

Freshman English Writing Survey
Sandra Eggers
Asia University

Introduction

This paper presents two questionnaires on writing for the Freshman English classes. A brief description of Asia University students and some of the questions that motivated this research will begin this paper. The next section will discuss the results and draw some conclusions. The paper will conclude with recommendations for classroom instruction.

Description of Students

At Asia University every Freshman English class contains a wide range of writing ability. If asked to write a paragraph, some students write very short "paragraphs" consisting of only one or two sentences or sentence fragments. However, other students write quite long and complex paragraphs following correct form and often expressing complicated ideas. These students seem to enjoy writing and put considerable thought and energy into assignments. Understanding the background of our students enables us to be more effective classroom instructors and allows us to be more culturally aware of our students' educational background.

Because of a language barrier, particularly at the lower levels, teachers are often not really aware of the attitudes and history of the students in their classes. Are these students skilled or unskilled writers? Have they ever learned about writing process techniques such as brainstorming? How much writing have they done in English classes in high school? How much writing have they done and are they doing in Japanese? Do they even like to write in Japanese, let alone English? I

designed two questionnaires to help me understand the writing history and attitudes of my Freshman English students. I also hoped that they would shed light onto the writing behavior that I observed in classes.

Administration of the Questionnaires

All three of the Freshman English level 10 classes filled out questionnaires. To broaden the range of responses, the Business and Law level 24 classes and the Economics and International Relations level 8 classes were included in the sample. This is by no means a random sample of the Freshman English students. The results will be skewed toward students with lower writing ability as none of the very top level classes were polled. However, the attitudes and opinions that emerge are probably valid for many of the students in the lower levels.

All three teachers involved in the research did essentially the same steps in administering the questionnaires, although timing of the paragraph writing occurred differently. Two teachers assigned the paragraph as homework and another had the students do it in class. To insure that students could understand and respond easily to the questions, the questionnaires were given in Japanese and the students answered in that language also. The questions are mostly multiple choice, but the few that did require a written response were translated by student assistants with a fairly high ability in English.

The Questionnaires and Responses

This first questionnaire explores the general writing history and attitudes of Freshman English students. Following

are the results (The figures are rounded so totals may occasionally not add up to exactly 100%).

1) How many years of school have you completed?

- a. 12 years 65%
- b. 13 years 24%
- c. 14-17 years 10%

(There are a number of foreign students in Freshman English classes who have attended university in their home countries. Also, it is not unusual for Japanese students to attend a preparatory school for one or two years before attending university.)

2) How many years of English have you taken?

- a. 6 years 51%
- b. 7 years 30%
- c. 8-12 years 14%

3) Have you had a native language English teacher before this year?

- a. Yes 45%
- b. No 55%

3a) If yes, for how many years?

- a. 1 year 58%
- b. 2 years 20%
- c. 3-5 years 16%

4) Have you learned about brainstorming (such as mind mapping and list making) before in writing classes?

- a. Yes 9%
- b. No 91%

4a) If yes, what year in school?

- a. High school first year 14%
- b. High school second year 7%
- c. Freshman at Asia University 64%
- d. Other university 4%

5) Can you generally write adequately for your class assignments such as reports and papers?

- a. Yes 36%
- b. No 64%

6) Can you generally write adequately for real life writing activities such as letter writing?

- a. Yes 41%
- b. No 59%

7) Do you think your Japanese writing ability helps you to write better in English?

- a. Yes 46%
- b. No 54%

8) Do you like to write in Japanese?

- a. Yes 49%
- b. No 51%

- 9) Do you like to write in English?
 a. Yes 32%
 b. No 68%
- 10) What is the hardest aspect of writing in Japanese?
 a. word choice 4%
 b. vocabulary 7%
 c. thinking of ideas 42%
 d. organizing ideas 31%
 e. grammar 6%
 f. other 2%
 g. no response 6%
- 11) What is the hardest aspect of writing in English?
 a. word choice 14%
 b. vocabulary 25%
 c. thinking of ideas 4%
 d. organizing ideas 35%
 e. grammar 1%
 f. no response 18%
- 12) Place a check next to the type of writing you did in your **high school English** classes. Then circle how often you did this type of writing. (NR=no response)
- | | NR | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Yearly |
|----------------------|-----|-------|--------|---------|--------|
| a. grammar exercises | 7% | 32% | 55% | 3% | 3% |
| b. sentences | 38% | 23% | 37% | 3% | 2% |
| c. paragraphs | 79% | 6% | 9% | 3% | 1% |
| d. compositions | 64% | | 22% | 7% | 3% |
| e. letters | 84% | | 4% | 4% | 6% |
- 13) Place a check next to the type of writing you did in your **other high school** (not English) classes. Circle how often you did this type of writing.
- | | NR | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Yearly |
|-----------------|-----|-------|--------|---------|--------|
| a. sentences | 35% | 12% | 36% | 13% | 3% |
| b. paragraphs | 76% | 5% | 9% | 6% | 3% |
| c. compositions | 87% | | 3% | 3% | 7% |
| d. letters | 59% | | 9% | 9% | 22% |
- 14) Place a check next to the type of writing you do in your **other university classes** (not Freshman English). Then circle how often you do this type of writing.
- | | NR | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Yearly |
|--------------------|-----|-------|--------|---------|--------|
| a. paragraphs | 85% | 1% | 9% | 1% | 4% |
| b. compositions | 66% | 2% | 12% | 15% | 5% |
| c. letters | 87% | | 3% | 6% | 3% |
| d. research papers | 70% | | 4% | 16% | 9% |
| e. book reviews | 62% | | 5% | 2% | 14% |

The second questionnaire asked questions specifically about how students write a paragraph. Students were asked to write a paragraph and then fill out this questionnaire after they finished writing.

- 1) Did you use a dictionary?
 - a. Yes 56%
 - b. No 43%

- 1a) Why or why not? (Students wrote their own answers to this question.)
 - a. there are words I don't know 45%
 - b. to check spelling 4%
 - c. not difficult to use the dictionary 2%
 - d. rely on dictionary too much 2%
 - e. thought I couldn't use it 15%
 - f. used the words I know 20%
 - g. asking teacher is easier 2%
 - h. didn't have a dictionary 4%
 - i. found the words before writing 2%

- 2) Did you brainstorm (make a list or a mind map) before you wrote your paragraph?
 - a. Yes 57%
 - b. No 38%

- 2a) Why did you not use mind mapping or some other type of brainstorming technique?
 - a. could do without 10%
 - b. wrote what came to mind 33%
 - c. did it in mind 10%
 - d. didn't know about mind mapping 12%
 - e. no time 18%
 - f. not useful 3%
 - g. troublesome 6%
 - h. thought I didn't have to 6%

- 3) Did you revise or recopy your paragraph after writing?
 - a. Yes 34%
 - b. No 65%

- 4) Did you correct grammar mistakes?
 - a. Yes 37%
 - b. No 61%

- 4a) How many times did you make corrections?
 - a. 1-3 times 78%
 - b. 4-6 times 15%
 - c. 7-10 times 3%
 - d. 11-13 times 2%
 - e. 13 time and above 2%

- 5) Do you usually think of what to write in Japanese and then translate the sentence to English?
 - a. Yes 80%
 - b. No 16%
 - c. No response 4%

Interpretation of the Results

The survey revealed that most of the students are unskilled writers. By unskilled I mean that only a very small percentage have learned about writing process techniques. Most students don't know about the importance of brainstorming techniques or about the concept of writing processes. Some of those that are aware of these techniques consider them a nuisance or too time consuming to be useful. Few students take the time to revise and therefore rely on their first thesis statement. Few students have extensive experience writing in either Japanese or English. English education in Japan has concentrated on grammar exercises, not writing.

Surprisingly, the students don't seem to be overly concerned with error correction. Many students did not use a dictionary at all or only a few times. A significant proportion said they were consciously trying to use the vocabulary they knew. The number of corrections for grammar was also very low.

Another interesting result was what they considered to be the most difficult aspect of writing. For Japanese, the biggest concern was idea development. For English, though, the biggest concern was idea organization. This finding may not be surprising in light of how little English writing many of them have actually done. They are not familiar with the concepts of thesis statements, topic development, and the form of a paragraph or essay. Because many rely heavily on translating their Japanese thoughts into English, the form of their paragraphs is often circular as in Japanese writing, rather than linear as in English writing (Kaplan, 1967).

Recommendations for Freshman English Teachers

The following section will address four characteristics of Freshman English writers that emerged from the research and make suggestions for classroom instruction.

1) Many of the Freshman English students are unskilled writers. They have little practice in writing.

An effective method to help students become more practiced at writing is using journals in classes. Writing is a skill and like any skill, actually doing it is the best practice. Writing in journals allows students the informal writing situations and practice they need. By informal I do not necessarily mean personal. Ruth Spack (1983) recommends the use of journals on classroom topics, rather than purely personal ones--which ESL students feel are inappropriate for classroom conversation--to help students develop ideas. I assign journal topics that personalize the themes in the Freshman English text, *New Perspectives*. For example, I ask them to write whether or not they plan to marry or what type of job they would like in the future. Often, the "writing" is simply making a list or a mind map. In this way, students are practicing many types of writing.

2) Students view writing as a one-step task involving little planning or revising. They are unaware that writing is a process.

One technique that could be used to help students learn about the writing process is to have the students do brainstorming either individually or with a partner. This initial brainstorming can be shared with the class through a group discussion, resulting in putting many different ideas on

the board. The teacher can feel free to interject ideas. Students then copy all of the ideas into their journals and choose the ones they want to write a paragraph about. This brainstorming worked particularly well with the topic, "Why do People Get Married?"

To help students learn about revising, teachers can have students rewrite paragraphs from tests. The teachers write comments, usually in question form, on all of the paragraphs. The teacher then groups the students--hopefully with people of varying writing ability. Students then read the paragraphs and ask each other questions, using the teacher's questions as a starting point. One of the paragraphs my students wrote in my classes had originated from a list of questions students asked each other about working women. In helping each other to revise the paragraphs, students looked back at the original list of questions.

3) Students consider organizing ideas a difficult aspect of writing English.

Presenting models for students to use and copy will help students with their writing. I usually showed students a sample writing early in the explanation of the writing assignment. With lower levels it seems particularly important to model thesis sentences. I have also copied both good and bad samples of student writing onto overhead transparencies. Watson (1982) suggests that models are important for the ESL classroom, but that they should be introduced after the students have written a draft. This allows students to create and own their own texts and meaning. Kaplan (1966), on the other hand, urges teachers to use models throughout the writing process. Introduction of

models will help students understand the overall linear organization of an English paragraph or essay in contrast to the often circular nature of a Japanese paragraph.

Conclusion

This survey was done in November 1993, which is almost the end of the university year in Japan. The information and ideas I gained in how to teach students writing at Asia University is invaluable. Next year, I will give the questionnaires to my students. I plan to revise and refine the questions and have them ready at the beginning of the year. I invite all of my colleagues to administer the questionnaires to their students. Since this survey was not a representative sample, they may find that their students' writing skills are different from those students represented here. In this way, we can become more effective teachers and the Freshman English Program can begin to gather information for a new curriculum.

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