

Japanese Students and the Process Approach

Harry Meyer

Takagi (2001) found a variety of problems with the educational environment in Japan regarding the teaching of English writing. For example, it is common for Japanese high school English teachers to concentrate on grammar and not have the students write paragraphs, because:

... such writing is usually not required for the university entrance exams. For teachers and students who are concerned with the entrance exam (and most are), there is little incentive to teach and to learn how to write paragraphs in English (Takagi, 2001).

After surveying 25 students, who had lived in both Japan and the United States, Takagi found that of the students who took writing courses in the U.S., the difference in writing instruction was clearly contrasted between the focus on grammar in Japan and the focus on organization, content, and length of paragraphs in the U.S.

Kobayashi and Rinnert (in Yasuda, 2006: 4) found that writing activities were given more emphasis in U.S. high schools, than in Japanese high schools. They noted that:

... Japanese high school students have few opportunities to develop the academic skills that are necessary for writing papers, such as evaluating the information they read and questioning its accuracy or reliability (*i.e.*, critical thinking), and finding information from outside sources and incorpo-

rating it into their arguments (ibid).

These findings are supported by Onada, and Todayama (Ibid.).

Even those students who may have attended high schools, which gave greater emphasis to writing, are still likely to encounter problems, as Japanese rhetorical patterns differ from those of English. For example, in an English paragraph, the thesis statement comes first, in the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph. In a Japanese paragraph, the thesis usually comes at the end. In written Japanese, the reader has a greater responsibility to interpret the words of the writer than in English, where responsibility for clarity of communication falls on the writer.

Japanese students need to be made aware of the differences in writing style between Japanese and English, and of the audience to which they were writing.

The process approach presents a useful way of introducing Japanese students to Western rhetorical style.

Writing Samples

The first two writing samples, were written by intermediate level students taught privately by the author. Both students were in their thirties and had previously studied English at the junior and senior high school level. They did not attend university, but did begin studying privately once a week in their late twenties.

The latter four writing samples, were written by second year engineering students, at a small university in Japan. Two writing assignments were given to 48 students. These four have been selected as the most typical examples. The assignments were kept short because of concerns about the low-level of the two classes surveyed and time restrictions.

After correcting these assignments, a variety of errors became apparent. The most common of these were poor use or non-use of articles, poor spelling, and confusion over the following: singular vs. plural forms, countable vs. uncountable nouns, verb conjugation (i.e. is/are), comparatives, conventions (i.e. "It's 7.95 dollars instead of seven dollars and ninety-five cents), capitalization, and use of tenses.

Student Composition # 1 - Advice For Learning English

Comments:

The first problem is that the thesis of the essay isn't addressed until the third paragraph, where an opinion is given. This is similar to what Takagi (2001) mentioned. Though the thesis comes in the first sentence of a paragraph, it does not come until the third paragraph, with the first two paragraphs being a narrative of the student's English learning experience rather than part of an introduction to the topic. The writing also seems to lack focus and expresses a chronology of the student's English learning experience rather than an expression of opinion (with the exception of the third paragraph) or recommendation.

Suggestions:

This student needs help organizing ideas in a sequential order starting with the thesis followed by supporting evidence and a conclusion making a recommendation.

Arguing the thesis requires a progression of ideas and linking between the ideas and paragraphs to produce fluidity and cohesion. They would benefit from exercises dealing with conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *because* etc.

Western rhetorical style needs to be reviewed or possibly introduced. The student would benefit from the presentation of guidelines detailing a formula to follow, as well as example models to refer to. Peer/teacher feedback could then provide re-enforcement to the student.

Peer feedback acts critically here as it reminds the student of information presented by the teacher. The writing of multiple drafts will help re-enforce those lessons.

Student Composition # 2 — My Favorite Singer

Comments:

The topic the student has chosen to present is their ‘favorite singer.’ This choice allows the student to write about a topic of interest to themselves, thus increasing motivation towards the task.

This piece of writing begins with a clear statement, ‘my favorite singer is Ken Hirai,’ followed by a progression of ideas - initial impression, opinion on his best CD, a statement on why they like him, and a conclusion.

There are problems with grammar and lack of coherence.

Suggestions:

The format of this writing is quite good compared to most students of this level. The problems encountered here were not of a formulaic nature, but of a grammatical one.

The student would benefit from peer feedback regarding the mechanics of the writing.

A problem may be encountered in that this student’s peers may not have a

suitable command of grammar to make useful criticism; therefore, the teacher will have to monitor general problems encountered by the students and take appropriate measures to remedy them.

One way of doing this is to present a short lesson on one topic such as the proper use of articles and conjunctions followed by peer review by two or three classmates of the same piece of writing. This may clear up some problems. This could be followed by a group discussion where students may clarify any outstanding problems. If they are unable to do this initially, then they must consult their sources (notes, dictionaries etc.) and reach a consensus as to what is correct. If they still cannot agree, they may then consult the teacher. This way the teacher plays a minimalist role, as advocated by Muncie (2000: 49).

This exercise also has the added benefit of raising consciousness towards grammatical issues.

Student Composition # 3 — Introducing Yourself to a Pen pal

Comments:

This student makes minor errors in spelling, one of them common to Japanese writers of English, that is the confusion between 'r' and 'l' - 'rivelary' instead of 'library'. Confusion regarding the use of the definite article is seen with 'watch the TV' instead of 'watch TV.'

Aside from the serious grammatical flaws, the student fails to grasp any sense of audience. A model is provided to assist the student with format, but while they loosely follow the format provided, they fail to convey that they have a sense of audience. There is no greeting to the pen pal Alan and no conclusion i.e. 'how about you?'

Suggestions:

The grammatical problems could be dealt with by supplemental materials, such as close exercises. These exercises could then be re-enforced through writing exercises and peer review. This not only benefits the writer (i.e. having someone correct their mistakes), but benefits the reviewer, as correcting the work of others gives them the opportunity to remember what they have just learned and apply it, in other words this acts as a consciousness raising activity.

To raise audience awareness students could be assigned pen pals in the class. This would provide an immediate and real audience for them rather than a fictional one. Their pen pal could ask a series of questions provided by the teacher through a feedback sheet. This would help the student to understand what areas of the letter need clarification and allow them to make the necessary revisions in their later drafts.

Student Composition # 4 - Introducing Yourself to a Pen pal**Comments:**

As seen in the previous piece of writing grammar is the greatest concern, and could be dealt with in the manner described above.

While this student does at least address their fictional pen pal — ‘Dear Alan,’ they fail to make a polite or adequate conclusion — ‘that’s all.’ As in Student Composition # 3 they fail to ask their pen pal for any information. A letter is a discourse between two or more people, and not simply a statement of facts. The problem of audience awareness needs to be addressed. The student also needs to learn to conclude a letter properly i.e. ‘take care,’ ‘cheers,’ ‘write back soon,’ or for formal letters — ‘kind regards,’ ‘best wishes’ etc.

Suggestions:

Grammar problems and raising audience awareness could be dealt with in the manner described in the suggestions for Student Composition # 3.

Student Composition # 5 — Prices in Japan**Comments:**

While the model provided for the assignment gives the student an example of an introduction i.e. ‘Many things are more expensive in my country than in the United States. For example...,’ the student fails to use this example for an introduction or provide an alternative introduction. There is also no conclusion, though no conclusion is modeled in the assignment and the assignment is of unspecified length.

The student also demonstrates a variety of grammatical problems.

Suggestions:

The student would benefit from peer review and perhaps a more detailed model — one with a conclusion.

They also need to review modals and other grammatical issues. This could be done as outlined in the suggestions for Student Composition # 3.

Student Composition # 6 - Prices in Japan**Comments:**

This student uses the introduction modeled in the assignment and then goes on to make a variety of spelling and grammatical errors. . Again we see confusion between ‘l’ and ‘r’ with the spelling of eleven as ‘ereven.’

Suggestions:

The spelling and grammatical errors made are common for Japanese students and could be dealt with as per the suggestions in Student Composition # 3.

Conclusion

The process approach could provide an answer to some of the problems of the educational environment in Japan. Through it, western rhetorical style with its emphasis on audience awareness, content, organization, and persuasion can be introduced in a creative and personalized way, that can lead to greater motivation and retention of new language and writing style.

Notes

Muncie, J. (2000) "Using Written Teacher Feedback in EFL Composition Classes." *ELT Journal* 54/1: 47-53.

Richards, J. et al. (2005) *Interchange - Student's book 1* (third ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Takagi, A. (2001) "The Need for Change in English Writing Instruction in Japan." (www) <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2001/07/index> (June 16, 2005)

Yasuda, S. (2006) "Japanese Students' Literacy Background and the Role of the Writing Center." *The Language Teacher* 30/5: 3-7.

Appendix 1: Advice For Learning English

What advice would you give someone who asks you how to best learn English? Try to write at least 3 paragraphs.

The first. I was listening the radio, but I couldn't continue, The next. I listened The CD of Story. That was I couldn't continue too. I like the movie a very much, So I watched many movies. I had favorite movie. I watched that many times. I think that is become hearing lesson.

The next. I went to the English class of community center. That class had native speaker and Japanese teacher. We had a text book. And We had a home work every weeks. They gave us the some topics. Then. We were writing that and we have to speech front of another student.

I think. What is most best good for learn English. I made a friends of native speaker. I could not speak English. But, when we went to the Restraunt, I have to explain of menu for then. The some Restrant didn't have a picture's menu. At that time. I have to tell them material, how to cook, color, and taste. That was good study for me.

I used to hearing of English little by little, After that I tried to listen to the CD. Sometime Story, Sometime text CD. When I was start study English, I couldn't hearing. But After the many experience. My ear got accustomed to English So I can understand more than before.

Appendix 2: My Favorite Singer

Tell us about something or someone you like very much. You can write about a favorite book, TV show, singer, actor, athlete, pet or something else. Anything is okay. Try to write at least 3 paragraphs.

My favorite singer is ken Hirai. He is Japanese musitian. I heard his music for the first time about seven years ago. Maybe, I was driving my car while listening FM radio.

He impressed me a very beautiful voice. After that. I bought his CD in 2000. The first CD was single CD. The title "why." I bought a 3 or 4 Cdes.

I think the best CD is new album "UTA BAKA." because. this CD is his memorial album of Ten years. And, This CD include new single the name is "POP STAR." He made this song for the total of ten years his music, very right sound, and I like a music video.

Why I like him? I like his voice, lyric, and music. He making the music hisself almost, when I was sad, I have a music of him. when I was cheerful. I have much of his music. So. only not sad sound. only not powerful. He have many kind of sound. So I like him.

Appendix 3: Introducing Yourself to a Pen Pal

Look at the letter below.

June 14, 2005

Dear Alan. How are you?

My name is Takaaki Jimbo. I'm a university student in Japan. I love my classes, but I'm very busy. I get up at 6:30 a.m. and eat breakfast, then I shave, have a cup of coffee and read the newspaper. I leave my house at about 8:00 and drive to school. I get there at 8:30 and talk with my friends. I have classes from 9:10 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. everyday. On Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, I work at a convenience store for a few hours, then I go home and eat dinner. I study Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings, and on weekends. I like to play basketball on weekends, if I have time. How about you?

You are going to write a letter to a pen pal in the United States. His name is Alan. Introduce yourself by answering these questions:

What do you do? Are you a student? Do you like your classes? What's your favourite class? Do you have a part-time job? Where do you work? Describe your daily routine. What do you do in the morning? What do you do in the afternoon? What do you do in the evening? What do you do on weekends?

Ex. 1)

I'm a university student. My classes are soso. My favorite class is English. I get up at 7:00 a.m. and eat breakfast, then I brush, have a cup of milk and watch the TV. I leave my house about 8:00 and train to school. I get here

about 9:30 and talk with my friends. Everyday after school. I study at rivelry for a few hours, then I go home and eat dinner. And, on weekends. I work at supar market.

Ex. 2)

Dear Alan. How are you?

I'm a university student. I like my classes. I get up at 9:00 a.m. and eat breakfast. Then I washing face and brashing tooth. I leave my house at about 10:35. I have classes from 10:45 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. everyday. After school, I sametimes go my friends house to play TV game. I sametimes study homework evening.

That's all.

Appendix 4: Prices in Japan

Write another letter to your pen pal Alan in the United States. Tell him about prices in Japan versus the United States.

Look at part 11 on page 20 of the textbook (Interchange 1 — Third Ed.). Complete the chart then compare prices in Japan with prices in the U.S.

Many things are more expensive in my country than in the United States. For example, a newspaper costs one dollar at home. In the U.S. it's cheaper. It's only 75 cents. A cup of coffee costs...

Ex. 1)

A newspaper is 75 cents in the U.S.

A newspaper is 100 yen in Japan.

U.S. newspaper is more cheaper than Japan's newspaper.

Japan's CD is 3000 yen

U.S. CD is 7 dollars and 95 cents

Japan CD is more expensiver than U.S.

Ex. 2)

Many things are more expensive in my country than in the United States. For example, a newspaper costs one dollar at home U.S. , it's cheaper. It's only 75 cents. A cup of coffee costs one dollar at home. In the U.S. it's same. It's one dollar. A CD costs ereven dollars at home. In the U.S. it's more expensive thum. It's seventeen ninety-nine dollars. A paperback book costs six dollers at home. In the U.S. it's more expensive than. It's seven ninety-five dollars.
