

# Learning from Our Students' Previous L2 Writing Experiences: The English Composition Question on University Entrance Exams

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## Abstract

*This article attempts to help EFL writing teachers in Japan become more aware of the previous L2 writing experiences that their students may have had. Specifically, it discusses students' experiences preparing for the English composition question on university entrance exams and compares these with the writing experiences they are likely to encounter in a university-level EFL writing classroom. It will be shown that these two different writing experiences share some basic characteristics in common, but that they also differ in important ways. It is hoped that an increased awareness of these similarities and differences will help teachers reflect on and refine their approach to EFL writing instruction.*

## Introduction

I have argued elsewhere (Ross 2001) for the need of EFL writing teachers in Japan to become more aware of the writing experiences their students have been exposed to in the Japanese school system. That paper focused on one commonly taught L1 text type, the *kansōbun*, and suggested that students may be transferring rhetorical features from that text type to their L2 writing in English. Since English language instruction is a major part of the Japanese educational system, it is also important to examine the experiences students have had writing in English. This article focuses on one such experience — the writing of a short English composition that is required on many Japanese university entrance exams. I hope to show how this experience offers important clues about how EFL teachers can improve the quality of the instruction they offer their students. Specifically, I examine two basic issues: (1) the kinds of text types and writing tasks that appear on entrance exams, and (2) the kinds of instruction students are given to improve their writing skills. The article will also consider how the students' experiences preparing for the English composition question on university entrance exams compares with the writing experiences they are likely to encounter in the EFL writing classroom. It will be argued that these two different writing experiences share some basic characteristics in common, but also differ in important ways. It

is hoped that increasing awareness of these similarities and differences will clarify ways in which teachers can improve their approach to EFL writing instruction.

## 1. The English composition question on university entrance exams

An obvious source of information about the English composition question on university entrance exams are the exam preparation guidebooks published by major *juku* (cram schools) in Japan. A quick look through these books shows that there are two basic types of writing questions. The most common is translation from Japanese, and an overwhelming number of the guidebooks are devoted to training students in this type of writing. Typically, these books consist of a large number of basic sentence patterns for students to memorize, sample answers from past exams, and a section on common grammatical mistakes. The other type of writing is a short English composition, and it is this type that is the focus of this paper. Although not as prevalent as the translation task, the composition question is becoming more common on entrance exams, reflecting an increased interest in measuring the communicative ability of applicants (Ishigami 1996). A far smaller number of exam preparation guidebooks covers this type of question, but they share a similar approach and typically include a review of basic grammatical structures, large numbers of sentence patterns and expressions, sample questions and model answers, advice about common mistakes, hints about how to plan and revise writing, and advice on editing for stylistic, mechanical, and grammatical accuracy. This section of the paper will focus on a description of the various types of texts and writing tasks that are found in these guidebooks. First, however, several points need to be made about potential confusion regarding the term 'composition'.

In the test preparation guidebooks, the Japanese term for 'composition' (*sakubun*) is used to refer to both the translation and the composition tasks (see Ohya 2000). The former is referred to as an *eisakubun* question, while the latter is called a *jiyuu eisakubun*, or 'free composition' question. For many, this will be confusing on two levels. First, there is the use of '*sakubun*,' a term typically understood to mean 'composition,' for a translation question. Second, as we will see later, only a small number of the *jiyuu eisakubun* writing tasks fit common conceptions of what constitutes a 'free composition'.

Also, 'composition' is used as a broad term that includes text types (e.g. conversations) and tasks (e.g. demonstrating the ability to produce specific speech acts such as requests and refusals) that are not typically associated with the term. Finally, the typical 'composition' question is a short paragraph, requiring a response of up to 60 words; longer, multi-paragraph compositions of between 60-120 words are less common, and

extended pieces of over 120 words even less so (Sugiyama and Kobayashi 2002).<sup>1)</sup> The guidebooks all focus on preparing students for the shortest 'composition,' and only Yoneyama (2001) deals (briefly) with the more extended texts.

Now that we have a better idea of how the term 'composition' is used in the context of university entrance exams, we can turn to a description of the types of texts and writing tasks that the term covers.

### 1.1 Text types and writing tasks

The five exam preparation guidebooks used in this study (Hanamoto 1995; Ishigami 1996; Ohya 2000; Sugiyama and Kobayashi 2002, and Yoneyama 2001) all categorize the text types they include under the term 'composition' differently. The following list is an adaptation from these sources, and includes sample questions from Ohya (2000) and Yoneyama (2001) to more clearly illustrate the writing tasks that students are expected to complete for each text type.<sup>2)</sup>

**1. Topic-based compositions.** This category represents the most common type of composition on university entrance exams. It includes a number of text types (e.g. persuasive essays and narratives) which have been grouped together because of the similarity in the task that they require students to perform: writing on a given topic or theme. The category can be broken down into the following five sub-types:

#### a. Expressing opinions

The text type that receives the most attention in the test preparation guidebooks is one well-known in the ESL/EFL writing field: persuasive/argumentative writing. For this task, students are asked to express and give reasons for their opinions on topics of personal interest or social significance, or to write their reactions to a briefly stated opinion. Sample questions include:

- Recently, the number of '*freetas*' is increasing in Japan. Do you approve or disapprove of their attitudes to work?
- What do you think about requiring students to wear school uniforms?
- Discuss your reactions to the following opinion: 'In order to protect the environment, all private use of cars should be banned.'

Although less common, students may also be asked to read an English or Japanese passage — ranging anywhere from between one and several paragraphs — and write their reactions to the opinion(s) stated in that passage.

#### b. Writing about yourself

After persuasive/argumentative texts, personal essays in which students are asked to write about people they know, experiences they have had, or their wishes, hopes and desires receive the most detailed coverage in the guidebooks. Sample questions include:

- Why do you want to go to university?
- Choose a country you would like to visit. Explain why you would like to visit that country and how long you would like to stay.
- What event in your life has made a big impression on you and why?
- Who is someone that you admire?

It is worth noting that as is the case with persuasive/argumentative essays, students are told that they must clearly state their main idea (i.e. present a thesis statement) and then offer support for it. That is, although writing a ‘personal essay’, students are reminded of the importance of adhering to the standard expository writing style.

#### c. Definitions/Descriptions

This question requires students to explain an aspect of Japanese culture. This may involve defining a common Japanese word, expression, or proverb, or it may involve describing a typical event or custom. Some samples are:

- Explain the expression *mikka bozu*
- Explain the meaning of the words *karaoke* and *oyakodonburi*
- Describe New Year’s Day in Japan to a foreign pen pal
- Explain the tradition of *hanami* to a foreigner

#### d. Responding to Visual prompts

The next type of topic-based question involves responding to a visual prompt, usually in the form of an illustration (either a single or multiple frame cartoon), or, less frequently, a graph. There are two basic types of texts that students are expected to produce for this task. One is an interpretive description of the meaning and significance of the data presented in a graph or of the message behind an illustration. The other is a narrative, in which students present a story based on the clues suggested in the illustration.<sup>3)</sup> Some sample questions include:

- Explain the meaning of the following cartoon
- Create a story based on the following set of pictures
- Explain the information found in the following graph

e. 'Free' writing

The final type of topic-based composition is a free writing question, and it receives the least amount of coverage of the text types mentioned so far. As the sample questions show, these tasks tend more towards creative writing, whereas the other four are types of expository writing. As the most open ended of all topic-based questions, these tasks will strike most readers as more worthy of the term *jiyuu sakubun*, or 'free composition' (see above). Sample questions include:

- Write up to 40 words on the topic 'snow'
- Write a paragraph starting with the phrase 'If I were a bird . . .'
- Continue from the first sentence of the following story: *From the moment I overslept I knew it was going to be a bad day.*
- Write one or two sentences using the following words: *go/today/friend(s)/because*

Although it is not possible for me to make any statements about the precise frequency of the various text types on the entrance exams at this point, the guidebooks give the most detailed coverage to the first three: expressing opinions, writing about oneself, and describing and defining. It should be noted that these text types also tend to receive detailed coverage in the ESL/EFL writing classroom. Also, according to Ishigami (1996), responding to visual prompts is being included more frequently on entrance exams, and this text type receives fairly detailed coverage in the guidebooks. As mentioned above, the 'free' writing question receives much lighter coverage.

**2. Summaries.** Summary writing is only briefly mentioned in two of the five guidebooks (Hanamoto 1995 and Ishigami 1996). For these questions, students are asked to summarize an English or Japanese passage that varies in length from a single, short paragraph to a multi-paragraph essay. The task may also require students to present their opinions about the passage they have summarized. This text type receives the least detailed coverage of the texts mentioned so far, suggesting that it only rarely appears on entrance exams. However, it should be noted that although students get limited exposure to this text type, summary writing is often a part of ESL/EFL writing courses, especially those with an emphasis on academic writing.

**3. Conversations.** Entrance exams may also include questions that attempt to measure a student's ability to produce a variety of accurate and appropriate speech acts. Writing part of a conversation is one such example, and with this task we are clearly moving away from the accepted understanding of the term 'composition'; however, since it is included in one of the guidebooks (Yoneyama 2001) it should be mentioned briefly. For this task, students are usually asked to provide one or more lines of a con-

versation. The context of the conversation (e.g. who is speaking, what the topic is) as well as some co-text is provided. It should be noted that this information may either be in Japanese or English. Sample tasks include:

- You are walking along the street when someone asks you for directions to the train station. Tell him/her the way.
- Read the following conversation and fill in an appropriate response for the two missing lines.

4. **Letters.** The final text type that students may be expected to produce on entrance exams is a letter. However, this question typically involves filling in missing sections of a letter that has been provided or ‘composing’ a letter based on a set of detailed prompts. As the following sample instructions show, the aim is clearly to gauge a student’s ability to produce appropriate speech acts, and not to compose a letter.<sup>4)</sup> Note also that these questions are most commonly written in Japanese. Some examples include:

- You received a letter inviting you to dinner but must refuse because of a previous engagement. Write a reply that includes the following: give thanks for the invitation/explain why you can’t accept/state that you hope you will be invited at some other time.
- Write a letter of complaint to a mail order company for sending you a sweater you did not order. Among the problems you should mention are the size, color, and style of the sweater.
- You would like to study at a university in America. Write a letter to an admissions office including the following: your age/your wish to enter in September 1999 to study drama/a request for information about requirements, campus housing, and student loans/ask them to send you a pamphlet.

## 2. Training students to improve their writing skills

The above overview of the text types that students are expected to produce on university entrance exams shows that there is considerable overlap with the kind of writing they will be expected to produce in their EFL writing classes. As mentioned previously, the text types that receive the most emphasis in test preparation guidebooks — expressing opinions, personal essays, and definitions and descriptions — are also the text types that form the core of many EFL writing classes, especially those that are more academically inclined.<sup>5)</sup> This section moves the discussion to the second issue to be investigated in this paper: the training that students are given on how to improve their writing skills. Although we will see that the guidebooks share some similarities

with mainstream EFL approaches, we will also notice several areas where the approaches differ.

### **2.1 Students' previous writing instruction and training: shared understandings**

Much of the general advice given in the test preparation guidebooks about what it takes to improve writing skills will strike EFL writing teachers as both familiar and sound. Advice common to the guidebooks under consideration includes:

1. In order to improve your English writing skills, it is important to read extensively in English.
2. In order to write smoothly and naturally in English, you must avoid directly translating from Japanese.
3. The ability to write is a specific, acquired skill that comes only with practice. Merely having a large vocabulary or analytical knowledge of the grammatical system does not guarantee being a successful writer.<sup>6)</sup>
4. Writing is a process that involves several stages: thinking, planning, writing, revising, and editing.
5. The goal of writing is to express yourself clearly and honestly, using simple, direct language.
6. Compositions must be coherent, logically and topically consistent, and include support for the statements that you make.

These six points suggest that our students may already be familiar with the basic concepts behind the approach to writing that underlies most EFL writing classes. In other areas, however, the training students receive may be very different from the experiences they will have in their EFL classes.

### **2.2 Students previous writing instruction and training: the problematic**

Although the basic approach to writing found in the test preparation books may be closer to current EFL approaches than is commonly assumed, a closer look at the guidebooks reveals several areas in which these approaches diverge. This includes advice on how to approach writing tasks, the accuracy of statements about Japanese and English rhetorical organization, and the accuracy and appropriateness of the lan-

guage samples presented. After outlining these problematic areas, brief comments on some of the issues they raise for the EFL writing teacher will be made.

### **2.2.1 Use the L1 for brainstorming**

All of the test preparation guidebooks advise students to use the L1 in the ‘brainstorming’ stage of writing. They also advise students to avoid directly translating into English when writing up their compositions, arguing that this will produce awkward English texts. Instead, students are urged to concentrate on expressing their ideas simply and directly in the English they already know.

*Comments.* The advice to avoid direct translation from Japanese to English is certainly consistent with common teaching practice; obviously, the position on the use of the L1 is far more controversial. This is not the place to enter into a full debate about L1 and L2 use in the language classroom, but a crucial issue is raised: Although students may be used to using their L1 in the initial stage of writing, EFL methodology and writing textbooks typically encourage — if not insist on — the sole use of the L2. However, there are several arguments in favor of a ‘judicious use’ of the L1. These include: 1) the affective advantages of reducing stress and anxiety and validating the learners’ own linguistic and cultural identity, 2) an increase in the complexity of the ideas that students attempt to express, which may also 3) encourage learners to produce more syntactically and lexically complex language.

However, use of the L1 in the brainstorming stage of writing raises the complicated issue of translation. Although the test preparation guidebooks all urge students to avoid directly translating their L1 notes when writing up their English composition, their advice about the best way to do so will strike many teachers — especially those who follow traditional conceptions of the process writing approach — as problematic. This issue will be explored in more detail in the following section.

### **2.2.2 Memorize basic sentence patterns and formulaic expressions**

As stated above, the guidebooks are unanimous in agreeing on the importance of reviewing grammatical structures and memorizing large numbers of sentence patterns and formulaic expressions so students will be able to avoid the problems associated with direct translation. This is reflected in the organization of the guidebooks, which are overwhelmingly devoted to those areas. As one example, in Hanamoto (1995), work on structures and patterns covers Chapters 1-4 (pp. 8-190), while only Chapter 5 (pp. 192-214) explains the text types covered on the entrance exams and gives advice about how to improve composition writing skills. The rationale for what may appear to be a lopsided approach is the belief that without a solid grounding in grammatical structures and a command of useful patterns and formulas, students will merely be



stringing together whatever English vocabulary they happen to have command of, or they will be forced to rely on the inadequate strategy of direct translation.

*Comment.* The emphasis on structures and sentence patterns and formulas may be the area of greatest mismatch between the approaches to writing advocated by test preparation guidebooks and mainstream EFL approaches. Although communicative language teaching and the process approach to writing both downplay their importance, students' previous experiences may have given them the expectation that the study of structures and sentence patterns is an essential part of what it means to learn how to write. While it can be argued that there has traditionally been an overemphasis on these areas in English language education in Japan, it can also be argued that this has been matched by its under-emphasis in mainstream ELT. Researchers in applied linguistics (e.g. Hoey 1991, Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992, and Sinclair 1991) have long argued for the importance of patterns in language learning, and recent research in corpus linguistics (e.g. Conrad and Biber 2000 and Hunston and Francis 2001) is refocusing our attention on this issue. This research suggests that since patterns and formulas (and in the case of writing, rhetorical organization as well) play such a major role in the language system, teachers need to realize that an approach that emphasizes the memorization of patterns above all else may be as inappropriate as one that ignores them completely.

#### **2.2.4 Be aware of the different purposes of writing in Japan and 'the West'**

Ohya (2001) claims that the overall purpose of writing instruction differs significantly in the Japanese and 'Western' educational systems. He argues that the purpose of teaching composition in the former is to foster self expression, while in the latter it is to teach the art of persuasion.

*Comment.* Ohya's purpose is to emphasize that the composition question on entrance exams attempts to measure students' ability to write logically organized essays that include concrete support for the positions they take. His claim brings up two issues that should be of interest to all writing teachers — and which are at the core of contrastive rhetoric studies: 1) what functions and purposes do various genres and text types fulfill in the L1 and L2, and 2) how are these functions and purposes similar or different across the two languages? While there is some evidence in support of Ohya's claim that students may indeed have a lot of experience with 'expressive' writing (see, for example, the work on *kansōbun* cited earlier in Ross 2001), the claim that this is the only type of writing they have experienced is highly questionable. A large number of text types are taught in the Japanese school system, including a variety of expository text types (Ross 2001), suggesting that Ohya's statement is overdrawn. Although his claim that persuasive writing is not taught in the Japanese composition classroom is questionable, it very well may be that this text type receives comparative-

ly light treatment.

### 2.2.5 Be aware of differences in L1 and L2 rhetorical organization

Ishigami (1996) and Ohya (2000) assert that English compositions follow a deductive pattern, starting with the ‘conclusion’ and then providing explanations, examples, and reasons in support of that conclusion. Both writers suggest that this differs from the preferred style of Japanese composition, which Ohya (2000) argues follows an inductive pattern, while Ishigami (1996) claims that it follows the *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* pattern of development.

*Comment.* As suggested in Section 2.2.4, generalizations about differences in English and Japanese rhetorical patterns need to be made very carefully. Researchers in contrastive rhetoric have expressed doubt about the prevalence of the *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* pattern in Japanese writing (e.g. Kubota 1997) as well as the claims that Japanese composition follows a purely inductive style (e.g. Hinds 1990), or that English compositions are necessarily organized deductively (Kubota 1998). There is no space to get into the debate here, but recent research in contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Connor 1999 and Matsuda 1997) emphasizes the importance of moving away from constructing false dichotomies between the L1 and L2 and stresses the need to focus on areas that the two languages share in common just as much as the points in which they may differ.

### 2.2.6 Language samples

As mentioned earlier, a major function of the test preparation guidebooks is to provide learners with a large number of structures, sentence patterns and formulas, and model compositions. While for the most part the language samples they present are both accurate and useful, a closer look at two of the guidebooks (Hanamoto 1995 and Ohya 2000) reveals several examples of questionable usage.<sup>7)</sup>

For example, Hanamoto (1995) presents the following two model answers, both of which fail to follow his own advice on the importance of writing a logically coherent essay that sticks closely to the given topic. In the first, it is difficult to determine whether the main topic of the paragraph is Hideo or the writer’s grandmother, and in the second whether the writer is focusing on her friend Helen, the city of Boston, or her own dreams for the future:

Question: Write a response within 60 words on the topic ‘Someone I know’

Model Answer 1:

*Hideo lives in the countryside where my grandmother lives. My grandmother is my father’s mother and lives in Akita Prefecture. When I was a boy, I often vis-*

*ited her with my parents in the summer. I became friends with him then and often went fishing in a river together. Even today, I often think of him fondly.*

Model Answer 2:

*I'm going to write about Helen, my American pen pal living in Boston. She says it's a very beautiful city. We began writing to each other four years ago. She is 16 and a high-school student. She is very interested in Japanese culture. It's my dream to visit her in America when I become a university student.*

In addition to these problems of logical development and coherence, some samples in Ohya (2000) are problematic at the pragmatic level. The following sentence patterns for declining an invitation will probably strike the reader as excessively formal in the context in which they are provided — a letter from a high school student to his or her pen pal:

- *I regret to say that . . .*
- *I am afraid that . . .*
- *. . . have a previous engagement (appointment)*
- *. . . have a meeting scheduled*

A similar problem is found in these examples of patterns for describing opinions (Ohya 2000):

- *I am of the opinion that . . .*
- *. . ., and thus you cannot deny that . . .*

There are also examples of sentence patterns that may strike the reader as grammatically 'accurate', but awkward in the given discourse context. The first three patterns (Ohya 2000) are for describing an illustration, the fourth for expressing an opinion (Ohya 2000), and the last (Hanamoto 1995) as the opening sentence of the model composition cited above:

- *I see in the picture . . .*
- *The funny point is that . . .*
- *I am sure that it is necessary to . . .* (used to emphasize the necessity of something)
- *They say that . . .* (used to introduce a generally held opinion)
- *I am going to write about . . .*

Finally, Ohya (2000) presents inconsistent and questionable advice on the use of the conjunctions *because/but/so*. He stresses that since *because* is a conjunction, students

should never start a sentence with it; however, in the model answers and sentence patterns he presents, both *but* and *so* are commonly used in that position. This particular point of grammar is a controversial one, and many would now consider it to be more properly thought of as a stylistic rather than grammatical issue. The point, however, is that Ohya's explanation is inconsistent with his use of conjunctions in the model compositions he provides, which is obviously a source of potential confusion for students.

*Comments.* It would be easy to make too much of the above examples of questionable language use found in the exam preparation guidebooks, and it needs to be stressed that they represent a very small percentage of the total number of sentence patterns and model answers provided in the guidebooks. However, the existence of such language raises the important issue of what to do about inappropriate, inaccurate, or inconsistent uses of language that our learners may have encountered. Notice, too, that most of the problems cited above are not related to grammatical accuracy, but are issues of rhetorical, pragmatic, or discourse appropriateness — precisely the areas in which EFL students are said to have the most trouble (see, for example, Bardovi-Harlig 2001 and Cook 2001). This is a helpful reminder that EFL writing teachers need to address these areas in addition to whatever work on the writing process, grammatical structures, and mechanics they include in their classes.

It also suggests the need for a closer examination of the language samples that students are exposed to so teachers can identify any areas where negative language transfer may be traced to the language instruction they have received. I have long noticed, for example, the widespread use of the expression '*I am going to write about . . .*' as the topic sentence in the introductions of students' essays, so I was not surprised to find it as the opening of the model essay cited above in Hanamoto (1995). A more thorough investigation of the kind of language that students are exposed to at the secondary school level will no doubt help us to identify other instances of similar problems.

### 3. Concluding remarks

Before making some final comments on unresolved issues that have been brought up either implicitly or explicitly in the paper, it might help to summarize some of the major observations made so far. In Section 1, which dealt with the types of texts that are included in the English composition question on entrance exams, we discovered the following:

- Translation from Japanese to English remains the major writing task that students are expected to complete on university entrance exams.
- However, students are increasingly expected to be able to write a composi-

tion in English.

- The compositions required of students are of limited length, most commonly single paragraphs of up to 60 words.
- Test preparation guidebooks focus especially on three text types: opinions (i.e. persuasive texts), descriptions and definitions, and personal essays. These texts emphasize the importance of a clear thesis statement, supporting sentences, logical development and coherence, and a clear conclusion. These text types and features are also emphasized in most mainstream EFL writing classes.
- In addition, the guidebooks also briefly cover other text types such as 'creative' or 'free' writing and narratives.
- Some tasks (e.g. writing conversations and letters) attempt to measure a student's ability to produce appropriate speech acts such as apologizing and refusing rather than their 'composition' skills.
- One text type that is commonly found in EFL writing classes but that receives very little attention in the exam preparation guidebooks is summary writing.

Section 2 of the paper discussed the kinds of instruction that students receive to improve their writing skills. The main features of this instruction were described in the following way:

- The test preparation guidebooks are similar to mainstream EFL approaches regarding such issues as the reading/writing connection, the various stages in the writing process, and the importance of coherence and logical development in a text.
- At the same time, however, the guidebooks focus attention primarily on basic grammatical structures and useful sentence patterns and formulas.
- Students are encouraged to use the L1 in the brainstorming stage of writing and admonished to avoid translating from Japanese to English when it comes time to write up their compositions.

- Some of the guidebooks stress that the purpose behind writing is fundamentally different in the L1 and L2, claiming that in the L1 it is to develop the ability for self expression, while in the L2 it is to improve the ability to persuade. They also mention differences in L1 and L2 rhetorical organization, claiming that L1 texts are organized inductively or according to the *ki-sho-ten-kentsu*, whereas L2 texts are organized deductively.
- Although the language samples presented in the guidebooks are generally accurate, there are some samples that may be considered to be inappropriate at the pragmatic, rhetorical or text-discourse levels.

The following implications for the EFL writing teacher in Japan follow from the above observations:

- Although translation from Japanese to English still accounts for most of the writing students do on entrance exams, the existence of the English composition question proves that (some) universities are attempting (to some degree at least) to measure students' 'communicative ability', suggesting that we may need to rethink our understanding of and attitudes towards entrance exams.<sup>8)</sup>
- Although the test preparation guidebooks all stress grammatical structures and the memorization of sentence patterns and formulas, they also include advice about the writing process that is consistent with EFL writing practice, suggesting we may also need to reassess our attitude towards these guidebooks and the approaches taken in them.
- Following from the above, teachers need to clarify the place that work on structures and sentence patterns and formulas will have in their writing classes.
- Keeping in mind that the guidebooks advocate the use of the L1 in the first stage of the writing process, teachers need to carefully weigh the benefits and the drawbacks of the use of the L1 in the writing process.
- Statements made in the guidebooks regarding rhetorical patterns and the purpose of writing instruction in the L1 and L2 cultures are debatable and demonstrate the need for teachers to carefully consider any assumptions they hold or statements they make about differences and similarities across

languages.

- By better acquainting themselves with the language instruction and materials students are exposed to, teachers will be able to identify those areas of negative transfer from the previous learning experiences of students (see the example cited in 2.2.6 on starting an essay with the phrase '*I am going to write about . . .*').

Obviously, we have to be very cautious about assuming that any of the statements above applies to the entire university-level population in Japan. The English composition question is by no means a universal feature on entrance exams yet, being primarily found on the exams for national, public, and the more competitive private universities (Hanamoto 1995). However, the claim that this paper has set out to make is a limited one: the experiences that students have had in preparing for the English composition question on university exams is of potential value for any EFL writing teacher in Japan who is looking for ways to reflect on and improve his or her teaching practice. A great deal of work remains to be done on uncovering the many factors involved in the experiences our students have had preparing for the exams, and a great many questions remain to be answered. Some of the questions include:

- How — and how much — is writing taught in *juku* classrooms in Japan? This paper is limited to information gathered from self-study books published by major *juku* and says nothing about how the information and approaches found in them get translated into actual classroom practice.
- How is English writing taught at the junior high school and high school level, and how is it similar to or different from how writing is taught at *juku*?
- How much practice do students actually have with writing? Are they producing L2 texts or are they primarily reading the self-study books and memorizing the patterns found in them?
- If students are producing texts, are they getting feedback on their writing? If they are, what kind (for example, do teachers focus on local or global 'errors')?

In spite of the limitations of this study and the issues it leaves unresolved, I hope it has demonstrated the importance of learning more about the previous writing experi-

ences our students have had before we meet them in our classrooms. Not only will this help explain how they may perform on a given writing task, but it offers us useful hints about how we can reflect on and refine our own teaching practice.

### Notes

- 1) Note, however, that Yoneyama (2001) states the shortest compositions include texts of up to 80 words.
- 2) The questions used in the guidebooks are taken directly from entrance exams from previous years. Some are presented unchanged, and others have been simplified. Also, I have translated those questions that originally appear in Japanese.
- 3) One source (Yoneyama 2001) presented a map and asked students to use it to give directions for getting from Point A to B. This was the only such use in the category of visual prompts.
- 4) Some guidebooks tell students to familiarize themselves with the letter format (e.g. Ishigami 1996), while others (e.g. Ohya 2000) downplay the need, explaining that the format is often provided on the exam itself. Ohya (2000) also states that this text type is appearing more frequently recently.
- 5) That is, not only classes that teach such prototypically academic text types as research papers and review articles, but those that cover expository texts such as comparison/contrast, persuasive essays, and definition and description. These text types are often viewed as giving students their first experience with features found in the more prototypically academic text types such as a thesis statement and supporting evidence.
- 6) When writers argue against the need for ‘analytical’ knowledge of grammar, they are referring to the kind of knowledge that allows one to label parts of speech and parse sentences. As we’ll see later, they very much believe that students need to internalize basic grammatical structures and memorize large numbers of patterns and formulas.
- 7) I am limiting myself to these two sources for reasons of space and do not mean to suggest that questionable advice on usage was a greater problem in these texts than in others.
- 8) It should be noted that the composition question is often — but not always — a small part of the overall percentage of points awarded on the exam. As Ohya (2000) tells us, it can be up to 30% of the total on some national university exams.

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