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English Language Writing Centres in Japanese Universities: What do Students Really Need?

Jim McKinley, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract

The installation of English language writing centres in Japanese universities is a relatively recent event—the first ones established with funding from the Ministry of Education in 2004. Because of the EFL writing context, setting up a writing centre requires consideration of students' needs and cultural expectations of writing and writing centres. In general, writing centres that have been established in Japanese universities follow a structure similar to those in the US. This raises the question as to whether or not this is appropriate for the particular needs of EFL students and the obstacles they face. For this study, in order to explore students' attitudes toward writing centres and the role they play in writing education, interview data was collected from students of English composition in two different departments at a university in Japan well known for its English language education: the English department, which does not have a writing centre, and the liberal arts department, which has one of the first writing centres established in Japan.

Keywords: writing centre, Japanese university, EFL writing, peer editing, writer feedback

Introduction & Background to the Study

In the early part of this decade, for Japanese students in English-medium universities overseas, there was a seemingly overwhelming lack of English writing ability. It seemed that many Japanese students had not had much or any previous academic writing education in English before heading overseas. According to the research at the time (e.g. Casanave, 2003; Connor, 2003), this was difficult to explain, as there was a great lack of scholarly investigation being done in writing classrooms in Japanese universities. In 2006 the results of an in-depth qualitative study conducted with English majors at a reputable university in Japan involving classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of students' written texts showed that those students were provided with academic writing classes, but that the lack of emphasis on the importance of writing skills (in comparison to speaking skills, for example) seemed to greatly hinder their writing skills development (McKinley, 2006).

In an unpublished 2007 study carried out at the same university as the current study, there were similar findings, compounded by the fact that there was no writing centre of learning support resources (McKinley, 2007). What was most evident there was that students—with just one writing class per week—were not spending sufficient time and energy

developing their writing skills. The students who voluntarily attended writing workshops for the unpublished study did so gratefully, and all made requests to the department to have a writing centre established.

Historical Background

In general, translation skills, grammar, and spelling accuracy are components of English writing that have held value in Japanese education since the Meiji restoration. Due to this origin of language education in Japan, language mechanics form the basis of assessment of English writing in Japanese educational systems today. In addition to this historical importance, Japan's examination culture has been responsible for reinforcing this value. Ultimately, writing does not fit into Japan's exam culture, a major reason being that it is regarded as difficult to assess (see Hamp-Lyons, 2007)¹. The assessment of content in extended English composition requires knowledge that assessors cannot access easily, due to limited language proficiency on the part of the teachers, and thus this skill remains neglected in a culture that values examination scores over ability to communicate (Gilfert, 1999; Moore & Lamie, 1996; Taylor & Taylor, 1995).

Approaches to EFL Writing in Japan Today (from Product to Process)

The continued reliance on the grammar-translation method is explained by teachers' lack of training in other methodologies (Moore & Lamie, 1996). In universities, the importance of passing examinations is less emphasised, and according to Casanave (2002) in her book *Writing Games*, this is where the grammar-translation method (i.e. *product* approach) leads into the model-product approach (i.e. *process* approach). This shift in approach is related to the inclusion of genre theory and writing for specific purposes (Belcher, 2004). With the new focus on writing for specific purposes, genre studies (sometimes identified as English for Specific Purposes) led to a natural progression of the model-product approach.

¹ Although Hamp-Lyons does not refer explicitly to Japan's exam culture, she refers to exam cultures in general as contrasting "learning cultures" as a way of pointing out the difficulty of assessing writing in an exam culture.

The model-product approach is a pedagogical method focusing on process writing that involves modeling, student-instructor negotiation, and autonomous composition. This approach coincided with developments in writing for specific purposes and genre studies as it allowed flexibility, making the writing process more accessible for both students and instructors and allowing instructors to work directly with students at various stages on the meanings they could create (Hyland, 2003).

Process writing became a popular approach in teaching L2 writing in the 1980s (Susser, 1994) at the same time that communication skills became the focus for curricula and policy-makers (Carroll, 1997). However, it has been suggested that the process revolution may never have actually happened in Japan (Casanave, 2003). Further, the debate remains whether process writing is actually more effective than product or *form* writing (Canagarajah, 2002). In traditional writing classes, the focus was on the typical (usually five-paragraph) essay form and writing style, not content or structure, as teachers were unable to provide feedback of any value on content (Shih, 1986).

A researcher and teacher of English language scholarship in Japan, Yoshimura (2001 as cited in Connor, 2003), conducted an experimental study echoing the work of Oi and Kamimura (1997), who found Japanese students were successful when taught Western argumentative essay patterns as well as organisational patterns and coherence structure. Yoshimura acknowledges criticisms of teaching the *form* as opposed to the process and content of essay writing, but is convinced that the benefit for beginning Japanese writing students comes when they are comfortable with a *form* of writing. Yoshimura goes on to explain that their success with *form* can then be transferred to future writing contexts. Yoshimura, as well as Matsuda (2001), suggest Japanese students are more comfortable with a *form* of writing because of a lack of familiarity with English writing strategies.

Anthony (2000) refers to the teaching of *form* as the teaching of a *genre*. In a study he conducted in a university in Japan, it was noted that students with considerable knowledge in their subject areas could develop non-formal aspects in written text. He maintains however, that

if the learners had little experience with the target context, a course aimed at developing writing skills needed to operate in that context would be destined to fail. In such cases, a focus on the more easily observable, formal features of the target genre would perhaps be more effective. (p. 1)

Because English is a foreign language in Japan and not a second language, students do not sense any particular importance of English in their everyday lives. Also, the time frame for a foreign language course tends to be short in Japanese universities—usually fifteen 90-minute lessons over a period of one semester (Anthony, 2000). Although approaches in process writing pedagogy may be useful, Anthony (2000) explains that

most have been developed in classrooms where the learners are either native speakers or approaching native speaker levels. In a foreign language classroom, on the other hand, few learners will be at an advanced level, and many will be struggling with even basic vocabulary and grammar points. To ask such learners to analyze texts and negotiate the writer's purpose, audience's assumptions, and so on components of process writing is clearly unrealistic. (p. 1)

Based on Anthony's observations, it seems that process writing did not necessarily have a place in Japanese universities due to a general lack of proficiency of the students. Therefore, instead of taking up major changes in pedagogy as part of the process revolution, teachers of English writing in Japan have instead maintained product-based writing. Sensing that L2 writing pedagogy was in need of some innovation without taking up the apparently "unrealistic" efforts of process writing, scholars and researchers of the teaching of English writing in Japan have been looking more towards social and political aspects (content) instead of linguistic and textual aspects (accuracy) in finished written products. Casanave (2003), in her discussion of the debate over Japan's position on the process and "post-process" movements, explains that a socio-political perspective needs to be expanded in order to explore the diversity of individual writers and writing contexts. This emphasis is centred on the basis that L2 writing education in Japan never caught on to the process movement.

Muncie (2000) suggests, however, that process writing exists in Japan but is ineffective in that students have no choice in using feedback from their teachers who are considered *experts*. Students are in no position to negotiate with redrafts; they simply must follow their expert teacher's advice as closely as possible. The feedback therefore loses any value it may have had, he argues, had students been involved in it. In a trial conducted by Muncie (2000) with academic English writing students in a Japanese university, using peer feedback on mid-drafts and teacher feedback on final drafts encouraged writer autonomy. The students were required to produce a summary using points from both peer and teacher

feedback, which allowed the feedback to have more long-term effect on students' future writing.

Collaborative Writing, Teacher Feedback and Peer Response

Japanese university students, with appropriate supervision, tend to respond positively to a more collaborative style of writing in which dialogue between themselves as writers and others helps them to achieve a final goal (Kubota 1999). As Clark and Ivanic (1997) point out, “With respect to the interactive/interpersonal aspect of writing, writing collaboratively is a very different activity from writing alone” (p. 83). Independent writing requires facilitation, and this is normally achieved through successful “dialogue” between writer and assessor through teacher feedback in various stages of the writing process. Student writers are able to incorporate feedback and response not only from teachers but also peers into the process of writing (Atkinson & Connor, 2008).

Peer response has developed from the social construction of knowledge (i.e. that knowledge is socially constructed, see Vygotsky, 1978), and is an important part of L2 writing instruction at the university level. Social relations may vary more widely based on students' backgrounds with the target language, and although some earlier studies revealed negative reactions to peer response (due to embarrassment or shame of others seeing their work, as well as a lack of confidence in being useful as peer editors, see Falchikov, 1995), others showed that revisions based on peer response increased performance and confidence of responders (Leki, 1990). However, doubts remain on the validity of peer comments (Atkinson & Connor, 2008), particularly in consideration of meeting the expectations of native speaker teachers.

Attitudes to collaborative learning are ideological (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). The idea that collaborative writing would lend itself well to Japanese culture seems logical. Individualism is often played down, so building a piece of writing collaboratively would seem appealing. However, traditional Japanese learning styles lead to hesitance and resistance to collaboration (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Ideas that only the teacher (and often only a native English teacher) can provide useful feedback are not uncommon. In addition, students may resist peer work activities since they lack confidence, as there is a belief that the purpose of peer work is to be helped, and that can only be done by someone with more expertise

(Falchikov, 1995). Thus it would seem that there would be great interest in receiving tutorial guidance in a writing centre.

Writing Centres – Politics and Other Obstacles

It was around 1975 that writing centres changed from writing *clinics* to writing *centres*; conceptually they were no longer places for error correction, but rather places to discuss and receive advice on writing (Haswell, 2008). A significant point here is that the writing centre tutor became part of the teacher–student dialogue. This has been described as an “interruption” or an attachment of “an ancillary learning centre course to the lecture teacher’s classroom” (Haswell, 2008, p. 339). The fact is, the one-to-one, face-to-face conference that happens in the writing centre is a completely different kind of dialogue, one that follows the line of reasoning that university students receiving writing instruction are “conceptualized in terms of catch-up, remediation, or immaturity. Ultimately university writing teachers have taken on a repair role, and the writing centre tutors left with the truly incompetent” (Haswell, 2008, p. 339).

This raises the issue for writing centre tutors as to whether they should conform to the academic system—the set “writing program” within the department—or if they should critique the system in order to encourage students to understand the value of critique and learn to be effective critics themselves (Pemberton, 2006). It is a question of the goals of a writing centre. Should tutors be serving as teaching assistants, helping students to reach the expectations of the writing teachers? Or should they be guiding and offering students advice in order to help them become better writers in general? There are many factors to consider in the approaches a writing centre and its tutors take, but if they can agree on a community of practice in which writer identities are facilitated and everyone involved is a full participant (i.e. utilising Vygotsky’s social construction of knowledge framework where students can negotiate their learning and development with instructors and tutors), then everyone should be able to benefit (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007).

A Writing Centre in Japan

The writing centre in the liberal arts department of the university where the study was held was established in 2004 (along with two other universities) as one of the "GP" (Good Practice) projects with funding from the Ministry of Education and was awarded in recognition of excellence in undergraduate education (Johnston, Cornwell, & Yoshida, 2008). The centre provides students with one-to-one writing instruction in English only. Students can work with tutors on all aspects of writing, usually consulting the writing centre with course papers and application letters and essays. Although designed mostly for undergraduate students of the liberal arts department, some graduate students and faculty also use it. The group of tutors is made up of graduate students and two people with extensive tutoring experience (in 2008 there were ten graduate student tutors and two non-student tutors). The tutor training requires tutors to participate in a training session and read materials. The centre has one director who is a professor of English in the department.

The Study

As part of any language curriculum, there is a certain focus on the *skills* of the target language, typically reading, writing, listening and speaking. For students in the English department, these skills are covered in compulsory or *core* curriculum courses. Listening and speaking are lumped together into one course, and reading is presumably addressed in the ever-unpopular writing course (although separate reading courses are offered in some departments). The writing teachers have the task of making writing appealing to students, and the obvious approach is the popular communicative style, where students can work in groups and spend time peer reading each other's writing. (This Western approach to writing education coincides with the movement towards the process approach which although late, has been gradually replacing the product approach in English writing curricula across Japan.) All of these ideas are built into a "writing program"—a seemingly mysterious part of the university curriculum.

This evasive concept of a *writing program* is most often associated with Writing Program Administrators—those people responsible for the writing curriculum. That person is usually a department chair or some other person in a leader role who may or may not have any interest in writing (L'Eplattenier & Mastrangelo, 2004). The "writing program" in these cases is for all intents and purposes left entirely up to the teachers. There are no guidelines, not even

a standardized set of goals between writing teachers. There is no way to assure quality control unless students complain. This is the situation at the university of the current study where there are four different departments in which English writing is taught. This study was designed to investigate students' attitudes toward the writing education offered by two of those four departments, and to explore how any awareness of a "writing program" affected student attitude. While the liberal arts department has made efforts to assemble some kind of writing program (in comparison to the others that have not), and has established a writing centre, it has not been established within a documented writing *program*, per se. Students may receive widely disparate instruction depending on their teacher. Ultimately, and particularly for the English department students, the classes from which teachers receive the most positive feedback are student-centred, and focused on collaborative writing.

Data Collection

Structured interviews were conducted with all students from four randomly selected compulsory English composition classes, two in the English department (all were second-year students of advanced-level proficiency) and two in the liberal arts department (all first-year students considered of native or near-native fluency). A total of 76 students from the four classes participated. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. There were eight interview questions as follows:

1. Have you ever lived overseas? Where? How long?
2. Have you ever studied in an international school or school that specializes in English language studies? If so, which school (where), and for how long?
3. Have you ever been to a writing centre for extra assistance on your writing (in any language)? If so, where, when and in what language?
4. Do you feel it would help you for the writing assignments you have now to work with a tutor in a writing centre? Why or why not? (Liberal arts students were asked to provide feedback on any experiences in their writing centre.)
5. Do you feel that you are a strong writer in English? Why or why not?
6. Do you believe your writing classes are providing you with sufficient writing skills development? Why or why not?
7. Do you believe peer reading in class is a valuable exercise? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel that you are able to work independently on your English writing? Why or why not?

Analysis of Results

The English department students and liberal arts students provided a variety of responses, but there were some significant trends noted. Typical of the students at this university, most had overseas experience. The interviews were conducted in English.

Compared with the two English department classes, the liberal arts students were generally more positive about what the university was providing them in terms of writing skills development. In addition, the liberal arts students were generally more positive about their own writing ability and about peer reading activities in their writing classes. They were also more positive about writing independently.

Although there is no writing centre available to English department students, some had past experiences with writing centres in their high schools. All responded positively about what a writing centre can offer, but negatively about the writing skills development offered by the university.

It would be ideal to make a link between the writing centre and students' satisfaction with their writing skills development, but the comments by those liberal arts students who had used the writing centre were noteworthy. While most students were positive about the experience, with appreciative comments ranging from good advice to individual attention, nearly half of those students commented that the value of using the writing centre depended on the tutor, and two commented that they actually received bad advice.

Specific Cases

Liberal Arts class 1 (15 students): One third had used the writing centre. Of those, all five students were positive about the writing centre, commenting that they received good advice and appreciated the individual attention. Of those students who had not used the writing centre, there were two negative comments: "I don't need it," and, "My friend had a bad experience."

In this class, all students felt positive about their writing skills development in their classes. Three students (all who had never used the writing centre) gave a neutral or negative response about peer reading exercises. One commented, "Professor feedback is better."

There were a total of five students who responded positively about writing independently, none having been to the writing centre.

Liberal Arts class 2 (24 students): Fifteen of the students had used the writing centre. Of those, nine were neutral or negative about the writing centre, mostly concerned that it depends on the tutor whether the writing centre is helpful or not. The positive responses ranged from helpful advice on grammar and overall writing skills to a general feeling of a need for the centre. The two negative comments were: “Bad advice,” and, “The tutor couldn’t help.”

In this class three students felt negative about their writing skills development in their classes. Of those, two had not been to the writing centre. The one who had been gave a neutral “depends on the tutor” response. Nearly all (21 students) were positive about peer reading. As for confidence in writing independently, the class was fairly evenly split with nine positive, seven neutral, and eight negative. Of the nine positive responses, only two had been to the writing centre. Of the fifteen students who had been to the writing centre, thirteen of them were neutral or negative about writing independently.

English class 1 (18 students): Only three students had experienced a writing centre before enrolling in university. Sixteen students suggested they would go to a writing centre if they could. Four students gave neutral or negative responses to their writing skills development in their classes, three of those being the students with writing centre experience. Three students gave positive responses for writing independently, only one with writing centre experience.

English class 2 (19 students): No students had ever experienced a writing centre. Nearly all (17 students) suggested they would go to a writing centre if they could. The one negative comment was: “[I would not go to a writing centre because] we need to think for ourselves.” This class had the highest ratio of dissatisfaction with their writing skills development in their classes with six giving neutral responses. There were three neutral and one negative response to peer reading. The negative comment was: “I can’t give advice.” Of the three students who responded positively about writing independently, one was neutral and one was negative toward using a writing centre.

Conclusion

The study found that in the English department where there is no writing centre, the students were found to be less positive about peer editing in class and working independently than their counterparts in the liberal arts department who do have a writing centre. Students in the liberal arts department who provided data were much more positive about peer editing and working independently with their own writing, but less positive about the writing centre.

Ultimately, there is much to consider in the installation of a foreign language writing centre. The idea of implementing a writing centre as a way of nurturing students' ability to write independently seems to have been lost somewhat on the students in this study. This is not to suggest that the writing centre isn't reaching the students and fulfilling a need. One issue is that students don't have a clear idea of what the writing centre is supposed to do for them. Students' expectations seem often to conflict with those of the tutor. For example, comments in the interviews included, "I wanted him to fix my grammar but he wouldn't," and, "I thought if I went to the writing centre I'd get an A on my paper... but I actually failed it!" One solution (put into practice as of April 2010 at the writing centre) is for students to complete a form that requires them to consider their needs specific to the writing they bring to the centre. The form was built using feedback from the writing centre tutors and is titled "The Writing Center Request Form" (see Appendix). It gives students a chance to review their writing, and be reminded that the tutors are not going to correct their writing, but will attempt to answer any particular questions raised by the student.

The other issue lies in the goals of the centre, students, and teachers. The tutors are currently serving more as teaching assistants, rather than guides to students' writing skills development. The students are asking the tutors to help them meet the expectations of a particular task, rather than discussing general writing needs. It seemed clear in this study that it was the students who were able to identify real writing needs who benefitted the most from the centre. For the others, particularly those who felt neutral about the centre, the issue was often that the tutor may not have been able to help explain the teachers' expectations on a task. In those two negative responses from Liberal Arts class 2, it seems the tutors even gave advice that went against the task expectations. This is a dangerous path. It seems obvious that the centre needs to move away from this type of tutoring, and more towards general skills development. A strong recommendation would be for the centre to start writing workshops on specific themes in collaboration with the writing teachers. Some suggested workshop themes

(borrowed from the University of Sydney's Learning Centre and adapted for use in the unpublished 2007 study mentioned in the introduction) include: "Structures: Grammar and the Paragraph," "Critical Writing," "Reading for Effective Note Taking," and "Critical Reading." These workshops could be several weeks long with at least one meeting per week. This should help assist students to become more independent and stronger writers.

Notes on the contributor

Jim McKinley is an Assistant Professor of English and interim director of the Writing Center in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. His research interests include EFL writing curriculum design and implementation, and critical writing pedagogy.

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The Writing Center Request Form

Student: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____

Professor: _____

Assignment and/or area of focus (must be **detailed**): _____

Student pre-session checklist: (You **MUST** check these before your conference!)

I have the most **updated draft** of my paper, and any comments or feedback from my professor (if available).

I have **necessary readings and notes** to help facilitate the discussion.

★NOTE: *Tutors can NOT help you with course content. Such questions should be asked to your professor.*

I have **re-read my paper** before bringing it to the center, and have the following points I want to discuss with my tutor:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

★NOTE: *Tutors will NOT correct your grammar.*

I have made my appointment at least **a few days before** the assignment due date. Assignment due date: _____

★NOTE: *The tutorial affects the whole writing process. You may require MAJOR revisions that will take time. Your conference is not an editing session for minor mistakes.*

Tutor signature/comments: _____

Student evaluation of tutorial (please be specific and detailed, and return to Prof.):
