

# Asian Students' English Writing Experience

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This study investigated English writing training which Asian students in American graduate schools had received in their home countries and specific problems that they encountered in U.S. academic writing. Forty participants responded to a questionnaire, and six of them participated in follow-up interviews. The findings show that participants received form-centered writing instruction mainly through such activities as sentence-level exercises, translation, and personal essays, and lacked training in advanced academic reading and writing. In the U.S., along with continued concerns about grammar and vocabulary, participants encountered various problems in academic writing, such as the lack of knowledge about expected organization of research papers or how to synthesize information from reading sources. Participants were also found to develop specific coping strategies to overcome their problems, such as drawing on models or asking experienced students for help. Based on the findings, pedagogical implications from the perspective of Asian contexts are discussed.

本研究は、アメリカの大学院で学ぶアジア出身の学生が母国で受けた英語ライティングの訓練と、アメリカでのアカデミック・ライティングにおいて遭遇した問題点を調査したものである。40人の参加者がアンケートに答え、うち6人がその後のインタビューに答えた。その結果、参加者は、文レベル及び訳の練習、エッセイなどのライティングを通して、

形を中心とするライティングの指導を受けたが、高度なアカデミック・リーディング、ライティングの指導は十分に受けなかったことが分かった。また、アメリカでの学習において参加者は、文法、語彙に対する不安を継続的に感じるとともに、リサーチ・ペーパーの構成に関する知識や、文献からの情報の整理の仕方などの様々な問題に直面したことが分かった。更に参加者は、モデルの活用、アメリカでの学習経験の豊富な学生に助言を求めるなど、問題を克服するための対処ストラテジーを産み出し使用したことも分かった。こうした結果を基に、アジアにおける英語ライティング指導について検討する

**T**oday's growth in the number of Asian students pursuing their academic training in English-speaking countries brings to EFL teachers a need to help students prepare for their overseas studies while they are in their native countries. In American higher education in particular, Leki and Carson (1994) comment that many university courses "evaluate students through some form of written text (e.g., essay exams, short-answer essays, research papers)" and that "[a]bility to write well is necessary both to achieve academic success and to demonstrate that achievement" (p. 83). Considering the great emphasis on writing at U.S. universities, the kind of writing training Asian students receive prior to their U.S. studies and the problems in their English academic writing need to be examined. To investigate these issues could contribute to the improvement of writing instruction for Asian EFL students who plan to study in academic programs in the

U.S. and/or in other English-speaking countries.

To date, however, there have not been many studies (e.g., Leki, 1995; Liebman, 1992; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Spack, 1997) that investigated these issues. Thus, this study has a dual purpose: (1) to describe English writing training received by Asian students in their home countries and (2) to identify specific problems they encounter in U.S. academic writing and investigate how they learn to handle their problems. The target academic activity for investigation was writing research papers (term papers) for courses because it is a common requirement in U.S. universities. As a target population, graduate students were selected due to their ability to provide a comprehensive view of their university English writing training background. Moreover, compared to undergraduates, graduate students could be expected to be more attentive and analytical regarding the particular problems they encountered in U.S. academic writing and how they dealt with their specific writing problems.

## Method

### *Study design and procedures*

The research site was a large U.S. mid-western state university. The study was conducted in two stages, using quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. In the first stage, a questionnaire was used, and in the second stage, follow-up interviews were conducted. The questionnaire consisted of six questions<sup>1</sup> of three types:

(1) a short-answer question (i.e., “Question 1. What writing courses in English did you take in your home country? What year?”), (2) Likert scale questions, and (3) open-ended questions [see questions above tables for exact wording regarding (2) and (3)]. In the follow-up interviews, participants were asked to clarify their responses in the questionnaire by adding details and examples.

### *Participants*

Forty participants responded to the questionnaire in the first stage. They were eight males and 32 females, ranging in age from 22 to 45. Twelve of them were from Taiwan, eleven from Japan, eight from Korea, four from Malaysia, two from the People's Republic of China, two from Thailand, and one from Singapore. Almost all the participants had completed their undergraduate degrees in their home countries and some (eight out of 40) had finished their master's degrees back home. In the U.S., participants were mostly education majors with some majoring in linguistics. In the second stage, six (one male and five females) out of the 40 participants from the first stage were interviewed: three from Japan, two from Taiwan, and one from Korea. Those six participants were selected mainly on the basis of open-ended responses that showed the most depth of analysis.

### *Data analysis*

For the Likert scale questions, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and follow-up means comparisons (Scheffé tests) were performed to determine statistically significant differences among the items in each question. For the short-answer and open-ended questions, participants' responses were categorized and ranked by order of importance. The rank orders were compared according to participants' academic status (master's or doctoral students) to see if there were any differences between the two groups. Finally, participants' responses from the follow-up interviews were examined against the findings obtained from the questionnaire results.

### *Findings/Discussion*

From the synthesis of the questionnaire data and the interview data, the following results were found. First, most participants (35 out of 40) took English writing courses during their undergraduate years in their home countries. Those courses included general English writing (composition) and/or specific writing courses such as business writing or research paper writing. However, their writing activities focused on sentence-level exercises, translation exercises, and personal essays. These activities were significantly more frequent than the other activities (see Table 1). Lectures and feedback on students' writing given by teachers as well as students

reading textbooks about writing were significantly more preferred styles of instruction than the others; there was a general lack of experience with students' discussions on writing, peer reviews, and showing examples of students' writing chosen by teachers (see Table 2). Significantly more emphasis was placed on grammar and spelling and the use of topic sentence with supporting details than the other types of instructional focuses (see Table 3). These results generally coincide with the traditional approach to EFL writing in Asia discussed by Shih (1999) (see also the following sources regarding writing instruction in specific Asian contexts: Mohan & Lo, 1985 for Hong Kong; Liebman, 1992 and Takagi, 2001 for Japan).

Most participants did not learn to do advanced academic reading and writing. The activities of writing research papers and theses in English were significantly less frequent than the other writing activities (see Table 1). Such essential reading skills as careful and critical reading of potential information sources received significantly less attention among the various types of instructional focuses (see Table 3). Due to the lack of experience with reading and writing research papers in English in their home contexts, participants, both master's and doctoral students, encountered problems with a lack of knowledge about expected organization of research papers and pre-writing skills (e.g., synthesizing information from reading sources) when they first

wrote research papers in the U.S. Moreover, grammar and vocabulary were also included among the major problems which participants encountered (see Table 4).

In fact, two Taiwanese participants in the interviews articulated the problems that they encountered in U.S. academic writing as follows:

They [our teachers in Taiwan] didn't really teach us how to write a paper step by step, like you've got to have an introduction, literature review, and methodology, discussion, conclusions, limitations, future studies or something like that. I think that's the very general problem in Taiwan's colleges, because I know many new comers [Taiwanese students], in their first master's semester, don't know how to write a paper at all (Taiwanese student A).

[When I wrote research papers in an American graduate school for the first time], I didn't know what to do. I collected a lot of [journal] articles and put them on my table, a big pile of paper and I didn't have time to read all these and then I keep finding more and more articles . . . I wish I had learned how to organize information before coming to the U.S.A. (Taiwanese student B).

Pre-writing skills and grammar and vocabulary continued to be major problems even as participants, both master's and doctoral students, gained more experience with writing research papers in the U.S. (see Table 5), as was also found by Leki and Carson (1994). Participants' concerns about pre-writing skills seem reasonable since writing a research paper involves reading and synthesizing information from outside sources. Their continuing concerns about grammar and vocabulary, on the other hand, could be interpreted as their desire for rhetorical refinement in their writing or an issue of efficiency for "more speedy processing of language" (Leki & Carson, 1994, p. 90). In fact, one of the Japanese students who participated in the follow-up interview mentioned that "students who plan to study in U.S. graduate schools need to fully understand English grammar" because graduate students are busy with writing and have no time to study grammar.

In order to solve their various writing problems, participants developed specific "coping strategies" (Leki, 1995) (see Table 4). For example, they looked for models (Leki, 1995); they read manuals about writing a research paper and read research papers (e.g., journal articles) to learn the expected organization. Participants also utilized others' help; they asked tutors or native-English-speaking classmates to proofread their papers and asked experienced students or native-English-speaking classmates about the organization of a research

paper. They also asked instructors, experienced students and friends for advice, for example, on how they could organize information from reading sources effectively. In the interview, one of the Taiwanese students shared her experience as follows:

I talked to one of [the] senior students from Taiwan and she showed me her index cards and she showed me how she organized all the [journal] articles she collected. She uses index cards and she uses all kinds of colors, like uses one color for the author's names, one color for the articles' names, and one color for the source information, so she keeps a good file of index cards. And I thought that's the way I should do [it], so I went home and started putting all my articles in my index cards (Taiwanese student B).

## Conclusion/Implications

This study investigated English writing instruction which Asian graduate students at an American university received in their home countries and how they learned to write research papers in the U.S. The findings show that participants generally received form-centered writing instruction at home. Moreover, due to the lack of training in academic reading and writing skills back home, participants encountered problems with expected organization of research papers and pre-writing skills in

their U.S. studies. In addition, participants continued to feel concerned about grammar and vocabulary in English. The findings also revealed that participants developed specific coping strategies such as looking for models or utilizing others' help.

Based on the findings, the following suggestions are made for writing instruction in Asian contexts. First, students should be exposed to more academic reading and writing (e.g., research papers) in their writing classes so that they can familiarize themselves with expected organization of particular types of academic texts in English. Second, given the fact that participants in this study utilized others' help as a coping strategy, students in writing classrooms should participate in peer review sessions to utilize mutual feedback and raise their audience awareness. They could also share with the class specific problems they encounter in writing research papers (e.g., incorporating information from readings into their writing) and ask for advice on

how to overcome their problems. Third, participants' continuing concerns about grammar and vocabulary indicate that writing classes should incorporate activities to improve students' control of relevant grammar and build necessary vocabulary through reading and writing academic texts.

This study is a preliminary study and we cannot make strong generalizations about writing instruction for all Asian contexts. Based on this study, however, writing teachers and researchers in Asia can build a network and share information about research and pedagogical issues to improve writing instruction for Asian EFL students who are interested in future overseas studies.

### Note

1. The original questionnaire had 13 questions. Six out of the 13, which were the most relevant for the research questions of the present study, were selected here.

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## Appendix: Tables

*Question 2. What did you do in your English writing classes in your home country?*

*Table 1. Activities in English writing courses in home country*

Activities	Participants (N = 34)	
	Mean	(S.D.)
1. Sentence-level exercise	3.59	(1.23 )
2. Translation exercise	3.09	(1.53 )
3. Personal essays	3.18	(1.40 )
4. Critical review of academic journal articles	1.79	(1.25 )
5. Research papers	2.18	(1.42 )
6. Thesis	1.94	(1.43 )

\*\* 1 > 4, 5, 6; \*\* 3 > 4 ( $p < .01$ )

\* 2 > 4, 6; \* 3 > 6 ( $p < .05$ )

Note: All responses are based on 5-point Likert scale (this applies to Table 2 and 3 as well):

1. Never or almost never did; 2. Generally did not; 3. Sometimes did; 4. Often did; 5. Always or almost always did

*Question 3. How did your teachers in your home country teach you to write in English?*

Table 2: *Instructional styles in English writing courses in home country*

Instructional styles	Participants (N = 35)	
	Mean	(S.D.)
1. Teacher lectured.	4.14	(1.12)
2. Teacher showed examples of writing by students from class.	2.34	(1.31)
3. Teacher gave feedback to students' writing.	3.71	(1.32)
4. Students read textbooks about writing.	3.49	(1.27)
5. Students discussed writing.	1.94	(1.19)
6. Students participated in peer reviews.	1.51	(0.89)

\*\* 1 > 2, 5, 6; \*\* 3 > 2, 5, 6; \*\* 4 > 2, 5, 6 ( $p < .01$ )

*Question 4. What were you specifically taught in your English writing classes in your home country?*

Table 3: *Focus of instruction in English writing courses in home country*

Focus of instruction	Participants (N = 35)	
	Mean	(S.D.)
1. Check for grammar and spelling	3.58	(1.38)
2. Quotations and citations	2.58	(1.42)
3. Topic sentence with supporting details	3.36	(1.36)
4. Process of writing	2.31	(1.35)
5. General organization of academic papers in English	2.83	(1.46)
6. Quick reading of potential sources	2.22	(1.25)
7. Careful and critical reading of sources	1.83	(1.16)
8. Awareness of audience	2.33	(1.29)

\*\* 1 > 7; \*\* 3 > 7 ( $p < .01$ ); \* 1 > 4, 6, 8 ( $p < .05$ )

*Question 5. What kinds of problems did you have when writing research papers for the first time in the U.S.? How did you overcome those problems?*

*Table 4: Top five problems in U.S. academic writing and solutions (by rank order of importance)*

Problems Master's students (N = 14)	Solution to problems Master's students	Problems Doctoral students (N = 25)	Solution to problems Doctoral students
1. Lack of knowledge about organization of research paper (26.7%)	Use of models Help from experienced students	1. Grammar & vocabulary (20.9%)	Help from tutors Continued practice
2. Grammar & vocabulary (16.7%)	Error correction by native speakers	2. Lack of knowledge about organization of research paper (18.6%)	Use of models Help from native speakers
3. Rhetorical patterns (13.3%)	Use of models	3. Expressing thoughts & ideas in English (16.3%)	Reading many research papers and books Proof-reading by native speakers
4. Pre-writing skills (10.0%)	Transfer of L1 writing experience Help from friends, instructors and librarians	4. Pre-writing skills (14.0%)	Reading manuals Help from friends, experienced students and instructors
5. Format of citation/quotation (10.0%)	Use of models Use of instructor's preferred citation styles	5. Native-like fluency in English (9.3%)	Comments from native speakers

*Question 6. What are the specific problems that you have now when writing research papers in English in your graduate courses?*

*Table 5: Problems that participants currently face when writing research papers*

Master's ( N = 11)		Doctoral (N = 23)	
1. Grammar & vocabulary	28.5%	1. Grammar & vocabulary	20.0%
		1. Pre-writing skills	20.0%
2. Pre-writing skills	19.0%	3. Expressing thoughts & ideas in English	13.3%
		3. Native-like fluency in English	13.3%
3. Organization/format of paper	14.3%	5. Audience characteristics & expectations	11.1%
3. How to do citation	14.3%		
3. Native language influence	14.3%		
6. Expressing thoughts & ideas in English	4.8%	6. Coherence in English	4.4%
		6. Instructor's expectation/criterion	4.4%
		6. Time-consuming	4.4%