

A Study on the English Writing Ability of Tokyo Kasei University Students

by

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Introduction

Writing skills have so far been considered extremely difficult for Japanese students to achieve compared to the other three performative skills of English, namely: listening, reading, and speaking. There are two basic reasons for this.

First, in the present climate of English learning in Japan, both the integrative motivation and instrumental motivation for Japanese learners of English to improve their writing skills are, with rare exceptions, very low. They rarely have the chance to write any English documents, term papers or letters to non-Japanese readers.

Second, there have not been enough writing classes conducted through six years of junior/senior high schools in Japan. How best to raise the students' writing ability is one of the overriding questions to be solved in Japanese English-teaching situations. As a basis, English and Japanese are two very different languages in terms both of its linguistic aspects, such as syntax, word order, word usage, word choice, and thought patterns, including rhetorical organization and ways of topic development. Therefore, we English teachers must exert a lot of energy on elaborately planned writing courses, especially focusing on the differences between English and Japanese. It will still be difficult, of course, to carry out our writing classes to meet these requirements adequately and satisfactorily.

The poor performance of Japanese students in their English writing, compared with other non-native English learners such as Arab, Chinese, Persian, and Spanish students, has been pointed out

by Barbara Kroll(1990). In her study, Kroll compared performative ability of the students in the classroom and at home. The result was that the Arabic essays were the most accurate, while the Japanese writing in class had nearly three times as many errors as the Arabs writing at home.

The Japanese essays were ranked lowest of the five, in terms of rhetorical competence and syntactic accuracy.

2. TENDENCIES OF ERRORS OF TOKYO KASEI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

In order to analyze the actual discrepancies of English writing for academic purposes, a study examining the various tendencies of errors of the Japanese college students was conducted. This chapter presents a descriptive analysis of essays written by 127 Tokyo Kasei University students, one essay per student. The subjects in this study are all undergraduate students. They are 48 English major freshmen, 45 Environmental Science major sophomores, and 34 juniors who belong to the English Language and Culture Zone. The essays were written and collected from each class in early May. It was from this time that the students were just beginning to learn about how a typical English paragraph with a main idea sentence is formed. They also learn how it is supported by appropriate detail sentences and develops and progresses. So it is well presumed that the students had no solid previous knowledge about the essential structure of an English paragraph and how to be consistent among paragraphs in order to produce a good essay.

The respective essays were checked for the following 27 items.

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- 1.00 Communicative Quality:
Whether or not the essay conveyed the idea of the writer and is consistent in that point of view.
- 2.00 Logical Organization:
Whether or not the essay contained logical sequencing of ideas throughout the essay.
- 3.00 Paragraphing:
Whether or not the essay is paragraphed appropriately, and coherence is well kept between the paragraphs.
- 4.00 Grammaticality:
Whether or not grammatical errors were made in terms of the following points.
- 4.010 Syntactic Errors including Word Order, and Lack of the Subject.
- 4.020 Lexical Choice and Word Form.
- 4.030 Noun/Pronoun Error.
- 4.031 Singular/Plural Noun.
- 4.032 Pronoun.
- 4.040 Verb-Centered Error.
- 4.041 Verb (Transitive/Intransitive, Conjugation)
- 4.042 Verb (Tense)
- 4.043 Verb (Subject/Verb Agreement)
- 4.050 Adjective, Possessive.
- 4.060 Auxiliary Verb.
- 4.070 Adverb.
- 4.080 Preposition.
- 4.090 Conjunction.
- 4.100 Article.
- 4.110 Infinitive.
- 4.120 Gerund.
- 4.130 Participle.
- 4.140 Voice.
- 4.150 Subjunctive Mood.
- 4.160 Comparative
- 4.170 Omission.
- 4.180 Punctuation, Wording, Capital/Small Letter.
- 4.190 Spelling.
- 4.200 Miscellaneous.

Table 1 provides the numbers and percentages of the students who made errors or had problems under each item. We examined all of the 127 essays and checked the errors of each student. A student who made plural errors under one checked item was counted as one. The percentages were calculated in proportion to 127 subjects.

TABLE 1 ERROR CATEGORIES AND PERCENTAGES

	Total Number	Total Percentage	Number of students by class				
			1A	1B	2B	3A	3B
Communicative quality	37	29.1	4	3	21	6	3
Logical organization	38	29.9	7	3	24	3	1
Paragraphing	17	13.4	5	1	11	0	0
Syntactic errors	47	37.0	8	6	21	4	8
Lexical choice	25	19.7	7	4	8	2	4
Singular / Plural noun	45	35.4	7	6	16	4	12
Pronoun	1	0.8	0	0	1	0	0
Verb - conjugation	39	30.7	6	10	17	1	5
Verb - tense	6	4.7	0	1	3	1	1
Subject / verb agreement	12	9.4	2	1	7	0	2
Adjective, possessive	20	15.7	2	5	9	2	2
Auxiliary verb	3	2.4	1	1	0	0	1
Adverb	7	5.5	0	1	4	0	2
Preposition	15	11.8	4	3	4	1	3
Conjunction	7	5.5	3	2	0	0	2
Article	43	33.9	10	11	13	3	6
Infinitive	5	3.9	1	1	2	1	0
Gerund	1	0.8	1	0	0	0	0
Participle	5	3.9	0	0	4	0	1
Voice	4	3.1	2	0	1	0	1
Subjunctive mood	1	0.8	0	1	0	0	0
Comparative	8	6.3	0	4	4	0	0
Omission	39	30.7	5	4	19	1	10
Punctuation, wording	14	11.0	3	0	3	5	3
Spelling	28	22.0	3	4	11	4	6
Miscellaneous	2	1.6	0	0	1	1	0

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As shown in Table 1, about 30% of the students have problems in communicative quality and logical organization, respectively.

Under the grammatical items, more than 30% of the students had errors related to;

- (1) syntactic errors including word order
- (2) selection of singular or plural nouns
- (3) use of transitive/intransitive verbs or conjugation of the verbs
- (4) omission of clauses, phrases, or words

Few errors were discovered relating to the gerund and subjunctive mood, perhaps partly because only a small number of students used expressions which contained either grammatical feature.

Subdivided Analysis (Percentages by Grade)

Table 2 provides the numbers and the percentages of the students who made errors under the checked items by grade.

TABLE 2 ERROR CATEGORIES AND PERCENTAGES BY GRADE

	freshmen		sophomores		juniors	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Communicative quality	7	14.6	21	46.7	9	26.5
Logical organization	10	20.8	24	53.3	4	11.8
Paragraphing	6	12.5	11	24.4	0	0
Syntactic errors	14	29.2	21	46.7	12	35.3
Lexical choice	11	22.9	8	17.8	6	17.6
Singular / Plural noun	13	27.0	16	35.6	16	47.1
Pronoun	0	0	1	2.2	0	0
Verb - conjugation	16	33.3	17	37.8	6	17.6
Verb - tense	1	2.1	3	6.7	2	5.9
Subject / verb agreement	3	6.3	7	15.6	2	5.9
Adjective, possessive	7	14.6	9	20.0	4	11.8
Auxiliary verb	2	4.2	0	0	1	2.9
Adverb	1	2.1	4	8.9	2	5.9
Preposition	7	14.6	4	8.9	4	11.8
Conjunction	5	10.4	0	0	2	5.9
Article	21	43.8	13	28.9	9	26.5
Infinitive	2	4.2	2	4.4	1	2.9
Gerund	1	2.1	0	0	0	0
Participle	0	0	4	8.9	1	2.9
Voice	2	4.2	1	2.2	1	2.9
Subjunctive mood	1	2.1	0	0	0	0
Comparative	4	8.3	4	8.9	0	0
Omission	9	18.8	19	42.2	11	32.4
Punctuation, wording	3	6.3	3	6.7	8	23.5
Spelling	7	14.6	11	24.4	10	29.4
Miscellaneous	0	0	1	2.2	1	2.9

As mentioned above, the subjects consisted of 48 freshmen and 45 sophomores and 34 juniors. The percentages in the Table 2 were calculated for each year. Table 2 shows that the communicative quality and logical organization of sophomores who are not English majors were as high as 46.7% and 53.3%, respectively. The distinction between singular and plural nouns had not been mastered by many of the juniors. Furthermore, 43.8% of freshmen who are English majors made errors in the use of articles. On the other hand, the error ratio decreased to almost half of that in the case of the sophomores and

juniors. Finally, 42.2% of sophomores who are not English majors had problems in understanding the omission of clauses, phrases, and words.

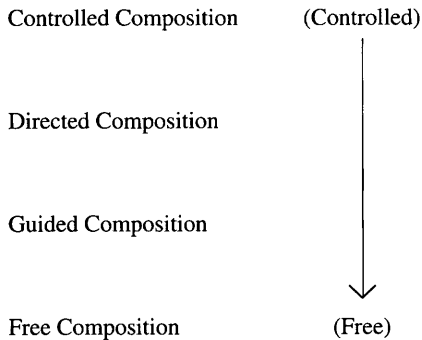
3. IMPLICATIONS

As with the case suggested by Kroll(1990), it might also be suggested that probably the students who wrote the essays analyzed did not understand what is important in writing an essay in English. They are required to provide a clear sense of purpose and be consistent in point of view within appropriate logical English organization. In addi-

tion, creativity in establishing the context, a coherent structure, grammaticality, appropriate selection of vocabulary, and a thorough knowledge of spelling are also necessary.

In class, freshmen and sophomores rather concentrated on writing short and simple essays within one page in class. On the other hand, junior students challenged long, profound essays using complex sentences in two or three pages. Therefore, it is likely that the greater number of grammatical errors tabulated in the junior essays was partly due to the difference in the nature of their essays. This would also explain the unexpected number of passages that were unsatisfactory in terms of communicative quality.

In this study, our analysis focused on communicative quality, logical organization and the students' grammatical knowledge of English in the essay. It might be suggested that the low scores recorded on communicative quality and logical organization must be due to lack of practice in paragraph writing at the high school and college levels. As Okihara (1984) stated in his study, the following order of practicing will be very helpful to improve the students' writing skills.



The most frequent errors in terms of grammar found in this study were mistakes made in the usage of articles, syntactical errors, and omission. It is possible that the first two items might be caused by the linguistic differences between English and Japanese. There are no articles in Japanese, and the Japanese language has quite a different syntactical structure from English.

As for the many errors that were made concerning the omission of clauses, phrases, and words, three

possible reasons can be considered. First, it might be suggested that the students who wrote the essays analyzed here were not aware of some of the differences between colloquial and written English. This is evident with the frequent omission of adverbial clauses, adverbial phrases, subjunctive clauses, conjunctions, adverbs, and participles in the essays. Second, it might be also suggested that because the way we Japanese omit or add words in our language is different from that in English, the students kept sticking to the deeply formed habit of omission in Japanese language and this was evident in the English essays. Third, because of their limited vocabulary, the students might not have been able to think of adequate expressions or the formation of English sayings. As a result, the students failed to express themselves clearly and fully despite of their efforts to do their best.

The goals of writing English are, we believe, not to become too sensitive to English grammar, not to acquire as much vocabulary as the native speakers of English, and also not to be too conscious of fluency in writing. Same as the students' native language, based on sufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, through sufficient paragraph writing in order to organize a whole essay well and clarify its theme, the quality of the students' writing should be enhanced to an acceptable level to the native speakers of English. This should include adequate expression of ideas and creativity which the writers intend to employ. The content of the essays with the development of an attractive theme should be presented and well understood by the readers.

According to Hatori(1982:23), there should exist various levels involved in writing activities. As the learners proceed to more advanced levels, the element of what we call "talent" is intricately related to the writing product. That is to say, not only the concentrated learning attitude of how to write but also the overall creativity and the imagination is to affect their writing. It seems extremely difficult to attain the writing proficiency as the near-native professional writers. Very few learners are likely to achieve this even if they have such a writing talent. When we think of our mother tongue, we easily agree with his view. It is surely a matter of idiosyn-

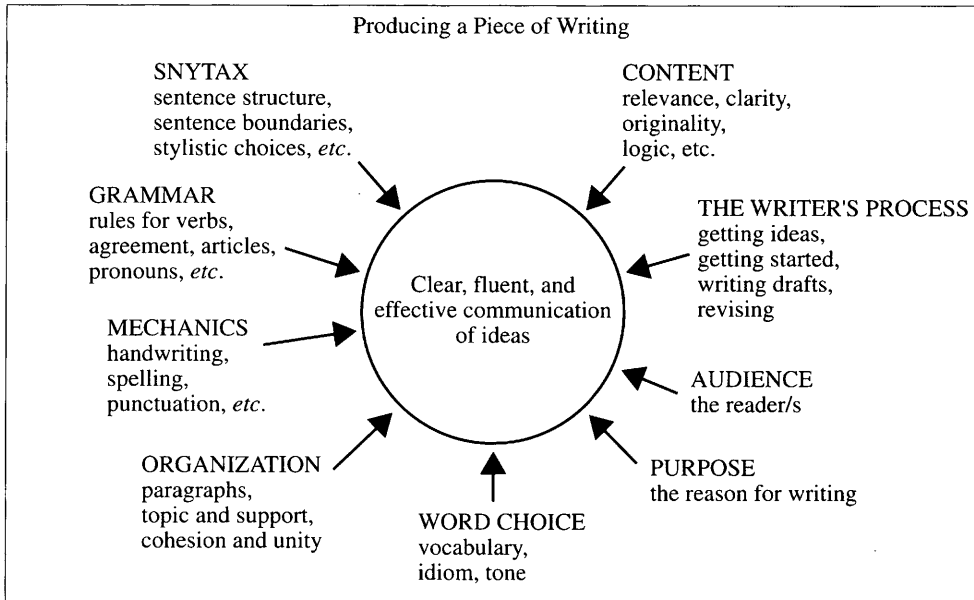
cratic ability by nature. The writer's talent makes the difference in writing.

In order to enhance the learners' levels of writing, teachers should continue a number of empirical studies to check the actual levels of writing skills of the students. More analytic scoring should be neces-

sary for the students and properly feeded back to them so that they can improve their writing by themselves. Raimes(1983b) showed the elements which function synthetically to EFL writing as indicated on Chart 1.

Based on the elements shown on Chart 1, further

CHART 1 PRODUCING A PIECE OF WRITING (Raimes, 1983b)



study will be expected by application of more analytic scoring, for example, the one suggested by Heaton(1975). He suggested the items of Grammar, Vocabulary, Mechanics, Fluency and Relevance to be scored from 5 to 1, respectively, and to be totalled to obtain the holistic rate. Here we would like to claim to add the 6th scoring item to Heaton's; that is "Content/Idea" in order to set up a new analytic scoring measure. Logical organization will be achieved through "Fluency" and "Content/Idea", and communicative quality is closely related to "Relevance" of the new scale. We would like to continue this study. We hope this type of study is to facilitate our students to become more proficient in writing English.

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東京家政大学学生の英語のライティング能力に関する一考察

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日本人の英文を書く力が、平均においては十分でないということが指摘されてから久しい。非英語圏の他国の大学生と比較しても、日本人大学生のライティング力が弱いという結果が、複数の先行調査・研究で明らかにされている。その原因は、文法項目や語彙面の指導など、英語教育上の問題に起因することもあるが、文章構成上の問題として、母国語である日本語の干渉も大きいと思われる。

東京家政大学の1年生48名、2年生45名、3年生34名に英文エッセイを書いてもらい、伝達力、英語的論理、パラグラフの展開法、文法などについて、誤りのある学生の人数を項目別に集計した。その結果、伝達力においては29.1%、英語的論理の展開においては29.9%の学生が不十分であることが判明した。文法事項で誤りをおかした学生の割合は、高い順から、文構造37.0%、名詞の単数・複数の使い分け35.4%、冠詞33.9%、動詞の活用の誤り30.7%などとなった。次に学年別では、英語英文学科専攻1年では冠詞の誤りが、環境情報専攻2年では文章全体の論理性における問題点が、言語文化ゾーン3年では文章の長文化に伴い、名詞の単複の誤りが多かった。