Perspectives

Inconsistencies in Writing within the Japanese Junior High School EFL Education System

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This study explores writing and the Japanese junior high school English education system in the East Yamanashi school district. Through the examination of writing within significant components of this particular system, wide discrepancies are found between the Ministry of Education writing objectives and writing as it practically exists in exams, textbooks, and classrooms. Results suggest that the Ministry should more explicitly describe objectives and better monitor the system. At the practical level, the study underscores the need for instructors to supplement opportunities for students' own writing while calling for a closer examination of writing activities among all elements of the system.

日本の英語教育において重要な要素である、試験、教科書、そして教室に現実におこなわれているライテイングと、文部科学省の掲げるライテイング教育の目的には、かなり大き相違があることがみとめられる。文科省はライテイング教育の目的をより明確に示し、また、実体をよりよく監督する必要があることを、本研究の結果は示唆している。また現場においては、教師が英語教育のなかのさまざまな場面で、ライテイングがどのようにおこなわれているかを詳細に検討しつつ、生徒が主体的に英語で書く機会を補ってゆく必要を、本研究は強く示している。

Since the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology and hereinafter the Ministry of Education or the Ministry) set forth a new, communicative-based set of guidelines for Japanese junior high school English education in 1993, the term "communicative approach" had often been bandied about by English teachers at meetings in the school district where I worked. As a junior high school ALT at the time, I welcomed the Ministry's emphasis on communicative English, but I began to wonder just what was meant by "a communicative approach." I also began thinking about my students' experiences with communicative methodology, not only in classroom instruction, but in all parts of the educational system, including textbooks and exams. In particular, because of my own interests in EFL writing and because of my practical experiences with writing in the junior high school curriculum, I was especially curious about the writing activities that my students encountered. My focus was on building up a comprehensive picture of my students' experiences with writing and communicative methodology that would take into account all-important aspects of the junior high school English system.

While my research interests in communicative methodology involved writing within all the important elements of the educational system at the junior high school level, prior research has focused on other aspects of language learning. Research has generally concentrated only on individual elements of the system (instruction, textbooks, or exams) at the high school level, usually without strongly emphasizing any of the four language skills. For example, focusing on instruction, a general overview of Japanese high school English was undertaken (Gorsuch, 1998; Hirayanagi, 1998). Hirayanagi (1998) noted the strong prevalence of grammatical rules in high school English instruction, including explanations of grammar, rewriting and translation exercises. Similarly, Gorsuch (1998) commented on the disparity between the predominant *yakudoku* teaching methods, with their emphasis on grammatical structure and translation of English texts into Japanese, and the communicative stance embraced by the Ministry of Education high school English guidelines. High school English textbooks were another aspect of the system examined for communicative relevance (Gorsuch 1999; Miura, 2000). Gorsuch (1999) found that the six most widely-used Ministry-approved textbooks in Japan failed to promote communicative language activities. Exams and high school English education have also been investigated. This research, though, has tended to concentrate not

on communicative methodology and exams, but rather on comparisons between university entrance exams and the high school system, with particular emphasis on reading. Differences in reading levels between high school reading materials and college/university entrance exams were found (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Kimura & Visgatis, 1996; Mulvey, 1999; Mulvey, 2001) with Brown and Yamashita (1995) and Kimura and Visgatis, (1996) specifying the need for change at the university level while, more recently, Mulvey (1999, 2001) linked reading level discrepancies to pedagogical influences.

Research at the textbook and instructional levels, then, seems to indicate that communicative methodology has had very little influence on Japanese high school English education. But because this research has taken such a different perspective on Japanese English education and language skills from my own as one with here-and-now goals for junior high, it does not really address my specific research needs based on communicative methodology, writing, and the junior high school system.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine writing and communicative methodology within the junior high school English system as it pertains to my junior high school students in East Yamanashi. To accomplish this it was necessary to first look at how the Ministry, as the system's primary authority, views a communicative approach to writing. In addition, it was important to examine the kinds of writing undertaken in practice and determine how well they implement the Ministry's communicative objectives on writing. Accordingly, I addressed two research questions:

1. How does the Ministry of Education, through its objectives, describe a communicative approach to writing?
2. How well are these objectives adopted by the current system?

Answers to these questions provide valuable insights because the formal guidelines laid down by the Ministry make it extremely important that writing be uniformly defined and enacted throughout the system. In fact, if interpretational discrepancies appear in what writing represents or its place within English education, not only will different parts of the system be working at cross-purposes, but fundamental objectives are unlikely to be met. Moreover, as inconsistent views of writing are

conveyed to the instructor, the teacher is left to mediate between these differing viewpoints. This study, then, hopes to uncover any inconsistencies in approaches to writing to both highlight the pressures brought to bear on the teachers by the system at the practical level and to provide insights into the junior high school system as a whole. Of course these insights, based on only one specific educational setting (East Yamanashi) and one skill (writing), cannot address other parts of the school system or speak to communicative methodology as it relates to other language skills. However, it is hoped that they will provide a glimpse into English education while encouraging further study.

The Study

In response to the two research questions, the study looks into both the communicative approach as embodied by Ministry of Education junior high school writing objectives and the practical elements of writing such as found in an entrance exam, the syllabus, and classroom instruction.

Ministry writing objectives for each grade provided a basis upon which to compare and evaluate specific writing activities. Objectives from the first to third year were used to analyze each corresponding textbook and workbook, while third-year objectives also formed the basis for examining the Yamanashi Prefecture public senior high entrance exam. The 1993-98 Ministry objectives were utilized because the textbooks, workbooks and most recent entrance exam used had all been created under these particular guidelines.

After using Ministry objectives to establish a description of writing, I examined original sources from this particular school system. Insights on writing in the entrance exam were provided by an analysis of the Yamanashi Public High School entrance exam, the system's most influential exam. As the primary instruments upon which the syllabus is based, the students' textbooks and workbooks were also examined. Finally a teacher survey exploring writing and classroom practices within the East Yamanashi district was conducted to gain a general view of writing within the junior high school English classrooms of East Yamanashi.

Ministry Objectives for Writing

Ministry English objectives for writing, seen below in the course of study for lower secondary school foreign languages, consist of (a)

overall English objectives, (b) writing objectives, and (c) content objectives. Writing objectives and content objectives are broken down by year. These objectives spell out Ministry writing guidelines, thereby supplying a definitive description of writing upon which the practical elements of the system can be evaluated. To assist in this evaluation it was first necessary to compile a description of Ministry writing objectives for each year: a functional description that could be readily compared to the types of writing practically advanced in other parts of the system. Because of this, only Ministry objectives which offered specific descriptions of writing were used, especially objectives supplying descriptive insights on the following:

1. What "writing" should consist of. (Does the objective provide specific details about what constitutes appropriate writing?)
2. The level in the language system at which students should be writing. (Does the objective refer to writing at the word, phrase, sentence, or text level?)
3. The place of writing in relation to the other three language skills. (Does the objective mention writing in relationship to speaking, reading, or listening?)

Course of Study for Lower Secondary School Foreign Languages (in English)

Overall objectives. " To develop students' basic abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to deepen interest in language and culture, cultivating basic international understanding." (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 227)

Six important concepts are listed as overall objectives. Four of these six concepts are rather vague: "a positive attitude," "interest in language," interest in "culture," and "basic international understanding." Although these may be worthwhile notions, their abstract nondescript nature fails to contribute to an explicit description of writing. Because the two remaining concepts basically specify receptive and productive skills ("to understand a foreign language" and to "express themselves in [a foreign language]"), only the concept about expressing themselves seems pertinent to writing. While "basic abilities" and their development contain no indication of what writing should be, the phrase "express themselves

in [English]" suggests writing as self-expression. Therefore, from the overall language objectives, only the concept of students expressing themselves through English contributes to a description of Ministry-approved writing.

Writing objectives. First Year, "To enable students to write about simple and familiar topics in plain English, to familiarize them with writing English, and to arouse interest in writing."(Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 228). Second Year, "To enable students to express their ideas etc. [*sic*] in simple written English sentences or passages, to accustom them to writing English, and to cultivate willingness to write English." (p. 230) Third Year, "To enable students to express their ideas etc. [sic] in simple written English passages, to develop proficiency in writing English, and to foster a positive attitude toward writing." (p. 231)

The objectives for writing, although listed by grade, consist of many of the same points for each year. For example concepts such as "interest," "willingness," and "positive attitude" are mentioned from first to third year. But, as simply restatements of the vague overall English objective "to foster a positive attitude towards [English]," these objectives offer no specific insights into writing.

Other writing objectives for both first year ("to familiarize them with writing") and second year ("to accustom them to writing") seem to emphasize engagement with writing. As such, they supply more of a message on use—the need to engage in writing—than a descriptive addition to writing.

For the first year, then, there remains only one writing objective. However, because this objective deals with the types of topics to be written about (simple and familiar topics), it cannot help to specify writing. Even the notion of "plain English," while suggesting an emphasis on simple English, does not provide much detail. As a result, none of the three writing objectives helps to clarify the nature of first-year writing.

As in the first year, only one second-year writing objective is left: "to enable students to express their ideas etc. [*sic*] in simple written English sentences or passages." This last objective, though, provides insights into both appropriate writing, writing that allows students to express thoughts, and the level at which it should be undertaken (sentences or passages).

After eliminating the "positive attitude" objective, two third-year writing objectives remain. The first one, "to develop proficiency in writing English," is open to numerous interpretations and, like the notion of familiarity before it, does not address important questions about writing.

The second objective, however ("to enable students to express their ideas etc. [*sic*] in simple written English passages") maintains, like the second year writing objective, a learner-centered focus. It differs, though, from the second-year objective by changing "English sentences and passages" to "English passages." This exclusion of "sentences" marks a noticeably broader, text-level approach to writing.

Content objectives for writing. First Year, "(1) To copy words and sentences correctly. (2) To listen to words or sentences and write them down correctly. (3) To write intended messages in simple sentences." (Ministry of Education, 1993, p**.** 229) Second Year, "(1) To organize intended messages and write them without missing important points." (p**.** 231) Third Year, "(1) To write the outline and/or the main points of what has been listened to and read." (p**.** 232)

The first-year content objectives, reflecting the students' new role as second language learners, embrace a wide description of writing. This ranges from simply printing out written or spoken words or sentences to explaining themselves in easy sentences.

In the content objective for the second year the use of the phrase "intended messages" again seems to stress the writer's intentions. The terms "without missing important points" and "organizing," though, are unclear. While the inclusion of "organizing" seems to stress the importance of ordering the writing in some coherent way, it is difficult to determine what "important points" might include.

The third-year content objective specifies summarization through the writing of outlines and main points of spoken or written texts. This promotes a more text-based approach, which coincides with the wider focus on students' own writing in passages as specified by the third-year writing objective.

Syllabus design and treatment of the contents. "In conducting language-use activities in listening, speaking, reading and writing, priority may be given to activities in one or more skills according to students' learning stages, but no particular emphasis should be placed on activities in any one or more skills over the three-year period. Further, at the starting stage, special priority should be given to aural and oral activities in the light of the importance of teaching pronunciation." (Ministry of Education, 1993, p**.** 241)

Here the objectives spell out how each of the four language skills should be approached in relation to one another. While stating that

aural and oral activities should take precedence at the introductory stage and that at certain stages one skill may be more prominently featured, over the three years the guidelines unequivocally assert that a balance between the skills should be maintained.

Ministry Objectives for Writing: Summary by Year

From this examination of objectives, then, comes a clearer perception of Ministry views on writing. The broad perspective, furnished by the overall language objectives, regards students expressing themselves as an important concept. This concept is further embodied in other, more specific writing objectives that follow.

First-year objectives. Here only the content objectives help to specify writing. The first two objectives assume a very basic stance on writing (copying and writing down) at the level of "words and sentences" while the third emphasizes the writer's intentions and writing in sentences. The guidelines also de-emphasize writing in favor of oral skills at this "introductory" stage.

Second-year objectives. The second year description of writing contains only two pertinent objectives, one writing and one content. The writing objective places emphasis on students writing their own thoughts, which coincides with the writing of "intended messages" specified in the content objectives. Both see writing as the expression of the students' own thoughts or intentions, focusing writing on the learner as the writer. Also the specification of "organizing" in the second year content objectives seems to emphasize the importance of ordering the writing coherently. The level at which writing should take place is indicated in the writing objective, which states, "in simple written English sentences and passages."

Third-year objectives. Two different objectives influence the third-year description of writing; once again there is one writing and one content objective. The writing objective highlights the expression of ideas through "primary English passages" while the content objective features the writing of outlines and important points of texts written or spoken by others. What emerges, then, is an emphasis on writing as self-expression and writing for summarization purposes, both of which take place mainly at a textual level. As far as writing and other skills are concerned, writing, both in the second and third year should be featured equally with the other three skills.

It seems that the Ministry objectives have embraced, to a large extent, a quite general description of writing. This is the case even though more specific information about writing would help the Ministry facilitate the implementation of its writing objectives throughout the system.

The Entrance Exam

The Yamanashi Public High School Entrance Exam is the primary means by which junior high school students advance to high school aside from about 5-10% of students intending to enter private educational institutions. The particular exam reviewed here was the March 1998 high school entrance exam, which was the last major evaluation falling under the 1993-98 guidelines. This exam is examined in relation to third-year Ministry writing objectives.

Even with Ministry guidelines in place, this test is ultimately influenced by practical considerations. The need to obtain quantifiable, easily interpretable results that can efficiently assist with student placement to different high schools is essential. This, coupled with the widespread use of standardized testing in Japan to determine both educational and employment opportunities, supports the adoption of a formal, norm-referenced assessment.

In the exam itself, receptive skills receive almost all the evaluative attention comprising approximately 90% of the marks (reading 65% and listening 25%). Writing is the lone productive skill and is allotted the remaining 10%. Consequently, the equitable distribution of the four skills emphasized in Ministry guidelines is not reflected in the exam.

The test's standardized structure also puts strict limitations on writing and acceptable written answers. This is similar to the case of receptive skills, which are assessed primarily through multiple-choice questions. The entire writing portion follows; it consists of three items in which students must supply appropriate English phrases to fill in the text.

Jane: Yuki, you look very happy today.

Yuki: Yes, I'm going to visit Montreal, Canada next year.

Jane: Really? (1) ( ) ( ) ( ) French?

Yuki: French? No, I can't. Why?

Jane: Because a lot of people in Montreal speak French.

(2) _____ in Canada.

Yuki: I didn't know that. I don't think (3) _____.

Jane: Don't worry. I'll teach you French if you want.

Yuki: Oh, thank you Jane. I'll do my best.

(Yamanashi Prefectural Public High School Entrance Exam, 1998)

Item one requires students to fill in three blank spaces to make a question (*Can you speak French?*) using the text for hints. While item two does not set out actual spaces, it restricts acceptable responses by specifying answers be from four to six words (*Two languages are spoken in Canada* /*People speak both English and French in Canada*) and through the provision of a Japanese translation of the correct answer. The last item also supplies a Japanese translation as well as stating that six words are needed to successfully complete the sentence (*I don't think French is as easy as English*.)

The corresponding third-year Ministry writing objectives, as pointed out earlier, have a very different emphasis—one where self-expression and summarizing are encouraged. First of all, in the exam the self-expression feature of the Ministry guidelines is completely ignored. The test's restrictive nature, in its total control over what is written, limits acceptable answers to suit its standardized format**.** As a result, there is no room for any self-expression. Not only is self-expression disregarded but summarization is also overlooked. Lastly, implicit in both the summarization concept and the focus on writing "passages," is a more holistic approach to texts and writing. This holistic approach is missing in this exam, and although the Ministry has declared that the scope of writing should extend beyond the sentence level, the only writing that is assessed here works from the sentence level or below.

The reality, then, is that by adopting a very limited, minimalist view of writing, the test designers have adhered to none of the third-year Ministry objectives. The concentration on simply the word order of parts of sentences, in what basically amounts to a cloze and two translation exercises, illustrates a narrow, circumscribed attitude towards writing: writing that can be packaged easily into standardized test items.

Textbooks and Workbooks

Textbooks

The first-, second-, and third-year English textbooks examined here are from the *New Horizon English Course* series (Asamura & Shimomura,

1997a, 1997b, 1997c) and were used in the East Yamanashi district from April 1997 until March 2002. The textbooks were examined to determine how the four language skills are represented as well as how each writing exercise compares with Ministry objectives.

The language skills. The overall layout of the textbooks and how the skills are presented in each unit give an indication of the importance of each skill within the textbooks. Each book is arranged into distinct units interspersed with lengthy extra reading sections, from the two "Let's Read" exercises in the first-year book to four and five instances furnished by the "Let's Read" and literature sections in the second and third-year books, respectively. This disproportionate importance placed on reading mirrors the view of the language skills reflected in the exam.

The representation of each skill within each unit provides another perspective on language skills and the textbook. In both the second and third-year books each separate unit is divided into four parts. The first part is "Starting Out," which uses different topics to introduce "the basics of English" (Asamura & Shimomura, 1997d, p. 1). Next are the "Listen and Speak" and "Read and Think" segments, which deal with one theme. Lastly, the "Let's Try (and Write)" section at the end consists of different exercises including recorded rhythm exercises, writing exercises, and/or reading exercises (Asamura & Shimomura, 1997d, introduction)**.** In the first year reader, although the division into "Listen and Speak" and "Read and Think" is not specifically mentioned and the insertion of "Let's Try (and Write)" does not come until the sixth of the eleven units, each unit basically corresponds to these divisions. How the units attend to the skills then can be identified simply through the labels attached to the parts of each unit: "Listen and Speak," "Read and Think" and "Let's Try (and Write)." But, while each language skill on the surface seems well represented, writing exercises are often not included in the "Let's Try (and Write)" section, which leads to the complete exclusion of writing in many units. The result is that within the textbooks, writing is given the least consideration of the four language skills, representing only about 5 to 10% of the language exercises. The sought-after balance among the four language skills has not been achieved in either the units or the structure of the textbooks as a whole.

Writing Exercises. A closer examination of the particular writing exercises that do occur reveals the views of writing within each textbook. A comparison of these views with corresponding Ministry writing objectives for each grade should establish how well they match. In each

textbook a pencil icon indicates a writing exercise.

The first-year junior high school textbook contains seven writing activities. These writing exercises were evaluated according to the broad interpretation of writing (correctly copying/writing down words and sentences either read or listened to) encompassed by the first two content goals and the last objective with its emphasis on "writing intended messages in simple sentences."

The first two writing examples (Asamura & Shimomura, 1997a, pp. 9-10) involve listening and writing down the letters heard using uppercase letters, (BBC, USA, etc.) and an exercise involving tracing the letters of certain words. The third writing instance (p. 31) is a fill-in-the-blanks, self-introduction exercise where the students must follow the pattern and fill in their own information ("I'm __," "I'm from__," "I speak __.") The fourth writing exercise (p. 54) is also fill-in-the-blanks, one with the necessary information being supplied by a taped introduction. While all four of the above-mentioned exercises attend to objectives (tracing, copying, writing spoken English), their shared focus on writing at either the letter or single word level substantially limits the exercises and ignores the last objective's emphasis on writing intended messages in sentences. The fifth example (p. 62) shows a picture of a bedroom with various items to one side (such as a radio and books). The students must imagine that this is their room and then, following some examples, write about certain items (eg. The books are on my bed/The radio is by my desk.) As this could be considered "writing intended messages in simple sentences" through "copying" examples, it seems to meet objectives. The last two writing activities in the textbook ask the students to write about their daily routine following a written text (p. 70) and to write about the previous Sunday while offering some helpful phrases (p. 96). Again both of these exercises seem to allow the learners to express their intentions at the sentence level while giving them phrases to copy. But, while all seven writing activities meet some basic objectives, only three actually take into account the last content objective with its stress on the writer's intentions, or include writing above the simple word level.

The second-year textbook provides five writing tasks as indicated by the pencil icon. From the second year, Ministry writing objectives emphasize the principle of self-expression in "sentences and passages." Combined with this concept is the second-year content objective that stresses organizing the writing while working at the sentence level or above.

A "Let's Try (and Write)" item (Asamura & Shimomura, 1997b, p. 8)

and a diary exercise (p. 9) are the first two examples of writing. The first writing activity asks students to write about something they did last week, and sets up the subsequent diary exercise. By allowing students to recount their own experiences in writing, both activities follow the requisite self-expression goal set forth in the second-year writing objectives. The provision, in both cases, of an example and an opportunity to organize sentences themselves correlates to the content objective. The exercises also involve writing from at least the sentence level, with the second activity stressing a textual approach. Therefore, both writing tasks fit the stated objectives. The third exercise (p. 32) is a basic fill-in-the-blanks exercise**:** "When sending an e-mail what should go in the boxes?" As a cloze exercise asking for set information at the word level, it corresponds to none of the Ministry guidelines. The fourth writing activity (p. 46) involves writing a letter to a friend. This exercise meets all second-year objectives by allowing the writers to express their own ideas at a passage level while supplying information on points that could be included. In the fifth and last writing instance (p. 84), the students are asked to replace the underlined word or words with their own information to make a self-introduction. Again, the fill-in-the-blanks structure, operating at the word level, does not enable students to put their thoughts into sentences, nor does it help students to organize what they intend to express. Notwithstanding the fact that a few of the more basic writing activities may be seen as a review of some first-year objectives, only three of the five activities encourage self-expression at the sentence level or above and give the students a chance to organize their intentions in writing.

Self-expression, summarization and writing at a textual level are the notions upon which the six third-level instances will be analyzed. The first writing activity (Asamura & Shimomura, 1997c, p. 4) is a simple cloze exercise that works at the word level and does not involve either expression of thought or summarization. The second task (p.8) requires the students to write about a future dream by following a given text. While it allows for some self-expression beyond the sentence level, the summarizing objective is not addressed. The third writing exercise (p. 16), which consists of changing sentence fragments into full sentences, does not meet any third-year writing objectives. Similarly the next writing activity (p. 24), a cloze exercise to complete a newspaper article, deals only with single words and does not allow for self-expression or summarization. The fifth exercise (p. 32) requests a description of the student's neighborhood by following a sample text. Although there is

a chance here for self-expression**,** a summary is not called for. The last writing practice (pp. 68-69) is a post-reading writing exercise that seeks the students' opinion about whether or not English should be taught in junior high schools. The students read both sides of the argument and, using expressions and ideas included in the discussion, construct their own opinions. This text-based activity, then, encourages self-expression and permits a summary of main points that the students consider important. Overall though, only half of the six writing examples allow for some self-expression beyond the sentence level while only the last exercise requires any summarization.

It therefore appears that writing is very infrequently included in textbooks that provide the foundation for a full year of language study. Furthermore, the few writing instances that are offered often fail to comply with Ministry guidelines. This occurs even though the Ministry has endorsed each textbook. The result is that only a few writing activities in each book could meet a rather lenient interpretation of Ministry writing specifications. A picture emerges of Ministry-approved textbooks that not only fall short of meeting Ministry writing objectives, but also provide little opportunity to engage in writing at all.

Workbooks

The workbooks, *Let's Try* (Ishihara, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c), based on each textbook, are made by a panel of Yamanashi teachers especially for Yamanashi junior high schools. Each workbook contains mostly writing exercises, including activities such as filling in the blanks, arranging the English words in the correct order, finishing off partial sentences, and changing sentences to match Japanese translations.

While some of the workbook exercises could meet Ministry objectives such as the broad criteria established by the first two content objectives for first-year writing, what could be seen as the most important objective, self-expression, is not well represented. In fact, of each workbook's 80 pages, only five pages in the first and second year and three in the third year are labeled as "self-expression corner." The actual number of exercises that ask for even a bit of self-information for writing are the same for all grades—fifteen instances. Here is an example of a "self-expression" activity.

WORD BOX の語句を参考にして言ってみよう。自分がきのう家

に帰ったときに、家族がしていたことについて言ってみよう。
[Say what someone was doing when you came home yesterday.]
(例) [e.g.] When I came home yesterday my sister was watching TV.

(注) When I ~, 私が～したとき。 (Ishihara, 1997b, p. 17)

Of the more than 500 exercises that make up each workbook, only 15 work on self-expression. Clearly, self-expression is under-represented as it is encouraged in less than three percent of the questions. Also, none of the workbooks have exercises that go beyond the single sentence level and, in the third-year book, there are no exercises involving summarization. Therefore, while writing is the primary focus of the workbook, Ministry objectives on writing have again not been put into practice.

Survey

The survey, undertaken in the Spring of 1999, consisted of a trial questionnaire, the actual questionnaire, and a cover letter sent with both. The trial questionnaire and cover letter were given to eight Japanese English teachers from another school district. Accompanying it were two follow-up questions posed to elicit impressions about the cover letter and questionnaire. No major problems were reported after the trial questionnaire administration. The cover letter, identical for both the trial questionnaire and the survey, extended appreciation for participation, provided information about the study, its uses and the researchers involved, instructed respondents on what to do and assured participants of anonymity. The survey was in Japanese with an accompanying English version.

The questionnaire itself (see Appendix) is a self-report survey fashioned to get both a general impression of the type of writing done in the classrooms and the amount of time spent on each of the four skills. The first question directly attends to writing as compared with other skills. (Over a school year, what is the percentage of time spent by the students partaking in each skill during class?) Question two concerns itself with the type of writing that is done in the classroom setting, including self-expression through students' own writing and the third-year objective of summarization. (What kind of writing do the students do in class?) The nine categories in question 2 were developed in consultation with one other teacher and are based upon our experience with writing as it is

taught in junior high in this context. The questionnaires' responses were then compared to Ministry objectives.

The questionnaires were administered to all the Japanese English teachers (n= 23) in the nine different junior high schools of the East Yamanashi school district. Twenty-one questionnaires were returned. Results from the questionnaire can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Time Spent on Language Skills in the Classroom

Language skill	Percentage *M*	SD
Writing	25.00	8.06
Reading	31.00	12.73
Listening	26.00	9.30
Speaking	18.00	6.60

n = 20

One questionnaire had different percentages listed for question one in the English and Japanese versions. As a result, the response for question one on that questionnaire was discarded (n = 20 for question one only). All other percentages were taken from the Japanese questionnaire (only the Japanese questionnaire was returned in many cases). These results seem to indicate that according to teacher impressions, writing occupies an average 25% of classroom time. Thus it may be given more emphasis in the classroom than in the entrance exam or in the textbooks. Results also show the emphasis placed on reading at the practical level.

Table 2 relates to the kind of writing found in the classroom. The highest percentages of time spent on writing were exercises based on grammatical phrases (B), spelling (C), and memo taking (E). In fact, only B and C were used by every teacher. Although these three activities account for an average of 60.37% of class time, none of them are emphasized in the Ministry guidelines.

The activities that most closely match the Ministry guidelines are writing exercises that allow self-expression (F) and writing exercises for summarizing (G). Their combined average was only 15%. This does not seem to reflect the importance attached to students' own writing and self-expression in the Ministry guidelines. In addition, writing for

Table 2. Percent of Time Spent on Various Writing Activities

	Time *M*	Min Score	Max Score	SD
A. Fill-in-the-blank exercises (cloze exercises)	10.24	0	25	6.07
B. Writing exercises to support key grammatical phrases	23.33	5	50	10.51
C. Spelling exercises	19.90	5	40	8.13
D. Dictation exercises	5.10	0	20	4.80
E. Memo-taking	17.14	0	40	10.87
F. Writing exercises that allow self-expression	11.19	0	30	7.70
G. Writing exercises for writing main points or summarizing	3.81	0	15	4.86
H. Copying the textbook	9.05	0	30	9.34
I. Other exercises	.95	0	10	2.94

n = 21. *Note.* Due to rounding, totals do not equal 100 percent.

summarizing purposes (G) received the lowest mean score (3.81) of any of the eight writing exercises included in the questionnaire. The fact that summarization was specified only in third-year guidelines may, to a certain extent, account for its fairly low mean.

All activities had a wide range of percentages, running from 0 to 10 for "other exercises" to 5 to 50 for "writing exercises to support key grammatical phrases." These wide ranges may be a reflection of the varied perceptions of what constitutes writing within the teaching community surveyed. Results from the questionnaire suggest that Ministry writing guidelines are not well reflected in the students' classroom experiences.

Discussion

An obvious disparity exists between Ministry writing objectives and writing as it is represented in published materials and practically experienced. It would seem that the Ministry of Education has been largely ineffective in constructing and communicating a clear concept of writing as well as lax in its regulation of textbook elements of the system. On the other hand, it also seems that textbook, workbook, and test designers have not made a concerted effort to more carefully consider and account for the communicative stance taken by the Ministry of Education. An unfortunate repercussion is that teachers inadvertently become the arbiters between the varying perceptions of writing**.** If teachers simply defer to the practical elements of the system for appropriate writing exercises, not only will writing be under-represented but a minimalist definition of writing will inform classroom practices.

A comprehensive, long-term solution to address writing inconsistencies should originate from the Ministry of Education with clearer writing specifications and more effective monitoring of practical areas such as the textbooks. It is hoped that highlighting the differences between Ministry writing objectives and writing in the practical arena can encourage more dialogue on writing and eventually help to usher in more effective guidelines.

As for the short term, it seems essential that teachers provide extra occasions for writing and try to incorporate communicative approaches into everyday practice in order to increase opportunities for students to express themselves through writing. The findings should encourage the more careful examination of writing activities by professionals at all levels of the system, from the Ministry committees to material and exam developers to the instructors themselves.

While the research focus of this study was limited to writing in one specific educational setting, other skills should be studied to provide a broader picture of the education system. Future research should examine the most recent Ministry guidelines (March 2003) that, while continuing to stress self-expression, still seem somewhat vague. It should also examine the current system as a whole based on corresponding Ministry objectives**.** Additional insights could be obtained by shifting the scope of research from simply describing writing within the system to looking into practical concerns and perceptions of professionals in all segments of the junior high school English education system. At the instructional level, ideas on how to increase writing's profile within the classroom while increasing opportunities for self-expression through students' own writing would be of particular interest. Any approach proposed, though,

would have to take into account Ministry objectives while dealing with practical constraints imposed by assessment and syllabus requirements that often run counter to Ministry guidelines.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Please read the whole question and all the responses before writing a percentage.

NOTE: Please make sure percentages equal 100 %

1. Over a school year, what is the percentage of time spent by the students partaking in each skill during class?

-Listening _____ %

-Reading _____ %

-Writing _____ %

-Speaking _____ %

TOTAL 100 %

2. What kind of writing do the students do in class?

-Fill in the blanks [cloze exercises...]. _____

%

-Writing exercises to support the grammatical key phrases [in the workbook, worksheets, quizzes....]. _____ %

-Spelling [spelling tests, word bingo, writing the same word many times in the notebook...]. _____ %

-Dictation. _____ %

-Memo-taking [from the blackboard]. _____ %

-Own writing exercises that allow self-expression [English journal, diary, writing where ideas, experiences, daily life can be expressed,...]. _____ %

-Own writing exercises for summarizing/writing the main points of a passage listened to or read. _____ %

-Copying the textbook. _____ %

-Others [explain]_____

_____ _____ %

TOTAL 100 %

NOTE: Please make sure percentages equal 100%

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