Factors Which Influence the Quality of Composition of Japanese EFL Learners:
—With Special Reference to the Effect of EFL Proficiency

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A number of studies have attempted to determine the writing mechanism of EFL/ESL writers. However, only a limited amount of research with an empirical approach has been offered, and this has hindered the generalization of each study's findings. This paper reports a study which investigated to what extent L1 writing ability and EFL proficiency contribute to the quality of EFL composition written by Japanese university students. Forty students were asked to take an English proficiency test and then to write two compositions on the same topic; one in Japanese and the other in English. The scores of holistic evaluation of the students' L1 and EFL composition and scores on a language proficiency test were examined by correlational analysis, multiple regression analysis and factor analysis. The study showed that EFL proficiency accounted for the quality of EFL composition better than L1 writing ability did.

1 Introduction

Both the process and product of composing have been studied in the past two decades. However, which type of skill or knowledge significantly affects writing in L2\(^{(1)}\) is still a largely unanswered question. One reason for this is that the number of subjects in the previous studies is too small to draw a generalizable answer. More studies with various subjects should be conducted to test and extend previous findings.

Something else which makes the issue of L2 composition obscure is the variance of L2 proficiency among subjects. Unlike the case of L1 composition, EFL/ESL learners' insufficient ability to express themselves fully may make it difficult to apply their L1 writing ability during writing in L2.
This article begins with an overview of the major factors which have been thought to affect the quality of composition. It then describes my study and its findings. This study seeks to provide more statistical, quantitative data than previous studies, and will play an important part in the attempt to clear up the mechanism of writing in L2.

2 Factors which Influence the Quality of Composition

(1) The Findings of Previous Studies

From various studies which have been conducted on writing in L1 and L2, we can raise several factors which might affect the quality of composition. Here it seems reasonable to make a distinction between two types of factors, i.e. writers' external factors, which Hayes & Flower (1980) called task environment, and writers' internal factors.

The external factors include “mode” (Crowhurst & Piche 1979; Rubin & Piche 1979; Matsuhashi 1981; Reed et al. 1985), “audience” (Berkenkotter 1981; Crowhurst & Piche 1979; Kobayashi 1988; Rubin & Piche 1979; Sugimoto 1991), “topic” (Langer 1984) and “purpose of writing” (Perl 1979). However, discussing how these factors work in detail is a question which I want to keep beyond the scope of this present discussion, and I will concentrate on the latter type of factors.

The internal factors consist of L1 writing ability (writing strategies), and L2 proficiency, which are sometimes called ‘process-related skill’ and ‘linguistic skill’ respectively.

Many previous studies have been designed primarily to reveal what happens during production of texts and to characterize the writing behaviors of skilled and unskilled writers. These studies show that many of the processes of writing in L2 are comparable to those of writing in L1 and that L2 proficiency is not so influential (Zamel 1983, 1984; Raimes 1985). Even within-subject comparisons show that fundamentally writers employ the same strategies in both L1 and L2 languages (Arndt 1987; Edelsky 1982; Jones & Tetroe 1987; Hall 1990). One view among the researchers is that L2 proficiency has no correspondence with writing process and written products. On the other hand Pennington & So (1993) report that the quality of written products in a foreign language showed a consistent relationship to the subjects' general foreign language proficiency (p. 56). Hirose & Sasaki (1993) also conclude that EFL proficiency is a good predictor though L1 writing ability has more influence.

(2) The Limitation of Previous Studies

The problems of previous studies can be summarized in the following three points:

The first point is that the largest body of studies in L2 writing has considered the relation between the L1 and L2 writing ability; however, not enough work has been done on the within-subject comparisons of L1 and L2 writing ability.

Secondly, although it has been reported that the task influences the writing process and
written product, as I mentioned before, the difference of tasks among the studies has not been discussed. To take a simple example, persuasive mode is rather difficult, and demands much cognitive engagement even for advanced writers, while narrative mode is easy to compose even for unskilled writers (Matsuhashi 1981; Reed et al. 1985). The need for attention to the task is reinforced by the findings of Aoki (1992), which shows that narrative mode is inadequate for the kinds of writing research that attempts to distinguish good writers and poor writers, because narrative mode is easy enough even for the poor writers to write moderately good compositions.

Finally, previous studies of L2 writing worked with too small a number of subjects to permit meaningful statistical analyses or substantive generalizations (Cumming 1989 p.86).

Taking these points into account, the following research was conducted.

3 Methods

(1) Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to make the following issues clear: to what extent L1 writing ability and English proficiency contribute to EFL writing ability, and which is a better predictor of the quality of English composition.

(2) Subjects
The subjects selected for this study were forty-four Japanese university students enrolled in a General English Course at one national university. The subjects consisted of four third-year students and forty second-year students majoring in the humanities.

(3) Task and Procedures
This study was carried out in three sessions during the regular class hours in 1993. In the first session, subjects were asked to take the CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language) Form B. This test consists of a structure test (75 points), vocabulary test (75) and listening test (50). In this study, “subjects' English proficiency” is defined as the score on the CELT.

In the second session, subjects were asked to write a comparative essay in English within a time limit of forty-five minutes. The task was to compare life in a large city and life in a small town. This task was intended to involve comparison and contrast as a touchstone of the subjects' writing ability.

In the third session, they wrote a comparative essay in Japanese on the same topic within the same time limit. All of the subjects reported that they had never written on this topic before. During these three sessions, eighty-eight writing samples and the writers' English proficiency scores were collected: forty-four samples of English compositions, forty-four samples of Japanese compositions and the scores on CELT Form B.
The procedure for rating was as follows: First of all, I typed out all of the final drafts the subjects produced because as Pennington & So (1993) point out, their handwriting might affect the raters' judgment on the quality of the essays. Then, the compositions written in both English and Japanese were rated on three major points, i.e., content, organization and style. Rating consisted of holistic evaluation on a six-point scale for eleven analytical subcomponents which Kobayashi & Rinnert (1989) adopted in their study. The same kind of measurement with several subcomponents was adopted by Aoki (1992), Sasaki & Hirose (1993) as well. This will make the comparison with these previous studies easier. I have adopted a 6-point scale rather than the 5-point scale which was adopted by some of the previous studies. This is because in the 5-point scale the raters tend to keep to a moderate course and it makes the differentiation of the subjects difficult. On the other hand the raters must make a good-or-bad judgement in the 6-point scale profile. This idea can be seen in the TWE (Test of Written English) scoring scale.

As for the raters, two native speakers of each language rated all of the 40 compositions. Before rating individually, the raters met and negotiated the criteria in order to minimize the inter-rater difference. When the score of two raters differed by two points or more, a third person rated and the average was taken as the score. The raters of English composition all teach English as a foreign language to Japanese university students, and the raters of Japanese composition are graduate students who are majoring in Japanese language education, all with ample experience of teaching Japanese high school students.

For the analyses of the relationship between Japanese and English writing ability and EFL proficiency, ① correlational analysis ② multiple regression analysis and ③ factor analysis were conducted.

4 Results and Discussion

(1) Results of Analyses

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that there are significant correlations between total scores of English composition and CELT scores of structure ($p<.05$), listening ($p<.01$) and total score ($p<.01$). On the other hand, no significant correlations are obtained between English composition and Japanese composition.

Shown in Table 2, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that the combination of Japanese writing ability, which is represented by the total scores of Japanese composition, and English proficiency, which is represented by CELT scores, accounts for 48% of the variables contributing to the quality of English composition or in other words, EFL writing ability.

Table 3 reveals the details of the correlation between total scores of English composition and other variables suggested in Table 1. Figure 1 represents the results indicated in Table 3. The factor which is represented by the variables X1 (Content of Japanese composition), X2
(Organization of Japanese composition) and X3 (Style of Japanese composition) is L1 writing ability, and the other factor represented by variables X4 (CELT Structure), X5 (CELT Vocabulary) and X6 (CELT Listening) is English proficiency. The lines which represent English proficiency and Y (L2 writing ability) are in a similar orientation, while the lines which represent L1 writing ability and L2 writing ability close almost perpendicularly. This means that they have almost no correlation. These results suggest that English proficiency contributes more to the quality of English composition or English writing ability.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Eng.Comp. Total</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2 Jap. Comp. Cont.</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>3 Jap. Comp. Org.</td>
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<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Jap. Comp. Style</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Jap. Comp. Total</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 CELT Structure</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 CELT Vocabulary</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 CELT Listening</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>9 CELT Total</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
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<tr>
<td>constant</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>0.74</td>
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<td>Jap. Comp. Cont.</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>±0.70</td>
<td>3.20*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jap. Comp. Org.</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>±0.71</td>
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<td>Jap. Comp. Style</td>
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<td>1.71</td>
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<td>±0.14</td>
<td>1.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>CELT Vocabulary</td>
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<td>±0.11</td>
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<td>CELT Listening</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>±0.16</td>
<td>2.90*</td>
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</table>

r² = 0.48 Sample = 40

Table 3. Factor Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Commonality</th>
<th>Factor Loading①</th>
<th>Factor Loading②</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Y Eng.Comp. Total</td>
<td>0.406</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X1 Jap. Comp. Cont.</td>
<td>0.883</td>
<td>-0.891</td>
<td>0.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X2 Jap. Comp. Org.</td>
<td>0.710</td>
<td>-0.796</td>
<td>0.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X3 Jap. Comp. Style</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>-0.664</td>
<td>-0.180</td>
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<tr>
<td>X4 CELT Structure</td>
<td>0.491</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>0.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X5 CELT Vocabulary</td>
<td>0.308</td>
<td>0.340</td>
<td>0.439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X6 CELT Listening</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
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</table>
(2) Discussion

First of all, let us consider the relationship between English composition and English proficiency. From the results shown in Table 1 and 2, English proficiency is a better predictor of the quality of English composition than L1 writing ability, and among the subcomponents of English proficiency, the listening scores correlate more strongly with the quality of English composition. This result is consistent with the assumption of Pennington & So (1993), based on the study of 6 Singaporean university students, and that of Hirose & Sasaki (1993), which reports significant correlation between listening scores and the quality of written composition. It may seem strange that listening scores are significantly correlated with quality of English composition. One explanation for this result may be that the listening test reflects English proficiency which is required for an integrated activity like composition, more than mere knowledge of grammar or vocabulary. As is indicated in Figure 1, it would be more appropriate to conclude that the English proficiency which is represented by X4, 5, and 6 accounts for English writing ability. To put it the other way round, merely the cramming in of vocabulary or grammar knowledge is not enough for students to be good writers.

Next, let us consider the role of L1 writing ability. Only the content of Japanese composition shows significant contribution to the quality of English composition (Table 2). But taking into account the fact that subjects wrote two compositions on the same topic, it can be said that Japanese composition scores hardly account for the quality of English composition as is shown in Table 1 and Figure 3. This result is almost consistent with what Pennington & So (1993) claim, but is contrary to the research of Hirose & Sasaki (1993) which finds contribution of Japanese writing ability to English writing ability. One possible explanation is that the level of the subjects' L1 writing ability in this study was almost the same. (Standard Deviations: total score of English composition=6.07, Japanese composition=4.06). To make this problem clear, the top ten writers (good writers) and the bottom ten writers (poor writers) of English
composition had Japanese composition and English proficiency test scores compared. The mean scores are (1) English composition: 47.55/32.46 (good writers/poor writers), (2) Japanese composition: 38.36/37.86 (NS). (3) English proficiency: 110.7/93.2 (p<.05). These figures seem to suggest that some writers have high writing ability in L1 but that they cannot write good English compositions because of their poor English proficiency.

From these results, English proficiency, rather than L1 writing ability, accounts for English writing ability, and this can be considered as one of the characteristics of learners who are at this level of English proficiency. However, this conclusion should not be generalized to the characteristics of all Japanese EFL learners, because the subjects of this study may not have enough English proficiency to demonstrate their writing ability. The question of whether something like threshold level does exist in the Japanese EFL learners will be answered after replicating studies with subjects at various levels.

5 Conclusion

The present research attempted to clarify the contribution of both L1 writing ability and English proficiency (writers’ internal factors) to the quality of EFL composition. Consequently, it was confirmed that for Japanese EFL learners at this level, English proficiency has more influence than L1 writing ability on the quality of EFL composition. This result is statistically generalizable to learners between lower and intermediate levels, unlike the previous studies which have only a small number of subjects. And yet more studies on Japanese EFL learners at different levels are needed in order to examine the existence of threshold level or to understand the overall tendency of the relationship between writing ability and language proficiency. Finally, it should be noted that we also have to investigate the question of how external factors affect the writing process and product as well as making clear the influence of internal factors.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the paper presented at the 19th National Conference of the Federation of English Language Education Societies in Japan held at Matsumoto Dental College, Nagano, August 5th, 1993. Although the content here are basically the same, this paper includes new data.
2. In this paper, I do not make a clear distinction between “foreign language” and “second language” for convenience, except when I mention Japanese learners of English.
3. In this paper, “writing ability” is judged by the quality of composition; the writer who gets a high score on L1 writing is regarded to have high writing ability.
4. The number of subjects who participated in all three sessions is forty.

Acknowledgement

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References


