current study was to examine the personal experiences, beliefs, and practices of Japanese university students of varying levels of English proficiency who were enrolled in a 2nd-year university writing class. The research questions were as follows:

1. What experiences have students had with academic writing both in English and Japanese?
2. How do they perceive academic writing should be done?
3. What are their actual writing practices in English and Japanese?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 2nd-year students who were enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a private university in Japan. All of the students had taken at least three semesters of academic writing and, as the EAP program is a coordinated one,

the students had received the same type of writing instruction with regard to the academic writing process and types of academic genres they had been asked to write, which included persuasive and problem-solution essays. 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. Because of time constraints caused by the researcher's and the students' schedules, nine students were selected from the 14 students who responded to the interview request. 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. This was done to ensure that it was possible to interview students of varying levels of English proficiency in case the students' English language proficiency affected their perceptions of the writing process. One of the nine students selected for the interviews did not participate in the interview, so the final interviews were done with eight students. While all of the students who were interviewed had completed their 3 mandatory years of high school in Japan, three of the students had spent time studying abroad.

### *Interview Questions*

The interview questions were grouped into three major areas: students' experiences with academic writing, students' perceptions of academic writing, and students' writing practices. These questions focused on both students' L2 and L1 writing experiences and their perceptions of the similarities and differences between academic writing in English and Japanese. (See the Appendix for the complete list of questions.) Students were asked about their experiences with writing at both the high school and the university level. Finally, as previous studies have shown that a considerable amount of formal academic writing instruction Japanese students receive happens outside of the classroom, either at a *juku* (cram school) or through students practicing for the written component of Japanese univer-

sity entrance exams by themselves (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002), questions about students' experience with writing outside of the classroom were also included on the interview form.

### *Procedure*

The eight interviews were conducted during a 3-week period from June through July 2014. Forty 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 focused on a set of 19 questions. The students were sent a copy of these questions a week before their interview and asked to read through them and, if they wanted to, to make some notes on the interview form to help them answer the questions during the interviews. The interviews were conducted in both English and Japanese and the lower level students were encouraged to use Japanese to give more details about their responses to the questions. The actual interviews ranged from 21 to 34 minutes in length. The interviews were taped and later transcribed. These transcripts were then analyzed to determine the similarities and differences between the students' responses to the questions.

### *Results*

The results of the students' responses have been divided into the three areas that were being studied. This section of the paper looks at some of the key points from each of these areas in turn.

### *Students' Experiences*

When asked about their experiences with writing at a high school level, most indicated that they did have to write in both English and Japanese for class. All eight participants said that they were asked to produce written texts that were longer than one paragraph in length in Japanese and seven participants had done what they considered

to be academic writing in Japanese at high school. These included items such as short personal essays, reports and even, for one of the students, a graduation thesis. However, only two students said that they had received formal instruction about how to write in their high school classes. Three other students responded that they had not received formal instruction about how to write in high school. However, when asked about what they had actually done in their writing classes, they said that they had at least received some basic instruction from their teacher about how to write academically. For example, one of the students said that while she had not been taught how to write an essay, she had received feedback from her teacher with regard to a practice entrance exam essay she had done in class. While the teacher did not tell the student how to write the essay, her practice essay was returned with comments intended to help the student improve on subsequent writing assignments. Furthermore, none reported getting explicit writing instruction at the university level and only three reported receiving “some support” from their teachers with regard to how to write. As with the high school students, those students who were classified as receiving some writing instruction at the university level were often not explicitly taught how to write in class, but were given feedback by their teachers about how to improve their writing after they had turned in a written assignment.

Six students reported that they had been asked to write texts of a paragraph or longer by their high school English teacher. These included texts such as journals or book reports. Three of these students had also been asked to produce texts in a genre that could be considered academic writing. These included short reports or TOEFL-style essays. All of the students who were asked to write in an academic genre were given instructions about how to write during class.

## *Students' Perceptions*

Many of the questions concerning students' perceptions of academic writing in English and Japanese were related to their ideas about what makes a good paragraph or essay in these languages. When asked whether a good paragraph in English had the same rhetorical structure as a good paragraph in Japanese, half of the students said that they thought that it did while the other half reported that they believed the preferred rhetorical structures in English and Japanese were different. The most common reason students gave for this was that they thought that in English academic writing the writer needs to put the topic sentence first, while in Japanese, this is not necessary. However, when asked to describe a good paragraph they had written in both languages only one student talked about a sample paragraph in Japanese that did not start with a topic sentence. When asked about the difference, one student responded that, while Japanese does not require a paragraph to start with a topic sentence, he did so in his own writing because writing that way made his paragraphs easier to understand.

## *Students' Practices*

The last four questions of the interview were about the writing process that students used when writing in English and Japanese. All of the students reported using some type of process approach to writing in English. This included some kind of prewriting planning and making an outline as well as proofreading and checking the final draft of the essay before handing it in. This is not surprising given that this process approach to writing is taught in the academic writing classes the students take at the university. When writing in Japanese, a majority of the students, five of the eight, said that some type of a process approach would be best. However, when asked to describe an essay that they had recently written in Japanese, only two reported using any type of prewriting or proofreading while writing that paper. When asked why they did not use these

techniques to help them when writing in Japanese, despite having 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.

More students also reported proofreading when writing in English than those who said they proofread while writing in Japanese. Only two said that they did not proofread their English essays before turning them in, while five said that they usually did not proofread when writing in Japanese. Almost all of the students who said that they proofread their essays only proofread for grammatical problems. Only one student reported proofreading for structure, and even then she only reported checking for structure in her English writing.

## Discussion

The findings of these interviews support previous studies showing that Japanese students have little experience of academic writing in high school (Kobayashi, 2002; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2001). This still seems to be true even though the Japanese Ministry of Education has mandated that all high school students should be taught how to “organize their ideas logically and state their main topic or point of their argument clearly” (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002, p. 95).

The interviews also show that most of the formal writing instruction that students get at the university level is done in their English language classes. This is significant to teachers for two reasons. First of all, unlike students in many of the teachers' home countries, Japanese students may not have been exposed to academic genres of writing before entering university. This means that the writing teachers will need to scaffold their writing instruction so that the students can gain an understanding of the genres they are being asked to write in. Secondly, teachers need to be aware that the writing instruction that students are receiving 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, teachers will be helping them to participate in both the English and the Japanese academic discourse communities. This can be seen in the interviews as most of the students reported that many of the writing techniques they use when writing in Japanese they had learned in their English writing classes.

Finally, through these interviews it is also clear that students are aware of how to write well, both in terms of the appropriate rhetorical structures to use and the correct writing processes. However, there seem to be some differences between what students think should be done and what they are actually doing. This is more evident in what they reported doing when writing in Japanese than what they reported doing while writing in English. It is, however, necessary for students to work on writing in the correct style and in the correct way in both languages and the only way to do this is through practice, both in Japanese and in English.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to generalize the results of this research as the sample size is rather small. However, the results do seem to support the assumption that many university students lack some of the foundations needed to produce written texts in an academic genre. This is something that English language writing teachers need to be aware of when they are planning and teaching writing classes. If teachers are aware of their students' experiences and practices with regard to academic writing, this will allow them to structure their class in a way that helps their students build on what they already know. By doing so, teachers will be able to construct an academic writing class that is both meaningful and engaging.

## Bio Data

**Gavin Brooks** received his master of applied linguistics from the University of New England with a focus on the stages of language acquisition. He has taught English in Japan, Indonesia, Colombia and Ecuador. For the last 9 years he has been teaching in Japan and currently works as an assistant professor at Doshisha's faculty of Global Communications.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### Part 1: Experiences

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

#### Part 2: Students' Perceptions

1. What are the main differences between academic writing in English and Japanese?
2. What are the similarities between academic writing in English and Japanese?
3. Do you think that the writing skills you have learned in Japanese help you in your English writing classes?

4. Do you think that the writing skills that you learn in your English classes will help you with your Japanese writing?
5. What is the most difficult thing for you when you write in English for class?
6. What is the most difficult thing for you when you write in Japanese for class?
7. 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

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