The Effects of Integrated EFL Instruction on Japanese EFL Students’ Ability to Produce Argumentative Writing

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the effects of integrated instruction on Japanese students’ production of argumentative writing in an EFL context. The instruction was designed to bridge the gap between university-level EFL teachers’ emphasis on the written mode of English, and secondary school students’ preference for the development of their aural/oral abilities in English under the influence of Communicative Language Teaching. A class of Japanese EFL students participated in the study, writing two argumentative essays as pre- and post-test samples. A semester’s worth of integrated EFL instruction was given between these two tests. The students’ pre- and post-tests were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. After receiving the instruction, the students were able to write argumentative essays of better quality, support their argumentative position with objective reasons, include objective evidence, draw on credible external knowledge source materials, and cite external materials properly, though they still tended to overly rely on Japanese source materials. The study calls for more attempts to examine different types of integrated instruction in EFL classrooms in Japanese universities.

Key Words: Argumentative Essay, Integrated Instruction, Oral Presentation

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the main type of writing taught in university EFL writing classrooms has been academic writing, which includes argumentative writing and research papers. Because of the emphasis on academic writing, students’ EFL literacy development has been a large concern for EFL instructors at the university level in Japan (Huizenga, Snellings, & Francis, 2006). On the other hand, as Communicative Language Teaching has reached its primacy, more attention has been paid to the oral/aural aspects of L2 teaching/learning at the secondary school level (Kamimura, Oi, Matsumoto, & Kumamoto, 2007). Thus, there is a gap in the focus of L2 instruction between the secondary and university educational levels in Japan.

Even in the university EFL context, a considerable difference exists between student and teacher needs. For example, various analyses of student needs (Daigaku Eigo Kyouiku Jittai Chousa Kenkyuukai in JACET, 1986; Dokkyo University Research Institute of Foreign
Language Teaching, 1993; Osburn, 2001; Nakamura, 2001) have revealed that Japanese university students almost unanimously wish to improve their listening and speaking abilities in EFL; however, teachers in these cases consider it more important to develop their students’ reading and writing abilities in EFL (Toriyabe, 1994; Burton-Lewis, 1998; Tomioka, 2003). Namely, a striking gap lies in the goals of EFL learning/teaching, in that the students emphasize the fluent use of spoken EFL whereas the teachers underscore academic literacy skills.

Recent research in applied linguistics, however, has called for integrating the four language skills in L2 teaching. In ESL contexts, Carson (1990) surveyed studies conducted on reading and writing connections up to 1990, while Belcher and Hirvela (2001) compiled an anthology of more recent papers in this area. In addition, Grabe (2003) presented a review of the literature on this topic conducted both in L1 and L2 research contexts, and claimed the importance of connecting the two literacy skills in language classrooms. Hirvela (2007) further summarized studies in reading and writing relationships which were conducted from theoretical as well as pedagogical perspectives. In Japan, the importance of integrated EFL instruction began to be asserted, as is shown in the new national teaching guideline named “the Course of Study for Junior High Schools/High Schools, Foreign Languages (English),” which was notified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (2008, 2009). However, only a limited number of studies in integrated instruction have been conducted. Especially, few studies have been attempted to examine the effects of integrated instruction in the four language skills in EFL classrooms. One of these was a study conducted by Kamimura (2012), who investigated the use of integrated instruction in picture story production with Japanese EFL university students. The results of her study showed some positive effects of this type of teaching on the production of narrative writing in EFL. Because of the paucity of studies in this area, further research is definitely needed in order to examine the effects of integrated EFL instruction on Japanese students’ writing performance, especially on their writing performance in terms of more academically-oriented writing, i.e., argumentation, which was not dealt with in Kamimura’s study (2012).

Thus, two factors motivated the present study. First, an attempt was needed to bridge the gap in the focus of EFL instruction between the secondary school and university levels in Japan. Secondly, an attempt was also needed to connect Japanese EFL students’ learning goals and teachers’ teaching goals. Considering these two factors, the present study was conducted with the following purpose: to explore the ways in which integrated instruction can be implemented for the production of argumentative writing in EFL writing classrooms in Japanese universities.

2. Procedure

2.1 Participants

Nineteen Japanese EFL university students participated in the present study. The students’ English proficiency level was considered to be lower-intermediate as assessed by a mean score
of 502.6 points on the TOEIC®.

2.2 Contexts of the Present Study

The students who participated in the present study were taught how to write a paragraph and essay in English in the first semester of their first year at university. They then wrote narrations, descriptions, and expositions. Instruction in the second semester focused on the production of argumentative writing.

2.3 Data Collection

At the beginning of the second semester of their first year, the students wrote an argumentative essay as a pre-test with the following prompt:

Some people say that it is better to live in an urban city. Others argue that it is better to live in a rural town. Which position do you take? Give specific reasons to support your position.

Three months later, at the end of the same semester, the students wrote an argumentative essay as a post-test using the same prompt as in the pre-test. The students had not been told in advance that they would be given the post-test until the post-test was actually administered. In both tests, the students were not specifically told to use source materials in their compositions. Between the two writing tests, a semester’s worth of instruction that integrated the four essential skills was provided to the students. In the both tests, the students wrote essays as take-home assignments because the study attempted to examine how the students would use external source materials as evidence in their writing.

2.4 Intervening Instructional Procedure

Three sessions were set up in which the students received instruction in producing effective argumentative essays.

2.4.1 First Session (Reading)

The focus of the first session was to teach the students how to organize their argumentative writing. Specifically, they were taught the following points: (1) the English argumentative essay needs to have an introduction, body, and conclusion; (2) an argumentative position should be stated in the introduction and restated in the conclusion; (3) the argumentative position needs to be supported by reasons; (4) the reasons should be objective rather than subjective (i.e. those based on personal comments and anecdotes); (5) each reason further needs to be supported by objective evidence such as data and facts; (6) evidence becomes strong and persuasive if it is drawn from external resources (Paltridge et al., 2009); and (7) external sources should be
properly cited.

To consolidate the students’ understanding of these points, two reading texts, Passage 1 and Passage 2, were provided to them as input. The passages are shown in Appendices. Passage 1 (Appendix A), which argues against smoking, is one example of the texts used in the first session. The students were told to work on this text in several ways: (1) segment the passage into five paragraphs, i.e., one introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph; (2) find the thesis statement in which the writer’s argumentative position is stated, and (3) identify the parts where objective facts, data, or experts’ opinions are used as evidence; and (4) examine how evidence drawn from external source materials is cited in the text.

Passage 2 (Appendix B) is another example of the reading texts used in the first session. It is an argumentative essay which claims that the university that the students attended is appealing. The content of this passage was more directly connected to the writing task assigned to the students in the second session, which is explained in the next section. The students read and analyzed the passage to examine how the passage made use of external source materials as objective evidence to support the argument. Emphasis was placed on teaching the students the importance of avoiding plagiarism, which is forbidden in academic writing. The students, therefore, received instruction on how to incorporate materials from outside sources into their own writing by using direct quotations, paraphrasing, or summaries of the information in source materials (Bailey, 2011); they were also given instruction on how to cite source materials properly by using the authors’ names and publication years.

2.4.2 Second Session (Writing)

In the second session, the students were instructed to use what they had learned in the first session and to actually write the first draft of an argumentative essay as output. Namely, the students attempted to transform the declarative knowledge of argumentation into procedural knowledge, through which the actual production of argumentative writing could be possible.

The students were given the following instructions:

You are supposed to meet a group of international students and give them an oral presentation in which you will assert that Japan is an attractive country in several ways. Write a draft of an argumentative essay. Use objective evidence to make your draft convincing enough for the international students to understand and accept your assertion.

This writing task was designed to give communicative purpose to the writing task. As was stated in the Introduction, university-level EFL instruction in academic writing usually lacks the oral/aural aspects of EFL; therefore, the writing activity in this task was connected with an oral presentation. In addition, by specifying the presence of an imaginary audience, the task became contextualized and thus more meaningful for the students’ communicative purposes.
At the same time, the writing task was also designed to develop the academic skills of the students by requiring them to pay special attention to the following: (1) writing a draft and providing objective reasons; (2) including evidence drawn from external knowledge resources; (3) using credible sources; and (4) citing the sources properly. To accomplish this, they were told to use print materials such as books, journals, and newspapers, and not to use materials posted on the Internet except for those issued by public organizations, such as government reports.

2.4.3 Third Session (Speaking and Listening)

In the third session, the students gave oral presentations of their drafts that they wrote in the second session. As speakers, each of the students prepared slides and handouts, showed them, orally presented their essays, and answered their peers' questions. As audience members, the students listened to their peers' presentations carefully, rated them, and gave peer feedback, using criteria which included content, use of evidence, pronunciation, eye contact, memorization of the draft, and use of slides and handouts. After the presentation task was finished, based on the peer feedback the students revised their drafts and submitted the final drafts which included complete references.

3. Analysis

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Each student's essays produced both in the pre- and post-tests were first analyzed quantitatively in terms of the following measures.

3.1.1 Holistic score

The students' pre- and post-tests were holistically rated by two raters. One rater was a university instructor who had twenty-years of experience teaching EFL, while the other was a graduate student who majored in TEFL and applied linguistics. They rated the students' compositions independently, with one being the lowest score and nine being the highest. When any discrepancy in scores occurred, they discussed their ratings thoroughly until they reached an agreement.  

3.1.2 Kinds of reasons

The reasons used in each student's composition were counted and classified as either subjective or objective. Subjective reasons corresponded to the students' personal comments and anecdotes based on their feelings and experiences, whereas objective reasons drew on rational reasoning based on facts, statistics, and experts' academic opinions. The two raters who scored the students' essays also classified the reasons into two types. Again when any discrepancy in classification occurred, they discussed their judgment thoroughly until they reached a full agreement. The same procedure was used for the following four analytical measures (i.e., evidence
drawn from external knowledge sources, citations, credibility, and languages of sources).

3.1.3 Evidence Drawn from External Knowledge Sources

If a reason was classified as objective, whether or not objective evidence drawn from external source materials was used was examined. The objective evidence included facts, data, statistics, and experts’ opinions.

3.1.4 Citations

If an external source was used, an analysis was attempted to see whether or not the source was properly cited, including the author’s name and publication year.

3.1.5 Credibility

Further analysis was conducted to examine whether or not each source material used in the students’ essays was credible. If an outside source material was written by a specialist in an academic field, it was classified as credible. For example, if a book on the Japanese economy was written by an economist for an academic purpose, that book was regarded as credible. However, if a book on the same topic was written by a non-specialist for the general public, it was considered to lack credibility.

3.1.6 Languages of Sources

Lastly, each piece of outside source material was analyzed to examine whether it was written in the student’s L1, Japanese, or their L2, English.

3.2 Statistical Analysis

To examine whether there were any statistical differences between the pre- and post-tests, a paired t-test was performed for the holistic scores, and chi-square tests were used for the other five analytical measures unless no data for these measures were observed.

3.3 Qualitative Sample Analysis

The students’ pre- and post-tests were closely compared in order to trace the actual changes made between the two tests and to elucidate the qualitative differences observed in the two tests.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of the Quantitative Analysis

4.1.1 Holistic Scores

The mean holistic score for the pre-test was 3.74 (SD = 1.66) and the score for the post-test was 6.79 (SD = 1.73) (see Figure 1). The results of a paired t-test revealed a significant
difference in holistic scores between the test ($t = -6.8$, $df = 18$, $p < .001$). This suggests that the integrated instruction used in the present study had positive effects on the students’ production of argumentative writing in EFL.

4.1.2 Types of Reasons

Figure 2 presents the percentages of subjective and objective reasons observed in the pre- and post-tests. A total of 41 reasons were identified in the pre-test. Out of these reasons, 16 (39.02%) were identified as subjective and 25 (60.98%) were identified as objective. In contrast, 42 reasons were found in the post-test; only one reason (2.38%) was identified as subjective, and the others were all classified as objective (97.62%). The differences between the two tests in the two types of reasons were found to be significant ($\chi^2(1) = 17.11$, $p < .001$).

4.1.3 Evidence Drawn from External Knowledge Sources

It was found that none of the students’ pre-test essays used information drawn from external knowledge sources as evidence. However, out of the total of 41 objective reasons detected in the post-test, 39 (95.12%) included evidence drawn from external source materials. After receiving the instruction, the students tended to use evidence taken from external knowledge sources to support their argumentative positions.

4.1.4 Citations

In the pre-test, none of the students made use of external source materials; therefore, no instances of citations were observed. In the post-test, however, out of the total 39 source materials used, 30 materials (73.92%) were cited properly with the authors’ names and publication years. This result suggests that in the post-test, the students tended to provide objective evidence by drawing on outside source materials. However, not all the materials were properly cited: Some materials were incorporated into the essays with no indication of the sources, while other materials were used without the authors’ names, as direct quotations in the form of verbatim translations of several lines in the original English materials. Indeed, it was
found that the students depended heavily on using this type of direct quotations without indicating the authors' names when incorporating source materials into their texts.

4.1.5 Credibility

In the pre-test, no students used external source materials, which means that no instances of the use of credible sources were found. In the post-test, however, out of the total of 39 external source materials used, 28 (72.79%) were identified as credible. Therefore, there was a meaningful increase in the use of credible sources in the essays produced in the post-test, as compared with those written in the pre-test.

4.1.6 Languages of Sources

All the source materials used by the students in the post-tests were written in Japanese; no student referred to English materials. It seems that because the students were given the option to use either Japanese or English materials, they naturally relied on materials written in their native language, Japanese. The students might not have recognized that Japanese materials are easier to read but more difficult to summarize, and therefore, more difficult to incorporate into their compositions.

4.2 Sample Analysis

4.2.1 Representative Sample Writing

This section shows a representative pre-test (Sample 1) and post-test (Sample 2) written by Student 11. These samples explicate the differences between the two tests and allow us to examine the effects of the integrated instruction attempted in this study.

Sample 1(Pre-test)
I think it is better to live in an urban city than to live in the country. The reason is that an urban city has a lot of useful things. R1OE-[First, there are a lot of transports. We can use train, bus, taxi and airport. We can move faster and cheaper. However, people who live in the country have a few ways to move somewhere, so it takes a lot of time and money to move.] R2OE-[Second people who live in an urban city can get what they want soon. There are a lot of stores in urban city. I think it is the biggest reason that I support this position.]

NOTE. "R1OE-" means that the first reason is of the objective type and lacks evidence.

Sample 1 (pre-test) lacks organization as an essay: it is not divided into paragraphs, and a conclusion is not presented. Student 11 offers two reasons to support his argument for a country life, but both of the reasons lack objective evidence.
Sample 2 (Post-test)

I think it is better to live in an urban city because an urban city is very convenient.

R1OE+JSC+C+ [First, it is easy for us to go out somewhere in an urban city. According to Tsujimoto (2005), 23.3% people use trains as transportation on weekdays in an urban city. However, 3.6% people use it as transportation on weekdays in country. Everybody can get on a train. Therefore, train is good transportation, but we have to get a license to drive a car.]

R1OE+JSC+C+ [Second, there are a lot of convenience stores in an urban city. According to the journal Konbini (1996), the number of convenience stores in Tokyo is 4104. On the other hand, the number of convenience stores in Gunma is 561. If there are a lot of convenience stores, we can easily buy something anytime.]

In conclusion, an urban city is better to live.

Note. “R1OE+JSC+C+” means that the first reason is of the objective type and is supported by evidence drawn from a Japanese source that is considered to be credible and cited in the essay.

Sample 2 has several grammatical errors. Despite this problems, however, it has a clear organization as an essay. The argumentative position taken at the beginning of the essay and the two objective reasons are well-supported by evidence from external knowledge source materials. The two sources used in the essay are credible and clearly cited: the first source is a book written by a researcher who specializes in social economics, while the second source is a business journal which features convenience stores. Thus, compared with Sample 1, Sample 2 is a more appropriate form of the argumentative writing expected in an academic setting.

4.2.2 Other Samples

Other students also made a meaningful change between the two tests: they relied on subjective reasons without any evidence in the pre-test, whereas they used objective reasons supported by evidence taken from source materials. The following examples illustrate this change:

Student 1

--I can relax in the country. Now I live in urban city and there are many tall buildings around my house. And many cars are crossing the road. It is very noisy and produces dirty air. Although urban city also has good point, it is uncomfortable for my mind to live in the country. (Pre-test)

--Second, there are lot of nature. Different from dense area like urban cities, country has enough land. According to the statistics of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Gunma prefecture has 404,000 ha forest lands, and Tokyo metropolis has only 73,000 ha. The forest lands in Gunma are about five times as large as that in...
Student 7  --I have ever lived an urban city. An urban city has a convenience system. For example, an urban city has many trains, airplanes, buses, supermarkets, convenience stores etc. (Pre-test)
--First, it is important for human beings to live in nature. According to Kondo (2004), when people see flowers and green and spend in the space, they set their mind ease and feel relax. (Post-test).
Student 16  --I like to play river with my friend. I like to climb mountain. Climbing is very tired, but it is very nice. For example, I watch many kinds of animals. I think that I am very happy then. (Pre-test)
--First, the country's life is cheaper than the urban life. According to Oya (1998), land of the country and building expenses are very low. In addition we can rent a house very low price. For example, the house which has about 130 tsubo for faming, and the price is about 60,000 yen in a month. (Post-test)

These examples show that the students tended to use objective evidence by drawing on credible source materials after they received integrated instruction.

5. Conclusion

The present study attempted to design a method of integrated writing instruction for Japanese EFL university students and to investigate its effects on their production of argumentative essays. The study sought to bridge the gap between EFL teaching at the secondary school and university levels, as well as the gap between teachers’ and students’ teaching and learning goals.

An analysis of the students’ pre- and post-tests revealed the following results. After being given the integrated instruction, the students tended to:

1) Produce higher-rated essays;
2) Support their argumentative position with objective reasons;
3) Use objective evidence;
4) Draw on external knowledge source materials;
5) Use credible sources; and
6) Cite outside source materials properly; however,
7) Even in the post-test, they still relied entirely on Japanese sources.

These results suggest that the integrated instruction used in this study had positive effects on the students’ production of argumentative writing. Special care was taken to add aural/oral components to the teaching of academic writing. As a result, the listening and speaking activities led the students to consolidate the academic skills that they learned in their writing class. Indeed, the oral presentation task which involved actual peer audience made the students as presenters
realize the importance of audience, compared with the writing task where they composed for invisible readers. On the other hand, as listeners, they seemed to understand that the use of data and facts as evidence has a powerful persuasive effect on audience, especially when such evidence is visually presented on slides and handouts.

While the speaking skills required in everyday conversations are important, a more academically-oriented type of aural/oral instruction was pursued in this study; this resulted in the inclusion of oral presentations as a component of the integrated EFL instruction. Future studies are needed to design different types of integrated instruction, incorporating different components related to each language skill.

After receiving the instruction, the students were able to use information drawn from outside sources in their writing, as shown in the post-test. However, there were several cases in which the effects of the instruction were not found to be satisfactory; for instance, there were students who relied on books which lacked credibility, who drew on the same materials several times in the essay, and who failed to properly cite the materials. Argumentative writing is a mode which has been proven to be the most difficult for EFL students to produce (Kamimura, 2007). It requires of students to draw on not only writing skills, but also critical reading and thinking skills. Careful attention needs to be paid to individual students in order to monitor their progress in producing argumentative writing in EFL.

Notes

1 This study was partially funded by a Senshu University research grant 2012, "Research in the Teaching of Writing for Japanese EFL Students" ("Nihonjin Eigo Gakushuha no Tame no Writing Shidou Kenkyuu"). This paper was based on an oral presentation by the author at the 45th Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics held at University of Southampton, in September, 2012.

2 In this study, argumentation was broadly defined as a type of writing in which a writer tries to persuade the audience to understand his/her position. In this definition, as is shown in a prompt prepared for the writing session, the students were allowed to assert one argumentative position throughout their essay without presenting counterarguments.

3 Because the two raters discussed thoroughly the results of their analysis of the students’ essays in terms of the six measures until they reached a full agreement, an attempt to measure Interrater reliability was not made.

4 The samples presented in this paper are shown with all the grammatical and spelling errors left intact.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A  Passage 1: Dangers of Smoking

Most smokers enjoy smoking while ignoring the unwholesome effects of their habit. Smokers should realize the negative effects of smoking—not only to themselves, but to those with whom they contact. It is common knowledge that smokers develop lung cancer at much higher rates than nonsmokers. The rate of contracting cancer of the larynx is twenty times higher in smokers as compared to nonsmokers, while that of lung cancer is four times higher (Global Health survey, 2010). Adverse effects are not only inflicted upon the smokers themselves. The smoke is extremely harmful to those people who are in close proximity to the smoker. Tobacco smoke is usually classified into two main types: primary smoke and secondary smoke. Primary smoke is that which the smoker inhales himself; secondary smoke is the smoke that emanates from the lit cigarette that is passively inhaled by the people in the smoker’s environment. Dr. White, a famous cardiovascular specialist, says that secondary smoke actually has the potential for being more harmful than primary smoke. This is because secondary smoke contains 2.8 times more nicotine, 3.4 more tar and 4.7 times more carbon monoxide than the primary smoke. Those who are in close proximity to the smoker inhale both the primary and the secondary smoke. Thus, nonsmokers are often poisoned by smokers against their own will. The harmful effects of smoking are not only limited to those who are exposed at that specific moment. Smoking also has a long-term effect on subsequent generations. According to the report published by the Cancer Association in 1979, the rate of premature births among nonsmoking mothers is 2.8%, while that among smoking mothers is 9.2%. In conclusion, considering these facts, smokers should realize what harm smoking does to those around them as well as their own bodies. (Excerpted from Oi, Kamimura, and Sano, 2010, p.84).

Appendix B  Passage 2: International Merits of ABC University

ABC University can give you international perspectives. The university offers a variety of study-abroad programs. If you join one of these programs, you would surely improve your English abilities and also gain confidence in yourselves.
First, if you participate in a study-abroad program, you can make progress in English abilities. According to Seki, Nonaka, and Sumida (2009), professors at Niigata Seiryo Junior College, found that the students who studied English in study-abroad programs had significantly improve their English proficiency. Indeed, in their study the students’ TOEIC IP scores drastically increased from 383.9 points to 520.

Second, not only the teachers but also the students give positive response to the study-abroad programs. An ABC University student, Yuko Okada (2010) studied at Waikato University in New Zealand. She notes that she not only improved her English abilities but also gained confidence in herself.

In conclusion, ABC University will surely help you make meaningful progress in your student life.

[References]

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Masashi Takada for his careful analysis and suggestions. I would like to thank George Smith for his helpful suggestions for this paper. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments that helped me improve this paper.