

Difficulties and Strategies in Argumentative Writing: A Qualitative Analysis

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Argumentative writing constitutes an integral component of English language programs at Japanese universities; however, substantial research has documented L2 learners' difficulty in learning this form of writing. The following paper reports on a small-scale qualitative study examining the problems that a group of 1st-year Japanese students perceived in writing argumentative essays at a liberal arts university. The use of writing strategies was also examined to investigate how students responded to the difficulties they faced in order to overcome them. Data was collected from 7 participants in the form of individual interviews, comments from teacher–student conferences, and notes in e-portfolios. The data indicate that most participants perceived rhetorical features of English argumentative writing as the most problematic. Findings also suggest that participants primarily used cognitive, social, and search strategies to facilitate their writing, whereas metacognitive strategies were used minimally. Implications are discussed to improve writing instruction for argumentative essays.

「論証文」は日本の大学の英語プログラムにおいて不可欠な構成要素である。しかし、第二言語学習者が「論証文」を学ぶのに苦労する事は多くの研究で立証されている。以下の研究論文は、一般教養科目で「論証文」に取り組んだ大学一年生が直面した問題についての研究報告である。同時に、問題に直面した際の学生の反応と乗り切り方、つまりライティング方略も調査した。データは、7人の被験者への個人面接、学生と教師による対話中のコメント、そしてe-portfolioの記録である。データの質的な分析は、多くの被験者が英語における「論証文」の修辭的特徴を理解するのを一番の問題としていることを示している。また、被験者がライティングを容易にするため、メタ認知方略を最小限に使用するのに対し、主として認知方略、社会的方略、探索方略を用いるということも明らかになった。研究結果が示唆する内容に関して、「論証文」指導の向上を目指す議論がなされている。

Argumentative writing is perhaps the most common writing genre that L2 learners face in universities. Despite its prominence, this form of writing has been found to be the most difficult for L2 learners because it requires sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly, & Lewis, 2007). An additional problem in writing argumentative essays is that L2 learners often lack experience in writing academic texts in their L1. This issue is particularly relevant in Japan where there are limited opportunities for learners to develop their academic writing skills (Okabe, 2004). These difficulties create significant obstacles for students, particularly for those who wish to study in postgraduate programs in English-speaking countries (Stapleton, 2001).

Despite numerous studies that have investigated the rhetorical and linguistic features of argumentative writing, few studies exist regarding the difficulties learners experience when learning this genre for the first time. Learners who have not acquired academic writing skills in their L1 have been found to struggle in the transfer of organizational and rhetorical patterns to their L2 writing (Kubota, 1998). By learning about the challenges students face and their use of strategies, teachers can gain valuable insights to inform their practice. One aim of this research was to explore the struggles 1st-year university students experience in writing argumentative essays in the hope of providing insights that could be used to enhance materials and instruction. Another equally important objective was to examine how learners with limited L1 writing proficiency use strategies to cope with the problems they face in acquiring L2 writing proficiency.

Review of the Literature

A number of studies in L2 writing have tried to trace the difficulties Japanese learners experience in developing L2 writing by examining L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, and writing experiences in both languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota 1998). These investigations have led to the belief that the development of L2 writing proficiency is more likely to derive from a combination of experiences and instruction in the L2 than

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simply from the transfer of culturally preferred rhetorical patterns in the L1. Regarding perceptions of difficulty, Evans and Green (2007) found that L2 students perceive all aspects of argumentative writing to be challenging, although language-related components were thought to be harder than content-related elements. In contrast, data from other studies in L2 contexts showed different results. Marshall (1991), for example, suggested that L2 students may have difficulties with the structure of an essay more often than the language-related components. Kubota (1998) examined Japanese learners and found that problems reported in L2 writing may be caused by teachers' instructional emphasis on accuracy at the sentence level rather than on discourse organization. Al-Al-abed Al-Haq and Ahmed (1994) found that Saudi university students struggled with L2 rhetorical features such as writing clear thesis statements and arguments that were complete or sufficiently persuasive. L2 students' difficulties in producing justifications, generating counter-arguments, and rebutting counter-arguments have been documented in other studies (Connor, 1996; Liu, 2005). Some studies found that learners have difficulties in the transfer of the rhetorical schema acquired in their L1 to the target language (Connor, 1996; Hirose, 2003). The research to date suggests that L2 learners perceive various difficulties in acquiring the linguistic, organizational, and rhetorical features found in argumentative writing. These findings illustrate the importance of research in the area of contrastive rhetoric and suggest that inquiries in L2 writing should not limit explanations to a learner's linguistic and cultural background. In investigating argumentative writing in a L2 context in Japan, a comprehensive approach is needed to understand the difficulties learners encounter when writing (Matsuda, 1997).

Few studies have concentrated on uncovering obstacles from the learner's viewpoint by eliciting perceptions from L2 writers. Instead, difficulties in English argumentative writing have largely been approached by analyzing the essays. A problem with this method of analysis is that it associates an author's writing proficiency with the number of errors they produce on a piece of writing. Schachter (1974) argued that L2 writers sometimes produce a low number of errors not because they are "good" writers, but because they avoid tasks that they perceive to be difficult. Schachter's observation reveals the subjective nature of examining the difficulties in writing and illustrates the need to include student perceptions in studies examining this issue. Eliciting perceptions from L2 writers can reveal obstacles in the writing process from a learner's perspective and helps teachers provide meaningful and relevant instruction that addresses the particular difficulties and needs of L2 learners.

Some researchers have investigated whether there were common strategies used by L2 learners when composing argumentative texts. This line of research has established sev-

eral types of strategies including rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social or search strategies. Arndt (1987) found that composing strategies remained consistent across writers' L1 and L2 backgrounds, but variation exists in how the writers approached the writing task. Wong (2005) found that writers made use of a broad range of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies and used a similar range of composing strategies but used them in different ways. Mu and Carrington (2007) found that writers used rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies and that all, with the exception of rhetorical strategies, transferred across languages positively. The results to date do little to shed light on how L2 writers use strategies to complete writing tasks in different contexts.

Previous research results illustrate that more clarity is needed regarding the difficulties that learners experience in argumentative writing and the strategies they use in the composing process. The following qualitative investigation is a pilot study examining the struggles and strategies Japanese students report in the hope of leading to a larger study. The study was an attempt to fill the gaps in the literature by examining two questions:

- RQ1. What difficulties do L2 writers experience in writing the first draft of an argumentative essay in English?
- RQ2. Which strategies do L2 writers report using in writing the first draft of an argumentative essay in English?

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were seven 1st-year Japanese students (five female and two male) enrolled in a liberal arts program at a university located in Tokyo. All participants were aged 18 or 19 years old. Japanese was the first language of all the participants and each had roughly 6 years of English instruction before entering university. Participants were placed in the intermediate stream based on their TOEFL ITP scores, which ranged from 450 to 530. The intermediate stream represents nearly 70% of the total freshman student body. The participants were all taught by the researcher; therefore, selection was based on convenience sampling. Although all participants indicated in the initial interview (see Appendix A) that they had written short essays and narratives in English, these did not include the formal features typically found in argumentative writing such as a thesis statement, supporting evidence with citations, and providing counter-arguments.

Context

The study took place in the spring of 2016 in the first semester of a year-long academic reading and writing course in which the participants were enrolled. Students were required to write four to five multiple-paragraph argumentative essays over an academic year. The class met for 70 minutes, three times a week, and had two additional periods allotted for tutorials. For the writing component of the first semester course, students wrote a five-paragraph argumentative essay on an educational topic. The argumentative essay required citations from at least three scholarly articles and the use of Modern Language Association (MLA) style to format the paper. The purpose of this essay is to have students build an argument based on strong reasons and supported by evidence. Counterclaims and refutations also had to be included to show objectivity. The assignment was discussed in detail and several models were available to help students to format and organize their ideas. Short lessons and handouts were presented in several classes over 2 and a half weeks covering many features of academic writing such as how to write thesis statements and topic sentences, organizing ideas, and providing evidence. Students selected their topics and wrote a preliminary outline in the 4th week of classes. The outline required a thesis statement and three main ideas to support it. Students were encouraged to meet the instructor for feedback on their preliminary outlines. The first draft was submitted in an e-portfolio 1 week after the outlines were completed. The data collected in this study demonstrate the difficulties students encountered in writing the first draft and the strategies they applied.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first draft was selected for analysis for two reasons. The primary reason was that feedback given immediately following the first draft influences how students see their writing. Students are likely to express difficulties and use strategies that are influenced by specific comments made during the revision process. In addition, difficulties and strategies should be viewed independently because each stage presents distinct hurdles. If the first draft is isolated, a more accurate picture can be attained in how learners approach writing in the early stages of the composing process. Data was collected in several different ways to provide a robust description of problems and the types of strategies used. First, the primary sources of data were (a) the teacher–student conferences carried out immediately after the first drafts were submitted and (b) the later individual interviews. Each teacher–student conference was one 15-minute session; the interviews ranged from 15 to 35 minutes. Second, the interviews were semistructured with a series of required questions (Appendix A provides details of the interview protocol), but other questions

were asked to elicit more information from comments made in the teacher–student conference and the e-portfolios. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy and revised if errors were detected. Notes were also taken during the interviews. The interviews elicited data about the participants' backgrounds, the difficulties experienced, and strategies used. Third, comments in the essays themselves provided an additional source of data. Participants were encouraged to make comments in English in the margins to minimize errors when recalling events during the composing process. Some comments that were vague or difficult to understand were addressed during the interviews. Participants provided more detail about a particular problem they encountered or a strategy they used. If the researcher had difficulty understanding participants' comments or responses, Japanese was used or a third party was asked to translate. This occurred only twice in the study.

During data analysis, inconsistencies between the interview notes and recordings were checked. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. To answer the first research question, an inductive approach called pattern coding was used to analyze the data. This allowed for major themes and categories to be observed in the data. For the second research question regarding strategy use, data was analyzed using a deductive approach and a predetermined framework. The strategies with similar themes were grouped and compared to a taxonomy based on Mu and Carrington's (2007) research that encompassed writing strategies found in several prominent studies (Arndt, 1987; Riazi, 1997; Wenden, 1991). Though this taxonomy (see Appendix B) is by no means exhaustive, it provided an explicit and accessible framework for the classification of strategies examined in this study.

Results

The first research question is about the difficulties that L2 writers experience in the early stages of writing an argumentative essay in English. All seven participants made various comments in their essays or in the interviews and teacher–student conferences about the problems they faced during the composing process. In responding to the first interview question (Was this essay draft easy/difficult for you to write?), six of the seven participants perceived the first draft as a very demanding and stressful task. Comments such as “It was hard to finish on time” and “I was worried whether I was doing the assignment correctly” were used to describe the task. One participant stated, “I never wrote an academic essay before. This was my first time . . . and didn't know how to begin.” Specific difficulties that were reported by at least two participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Difficulties Reported* in Writing First Drafts (N = 7)

Difficulty	Number
Organization/structure	6
Integrating academic sources	5
Finding evidence	4
Writing topic sentences	3
Grammar	3
Writing counterclaims	2
Punctuation	2
Vocabulary	2
Academic tone	2

Note. * Does not include difficulties reported by a single participant.

The most common difficulty mentioned by the participants was organizing and structuring ideas in the essay. Even though the participants completed detailed outlines and clear guidelines were given for how the 5-paragraph essay should be organized and structured, several respondents indicated ambivalence about whether their ideas were satisfactory or how they should be placed within the essay. For example, Yuka stated, “I wrote an outline, but it is hard to choose where to put my ideas for my topic.” Another participant indicated that writing was difficult because the “structure is very different from how to write an essay in Japanese.”

Integrating academic sources was the next most common difficulty. The assignment required finding evidence from a minimum of three sources and using them in the essay as evidence for their claims and counter-arguments in the body paragraphs. In referring to a statistic found in a source, one participant reported, “This numbers might be good for my first main idea . . . but it’s too long, and I don’t know how to paraphrase in my essay.” This comment was directed at a short lesson that emphasized using statistics and paraphrasing material to support their ideas rather than simply using quotations from scholars. This problem is closely related to finding evidence, which was another concern. Some expressed frustration in searching through academic texts. For example, Tomoko said, “I spent 4 hours on Monday looking at journals using *ProQuest* (the university on-line database), and I still do not have good evidence for my topic.”

Other difficulties reported by the participants included writing topic sentences and counterclaims, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and using academic tone. Three participants reported their struggles in writing a topic sentence that offered a general idea of the argument presented in a paragraph. This is evident in Taka’s statement: “My topic sentence is always too long, so it is difficult for me. They has [*sic*] too many ideas for first sentence [in my paragraph]. Topic sentence should be shorter like the kind we did in class last week.” A couple of students commented on the difficulty in learning a style that was unfamiliar to them, particularly with making counterclaims.

As regards the second research question, the data indicate that the participants used a variety of strategies to facilitate their writing and overcome problems they faced. Table 2 shows the strategies reported by at least two participants. The two most frequently reported strategies were generating ideas and getting feedback. To produce ideas for the essay, one participant noted, “I didn’t know how to start writing so I start writing many ideas from the journals I read and then put them together . . . this was useful for getting sentences for my paper.” Two reported that they chose topics that were familiar to them, which made it easier to get started. Participants were also resourceful in getting help from their peers outside of class by sharing their e-portfolio online with a classmate. Four made references to seeking out feedback to improve their drafts such as Taka, who stated, “When I wrote a paragraph, I ask my friend in the class to look at it. This was good to see if she understand it and she helps me write better sentences too.”

Table 2. Strategies Reported* in Writing First Drafts (N = 7)

Strategy	Number
Generating ideas (cognitive)	5
Getting feedback (social/search)	4
Organization (rhetorical)	3
Formatting/modeling (rhetorical)	3
Resourcing (social/search)	3
Revising (cognitive)	2
Comparing (rhetorical)	2
Summarizing (cognitive)	2
Planning (metacognitive)	2
Reduction (communicative)	2

Note. * Does not include difficulties reported by a single participant.

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Other common strategies such as organizing, formatting, and resourcing were used to help the participants learn how to begin writing academically. Although organization was the most frequently reported difficulty, three of the participants reported strategies for how they confronted this challenge. Miho, for example, commented in her e-portfolio, “I do first main idea then second one and third one . . . if I do paragraphs together, I can use same structures to help me write arguments.” This comment indicates Miho’s use of repetition of rhetorical patterns to build an argumentative essay (i.e., topic sentence with a claim, evidence, counterargument, and refutation). Another strategy reported was the use of formatting and modeling, in this case, the use of handouts that provided examples and a model essay. Yuka’s comment describes her use of formatting: “When I have problem, I look at the paper you gave us and look at the examples. This helps me because I can see example clearly and make my sentences using some of same expression.” Three other participants relied on resourcing to facilitate their writing. Aya stated, “To get ideas, I look at journals online. I can find good arguments and evidences [sic].” The use of these last two strategies implies that the information provided in class or available online was helpful to some of the participants.

An assortment of other strategies including revising, comparing, summarizing, planning, and reduction were used by two participants. This illustrates that various strategies were used in the essays. Tomoko, for instance, stated her use of revising in writing: “I need to read what I write again and again. I change the mistakes I have and add some better sentences. I do this many times to improve.” A few participants noted that the strategies they used were similar to the ones they use when writing in their first language, although L1 strategy use was not investigated in this study. For example, when Yuka was asked why she referred to the class handouts, she answered, “I always do this before . . . in high school and when I was at my *juku* (cram school).”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyzed the problems participants faced and the strategies used to overcome them in writing the first draft of an argumentative essay. The most frequent difficulties reported were rhetorical issues such as organizing ideas and integrating academic resources. The rhetorical difficulties reported are similar to those in previous studies on L2 English argumentative writing such as Al-Al-Abed Al-Haq and Ahmed’s (1994) study. Several participants attributed this problem to their limited experience in L1 and L2 writing and their unfamiliarity with the rhetorical structures needed in argumentative writing. This replicates earlier studies that found that L2 users’ language background and experience influence the rhetorical features in their L2 writing (Conner, 1996; Matsuda,

1997). In the initial interview, participants reported a lack of experience, which can offer instructors valuable insight into the troubles their students may encounter. Linguistic difficulties such as concerns about grammatical structures, word choice, and academic tone and style were also indicated. Participants were in their first semester at university. Some noted the pressure of performing as well as their peers and viewed grammar and vocabulary as strong indicators of what constitutes “good” writing. Difficulties with the research element of the assignment were also reported, including problems with researching scholarly articles in English and finding evidence. For some of the participants, this was the most demanding task. Lack of experience in academic writing, cultural and linguistic differences between their L1 and L2, and their L1 writing ability were all reasons given; teachers should not assume that these issues are one dimensional.

The findings regarding writing strategies indicate that the participants in this study were resourceful learners. When confronted with a challenging task, they employed various types of strategies without explicit instruction on writing strategies. Generating ideas was the most common approach used. Participants reported that they sometimes made a list of ideas and reasons based on what they read to help them form arguments, topic sentences, and counterclaims. Some participants also chose topics that were familiar to them to generate ideas. Stapleton (2001) found benefits in choosing familiar topics such as finding evidence and producing more coherent arguments and counter-arguments. Seeking out feedback was another important strategy that helped some participants to confirm whether an idea made sense or fitted structurally into the essay. Classifying the strategies using the taxonomy proposed by Mu (2005) revealed that most of the strategies reported fell into three of the four categories: rhetorical, cognitive, and social/search strategies. Rhetorical strategies were the most common. A few participants used their knowledge of the organizational features of writing in both their L1 and L2 or used good models of writing and examples to guide them in writing their essays. Participants did not identify metacognitive strategies. They may have been reluctant to do so or were simply unaware of them even though Wenden (1991) found that these strategies are evident throughout the writing process. This reluctance or inability to use such strategies suggests that more awareness is needed for learners to understand how such strategies can help their writing.

Although it is premature to offer suggestions for teaching based on findings from a small group of participants, several implications are evident that can enhance L2 writing instruction. First, students perceive a lack of rhetorical knowledge rather than linguistic knowledge as a major obstacle in learning argumentative writing. An important responsibility for language instructors is to develop materials that target the rhetorical knowledge

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students need to complete a writing assignment. Appendix C is a model annotated paragraph on the death penalty I developed to help students apply new rhetorical patterns to their writing. Second, findings of the study suggest that perhaps more attention needs to be devoted to developing metacognitive strategies because L2 writers may not use these strategies adequately. Metacognitive strategy training may be particularly beneficial for writers who have limited writing experience even in their first language. Teachers can model metacognitive strategies, promote students' awareness of these strategies, and help students reflect on how they improve writing. Third, to better understand and respond to students' difficulties, L2 writing teachers can ask students what difficulties they have and consider students' input when designing instructional activities. Writing conferences are ideal contexts for teachers to ask students about their difficulties. Discussions during the writing conferences may move beyond focusing on what students have written. The emphasis in writing conferences can be directed toward finding the difficulties, strategies, and processes involved in producing a piece of writing.

In conducting this exploratory study, several limitations are evident. First, the study only examined a small group of participants. Because of the limited size and scope of the study, it is difficult to apply the findings to other contexts. If more participants with different academic experiences in writing were included in this study, greater insight could be gained on how Japanese learners approach this form of academic writing. A large data set is more likely to produce groups that can be contrasted to reveal discrepancies based on various factors such as overseas experience and academic exposure. Data based on larger groups would produce more reliable and salient findings. Second, the method of analysis was limited to student perceptions. If additional methods were used over a longer period of time, more knowledge could have been gained regarding how these L2 writers functioned in composing their essays. Despite these limitations, this exploratory study produced some useful data that can be used to plan a longitudinal study with more participants.

Learning argumentative writing in a second language is a challenging task. An understanding of learners' difficulties and processes allows teachers to provide relevant instruction. Future research can assist this endeavor by systematically examining learner needs and by investigating the relationship between perceived difficulties and strategy use and how it can impact the writing process.

Bio Data

John Peloghitis currently resides in western Tokyo and is presently teaching as an instructor in the English Liberal Arts Program at International Christian University in Japan. He teaches academic reading and writing, debate, and research writing. He is an active member of Japan Association of Language Teachers and Japan Association of College English Teachers and is interested in second language writing, learner strategies, syllabus design, and e-learning. <jpeloghitis@hotmail.com>

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Background Questions

1. What is your TOEFL score?
2. When did you start learning English?
3. Have you ever studied abroad an English-speaking country? If so, where and for how long?
4. How well do you write in Japanese?
5. What experience do you have in writing in English?

Writing Process Questions

1. Was this essay draft easy/difficult for you to write?
2. How long did it take you to write the draft?
3. How did you write this draft?
4. Describe the writing process of your draft.
5. What were the difficulties you encountered when writing this draft?

6. What did you do to overcome the difficulties?
7. What did you learn about English argumentative writing by writing this draft?

Appendix B

The Taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies (Adapted From Mu & Carrington, 2007)

Writing strategies	Substrategies	Description
Rhetorical strategies	Organization	Arranging ideas to fit the format of essay
	Use of L1	Translating generated idea into English
	Formatting/modeling	Considering the genre requirements
Metacognitive strategies	Comparing	Comparing different rhetorical conventions
	Planning	Finding focus
	Monitoring	Checking and identifying problems
Cognitive strategies	Evaluating	Reconsidering written text or goals
	Generating ideas	Repeating, lead-in, inferencing
	Revising	Making changes in a plan or written text
	Elaborating	Extending the contents of writing
	Clarification	Disposing of confusion
	Retrieval	Getting information from memory
Social/search strategies	Rehearsing	Trying out an idea or language
	Summarizing	Synthesizing what has read
	Resourcing	Referring to libraries, dictionaries
	Getting feedback	Getting support from professor, peers

Appendix C

Argumentation Model Paragraph on the Death Penalty

Second, the death penalty should be banned *[claim]* since it cannot be administered fairly *[reason 1 supporting the claim]*. When it is used often, it is almost certain that a few innocent people will be executed *[reason 2 supporting reason 1 and claim]*. According to Williams, The United States has executed at least 23 people during the last 100 years who were later found to have been innocent (37) *[evidence supporting reason 2]*. Since 1972, 100 people who were sentenced to die were later released when new evidence showed that they were innocent (Williams 40) *[evidence supporting reason 2]*. Moreover, race seems to be a factor in determining who will receive the death penalty. African-Americans are often sentenced to die while whites who committed similar crimes are given life in prison (Williams 52) *[evidence supporting reason 1]*. While it is unfortunate that some innocent people die, no system is perfect. The death penalty serves a more important purpose of protecting people from murderers who are likely to kill again *[acknowledgment]*. However, there are better alternatives to protect the public from murderers such as hiring more police officers or using more surveillance to monitor criminal behavior *[response to acknowledgment]*. A fairer system of punishment for terrible crimes should be implemented to preserve the personal liberties of both the innocent and *guilty* *[analysis/concluding sentence supporting claim]*.