

Japanese and English School Genres

Douglas JARRELL

The impetus for a study of the influence of the L1 (mother tongue) writing practices on the L2 (second language) writing comes from this writer's long-held suspicion that EFL college and university teachers find themselves faced with a problem: they are expected to teach students to write in a foreign language even though these students have not been taught how to write in their mother tongue. This 3-stage study was designed to investigate the situation. Initially, first-year junior college English majors were surveyed to determine the extent of their L1 and L2 writing background. Then, based on their responses, the "kansoubun", or "impressionistic essay", was chosen as a typical L1 writing activity. The resulting essays were examined for evidence of an overall structure that could serve to define the "kansoubun". Finally, the L1 writing activity was replicated in the L2 in order to determine the degree of rhetorical transfer between the two languages.

Unlike the spoken language, writing is not something that humans are "... born with a natural, biologically conditioned predisposition to acquire" (Kaplan,1987:12). It is learned at school rather than at home. This makes the students' formal education a determining factor in their ability to write in their mother tongue. An examination of their L1 writing production should provide evidence of the kind of writing experience they have had in their pre-college education. Based on an informal survey, the students involved in this study indicated that they were seldom expected to write extended papers, but that the papers that they were asked to hand in were most commonly "kansoubun."

The influence of L1 writing patterns on L2 writing has the subject of study since Kaplan pointed out the existence of culturally-specific rhetorical patterns in 1966. While there have been numerous studies of L1 influence on L2 writing, none of the comparisons of Japanese and English (Kobayashi,1984; Iwasaki and Hayasaka,1985; Hinds,1987; Hirose and Sasaki,1996) has investigated the "kansoubun." It may have been overlooked because of its ill-defined nature, but the lack of such research is odd considering that this may be the only extended writing activity that many students entering college have been required to do.

Of course the students' L2 writing background should be another important factor in L2 production, but in Japan English secondary education seldom requires students to engage in writing tasks above the level of the sentence. The majority of students in this study, for example, associated "English composition" with sentence-level translation. Only a few indicated that they had been required to construct written discourse in Eng-

lish at the paragraph level during their high school education. Therefore L2 writing background is not expected to have a strong influence on students' ability to produce extended text. When the L2 writing samples in this study were examined, they showed a resemblance to data from Martin (1985) who was investigating factual writing at Australian primary schools. His analysis of the primary school "genres" was applied to the L2 data of this experiment and was found to provide a partial explanation for the choices of the 3 composition teachers: of the nine L2 texts selected from among 40, the most highly rated were those essays employing the "school genres" that he describes as more mature. These results indicate that the assessment criteria of teachers could be based on a culturally-specific idea of genre without the teachers being aware of it.

The Experiment:

The L1 data was collected on a 3-day seminar trip to the hometown of the founder of the college. All 47 subjects were female, forming one first-year junior college class of English majors. At the time of the experiment, they had already taken 8 composition classes from the author. During that time they had been introduced to the format of paragraphs, but they had been given no instruction in paragraph writing per se. They had also been required to keep a diary, writing 3 pages as homework every two weeks.

Everyone was present on the seminar trip, a credit-earning graduation requirement. This condition satisfied two concerns of the author, that the subjects have similar background knowledge and that they produce the writing under identical conditions. On the last morning of the seminar, the students were given a 1-1/2 hour period to write a 2-page "impressionistic essay" on the founder, on the college president's lecture, and on how their thinking had changed. The papers were then collected by the escorting teacher and were not returned before the L2 writing activity.

The L1 writing activity was scheduled before the L2 activity because familiarity with the topic was thought to reduce the cognitive difficulty of writing in the L2. The L2 writing activity took place in the students' English composition class two days after the seminar trip. The two-day gap between the writing activities allowed them to draw on recent memory while avoiding the danger of a word-for-word translation of the L1 activity. The students were given the same writing prompt. At that time there were only 40 students present, so these 40 became the final pool from which 9 essays were chosen. In this activity they were told to fill 2 pages, approximately 200 words. While an equal period of time for the L2 activity would have been preferable, classroom circumstances meant that the first half hour of their class had to be spent explaining the writing activity, leaving less than an hour to do the writing. At the end of 55 minutes the students were instructed to hand in their papers.

The Choice of Essays:

The 40 L2 essays were read by the author and two experienced native speakers who had taught or were teaching composition at the college. Three “good” (G), three “medium” (M), and three “poor” (P) essays were selected by the three readers. No attempt was made by the judges to determine assessment criteria in advance. Once the nine L2 texts had been chosen, the matching L1 texts were culled and are identified with the G, M and P labels. These labels only reflect the assessment of the L2 papers and do not in any way indicate an evaluation of the L1 texts.

L1 “Impressionistic Essays”:

The nine L1 texts (translated into English by the writer) were examined for similarities in structure, and all showed examples of orientation (O), body (B), and conclusion (C). “Orientation” is used here to indicate the beginning of the text, where the reader is oriented, or introduced, to a topic; “Body” is the section where the student discusses the topic(s) in detail; and “Conclusion” is the section where the writer brings the text to a close. Generally, the L1 texts did not have a discourse topic that tied the text together. The majority of (O) oriented the reader to a local topic instead, and the topics changed continuously as the text progressed. A quick comparison of the (O) sections and the (C) sections ranged one below the other (Appendix 1) demonstrates that few writers had a discourse topic to return to when closing the paper. Of the two papers that do hold together, G3 uses advance signalling, “a great number of new things”, to predict the organization of local topics and concludes with impressions of the trip as a whole. The writer of M1 discusses her initial reservations about the trip but summarizes her experiences there with an anaphoric “learned many things,” and concludes, “I’m glad I came on this study tour”.

P1 and P2 are both remarkable for their use of interactive language, something completely inappropriate to an academic essay in English. Both writers address the president directly with their thanks, and P2 even addresses a question to him. It is clear that some of the novice writers are having difficulties distinguishing between the demands of very different writing tasks such as letters and essays even in their own language. The other writers did understand the less interactive nature of essays, and in their attempts to flatter the President (who they knew would be reading the essays) they used an indirect manner by showing interest in his lecture and heaping praise on his grandmother, the founder.

These L1 papers, if they can be considered typical of the kind of writing expected in Japanese secondary education, will serve as a poor model for EFL academic writing. Their lack of overall organization in the form of a discourse topic means that there is little danger of culturally-based rhetorical transfer. Instead, the thrust of any pedagogy should be aimed at making novice writers aware of writing imperatives such as the dis-

inction between interactive language in letters and and its relative absence in essays.

L2 Texts:

The nine L2 texts did have similarities to the L1 texts: they had examples of (O), (B) and (C), and most lacked a unifying discourse topic. An examination of the (O) and (C) sections (Appendix 2) shows that there are 2 texts in which the writers maintain the discourse topic. The M1 writer indicates reservations about the trip, as she did in her L1 paper, and once again concludes on a positive note. The G2 writer concentrates on the theme of history and seems to continue it in her conclusion. The other writers, as with the L1 texts, jump from one local topic to the next.

Considering that the M1 essay appears to be the most successful in terms of the discourse topic, we need to examine why it was judged less successful than G-1 and G-3 by the composition teachers. To answer this question we need to examine the way in which all the texts were judged. The P texts were marked down because they contain many basic grammatical errors that impede comprehension (see the conclusions of the three P texts in Appendix 2). They are also much shorter than the G and M texts. The M texts tend to have more grammatical errors than the G texts. This is not the case with M1, however, and therefore cannot be considered the reason for M1's lower rating. One possible answer is that it is due to the writing genre used. Martin (1985) examined the writing of English-speaking primary school students in Australia and identified the following types of writing in the classroom:

WRITING PATTERNS OF NOVICES:

Observation Comment: a "reactive discourse" rather than a genre. Something is mentioned and judged without any attempt to explain or justify the judgement, e.g., L1 text-P2 "I was impressed when we were shown a copper mirror. . ."

Recount: a description of the world that focuses on particular events, e.g., L1 text-M1 "I was excited to be able to touch. . . . We sat around the fireplace. . . . I stayed behind after everyone had left. . ."

FACTUAL GENRES:

Description: a description that focuses on things or people.

Explanation: a reason why a judgement has been made. This is not considered a genre but a move within a genre, a necessary part of the more complex genres of Report and Exposition.

Report: what an entire class of things is like.

Exposition: a judgement or thesis interpreting the world, justified by more than one argument.

Recount and Observation Comment are personalized writing forms, displaying individual reactions, whereas factual writing, especially in a Report or an Exposition, tends towards the impersonal and general. The “kansoubun” is by its nature a personal and individual kind of text—in other words it has qualities that English cultures consider as less mature and academic.

By applying Martin’s analysis to G2 and M1 (Appendix 3), we discover that M1 is a Recount. Certainly, for this particular writing activity the M1 writer has chosen an appropriate genre and arguably the easiest writing genre to organize because of the chronological nature of trips are easily recounted as a series of events. Despite her competence and the appropriateness of the writing genre, however, M1’s writing has not been given as good an assessment as G2.

G2 is a text which is held together by the theme of “history” rather than by chronology. We can distinguish between G2 and M1 by the use of the Report genre within the body of the G2 text. In lines 10-16, the G2 writer chooses to give an impersonal, extended Report on traditional Japanese paper umbrellas. This is not necessary for this kind of essay. A simple Description of the particular umbrella that everyone was shown by the president would have sufficed. In spite of this, the writer has chosen a more mature genre with its accompanying impersonality and has been awarded higher marks for this more academic tone.

As can be seen from the G2 text, writers have a choice of genre independent of the writing activity itself. Even an activity that lends itself to personal observations such as a “kansoubun” can be interpreted using factual genres.

Pedagogical Implications:

The L1 data shows that the students were vaguely conscious of the organizational needs of a text. They consistently used (O), (B) and (C) although most were either unaware of the need for a discourse topic or were incapable of tying things together with one, confirming the author’s initial suspicion that high school students lack writing skills in their mother tongue. The students’ recollections of their writing background seem to corroborate this by indicating a lack of emphasis on extended writing in both Japanese language and content classes. Finally, the “kansoubun,” a common school writing activity, encourages primarily “reactive discourse” and lends itself to school genres that are too personal for the kind of factual writing that western students are expected to produce in academic settings.

The L2 data indicates that native speaker composition teachers may unconsciously take into account Martin’s “school genres” when assessing EFL essays. Although they appear to rank one genre above another in their holistic rating of papers, teachers may not realize the existence of such a hierarchy within their own writing culture. Students like M1 may have the skills to produce above-average writing, but unless they are taught more mature genres they may never be challenged to extend their writing beyond the

easy confines of what they already know. In many ways M1 has accomplished her task as successfully as G2, and yet she does not get the credit for her effort. It is unfair to hold her accountable for her choice of genre unless she is informed of other possibilities.

One of the attractions of teaching genre explicitly is that EFL students will have a more definite idea of what is expected of them. They can first become practiced in the easier “school genres” of Recount, after which they can work up through the more mature genres. This will help them to develop the tools necessary to tackle the diversity of academic writing in the West, and if they do go on to study abroad they will have taken some of the necessary steps toward the kind of Expository writing that will be demanded of them in tertiary education abroad. Martin’s ideas on “school genres” provide steps that will be able to take the writer from the comfortable personal views of a “kansoubun” to the impersonality demanded in English academic writing.

APPENDIX 1: L1 Text Translations: Orientations and Conclusions

G1 Orientation

I first thought H.K. was amazing when I heard that she went to so much trouble to found this college, but gradually I began to think it strange and wonder why she thought she had to do so much.

G1 Conclusion

I think we should remember once again to be thankful and we should not forget that both man and nature do not exist as a matter of course and that they are both really important.

G2 Orientation

I thought that to H.K., Oppara was a place for her spirit to relax so that she could sustain her courageous ideas of democracy and sexual equality on which she founded this school, implemented the school motto and introduced skirts as part of the school uniform.

G2 Conclusion

I want to learn the true meaning of “kindness” that H. displayed and become a woman who possesses respect and pride as a woman. In addition, I don’t want this lecture where we can touch historical articles to disappear.

G3 Orientation

I think that I was able to learn a great number of new things on the Oppara seminar.

G3 Conclusion

I think my heart matured and my knowledge grew somewhat during the Oppara study tour. Somehow I felt that I had slipped through time to an earlier age.

M1 Orientation

I don’t have the temperament to sit still for a long time, and to tell the truth I was

very worried about being able to listen to a lecture for as long as 3 hours. However the President was full of humor and his enjoyable 3-hour talk went quickly.

M1 Conclusion

I learned many things on this Oppara study tour, but the best things were the President's lecture and being able to see the cultural artifacts. I'm glad I came on this study tour. I will also take pride in attending NWU which was built by that great person, H.K.

M2 Orientation

This was the first time I came to Oppara.

M2 Conclusion

When we live in these prosperous times, we tend to forget that there were times like these, but I think we should go forward with our lives keeping in mind that there was a time in Japan when people lived like this.

M3 Orientation

The first thing I thought when I came to Oppara was that it was a wonderful place surrounded by nature.

M3 Conclusion

Because of this I think I have to learn from H's example, and I thought once again that she was a great person. However, now I have dreams and hopes, so I want to make a daily effort to realize them.

P1 Orientation

This is the first time I have come to Oppara, and I love the surrounding environment.

P1 Conclusion

We were told many things by the President that I won't forget. I also want to tell my family about these things when I get home.

Thank you very much. Take care.

P2 Orientation

I am happy to learn about H's way of life and be able to study at this school.

P2 Conclusion

Does the President remember the students who were asking questions after everyone had left? I was impressed when we were shown a copper hand mirror and the desk where H. studied. I was excited we were shown things which can only be seen in a Japanese historical collection. Thank you very much.

P3 Orientation

The first thing I felt when I came to Oppara was that the air there was very clean.

P3 Conclusion

It was good to be able to hear such a valuable talk this year.

APPENDIX 2: L2 Texts: Orientations and Conclusions

(* indicates a spelling mistake in the original text)

G1 Orientation

The first impression of scenery* was that there was much nature, but there was only nature.

G1 Conclusion

Now, we can't do the same things, but we can try not to waste all of things as possible as we can.

I bought a postcard made of wood. I wrote to my friend of highschool.*

G2 Orientation

I'm interested in Japanese history. (But I'm not good at Japanese history) Especially I like from the end of Edo period* to the start of Meiji period. So K's lecture was very interesting.

G2 Conclusion

k's ancestor was long and distinguish* history.

G3 Orientation

I went to Oppara by bus.

G3 Conclusion

By the way, we looked a lot of antiques. I touched the book of Edo period. I was glad to touch the book.

M1 Orientation

I went to Oppara training from Monday to Wednesday on this week. I was worried* about this trip, but It* was OK.

M1 Conclusion

I think it was the best trip I ever had.

M2 Orientation

I went to Oppara on Monday.

M2 Conclusion

And it was thundering. I was very fearful.

M3 Orientation

In listening to K's lecture, I thought that H. teacher is very great. Because when she was fifteen years old, she had become teacher.

M3 Conclusion

Listening to K's lecture reminded me of people of a long time ago.

P1 Orientation

Oppara was very rustic.

P1 Conclusion

I looked about the room riously.*

P2 Orientation

Oppara's surroundings was wonderful.

P2 Conclusion

I thought she was really hard work to set up it.

P3 Orientation

I thought Oppara was very beautiful.

P3 Conclusion

I thought wonderful one after another story.

APPENDIX 3: Complete L2 Texts

G-2

(1) I'm interested in Japanese history. (2) (But I'm not good at Japanese history) (3) Especially I like from the end of Edo perid to the start of Meiji period. (4) So Koshihara's lecture was very interesting. (5) He showed us a lot of historical materials, and we feld them with our hand. (6) I was very excited. (7) The thing which the most interested in was a Japanese sword. (8) I had never seen a genuine Japanese sword until then. (9) There are imitation sword in my house, but genuine one was very different.

(10) The thing which I like is Japanese umbrella. (11) These are very beautiful design. (12) They have two type: 'Janme-kasa' and 'kara-kasa'. (13) 'Janme' means snake's eye.

(14) Umbrella's design looked like snake's eye in distance. (15) The gore is made from Japanese paper, and ribs and handle are made from bamboo. (16) 'Janme-kasa' was more expensive than 'kara-kasa', because 'kara-kasa' had no design.

(17) Most of Japanese historical materials were made from natural things, the bucket, futon, and candle etc. (18) After the lecture, my friends and teachers stayed there, and kosihara president showed us other things that he couldn't show us in the lecture. (19) His story was very funny and good. (20) kosihara's ancestor was long and distingish history.

M-1

(1) I went to Oppara training from Monday to Wednesday on this week. (2) I was worried about this trip, but It was OK.

(3) Presiden's lecture was very interesting. (4) Because we could touch and see some

valuable books. (5) I couldn't read that books but I could feel an old atmosphere. (6) I was deeply touched with a hearth. (7) It was the first time to see it. (8) But it was a little smoky. (9) After the lecture, my friends and I stayed there, and president show us some books that the other students couldn't see. (10) I think I was very lucky. (11) I was worried about president's lecture because it takes about 3 hours and I am a restless. (12) But president was very fun person and I enjoyed his lecture. (13) But sometimes I was sleepy because I stayed up late at night before the day. (14) Actually, It was the funniest things at Oppara. (15) We took candy, sweets, biscuits and so on there. (16) We ate a lot of them. (17) We played cards. (18) It was fun. (19) I think it was the best trip I ever had.

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