Composing Strategies of Japanese Learners of English

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This paper consists of two studies. The first study describes the composing activities by Japanese learners of English in terms of revising strategies. The result shows that poor writers tend to focus on surface level of writing such as spelling, grammar, etc., whereas good writers focus on meaning. The second study investigates the effects of 'global consciousness', i.e. good writers' composing strategy, on students' writings. As a result, the writers who were given the instruction of 'global consciousness' earned significantly higher scores than the writers directed to write without the instruction. Furthermore, contrary to our expectation, the writings of poor writers' improved not only in coherence and clarity, but also in usage as a result of the instruction.

1. Introduction

It is often said that writing English is a very difficult skill to learn and also to teach, especially for foreign students and teachers of English. In the school setting, it appears that until recently exercises of translation of Japanese into English have mainly been done as a writing activity where vocabulary and grammar have been focused. The focus of teaching writing has not been beyond a sentence level. It was not until quite recently that paragraph writing or discourse level of writing were introduced into the teaching of writing.

However, exercises of translation needs a kind of special skill to put Japanese into English or sensitivity for languages and also lacks in applicability. Teaching grammar and vocabulary is important, but nobody denies it takes a fairly long time for students to acquire enough of them. Also, it would not seem so easy that teaching the concept of paragraph writing will improve students' writing.

The writing ability of English which foreign learners should acquire first, we suppose,
is to write what they want to say even with many mistakes in grammar, vocabulary or spelling. We believe that teaching the strategy of planning or ordering what one wants to say before writing (pre-writing activity), or the strategy of checking what one has written whether one can say what is intended after writing (revising activity), is important especially for learners who already have some knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In short, if students learn the way to plan what they want to write or clarify the points of their writing before writing and the way to check their written products objectively from the viewpoint of coherence or clarity after writing, we imagine that they can produce more consistent and clearer writings than before.

Our purposes in these studies are, firstly, to investigate the composing strategies of Japanese learners of English, especially in terms of revising strategies employed by good writers and poor writers, and compare the findings with the results of previous research. The second purpose is to investigate how teaching the composing strategies of good writers to poor writers, and making good writers more conscious of the strategies they use, affect their products.

2. Related Studies

As Okihara (1985) points out, not much progress of research has been made in the teaching of writing, especially in the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language.

In the field of teaching English as a first language, the researches of Stallard (1974), Perl (1979), Pianko (1979), Sommers (1980), and Faigley and Witte (1981) seem to be important concerning revision. Stallard (1974) found that high scorers on an essay test made 184 revisions whereas poor scorers made only 64 revisions, and that high scorers made significantly more revisions on single word, multiple word and paragraph. Perl (1979) described that revising strategies unskilled writers employ are mainly surface error-hunting, lacking in flexibility such as reordering ideas. Pianko (1979) also noted that 'traditional' (average) writers made 3.71 revisions on average while writers in the remedial course made 2.56 revisions. With student writers and experienced adult writers as her sample, Sommers (1980) described that adult writers can make revisions on every level considering their readers, but student writers make revisions just as a rewording activity. In a study involving 6 advanced writers and 6 inexperienced writers, Faigley and Witte (1981) found that advanced writers made more revisions of all kinds than inexperienced writers, especially on the macro-structure level.

In the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language, research on revising strategies is extremely rare. Raimes (1985) found that the revisions by foreign students taking ESL composition courses were made mainly while writing and almost all of them were not employed as 'a clean-up operation'. In a more recent experimental study
involving 4 students in a remedial course and 4 students in a nonremedial course, Raimes (1987) found that the latter made more revisions and editing than the former.

The researches reported here roughly show that good writers make more revisions than poor writers, especially on the meaning level.

3. Study I

3.1 Purposes

The purposes of this study are to investigate the composing strategies of Japanese learners of English, especially in terms of revising strategies employed while writing and one week after writing by good writers and poor writers, and compare the findings with the results of previous research. One week after writing, it is expected that the subjects could achieve enough distance from their compositions and see them more objectively. We will see how the objectivity affects their revising.

3.2 The Subjects

The participants were 50 university students enrolled in a required freshman English course.

3.3 Procedure

The students were asked to write free composition (minimum 100 words) about their summer holidays following the directions listed below:

1. Use pens or ball-point pens.
2. Do not erase what you have written.
3. Draw a line on the part you want to correct, if you find it necessary to correct what you have written. (You may mark with a cross if the part you want to correct is long such as one paragraph, or two.)
4. Do not consult a dictionary.

One week after writing, the students were given back their compositions and asked to re-write them on new papers according to the following directions.

1. Correct whatever parts you think are incorrect or strange.
2. Draw a red underline on the parts you have changed as your teacher can find where you have changed.
3. You may use dictionaries this time.

Two scorers rated first editions of 50 students on 5-point scales in terms of (1) coherence, (2) clarity, and (3) usage including vocabulary, grammar and style, then picked 10 skilled students and 11 unskilled students out of 50.

Faigley and Witte’s (1981) taxonomy was used for counting and coding the changes that occurred in the first and second editions of student compositions. The taxonomy
was as follows:

![Figure1. A Taxonomy of Revision Changes](image)

Faigley & Witte(1981:403)

This taxonomy classifies revision changes as surface changes and text-base changes. Surface changes include formal changes such as correction of spelling or punctuation, and meaning-preserving changes which do not affect original meaning (e.g. ‘You pay two dollars’ for ‘You pay a two dollar entrance fee’).

Text-base changes are divided into microstructure changes and macrostructure changes. Microstructure changes affect meaning to the extent which readers can not infer its original meaning, but do not alter the summary or gist of a text. However, macrostructure changes have the most profound effect on meaning, changing the summary of a writing.

4. Results

4.1 The comparison between skilled group and unskilled group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Writing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second Writing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>skilled</strong></td>
<td><strong>unskilled</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F: Formal Changes, MP: Meaning-Preserving Changes, Mi: Microstructure Changes,
Ma: Macrostructure Changes.
*Figures in the tables indicate the means of revisions per 100 words. \[ \text{significant difference between two groups.} \] (p<.05)

4.2 The comparison between first and second writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Table 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Group</td>
<td>Unskilled Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first</td>
<td>second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{significant difference between two groups.} \] (p<.05)

5. Discussion

The first task of this research was to discover whether Japanese learners of English revise their composition in the same way as the subjects in the related studies. Table 1 indicates that good writers showed a greater frequency of microstructure and macrostructure changes, whereas poor writers showed a greater frequency of formal and meaning-preserving changes. The differences concerning meaning-preserving and microstructure changes between the two groups were significant. This tendency supports the result of the related studies that good writers tend to revise at global or meaning level while poor writers tend to revise at surface level.

However, revisions made one week after writing(second writing) showed almost the opposite tendency. As indicated in table 2, good writers made more changes in formal, meaning-preserving and microstructure categories, whereas poor writers made more changes in macrostructure category. From this result, it can be easily imagined that poor writers, who could have the objectivity one week after first writing, found the defects of macrostructure level in their compositions such as lack of coherence or a lack of clarity, while good writers, who wrote the first draft with more consciousness of meaning, did not see many defects of macrostructure level, so tried to correct the flaws at more surface level instead.

Table 4, in which the revisions between first and second writings of poor writers are compared, indicates that the frequency of formal changes significantly decreases(2.39→0.94, p<.05), and the frequency of macrostructure changes significantly increases(0→1.05, p<.05). Table 3 also shows the increase of macrostructure changes by good writers, but this increase resulted from many changes by one subject. In the second writing, few of good writers revised at macrostructure level.
Furthermore, what should be noted here is that all of the macrostructure changes by poor writers in the second writing were the addition of small and large chunks of text whereas half of the macrostructure revisions by one good writer who made many macrostructure revisions were deletion of some parts already written. That is, there is the possibility that good writers can add and also delete what they have written to clarify their points, but poor writers can only add something to what they have written. Experienced composition teachers often say that deleting is much more difficult than adding for students. Thus, it may be said that the more skilled the writers become, the more they delete what they have written to make their points clearer besides adding. It is an interesting hypothesis this study has suggested, but we need further research.

As described above, Study I showed that poor writers tended to concentrate on the surface level of writings whereas good writers were paying more attention to meaning level. In other words, good writers have more, to use our new term, 'global consciousness.' Furthermore, this study found that a cooling-off period (one week) after writing can facilitate for especially poor writers to achieve enough distance from their own compositions and see them more objectively, and also revise at the more macrostructure level.

6. Study II

6.1 Purposes

The second experiment was conducted in order to investigate the effect of instruction of good writers' strategy, what we call, 'global consciousness,' on writing quality. In other words, the learners' compositions, especially poor writers', will be improved by teaching good writers' strategy, i.e. paying attention to meaning. And whether or not writings of Japanese learners of English will change is judged in terms of coherence, clarity, and usage.

6.2 Procedure

In order to select subjects suitable for our second study and obtain their basic data, we asked 134 students (41 students : A class, 62 students : B class and 31 students : C class) to write free compositions about what they want to do while they are university students (Essay 1), following the same directions given in Study I.

Then, the written products were judged by two raters in terms of coherence, clarity, and usage. Papers could earn up to ten points for each criteria. Thus a total of 30 points was the highest possible score.

As a result, students of A class and B class were judged as equal, and only students of C class received significantly higher scores. Therefore, we decided to use A class as a controlled group, and B and C classes as experimental groups. The data are presented
Table 5
The Quality Ratings of Essay I
(Basic data: before the experiment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A class</th>
<th>B class</th>
<th>C class</th>
<th>A-B</th>
<th>B-C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) a total of three criteria</td>
<td>12.75</td>
<td>12.97</td>
<td>14.39</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) coherence + clarity</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>8.58</td>
<td>9.61</td>
<td>p&lt;.05</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) usage</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in Table 5.

In Study II, students of B and C classes were directed to write free compositions about what they did when they were high school students (Essay II). In addition to the same directions given in Study I, they were given another direction, i.e., not to worry about mechanic errors such as spelling, grammar, etc., but only to pay attention to what they want to say or meaning. That is the composing strategy good writers tend to have consciously or unconsciously. Thus, we hypothesized that writings would improve in the points of clarity, and coherence if students, especially poor writers who tend to worry about local errors, try to consider whether they can write what is intended. On the other hand, A class was given no directions except the ones in Study I.

7. Results

The results were analyzed from the three dimensions, (1) a total of scores for each criteria (coherence + clarity + usage), (2) a total of scores for coherence and clarity, (3) scores for usage. Table 6 presents the summary of data.

Table 6
The Quality Ratings of Essay II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A class controll</th>
<th>B class experimental</th>
<th>C class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) a total of each criteria</td>
<td>11.88</td>
<td>13.97</td>
<td>14.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) coherence + clarity</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>9.12</td>
<td>9.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) usage</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

indicates a significant difference. (p<.05)

In order to find the effect of ‘global consciousness’ on good writers and poor writers, we selected 10 high scorers and 10 low scorers from the controlled group, and 10 high
scorers and 10 low scorers from the experimental groups according to the basic data. Thus, we analyzed 40 essays in all. Their scores in Essay II are shown in Table 7 and 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7</th>
<th>The Quality Ratings of Good Writers (Essay II)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>controll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) a total of each criteria</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) coherence + clarity</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) usage</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates a significant difference. (p < .05)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8</th>
<th>The Quality Ratings of Poor Writers (Essay II)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>controll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) a total of each criteria</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) coherence + clarity</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) usage</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates a significant difference. (p < .05)

8. Discussion

As indicated in Table 6, B class (the experimental group) received significantly higher scores in quality than A class (the controlled group). To be more precise, B class, which was given the instruction of 'global consciousness', earned significantly higher scores in a total of scores for each criteria, a sum of scores for coherence and clarity, and also scores for usage. Furthermore, it should be noted that although the students of C class still earned higher scores in a total of each criteria and a total of coherence and clarity than B class, the significant difference, which had been recognized in a total of scores and a sum of scores for coherence and clarity in basic data (Essay I) between B class and C class (the experimental group), disappeared in the result of Essay II. It was a striking finding for us, because we had expected the effect of 'global consciousness' on the products of every writer. Thus, judging from the nature of the instruction, we had expected that C class would have held significant higher scores at least in a total of
coherence and clarity than B class. Looking at this result, first we considered the possibility that many of C class students were just instructed the composing strategy they had already had before the instruction, so the instruction of 'global consciousness' was not so effective compared with the students of B class who had not had the strategy. That was our first consideration. However, the result of the investigation of the effects of 'global consciousness' on the writings of good writers (Table 7) indicated a significant increase of scores in coherence and clarity. Therefore, we might conclude that the instruction of 'global consciousness' was effective for both of good and poor writers, but worked more effectively on poor writers.

Now, let us turn to the result of good and poor writers in Essay II. Table 7 indicates that although there was no difference for a total of scores of each criteria and usage between the two groups, good writers who were asked to be aware of meaning earned significantly higher scores for a total of coherence and clarity than good writers who were not given the direction of 'global consciousness.' This was the result we had expected. As our samples as good writers were not originally professional writers, we supposed that good writers at this level would not be fully conscious of the strategy they are using, in other words, they might unconsciously pay attention to meaning rather than mechanics of writing. Thus, we hypothesized that making them be more conscious of the strategy they are using, i.e. paying attention to meaning while writing, would improve their writing in terms of coherence and clarity. The result of the comparison between B and C classes in Essay II (Table 6) also supported this finding, although the difference was not significant.

Lastly, Table 8 shows that teaching 'global consciousness' to poor writers clearly improved their writings. In short, the poor writers who were instructed in 'global consciousness' earned significantly higher scores in every respect that the poor writers who were not given the instruction.

However, when the results shown in Table 6 (scores of each class in Essay II) and Table 8 (scores of poor writers in Essay II) were considered together, an interesting phenomenon emerges. There are significant increases of scores for usage in both the students of B class and poor writers given the instruction of 'global consciousness.' Considering the nature of the instruction, we had not expected the improvement in usage. But this finding would seem to support Cohen & Riel's (1986) research which found that the audience (readers) awareness improved not only the quality, but also usage of the children's (native speakers of English) writings.

9. Conclusion

Study I clarified that Japanese learners of English used the same composing strategies as described in related studies. That is, good writers payed attention to meaning while
writing, whereas poor writers tended to worry about mechanic errors. Study II showed that directing students not to worry about the surface level of writing, but to be concerned about getting their ideas across, 'global consciousness', improved their writings. That the strategy of 'global consciousness' was effective especially for poor writers became clear. In this way, bearing in mind that poor writers tend to be concerned about the surface level of writing, those of us who are teachers and researchers of language and writing must direct students to concentrate on meaning rather than mechanic errors, and facilitate them to interact more with the texts they write at the more global level.

However, some questions remain regarding why this 'global consciousness' affected not only coherence and clarity, but also usage in the students' writing. Furthermore, in this study we judged the composing strategy, which were identified in some of good student writers, as good writers' strategy, but it does not necessarily mean that people like professional writers are also using the same strategy. In other words, some writers may develop their thoughts while writing, and others may have their whole ideas first, then put them down on paper. So, further research is needed.

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