# A Study of Japanese University Students Learning English Academic Writing

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## Introduction

In an attempt to better understand the issues faced by students of English composition in a Japanese university, several student volunteers were observed and interviewed over the year of their course (April 2007 – February 2008). Based on the data collected with two students in particular, it seems clear that beyond basic language structure and organization issues, these students faced the greatest challenge when it came to developing critical argument and establishing writer identity. For the purposes of this paper, a background literature review is provided, followed by a brief description of the research context. A narrative discussion of some preliminary findings in the data with these two students follows. Finally, suggestions for addressing these issues in a university EFL writing classroom are given.

## Background

In Japanese EFL education, writing is the most problematic and neglected area of English language education [Davies 1999]. A lack of ability in composing extended written text, developing critical argument and establishing 'voice' in English academic writing has been recognised as significant academic obstacles for many Japanese students who go on to do postgraduate studies in English-medium universities overseas [Stapleton 2001, Stapleton 2002]. This has led to more consideration being given to the second language (L2) writer's socio-political perspective and identity [Casanave 2003].  In order to help people learn how to negotiate their identities through writing it is necessary to build the teaching of writing around writing tasks with real communicative purposes for real readers [Casanave 2002]. The task that fits this description readily and presents students the challenge of developing their skills is developing critical argument in essay writing. For Japanese EFL student writers, the task of developing a critical argument places them in an unfamiliar, foreign socio-cultural and socio-political context.

Critical argument is the key element of critical thinking. As a *critical* argument it is built on reasons, supported by evidence; otherwise an unsupported argument is only an opinion [Browne & Keely 1994]. Being critical means going beyond the factual level of writing (describing and/or explaining how things *are*) and expanding it into the analytical level (interpreting, evaluating or arguing how things should be *understood*) [Martin & Peters 1985]. The essential elements of argumentative writing include a claim, supporting reasons, evidence or proof, and a refutation of the claim [Browne & Keely 1994]. In expanding an argument with critical thinking, a further element is applied, what Stapleton [2001] describes as *fallacies*, which consider the variety of errors made in analysis of the argument based on logic or myth. Although fallacies cannot necessarily be standardised, since a reader will judge a text based on her/his own perspective, that judgement is made within a universally accepted standard for evaluating arguments [see Siegel 1997].

In Stapleton's [2001] study on writing and the critical thinking abilities of Japanese university students, it was found that the students were able to develop clearer critical arguments on topics that were more familiar such as Japan's import of rice from the US. The students were able to develop

more appropriate and coherent arguments and counter-arguments and were able to use evidence more effectively. Although it appears that it was the familiarity of topics rather than culture that was the tool for enhancing students' application of critical thinking [see Casanave 2005], the result was that the students managed to find their own voice and think critically about an argument topic.

Voice or *writer identity* is that element in argumentative writing that allows writers to assert their own claim on a topic. There is debate as to whether or not writer identity should be addressed in an EFL writing classroom [see Matsuda 2001, Stapleton 2002]. In 2001, Matsuda's *Voice in Japanese Discourse* described how 'divergent aspects' in writing practices, such as voice, have been neglected. In 2002, Stapleton's *Critiquing voice as a viable pedagogical tool in L2 writing* explains how too much emphasis is being given to voice, that students need to focus more specifically on argument. Matsuda's study emphasises that voice is not exclusively associated to individualism, nor is it an entirely foreign concept to cultures (like Japan) that stress collectivism over individualism. His conclusion that Japanese writers construct voice differently in Japanese than in English suggests that this is a point worth exploring in an EFL writing classroom, in order to isolate and utilise the existing strategies of establishing voice in Japanese writing, and to build on those strategies and adjust them for English writing. Stapleton's study argues that separating particular elements of voice, as what Matsuda described, is problematic because it has the potential to lead students to be "more concerned with identity than ideas" [p. 187].

*Socio-cultural inquiry*

Central to this study is the concept that writing is a communicative act, situated in a social, cultural setting [see Rinnert & Kobayashi 2001, Casanave 2003]. This socio-cultural environment impacts heavily on students' exposure to critical writing as well as their motivation to learn it. It is the intention of this study to use the students', teachers' and researcher's socio-cultural '*positionality*' (see next paragraph) in order to provide a broader perspective in drawing its conclusions. Although this approach has been considered by some to be limited by conflicts of socio-cultural positions (in this case Western teachers and researcher versus Japanese students), this study instead considers these differences as advantageous to the outcomes, in that it is *informed* by this difference, rather than limited by it [see McKinley 2005 for discussion].

'Positionality' is crucial to the understanding of how meaning is problematised in such a research project. It is how one identifies oneself in terms of the sense of where and to what s/he *belongs* or does not belong, and the social relations that are affected by this [Anthias, 2002]. The concept of positionality from an objectivist/positivist perspective (that all reality is objective and external to the mind and that knowledge is reliably based on observed objects and events) has the potential of invalidating a research project [Jaffe & Miller, 1994]. Although from a constructionist standpoint (to discover the ways that individuals and groups create their perceived reality) these concepts can rather be seen to *inform* it [Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Flowerdew, 2005]. The positionality of a Western researcher and native user of the English language is quite different to the students' positionality as Japanese learners attempting to cross cultures and display critical thinking in their writing of English, a foreign language. Culture and language barriers need to be taken into consideration and recognition of these barriers as potential limitations of this research project is essential. Also, the positionality as a Western teacher is one of challenging students and questioning what is commonly accepted, which are key aspects of developing critical thinking [Stapleton 2002].

**The Study: Participants and Setting**

*Teachers* The teacher involved in this study was teaching English composition in the English Department at a Japanese university in 2007. The teacher was a native Japanese speaker, but used both English and Japanese in the classroom. The primary language of instruction was English, which did not present any particular problems as the instructor has ten years of university experience in the US. According to Neuman [2003], the case study is the study of a real-life context, and thus the increasing use of non-native overseas-trained teachers of English in Japanese universities needs to be acknowledged and embraced in this study.

*Students* The two students in this study were native speaking Japanese second-year undergraduate students enrolled in the same English Composition course for 2007. They had different backgrounds and experience with writing; one had spent a significant amount of time overseas and had taken writing courses in English, while the other had limited overseas experience and no previous writing courses taught in English.

*Setting* The study was conducted at a small, private, highly selective university in central Tokyo. The students are accepted into the university's highly reputable English department in different ways. There is a standard entrance examination for those students graduating from Japanese high schools, and special examinations for students graduating from international schools in Japan or English-medium schools overseas. Students are required to take two years of once-per-week English composition courses. There is no set curriculum, objective or goals for these courses. Teachers are completely autonomous in their design and conduct of the courses.

**Research Methods & Preliminary findings**

This section will describe the observation and interview data collection, and provide some preliminary analysis of the findings.

*Observations*

The observations made were generally unobtrusive, but not passive, classroom observations. This approach is most appropriate in the exploratory phase of a study to find out what is actually happening in a particular situation [Robson 2002], in this case an EFL writing classroom. The observations were made once a month. The advantage of conducting observations is that the researcher is able to watch and record (note form – in a field journal) the teachers' and students' use of class time in relation to the discussion of and practise with students' writing skills. The observation schedule was not fixed in advance, but rather decided according to those lessons that should contain more of what this study is aiming to observe. In order to prevent teachers from teaching to my research interests, the study was not described explicitly before observations. All observations were audio recorded.

Through a flexible ethnographic approach, data was collected by focusing on common behaviours and events. Ethnography does not always involve observations, but for this study observations were essential in order to explore specific issues. To get deep enough into an understanding of the specific issues, anthropologists recommend that the ethnographic researcher needs to employ the method of *participant observation*, in which the researcher participates him or herself in the observed experience, rather than at a distance. More than just a method, participant observation is best described by Atkinson and Hammersley [1995, p.249] as a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers. As a participant observer the researcher should be able to come to understand and apply perspective, description, contextualism, process, flexible research designs and avoiding early use of theories and concepts [Silverman 2001]. During observations, although the

researcher was for the most part unobtrusive, there was some occasional participation in order to create a more natural environment, but not so much as to skew data of the observed processes. This concept is referred to as "role making" as opposed to "role taking" in an attempt to establish a situational identity based on "membership" rather than passive observation [see Angrosino & Mays de Perez in Denzin & Lincoln 2003, p. 115]. During the observations, some questions rose that were later brought up in the interviews.

*Interviews*

Through semi-structured interviews, as a flexible and adaptable data collection method, the researcher is able to ask the participants directly about their perceptions of, for my study, teaching or learning writing. Data was gathered through active interviewing with participants. The interviews were semi-structured with several questions prepared, and they were flexible to allow me to respond as an active listener [see Kaufman 1994] with appropriate and valuable follow-up probe questions. The process of active interviewing allows themes to develop from ideas grounded in the informants as well as ideas generated in the interviews [Holstein & Gubrium 1995]. Active interviewing is a theoretical position that takes into consideration that the topic of study forms the methodologies, and the methodologies ultimately form the potential of the phenomenon. In much the same way, the phenomenon could also shape the methodologies [Silverman 2001]. Therefore active interviewing is the most appropriate approach to studies in which theory is to be generated. All interviews with students and most interviews with teachers were recorded.

 "The interview is …a conversation with a purpose." It is "a flexible and adaptable way of finding things out" [Robson 2002, p.228].

Certainly the first step in conducting research is to express concisely a specific research problem with commensurate research questions [Minichiello et al 1990]. The problem was general but the questions were more focused and specifically related to the phenomenon [Strauss & Corbin 1990]. My interviews were semi-structured with questions moving from general to specific. Informants were encouraged to expand on their responses as much as possible. The focus on the specific areas of critical argument and writer identity were not brought up if the informant did not do so her/himself.

*Initial data collection questions with students (semi-structured, not all questions were asked to every participant):*

- What kind of writing assignments have you experienced so far? (journal, transcription, argument or analysis, report, research paper including literature review, others)

- How was it (one of the writing assignments) organised?

- Describe the process you go through in preparing for writing an essay.

- What are your criteria for good English writing?

- How has your writing skills development at this university helped you?

*Initial data collection questions with the teacher:*

- What is your experience with teaching English writing?

- What is your opinion of the fact that there is no current curriculum for writing skills development in this department?

- Do you feel the emphasis on writing is sufficient? Why/why not?

- What outcomes are students expected to obtain in your writing course? What particular skills do you feel need to be emphasised in writing?

For the purposes of this paper, interview data from student participants "Naho" and "Aya" were given some preliminary analysis, and a few comments from their teacher that relate to the issues they raised in their interviews have taken into consideration. It was found that Casanave's *writing game strategies* served as an appropriate analytical framework, as it takes into consideration issues related both to critical argument and writer identity. The six writing *game strategies* [Casanave 2002, pp. 61-74] are:

1) *Interaction with texts* – Does the writer engage in *conversation* with authors? Do they challenge or evaluate authors?

2) *Blending voices* – Does the writer merge her/his own voice with authors'? Does s/he simply take the authors' voices? Does s/he fail to bring authors' voices into the text?

3) *Owning research experiences and telling a good story from them* – Does the writer manage to present her or himself in the text through a high level of familiarity with the subject matter?

4) *Speaking with authority* – Does the writer take a strong critical stance on the subject matter?

5) *Learning to love writing* – Does the writer show a level of fluency relative to the readings? Is it a long piece of writing?

6) *Making the paper look right* – Does the text fit the prescribed organization and structure as developed in their writing classes?

*Case Study: Aya.* This student came into the class with a fairly standard background of Japanese schooling, with some experience overseas, giving her an upper-intermediate proficiency level, and the interest in studying English. Although she had very limited experience with writing before entering university, she was an intellectually curious student who enjoyed the challenges of writing in English.

Aya's issue of ownership related quite clearly to her regular comments about at first, a lack of familiarity with the topics used in class and later, a lack of familiarity by her peers with the topic she chose for her research paper.

In April, Aya explained, "I think it's very important to have a class teaching you the basic knowledge of English writing. If it's a very advanced class and you understand it – but if you don't understand the basic idea of the paragraph or – you can't be advanced… I don't know what I'm saying." It seemed clear that she had very basic expectations of the class, and was otherwise a bit unsure of what to expect.

By May Aya had this to say about the course textbook: "Well, I think I don't know – it was too Japanese thinking textbook. Well, he's teaching us lessons in English but the textbook - the author is Japanese … So Japanese language and English language is very different and I – Maybe the

author was Japanese-thinking man." She was satisfied with the basic lessons on paragraph work, and was starting to consider her position on "being critical" – something the teacher had introduced as a fundamental element to the class.

As witnessed in the classroom observations, the teacher had indeed encouraged the students to be critical in class. This led to something some students interpreted as an open forum for criticism. The teacher had this to say about it: "Maybe because of a lack of confidence, the students seem to be taking control… they are challenging the way the textbook presents information, suggesting it is insufficient or misleading…" Aya felt rather unsure about her position on all of this. Our conversation shifted a bit:

Aya: "Our class is very difficult class because A** and S** – they were half native and some have never been abroad for long time.  And Y**, me and N** has only been abroad for a year.  It doesn't make us half native, does it?"

Jim: *"So you feel more Japanese…"*

Aya: "I feel somewhere in the middle, always."

Aya felt a divide between her and the other students she considered to be more fluent, and therefore more critical. Part of the concern for her was ownership of ideas, since she had never been to the US, where her teacher and some classmates had spent a considerable number of years. For her writing task, she commented, "So I think, is it possible to do the essay up to his expectation?  The only thing I've got is assertion in my essay – so far. I think I'm going to use that disabled Barbie as my evidence of representing the social problems.  The problem is I don't know the background. I've never been to America and I don't know anyone from America."

By the end of the first semester, Aya knew she was only producing satisfactory work. She commented, "So, like I – I write my essay in English in Japanese style, so that's why it's not really good.  And I know that, but I – still can't figure out how to get out it.  And I'm kind of worried if I'm gonna do it again this semester because that's – I really don't want to do it. I really wanted more feedback from Mr ***, not from friends."

For Aya's big writing task – an argumentative research paper - in addition to concern about the ownership of ideas, Aya was also concerned about the large amount of peer-evaluation that had been introduced in the class – a practice Aya was not overly comfortable or familiar with. She commented, "It – oh, they're kind of thinking in the way – a way Western people does. So, it kind of has gap between me and them. So this is – it doesn't really help me – like I said before, it's kind of unsolvable problem."

Aya had chosen the wearing of a veil by Islamic women as her topic, because she felt she could provide a non-Western perspective on the topic. Unfortunately, her classmates seemed unable to attain the same perspective. They insisted it would be better for her to shift her perspective to a more Western one. She commented, "Then because I – or if I was just studying what – with Western methods. It would be really easy, and it would be really helpful.  I could just criticize of her wearing a veil. And argue her right because she's in England.  Why don't you adjust?  You know, I did." It became clear Aya was not willing to risk being disconnected from her writing. She commented, "It's really –it would be really unfair of me to write in a – way they suggest me to write."

*Case study: Naho.* This student came into university after having spent four years in the US. Her advanced level of proficiency and extensive academic writing experience led her to be one of he more capable students in the class. However, her expectations of the course were low. This changed as she discovered the depth of the tasks presented to her by her teacher.

Naho's concern with enjoyment seemed very strongly related to her ability to successfully argue and support her point – something she did not initially consider part of an English composition class.

In April, Naho had this to say about her expectations: "Well, I want to learn the grammar in more of a like interesting way. That we can all get involved. Because last year… Yeah, people weren't interested in it. Like I want to know like if there are interesting ways that we can learn those difficult things… and building up vocabulary probably… And like – well not just a composition class." In her first year, Naho's composition class was very basic, requiring nothing beyond the paragraph level – something very frustrating for a fairly advanced writer. But she had no choice since the department offered no placement test for writing, or any opportunity to show her ability to write.

By May, Naho's attitude changed a bit: "The content is, well half of the time I know the stuff we're doing already because I've learned it but sometimes I find things that are new to me." So she was trying to be more positive, but by June, she had this to say: "We're just like writing about nothing… just exercise, you know. We're doing the same thing but it doesn't have the meaning in that writing so that's why it's so boring."

Perhaps as some kind of "survival intellectual tactic", Naho began to give consideration to how she could find enjoyment in her class. She decided to focus on critical questioning, and in-class discussions as motivating – and these activities stimulated deeper thought about her writing class. At the start of the second semester, Naho had this to say: "We had a lot of chances to read so I think it improved my skill of reading and discussing about that topic. Mr. *** always like makes us speak in class so I think that was good because I like to have interaction among the classmates so I think that was really good… I'd like to see, do more discussions in class. I think it was very – I like to listen to other people's opinions."

In contrast to Aya's feelings about the peer evaluation, Naho was very positive. She commented, *"Well some people commented on like the construction of my outline or like some people said what I wrote in the thesis is not really covered in the body so like you have to follow your thesis. Some people just were like, Go for it."* All of this seemed to work very well for Naho, and she was able to decipher useful comments from the simply encouraging ones.

As for Casanave's *writing game strategies*, Aya's ongoing dilemma seemed very much related to game strategy #3 (*Owning research experiences and telling a good story from them*). She felt lost between cultures and languages, at odds with her peers and occasionally with herself. In the end she was overwhelmed and had wished she had chosen an easier topic to write about.

Naho's comments seemed to relate strongly to game strategy #5 (*Learning to love writing*). Her feelings about university writing had basically been numbed by her experience in her first year, but she felt inspired by the organization of this class, and ultimately prevailed and was highly successful with her research paper.

**Conclusion and suggestions for EFL writing classes**

The research question for this study was: *Do students recognize critical argument and writer identity as important to their advanced writing education?* It seems clear that both elements may not be central for every student, but that it is possible that at lest one of these elements may be a considerable factor in the student's ability to succeed in the writing class.

Curriculum developers and teachers can benefit from the outcome of this study by taking into consideration these particular elements for more advanced EFL writing classes. Suggestions include:

- Instead of focusing specifically on grammar, take students through features of academic writing so they can get a sense of appropriate forms and possibly start building a list of useful strategies and phrases. Spend extra time on this for lower proficiency students. Students' grammar tends to be better when their reading is incorporated into their writing.

- Take a close look at critical reading strategies (having questions for their reading) to help students find appropriate evidence to support their ideas. For most students this may be the first time to do this. Talk about appropriate sources.

- Practise reading for effective note taking to get students to build their essays on the evidence they have available to them.

- Quoting, paraphrasing and summarising needs to be clearly defined and practised in order to avoid plagiarism.

- Consider organisational structures by looking at the development of an argument. Work together to define 'argument' and 'position' and show students the advantages of taking one side of the argument.

- Work on a 'critique' and discuss the differences of that with critical writing. Show different organisational structures like thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

- Show students the benefits of analysing and evaluating their own writing. Go through the writing with a clear understanding of who the reader is and how they can focus the writing for the particular reader(s).

- Take advantage of the student-centred classroom and incorporate 'peer reading'.

For issues related to *writer identity*:

- Start the course with instruction of different types of writing. Particularly 'journal writing' as a place for students to explore with writing helps to get ideas out which should 'pick up' where their first year writing course left off. Make sure students understand why learning advanced writing skills are important. Try to incorporate their writing needs for other courses as much as possible.

- Show early on how the type of writing this year differs in that it should be extended beyond the factual level (descriptive, explanatory writing) to the analytical level (interpretive, evaluative writing).

- Discuss the appropriateness of using 'I' in students' writing. Introduce the idea of different 'selves' in writing [see Clark & Ivanic 1997] and get students to practice keeping themselves present in their writing without using 'I'. Explain how this strengthens the argument of the writer.

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