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Quinn, Brian
Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

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By Brian Quinn

Introduction

It is well known that Japanese students come to the university often with little or no English speaking ability. What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that most have never developed any competency in writing coherent English , either. This phenomenon may, in part, be partially attributed to cultural differences between the Japanese education system and that of most western nations. Writing skills in Japanese students' own native language, for the most part, remain thoroughly undeveloped due to the rigors and exigencies of the all pervasive entrance examination system. This aspect is even more prominently encountered when dealing with students at prestigious national universities where the vast majority of the students major in the sciences rather than in the humanities, and therefore have not only written very little in their secondary school days, but have usually also read very few books as well. In stark contrast, the majority of French, German, Dutch or Russian students have normally mastered many of the skills necessary for good writing in their mother tongue by the time they enter the university. As a result, the native English instructor at a European university can simply expect his students to already understand many

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of the essential concepts of good writing and almost immediately begin to concentrate on accuracy and style when designing a syllabus. In Japan, however, on the secondary school level, students have little experience either in expressing their own opinions about a wide range of subjects or in writing creatively. Therefore, the native English writing instructor needs to carefully adapt his strategies and objectives to better meet the needs of Japanese university students.

Following the popular trend in the 1980's to stress the importance of improving the speaking skills and communicative competence of students in Japan, there has recently been renewed attention placed on the need to help improve the writing ability of Japanese university students, particularly for those non-English major students who will, with ever growing frequency, sometime in the future need to possess at least rudimentary English writing skills when entering the workforce after graduation. As a consequence, an ever increasing number of native English instructors are today being asked to teach writing courses in addition to the more traditional speaking skills courses.

In addition to the fact that most Japanese students are poor writers in their own language when they enter a university, numerous other obstacles also exist which have to be overcome, or at least circumvented, by the teacher. First of all, such first or second year classes normally meet only once a week for 90 minutes, and frequently such a course at national universities will last for just one semester with no chance of continuation, and thus result in a total of only 12 or 13 meetings in all. Besides the lack of sufficient of contact between the

teacher and his students, the class size presents, perhaps, the most seemingly insurmountable challenge to the native English writing instructors in Japan. Class size may hover at around 50 or 60 students per class and will almost never be less than 30 students per class. Such writing classes in the West will often number 10 or 12 students. Unfortunately, university writing classes for 10 to 15 highly motivated students are unheard of in present day Japan. While such large classes can be managed rather easily in conversation oriented classes by utilizing pair and group work exercises, the staggering prospect of having to correct over 50 compositions on a weekly basis, for each writing class, and, at the same time, somehow still maintaining one's sanity remains a daunting task.

Fluency Before Accuracy

Many composition classes consist of students who dutifully write sentences, paragraphs, and eventually even short essays as assigned by the teacher or according to the instructions in a given textbook. Thereafter, the teacher conscientiously monitors the grammatical accuracy of the final product. Although the students do indeed get numerous opportunities to describe stereos, insects, or animal migration in northern Siberia, the result of such classes is often an uninspired atmosphere in which, instead of learning to write and express themselves more fully, the students merely attempt to write grammatically correct sentences and avoid the teacher's red pen while hardly developing any ability to write either imaginatively, stylistically or with any inspiration. Worst of all, the vast majority of students learn to loathe the act of composition itself and fre-

quently come away from such a course convinced that they will never be good writers in English, and instead of improving their confidence, such courses, more often than not, only serve to demoralize students and foster an even deeper dislike for English than they may have had before the course began.

For any teacher about to teach a writing course it is important to comprehend the fact that there should be basically two goals of any composition class; namely, accuracy and fluency. Native Japanese instructors generally tend to stress the importance of correctness (accuracy), however, Houser has quite appropriately noted that: " Contrary to conventional 'wisdom' concerning the teaching of composition, accuracy does ***not*** proceed fluency, yet most writing textbooks begin by emphasizing the construction of sentences and paragraphs as a prelude to fluid writing. Nothing could be further from the needs of the composition student. The unrealistic imposition of grammar and punctuation, of sentence and paragraph construction amount to unnecessary — and in most cases insurmountable – obstacles for the beginning writer." (Houser, p. 7)
In line with this concept, the most important factor for improving one's writing skills is therefore practice. Thus, through the encouragement of extensive practice in writing and unobtrusive teacher guidance, students have a much better opportunity to improve as writers. It is paramount that the students develop a good rapport and not fear the writing instructor, and most importantly, not be afraid of making errors. Teachers should guide the students to self-expression in English and not merely make wholesale corrections, most of which will soon be forgotten by the students anyway. The primary goal of the instructor at this

stage for beginning writers should be to encourage and cultivate their ability to express themselves and not allow a fear of errors to impede their writing progress.

It is also particularly important that the native English teacher avoid the tendency to 'teach' writing and instead allow the student to learn by doing rather than be taught. If a friendly atmosphere can be successfully created, then such a writing class can also provide the students the rare chance to develop an increased sense of awareness as well as strengthen their self-confidence and even eventually help them potentially reach a clearer understanding of life. This hidden agenda can thus become a kind of 'cross-cultural bonus' to such a class of teenage students, who will usually only have this one chance to be taught by a non-Japanese throughout their entire four years of university life. This second purpose of such a writing class is extremely important in order to help today's Japanese students also grow as human beings. Kelly has recently described the significance of this other role in more detail: " Recognizing the limits of traditional pedagogy, a growing number of language professionals are turning to methods that combine language training with personal development, especially activities that allow creative interaction with the environment and that stimulate self-expression. Two educational trends in particular seem to be underway: allowing students to learn rather than be taught, and an increased awareness that every action has an impact on learning. If a university is truly a time when students must develop self-confidence, individuality, and a clearer understanding of life, then a focus on language, and a teacher-dominated, lecture-test approach

might be counterproductive. Instead of instructors, Japanese college students need gardeners who will fertilize them with questions, anecdotes, ideas, and understanding, but as much as possible let them grow on their own." (Kelly, p. 187) Therefore, by asking students to write on subjects that have direct relevance to their lives, the native English writing instructor has the chance to help expand their minds as well as improve their writing ability.

Course Design

With the previously stated limitations of the weekly class meetings, it is essential that the writing instructor utilize the class time as efficiently as possible in such a course. One of the most critical factors in the eventual success or failure of a writing class is selecting topics and subjects to eventually be written about that are both relevant and of interest to the students. When such courses are taught by a native English speaker , then it is also important to take advantage of the Japanese students' great interest in things foreign and exploit this aspect in order to elicit a wealth of responses on various cross-cultural topics which allow students to both express their point of view as well as respond to different perspectives. If the teacher can carefully blend a menu of topics to take advantage of the students' natural curiosity, he can greatly increase the motivation of the students in responding to class discussions and written assignments.

Range of Topics

One of the unfortunate realities of most college level writing classes in Japan is the fact that most writing textbooks are both boring and uninspiring to the students. Such books are almost universally despised by the students and frequently only offer narrowly defined subject areas such as writing about science, technology, famous people, or even history. Few students will ever really be inspired by such course themes.

It is important when designing a syllabus that the teacher carefully combine a range of topics that are both interesting and challenging to the students. Japanese students tend to be keenly interested in themselves and the immediate world that surrounds them and the teacher should not hesitate to take advantage of this almost universal phenomenon.

The topics which frequently elicit the best written responses from students can be categorized into two main groups consisting of subjects on **'lifestyles'** and those on **'Japan and the world.'** Some of the topics on lifestyles that have proven to be highly popular among students include: student life, clubs, movies, dating, family life, sports, part-time jobs, marriage, foreign study, homes, careers, health, television, parties, shopping, cars and driving, fashion, travel and food. On the other hand, more difficult topics which give the students a chance to think and express their opinions (often for the first time in their lives) about their relation to the world as human beings are such themes as: working abroad, trade friction, Japan bashing, the decline of America, Japanese economic policy, Japan and World War II, whaling, liberalization of rice imports, the high value

of the yen, the U.S. Japan Security Treaty, women's rights, bullying, individualism, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, democracy, current events, and so on.

In the first few weeks such a course should concentrate on lifestyle topics which require less thinking on the part of the students. However, as the course progresses, the teacher should not be afraid to tackle more difficult topics in order to increase the students awareness of the world around them. The teacher is, of course, free to express his opinions on such topics during the class time, but the goal of the course is to have the students truly evaluate such topics and express their own opinions on the topic at hand, and not merely mimic the opinion of the teacher. At the beginning of such a course, the teacher may find as many as 20 or 30% of the students simply repeat what was written in the class text. Such students should gently be told what is expected of them and be allowed to rewrite the assignment without penalty. For the more difficult subjects, not only will many students have difficulty expressing their opinions at first, but many will have never even thought about such issues. However, as Japan continues to internationalize and increase its economic and political relations with an ever growing number of nations, Japan can no long afford to allow its best and brightest to leave the university essentially without any opinion at all regarding many of the vital issues facing mankind today. By giving students the chance to be exposed to different points of view, through various readings on the chosen topics, and then encouraging the students to express themselves freely and uninhibitedly, many teachers will be surprised to find that Japanese students are indeed quite capable of thinking both carefully and deeply about a

myriad of complex social, historical, political and environmental problems. Thus, not to challenge them with such an opportunity at this vitally important juncture in their mental development is a tragic waste.

The Need for Structure

Japanese students who enter national universities have mastered immense amounts of knowledge and are highly disciplined, however, they are also often quite immature by western standards. The university is thus a time for them to hone up on their social skills, gain some degree of independence and also develop a broader view of the world. However, one fact that cannot be ignored by the writing instructor is the fact that the majority of students lack self-initiative as a result of the self-sacrifice and high degree of compliance they so carefully developed in order to survive high-school and pass the rigorous entrance examinations. Therefore, when giving writing assignments to the students a series of 4 or 5 specific and related essay type questions will almost always elicit far better results, and more logically organized and thoroughly expressed ideas, than merely assigning open-ended essays. Kelly also makes a similar comment in this regard: "As anyone who has worked with such students will attest, they are inept at tasks not explicitly defined, and often worse than inept -- incapable of even starting." (Kelly, p. 180). The major reason for the students' inability is perhaps due to the all pervasive fear of making errors, which is an important aspect of Japan's face-saving value system.

One popular method to have students increase their writing skills is by ex-

tensive journal keeping. This is where the students keep a journal throughout the course and they are usually graded on strictly a quantitative basis, with, for example, 50 pages receiving an 'A', 30 pages a "B', and so on. However, for the above stated reasons, such journals often loose their sense of purpose and, as a result, the students do not develop the logical train of thought necessary to become better writers. It is therefore more desirable to have the students follow the same quantitative approach to the week's assignment at hand. Thus, in the same manner, at the beginning of the course, the teacher should show the students examples of a voluminous and thoroughly written assignment, which would receive an 'A' while a paper with only one sentence responses would receive a 'D', and so on. Through the use of such graphic demonstration, usually within about 2 or 3 classes the students are quickly able to clearly grasp what is expected of them by the teacher.

Sample Lesson Plan

An overview of a systematic lesson plan that has proven to work well within the constraints of the Japanese university 90 minute weekly class tradition is as follows:

1) **Introduction of topic** **10 to 15 minutes**
2) **Related reading** **approx 30 minutes**
3) **Student writing** **approx 15 minutes**
4) **Open discussion** **20 to 25 minutes**
5) **Homework assignment** **approx 5 minutes**

Each student is expected to devote from 30 minutes to 1 hour in carefully completing the written homework assignment.

Introduction of Topic

Each topic should be briefly introduced to the class by the teacher and the class should slowly prepare to deal with the topic by a series of 'opening questions' on the topic of the day and are most effectively covered by the students in pairs. The teacher then asks a number of students for some model responses and then moves on to the next question. For example, when dealing with the topic of **'part-time jobs'** some potentially ice-breaking questions could be: What is a part-time job? Have you ever had one? What was it? How much did you earn? What do you think is a good part-time job? A bad one? What are some advantages of part-time jobs? disadvantages? Are they good for high-school students? What would be your ideal part-time job? Such questions are non-threatening and a lot of fun for the students to ask both among themselves and of the teacher. They also help introduce some of the patterns to later be used in the reading and writing exercises. The teacher should be careful, however, not to spend too much time on this part of the lesson and save some time and energy for the open discussion section later in the lesson.

Related Reading

There are numerous textbooks available with interesting topics centered on student life in Japan as well as other books with readings on more global ques-

tions for the youth of Japan today. I personally use both my own compilation of short observations on various topics of interest as well as other carefully selected books. In a recent semester, I taught 5 writing classes using my own readings in one class, and 4 different textbooks for the other 4 classes after adapting the materials to the course objectives. The readings should neither be too brief, nor too long to be comfortably covered in the 30 minute allotted time span. In addition, as far as possible, all difficult vocabulary items should be annotated whenever possible. During the reading portion, teacher anecdotes and comments will help the students gain a broader perspective of the topic at hand.

The teacher should call randomly on the student to read the passage sentence by sentence. After finishing, if the text is recorded, the text may be played on tape or read by the teacher, with books closed, in order to provide listening practice and to also reinforce some of the newly encountered structures and vocabulary.

Student In-class Writing

Before each class the teacher needs to prepare two sheets for each student. One is a work sheet for class use while the other is the day's homework assignment. The worksheet should have 3 or 4 brief questions either about the reading or to ask for students opinions about factors related to the topic of the day. A text which I composed on 'part-time' jobs compares their popularity between Japan and the U.S.A. Some typical follow-up questions for this part of the lesson would be: What are some differences between part-time jobs in the U.S. and Japan? Do you agree that it is good for American high-school students to work

part-time? What are some dangers of part-time jobs? What are the best part-time jobs in Japan? the U.S.? Why? While the students write out their answers dictionary use is **not** permitted. The object is to write freely within their own limited vocabulary. The teacher's role is to circulate around the room to monitor their progress and help students who might be stuck on a particular question or suggest a simple strategy to answer a question or express an opinion.

The purpose of such writing in class is to allow the students to practice writing for speed and under a time limit. Such writing also helps consolidate the students' own feelings and reactions to the text and the topic. Finally, in-class writing helps the students to organize their ideas, even if only very loosely, which will later greatly help them to express themselves during the ensuing open discussion.

Open Discussion

After the students have had a sufficient amount of time to respond on paper to the text related questions. Then the class should move on to the next part of the class and discuss a broad range of topics related either directly or only indirectly to the day's general topic. Once again, if the topic were on 'part-time jobs', now the class would enter an open discussion led by the teacher and conducted primarily in pairs to now activate all that had been learned and practiced up to this point. This can be a time for fun and enjoyment as the teacher asks students if they would like to work part-time: working as a tutor for a gangster's child? teaching Japanese to a rich American businessman? doing manual labor?

passing out tissues at Shinjuku station? and so on? Depending on the topic, such open discussions can be either light hearted or serious. However, the goal is always the same, with the teacher trying to elicit honest responses from the students.

Homework Assignment

Finally, at the end of the class the homework assignment is passed out. This should normally consist of 4 or 5 opinion-type questions spaced out on an A4 sized sheet of paper. This homework should never be just passed out as an afterthought, but instead the teacher should take around 5 minutes to read each question carefully to the class and suggest how the students might go about answering each question. Finally, after going over each question one by one the teacher should ask if there are any questions regarding the assignment. From the outset of the course the supreme importance of the written assignment should be continually stressed, while its key role in determining the final grade should also be regularly mentioned. The most effective way to ensue that the students take the written assignment seriously is to promptly return each homework assignment at the beginning of each class. In the same manner, all homework should also be collected by the students at the start of each class so that no student attempts to finish his homework during the class itself. In order to be fair to the students who diligently do the assigned work, no late homework can ever be accepted (unless for valid medical reasons). If a student must be absent from a class due to athletic or club duties he is expected to give his com-

pleted assignment to another class member to hand in for him.

As mentioned earlier, the students are expected to complete the homework in a thorough manner. However, much to the surprise of many a teacher, numerous otherwise shy or reticent students find such assignments offer them an outlet for a type of self-therapy and thus use these assignments to express their feelings and experiences with unparalleled energy and enthusiasm. For this reason, students should be encouraged to write on the back of the paper if need be. Invariably, the great majority of students show a dramatic improvement within the course of about 10 weeks and, almost without fail, most students come to realize that writing in English is not as difficult as they may once have thought.

Correction

Since the primary goal of such a writing class is to give the students an opportunity to write extensively, the most important role of the teacher when reading the students' assignments is that of positive reinforcement. If the ideas are unclear, then the teacher should state so. If the ideas are humorous and funny, the teacher too should applaud the student for his wit. If a student's logical argument is found to be lacking then the teacher can also guide the student to a more logical conclusion. However, since the object is to increase fluency, throughout the correction phase, the teacher should act as a cheerleader and urge the student on to ever greater modes of expression. Grammatical corrections should be kept to a minimum while the teacher limits his comments to primarily offer suggestions as to how better express a particular idea.

If such a course were to continue for a full year or even two, then once a certain level of fluency has been achieved, then the students would be ready to move on to more traditional essay constructions and could concentrate on more complex writing techniques. However, except perhaps for English majors, there are seldom such possibilities within the framework of the present English language curriculum at most Japanese national universities.

Testing

Since the most important aspect of such writing classes is the weekly extensive writing practice, thus the weekly written assignments should have the greatest weight when determining the final grades. However, a final exam in the form of an expanded version of the weekly 15 minute in-class writing worksheet is a good measure of the progress the students should have been able to make throughout the course in developing strategies to express themselves. The 50-minute to 1-hour test format is ideal because it is equivalent to the time that the students are expected to devote to the weekly written assignments. Dictionaries are not allowed during the test because grammatical and spelling accuracy are not the most essential factors. Instead, the teacher is looking to see if the students have developed the ability to express their ideas clearly and thoroughly in the time allotted. The final grade should normally be weighted as follows:

Weekly assignments	**50%**
Class participation	**25%**
Final exam	**25%**

These percentages should also be clearly explained to the students at the first meeting and preferably be passed out to them on a printed course outline sheet so as to avoid any misunderstandings that might arise later.

Conclusion

Writing is a dynamic activity that takes a lot of stamina and style. The process of writing itself can often lead to self-discovery. Even the recent winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature, Kenzaburo Oe, noted that he came to realize many ambiguous things about his own feelings for Japan for the first time, only when he finally sat down to compose his eloquently written acceptance speech. It is for these great opportunities of self-expression and self-reflection that we should encourage our students to write. It remains harshly ironic, however, that these same values which most teachers almost universally esteem in good writers are rarely conveyed to their students in the composition classroom. It is simply inappropriate to stress English grammar and writing mechanics at the Freshman university level in Japan. If the students are encouraged to write while stressing the importance of fluency and quantity over grammatical accuracy, then the vast majority of students will almost certainly be able to increase both their confidence and the ability to write in English. New native English writing instructors in Japan should first familiarize themselves with the background of the Japanese education system and not expect more from the students than should be expected based on the Japanese secondary school

upbringing. The immediate focus of attention on writing mechanics is thus more often counterproductive than not and, as a result, the promulgation of such courses will only continue to contribute to the Japanese students' general distaste for English and add to their overall lack of confidence in ever being able to communicate successfully in a foreign language. However, if the native English writing instructor is able to cultivate a friendly, non-threatening environment, then most Japanese students will invariably thrive.

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