

Critical Thinking in FLA English Composition

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Introduction

Every degree student in the Faculty of Liberal Arts is required to complete English composition courses. After taking the English Placement Test, students are placed in Basic Writing, Composition 1, or Composition 2. The Basic Writing course gives students a chance to better understand the expectations of writing at the university level (see Macintyre's article in this volume), but this course is limited to a small number in order for those students to receive extra training and attention to their writing before entering Composition 1, where most students are placed. In Composition 1 it is expected that students will learn the basics of academic writing in order to appropriately develop and construct essays for different purposes. In Composition 2, it is expected that students will learn how to extend these skills into writing for research purposes.

There is an assumption that the students in the FLA have a much higher command of English than the average university student in Japan, so the content of the composition classes should be able to go beyond basic structures into more advanced elements of academic essay construction. What we are finding however is that there is a great need for a better understanding of writing theory, and some "back to basics" composition pedagogy in order to get students to think critically about their writing.

University EFL writing in Japan

English educators in Japan are starting to recognise the importance of writing ability as a communicative English skill (Rinnert & Kobayashi 2001), but this is being met with resistance based on a tradition of having never really focused on *how to write* beyond the sentence level in the first language (Jarrell 2000, Rabbini 2003). Moreover, academic writing in English at the university level requires skills in critical thinking—a capacity that has been commonly considered by researchers to not be cultivated in the Japanese education system (Stapleton 2002a).

From a historical perspective, Japan was only opened to the world less than 150 years ago. Thus, the influences of outside cultures have not been integrated into Japanese society to the extent they have in other developed nations. Education in Japan has not changed in terms of the cultural view that teachers hold a respected position both in and outside of the classroom. Traditionally, teachers are not questioned or doubted, nor are any authorities, ie authors (Moore & Lamie 1996).

This environment, therefore, discourages students to question opinions of those in positions of authority—a necessary step for students to develop critical thinking and critical arguments in their writing.

Historically, assessment in education in Japan has been heavily dominated by examinations (Taylor & Taylor 1995), a format that is not conducive to writing extended texts. Therefore, the assessment and consequently development of writing ability in Japan in any language has been limited (Jarrell 2000). In Japan as well as other east Asian countries, it is mostly a task of collecting the sources and presenting them in one document, having not done anything to alter the original texts as this would be disrespectful to the author, who is seen as an expert (see Pennycook 1996 for discussion). This is frequently viewed as plagiarism in English compositions, and a lack of ability in critical writing. Furthermore, the construction of the writer's voice in writing in Japanese is fundamentally different to that of English writing, and therefore 'writer identity' is also fundamentally different (Matsuda 2001). In Japan, identity is a collective concept, one that is recognised on a national level (Doi 2001). Thus, individual identity is typically not only discouraged, it is not desired (Hashimoto 2000).

It is clear that there are many obstacles for university students in Japan to develop their English writing skills. In addition to impediments of writing in a foreign language setting, the culture and identity of the students does not foster the use of strategies of writing such as development of critical argument or use of writer's voice, which often causes these students' writing in English to be seen as superficial from a western perspective (see Cummings, 2004; Stapleton 2002a). Thus, the development of these elements in students' writing is a significant area of pedagogical and research interest.

Research in EFL education in Japan has revealed writing to be the most problematic skill area for students. It has been described as 'neglected' (Davies 1999) and the least competent skill of English for university students of EFL in Japan (Kroll 1990), particularly with regard to developing *critical argument* (Kamimura & Oi 2006, Rabbini 2003, Stapleton 2001, 2002a) and establishing *writer identity* (Casanave 2002, Matsuda 2001). As a comprehensive theory of writing has yet to be established (Cumming 1998, Sasaki 2005), writing education is left to the whim of the environment in which it is developed. Taking into consideration the social and cultural aspects of the environment, English writing education in Japan is often reduced to grammatical and lexical studies for the purposes of examinations, since there is not much further need for English writing ability beyond this level (Rabbini 2003). However, this level of writing education offers very little in terms of sustainability. It does not consider the development of thinking skills or strategies for creating logical relationships between thoughts

(Shinoda 2006). Critical arguments are often not required and therefore not developed, and no real consideration is normally given to issues surrounding writer identity (Stapleton 2002b). This realisation has led to development of teachers' and curriculum developers' socio-cultural awareness (see next paragraph) in EFL writing in Japan, in order to avoid separation of the social and cultural relationships of students from their English writing (Rabbini 2003, Rinnert & Kobayashi 2001).

Each student brings his or her own social and cultural role and identity to the language classroom, often in great contrast to that of the teacher's. The factors that affect people's socio-cultural identities are based on the classroom itself, the interpersonal contexts in the classroom, their purposes for being there, and their personal backgrounds (Duff & Uchida 1997). These identities are evolving in the classroom. Within its own social and cultural situation, a student's socio-cultural positionality in the classroom impacts heavily on motivations for learning. This positionality is the student's sense of self, and the social relations that are affected by this (see McKinley 2005). Especially in a language classroom, Vygotsky's concept of collaborative learning (that all learning, even learning to think, starts with interaction), leads students to create knowledge through their social relations and interactions. Wenger (1998) suggests the negotiation in these interactions is how students develop new identities in language learning. As writing is a communicative act, situated in a social, cultural setting (see Casanave, 2003; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2001), it is necessary for a student to establish an awareness of his or her own socio-cultural positionality in relation to others to be able to develop writing skills. This concept is further elaborated in the methodology section of this proposal.

Previous studies with Japanese students have been conducted mainly in English-medium universities outside of Japan (mostly in the US), with little attention given to Japanese students' experiences with learning to write academic English in Japan before their overseas study (see eg, Inoue 1997, McFreely 1999, Yoshimura 2001). Also, research in the area of L2 writing has been heavily marked by its consistent comparison with native English writing. This comparison, according to some, has led insight into L2 writing to be limited, promoting a negative stereotype on L2 writing as never being as well-developed as native English writing (Kubota 1997, Stapleton 2002a). The area of greatest debate in Japanese students' lack of writing ability is the development of critical argument, considered by some Western researchers to be foreign concepts to Japanese students (see Stapleton 2002a).

Western-style writing pedagogy in a Japanese university

With the idea that Japanese student writers have limited backgrounds in writing extended texts¹ (see Hirose 2006), it is necessary to consider the practicality of English writing pedagogy in Japan. Jarrell (2000) suggests that the use of generic structures in writing allows for students to develop a deeper understanding of

language structures. Rabbini (2003) refers to Jarrell's study as supporting the idea that a genre approach to language instruction in Japan is ideal, and that it suits the process approach to writing that has developed recently in Japan. The genre approach's utilisation of authentic texts appeals to and motivates students as it is focused on their identifiable interests and knowledge. 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.

Therefore, the suggestion that critical thinking is a practice unachievable by Japanese students is highly problematic. It may be the Japanese students' lack of familiarity with the cultural context of the writing task that is leading them to write in a way that does not display critical thinking. Several issues arise here. Japanese students' English writing is in a foreign cultural context, and to develop an argument within that context, they rely on sources from that context. Those sources are in many cases their only window into gaining a cultural awareness of a particular subject or topic. Although these students develop their own personal opinions on these subjects, their cultural awareness of the expectations of how to express these opinions in writing is limited to that which is offered by the sources. This is where the issue of establishing writer identity becomes pivotal and indeed inseparable from developing critical argument (see Stapleton 2002b).

Conclusion

Ultimately the students being accepted to the FLA have a fairly clear understanding that a certain element of critical thinking will be required of them as part of the curriculum (although this is only hinted at in general curriculum information accessible to students). It is strongly recommended that there be more input from the faculty on the whole in order to better develop the curriculum for English Composition classes in the FLA. Students need to understand the basic concepts and purposes of writing; they need to think about who they are as writers, and who their audiences are. Writing needs to be a process in which the students' critical thinking plays a central role.

1 Although a *limited background* in writing education in Japan refers to a lack of focus on *academic essay writing*, this is not to suggest writing education in Japan is substandard. In fact, a study by Kitagawa & Kitagawa (1987) found exceptional benefits from a Japanese method of writing instruction called *seikatsu tsuzurikata* or 'life experience composition'. This technique stresses writer-based writing education and has been recommended for incorporation in American writing classrooms. Also, Ryuko Kubota emphasises that she did a variety of personal response writing in her education in Japan (Taylor & Taylor 1995).

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