Developing Students' Writing Skills in a Japanese Context[*]

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Introduction

Many years have passed since the introduction of teaching which put emphasis on communication was introduced into English education in Japan. We English teachers in Japan have been expected to develop students' communicative competence and to develop a variety of activities which encourage students to communicate in English.

Being able to communicate in English effectively includes developing both "receptive skills" and "productive skills." The former refers to abilities which enable us to understand content through Listening and Reading. The latter includes abilities by which we can convey our ideas and opinions through Speaking and Writing.

So far in Japan, we have spent a lot of time mainly teaching the grammar of English. The focus of learning has been on the rules of sentence structure, grammatical structures and the meaning of words or idioms. Through reading and writing, we check whether or not students understand those grammatical items rather than whether students can understand the overall meaning of what they are reading or whether they can express ideas fluently. One reason for this tendency might be that most students have a goal to pass the entrance examinations of universities or colleges. In order to pass the examinations, students need to have a lot of grammatical knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which writing is taught and to consider more effective ways of teaching writing. In section 1, we would like to consider the differences between speaking and writing. In section 2, two aspects of writing are introduced and how writing should be dealt with in the English classroom is discussed. In section 3, we are going to introduce the process-oriented approach to writing. In section 4, the usefulness of reading material to develop students writing skills is proposed. Finally, in section 5, we are going to consider how teachers can respond during students writing.

1. Speaking and Writing

Writing, as a productive skill, is often compared with speaking. Both are similar in terms of being a means of conveying a message. However, there are some differences. One of the most apparent differences is that in speaking there is immediate feedback from the listener or audience, while in writing, there is not. This is now, to some extent, changing. However, with the increasing use of email for communication where response time can be a matter of seconds or minutes.

Nevertheless in direct speech the listener is physically present and the speaker can

receive any feedback immediately.　According to the listener's direct feedback, the speaker can repeat, revise or change expressions so that the listener can understand what is being said.　They can also use a variety of gestures, facial expressions and body language to help to convey the meaning.　Moreover, the speaker can emphasize the important points of the utterances with the use of stress, pitch and intonation.　Through immediate interaction with the listener's available feedback, the foreign language learner can gradually develop his or her speaking skills.

On the other hand, in writing, the writer and reader are not usually in the same physical space.　The writer cannot receive any feedback from the reader immediately, so he or she cannot know whether the reader understands what the writer is trying to convey. Therefore a writer is required to elaborate the sentences and pay close attention to the organization of the content in order to convey his or her intention clearly and effectively.

From the viewpoint of immediate feedback, writing is a solitary activity and is not acquired in a daily life communication.　In most cases we need to be deliberately taught how to write.

Considering the difference between speaking and writing from the viewpoint of "time-pressure," the writer has the opportunity to think about what he or she wants to say and can make minor or even major changes to the message before the reader sees it.　A speaker on the other hand, may be under greater pressure to make sure that what he or she says is appropriate in the context, especially if it is an English speaking community, so that the message will not be　misinterpreted.

In traditional teaching, not so much emphasis has been placed on appropriateness, either in speaking or in writing different types of genres, and this may be a crucial factor for difficulties with expression that many Japanese students experience.

2. Writing in the Classroom

As pointed out in the previous section, writing is learned through a process of instruction. In this section we will consider how writing should be dealt with in the English classroom by describing two aspects of writing, that is, writing as a service activity and writing for communication.

2-1 Writing as a Service Activity

The term "Service Activity" is first used by Paulston (1976).　This refers to writing activities which elementary English learners mainly use in order to reinforce or help their learning.　These type of writing activities are undertaken in the Japanese classroom in order to help students memorize and practice new grammatical items or new structures or vocabulary.　With this method it is easy for students to see how they are progressing and to get feedback from their teachers.

It is very important for elementary learners to use these kind of activities.　Many of them, however, are at the sentence, rather than text level.　Widdowson (1978 : 115) criticizes this type of writing as follows:

The point of such exercises is not to get learners to make statements in writing which have some communicative purpose but to get them to manifest their knowledge of the working of the system of the language.　They are, in other words, exercises in usage.

We cannot say this kind of practice is an original writing activity because it has little relation to the development of writing skills.　While it may be useful for students to practice basic writing skills, they also need opportunities to develop their skills further so that they can write different types of texts for different purposes.

2-2 Writing for communication

These days writing has been under review at the discourse level as well as at the sentence level.　Many researchers have started to pay attention not only to the finished product but also to the process of writing.　In other words, the writing process is regarded as being as important as the outcome or product.　Zamel (1982 : 267) points out the importance of teaching writing which places particular stress on meaning and communication as follows:

> . . . writing is a process through which meaning is created.　This suggests that composition is instruction that recognizes the importance of generating, formulating, and refining one's ideas.

In other words, he suggests the necessity of teaching, not only for memorizing and producing grammatically correct sentences, but teaching which the process of writing itself is emphasized.　Such an idea for writing is very important when we try to make ourselves understood.　This is the original character of writing.　To write our ideas or thoughts in English has a communicative objective through which we convey some message to the readers.　This indicates that we have to teach writing for communication.　Many more of our students will need to use writing for such purposes in a society where international communication is becoming increasingly important.　Therefore, from now on, it will be important for English teachers to shift the way of teaching from writing as a service activity to writing for communication.

3. Process － Oriented Approach

Hedge (1988:21–22) describes three phases as major process writing activities: PRE-WRITING, WRITING AND REVISING, and EDITING.

PRE-WRITING is the stage where writers, before starting writing, think about what the purpose of the writing is and for whom they are writing.　The answers to these questions influence the choice of organization and the choice of language.　Each type of writing (e.g. a personal / formal letter, a report or an academic article and so on) has a characteristic form or style.　After deciding the theme of the writing and its audience, we can move to a brainstorming activity.　This activity lets the students work together and talk about the topic as much as possible.　By using a brainstorming activity, the students can list various

relevant information and ideas about the topic.

The WRITING AND REWRITING stage is one in which the writer makes a first draft and rewrites it.　Rewriting does not necessarily occur after completing the first draft.　The writer, during writing, might stop to read over and review what he or she has already written by assessing it for coherence and cohesion.　For instance, the writer has to consider whether ideas are expressed clearly for the reader, whether important information is missing and whether sentences or paragraphs need to be rearranged in order to make the final product clearer and easier to understand.　In this phase the writer has to pay attention not to the grammatical accuracy or spelling of words, but to the content of the message that is to be produced.

EDITING, the last stage, is the one where the writer makes the final readjustments and checks accuracy so that the text is as understandable as possible to readers.　The writer, in this stage, reviews the text for not only accuracy in grammar but for clearness of the overall structure.

In writing classes in Japan we are making efforts to devise activities which have emphasis on the writing process rather than the finished product.　It would not be said, however, that we have undertaken such activities fully because of problems such as entrance examinations, restricted time, class size, and so on.

4. The Use of Reading Material

Through some teaching experiences, the author strongly feels that many students, especially less proficient learners, have little confidence in writing text higher than the sentence level.　When they try to write at the paragraph level or at the text level, they are often too nervous to write, though they have already learned a lot of grammatical items and vocabulary.　Moreover the final product is often difficult to understand as a whole, though each sentence is grammatically correct.

One reason for this could be that students are not familiar with the context of their writing nor with how they can use grammatical items that they know to express their ideas. Another reason could be that they do not know how to organize a logical writing product. Those two reasons might indicate that a new grammatical item is not presented in any context when students learn it, and they have few chances to write at more than the sentence-level writing.

In the writing classes we aim to develop students' writing skills to express themselves effectively so that the reader can understand important points of the writing easily.　So in order to develop students' effective writing skills, in the classes, we would need to teach not only grammar and expressions but how an English paragraph and longer pieces of writing are constructed.　Using reading material would be helpful for students to express themselves in writing.

4-1 Construction of an English Paragraph

In order to make our writing effective and clear, it is useful that we learn how an English paragraph is organized before writing.　Imhoof and Hudson (1979:1) describe the typical

construction of an English paragraph as follows:

> The sentences in most well written paragraphs may be analyzed into four general functions. First there are paragraph introducers, which are sentences that establish the topic focus of the paragraph as a whole. Second, there are paragraph developers, which present examples or details of various kinds that support the ideas set forth by the paragraph introducers. Third, there are sentences viewpoint or context modulators, which are sentences that provide a smooth transition between different sets of ideas. Fourth, there are paragraph terminators, which logically conclude the ideas discussed in the paragraph in a psychologically satisfying manner. Not all pieces of writing will conform to this analysis; however, most successful paragraphs usually contain some combination of these four sentence types.

In short, in English writing, we state our topic first, which refers to our main idea, focus, point of view, and then we usually elaborate our statement by adding supporting details. Inhoof and Hudson (1979) also present various examples of English paragraphs, which are developed from the viewpoint of listing, examples, comparison, contrast, definition, classification, space and time, process description, cause and effect and generalization. In order to help students become familiar with the construction of English paragraphs, in daily classes, we would need to show as many model paragraphs as possible and illustrate that an English paragraph can be developed by various points of view.

It would be quite difficult, especially for elementary students, to express themselves at the paragraph level. In the class we should show a variety of understandable examples of English paragraphs, and teach that a paragraph consists of a *topic sentence* and some *supporting sentences*. It might be effective to show students a model paragraph such as the following:

> *Ann had a terrible time in her new house last week*. *On Monday, the sink was not draining well. She had to call the repair company. Next, on Wednesday, the stove broke. The repair person had to come back to her house. And then, on Friday the refrigerator made a terrible mess. The repair person spent many hours working in Ann's house that week.* (Daiichi Gakushusha:13)

This model paragraph demonstrates the development of topics according to time sequences. In the model above, the underlined sentence is a topic sentence. The following sentences support the topic sentence and give the reasons why Ann had a terrible time. It might be effective to teach that we can organize a paragraph developed by time sequences with the use of the signal words such as dates, first, next, soon, after, at last, finally, last, later, before, while, then and so on.

When dealing with the model paragraph in a class, we could ask students to find a sentence which states the topic of the paragraph and the sentences which refer to the reasons. And we could also let them understand that not only Ann but also the repair

person had a terrible time.

4-2 Other Advantages of Using Reading Material

The activities which use reading a model paragraph or a text often help students find out how the writer has devised it to make it cohesive.　Raimes (1983) points out the usefulness of close reading, where students read a short passage and give close attention to all the choices the writer has made.

Raimes (1983) says that, first, close analysis of a piece of writing helps students learn how to link between sentences logically.　Through analyzing, students can learn how the personal pronouns, the definite article and connecting words are used in a piece of writing. Second, she points out that close reading can help students find out the rules of punctuation. That is, it is helpful for students to examine where and how they can use commas, semicolons, and exclamation marks.　Third, she says students can notice how to hang the sentences together according to the basic rule that new information comes after old information in a sentence.

In addition to these, Raimes (1983) introduces some activities using reading material, such as *copying*, which gives students practice with the mechanics of punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraph indention, and *summarizing*, which can be helpful in searching for meaning and communicating that meaning.

In a Japanese context, especially in reading class, we often let students copy reading material in the textbook.　The purpose of the activity is to help familiarize them with English paragraphs and learn how the writer develops his or her ideas in the text.　It is true, however, that many students tend to copy it mechanically without a thought.

Summarizing requires the ability to not only find main points but also to express them in one's own words.　This activity would be effective for students practicing paragraph writing, but it appears to be quite difficult for elementary learners.

5. Responding to Student Writing

Writing is hard work for students: they make every effort before submitting the final product.　Generally speaking, however, teachers often only make a minimal contribution to the development of student writing skills.　When dealing with student writing, teachers usually spend a lot of time in finding or correcting grammatical or spelling mistakes in red. Such a response often makes students de-motivated or lose their confidence in writing.　The purpose of writing is conveying a message or an idea to the reader.　So the content or organization of the product should also be seen as an important aspect of the writing.　Silva (1990:15), who regards writing as a "complex, recursive, and creative process," illustrates concretely the teacher's role in the writing class as follows :

The teacher's role is to help students develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing, and planning structure and procedure), for drafting (encourage multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas) ; and for editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence

structure, grammar and mechanics).

As Silva points out, the teacher has a variety of roles in developing students' writing skills. We teachers, in our role, are apt simply to teach new items, give a lot of practice and check them. While students are writing, we might often do nothing until students hand in the final product, except for answering questions by students.

Harmer (2001) presents three important roles for teachers in the process-oriented writing activities: *motivator*, *resource*, and *feedback provider*. As motivators, teachers need to motivate the students to write and encourage them to make the product as clear and effective as possible. And, as resources, we can help the students at any phase of the writing process (pre-writing, writing and revising, and editing). For example, at the pre-writing stage, we can help them generate ideas and can provide them with ideas for planning. During writing we can also give them a variety of knowledge which they need, such as information and appropriate expressions and so on. Finally, as feedback providers, teachers have the same responsibilities as the reader. Teachers can give any feedback to the ideas or feelings that students have tried to convey through writing, from the viewpoint of whether the writing is interesting, or whether it is easy to understand, or whether the reader can share the writer's intention clearly. Teachers should respond positively and encouragingly to the content of what the students have written.

Harmer (2001) gives us two feedback techniques: responding and coding. Responding is to give some advice to students by showing how the text appears to us, how successful we think it has been and how it could be improved. This response can be given at various stages of the writing process, and it will be a valuable clue for producing a new version. When we respond to a final version, we can make comments about the work by saying "Well done," "You've written a very interesting composition, but paragraph 2 is not clear. . ." Positive response to the strong points of the product, moreover, is important in helping students gain confidence.

Coding is to indicate the position of mistakes by using codes, such as WF (wrong form), WO (wrong word order), // (new paragraph needed), and ?M (meaning is not clear) and so on. Using codes makes correction much neater and less threatening.

It is very difficult for Japanese, who are studying English as a foreign language, to write their ideas or thoughts in English in order to make themselves understood. Moreover, a lot of learners are apt to consider writing as an activity in which they merely translate Japanese sentences into English, rather than the communication of one's ideas through language. In writing activities, if we don't put ourselves in the reader's position or we cannot write what we want to express clearly, the readers would not be able to understand us correctly.

Considering writing from this viewpoint, it has to be said that in the writing classroom in Japan, we have not necessarily paid much attention to either the content or the audience. As mentioned above, our main concern may have been how we can generate grammatically correct sentences.

6. Conclusion

Until recently, in English education in Japan, writing has been used in order to reinforce or help student learning.　And teachers have focused on the written products that students composed, that is, on specific grammatical items and expressions.　One reason for this is that many students aim to pass the entrance examinations of universities and they need as much grammatical knowledge as possible in order to pass them.　Furthermore the problem of class size, 40 − 50 students in a class, is another factor in why teachers have considered more manageable aspects such as grammar and vocabulary rather than looking at the process of writing as a whole.

As has been discussed, however, writing is a means of communication and it traces a complex process before the final product is produced. The different stages, such as setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making drafts, revising and editing have been shown to be essential elements in the writing process (Hedge 2000).

In this paper we have discussed how important it is to develop effective ways of teaching in order to improve students' writing proficiency and to motivate them so that they feel encouraged to continue and develop their writing skills.

From now on, we English teachers need to change the focus of teaching writing from a student's finished product to the writing process which encourages students to take an active part in each stage of that process in order to express their ideas effectively.

Acknowledgement

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