

## Needs Analysis for the L2 Writing Class: Teacher/Student Perceptions

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In summing up his investigation of contemporary research into L2 writing, Silva (1993: 668) concludes that,

*“There exists, at present, no coherent, comprehensive theory of L2 writing. This can be explained in part by the newness of L2 writing as an area of enquiry, but an equally important reason is the prevalent assumption that L1 and L2 writing are, for all intents and purposes the same. This has led L2 writing specialists to rely for direction almost exclusively on L1 composition theories, theories which are, incidentally, largely monolingual mono-cultural, ethnocentric and fixated on the writing of NES undergraduates in North American colleges and universities...Clearly, L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways from L1 Writing. Therefore, L2 writing specialists need to look beyond L1 writing theories, to better describe the unique nature of L2 writing, to look into the potential sources (e.g. cognitive, developmental, social, cultural, educational, linguistic) of this uniqueness to develop theories that adequately explain the phenomena of L2 writing.”*

A possible solution to this lack of cohesive L2 writing theory might be to approach L2 writing based on an ethnographical perspective of writing taking into consideration the “*what is known about the various major components of the writing situation*” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 144) such as: 1) *the writer*, 2) *the writing*, 3) *the reader*, 4) *the content and form of the text*, 5) *the purpose*, 6) *the writer’s underlying intention*, 7) *the location*, and 8) *the processes of writing* (ibid). However, given the complexities of differing situations and teaching/learning contexts, it is considered that such an undertaking would possibly do little to contribute to a general theory of L2 writing (ibid). Nevertheless, there does seem to be a great need for developing localized pedagogies for the L2 writing class which are more sensitive to learner needs with broader, perhaps less stringent evaluation criteria than is applied to L1 writers which takes into account the variables of specific writing/learning environments, the learners and their linguistic resources (both systemic and schematic). In this regard, rather than trying to apply a theory or integrate research into a teaching context it may be “*better for teachers to become researchers themselves*” (Raimes, 1991: 423). The purpose of this particular paper therefore is to do just that and provide an example of how I have gone

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about trying to frame a workable teaching approach to L2 writing, not through reference to any one writing/research theory, but by addressing the needs of the learners themselves through a combination of needs analysis and my own interpretation of where learners need to be guided with the writing they produce. This process is not without its problems and further quantitative and qualitative investigation is needed to clarify more precisely how an effective pedagogy can be drawn out of needs based investigations. But by highlighting and discussing this issue and clarifying what I am trying to achieve in the writing class, I hope to produce more focused teaching strategies that will feed into an ongoing cycle of class based investigations where students are no longer the passive recipients of teacher knowledge, but rather active participants in the learning process.

### **Present pedagogical perspectives**

In appreciation of the fact that what can be achieved with any one set of learners cannot be generalized beyond ones immediate teaching context, I tend to approach L2 writing pedagogy from the perspective that if a learner is undertaking the task of learning to write in a second language, then it is clear that at some point they will have to conform to the patterns and structures of the writing conventions in the target language they wish to acquire and that they struggle with virtually the same writing processes as L1 writers in terms of planning, review, argument structure, reader orientation and use of sources. From a Hallidayan perspective; it is the development of familiarity with “*textual structure*” and “*direct instruction on written discourse*” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 142) that both L2 *and* (my emphasis) L1 writers need. The obvious differences being that for the L2 writer, there is also a lack of linguistic resources such as *fluency* (Silva: 1993: 662) *accuracy*, *quality* (ibid: 663) lack of vocabulary and *lexicosemantic features* (ibid: 667), which combine to restrict their ability to create meaning in a text to the same degree as L1 writers. The challenge for me as a teacher is how to reconcile these differences so that L2 writers are given guidance in understanding structural aspects of L1 genre and evaluated in a way that is: respectful of their learning background, more responsive to their immediate needs, less judgmental and more focused on encouraging expression over prescriptive grammatical form. The following preliminary investigation into learner needs provides a general overview of how I have gone about defining what issues I need to more fully address in the classroom to meet these objectives.

### **The learners**

The learners in question are native Japanese second to fourth year students studying various majors within the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Saitama University. Their language ability within the class is mixed but can be estimated to be between the level of lower to upper intermediate.

### **The teaching context**

The class meets for one 90 minute class per week over a 15 week semester which is accredited as one elective 'course', meaning that there are no subjects taught over a complete one year course unless students who took the first semester take the second semester course which, in terms of syllabus design, is generally a follow-on from the first semester. Classes on average number around 40 students with an approximately equal distribution of both male and female students.

### **The syllabus**

Over the past few years, the course curriculum has moved from offering single courses over one academic year comprising of two 15 week semesters, to a single semester course system where a subject such as writing is taught as a separate course for each semester with a different syllabus and where students can take credits for completing just the one semester. Accordingly, the syllabi for all subjects has been reformulated into making classes into complete one-semester courses with first and second semester courses functioning as independent units with separate content. This is not without its problems as will be discussed below.

In the case of writing classes, the first semester course work touches on clarifying the academic writing genre in terms of texts having a set, controlled introduction, body and conclusion. However, primarily, work in the first term usually focuses on planning and expanding ideas related to specific topics such as AIDS, global warming or human rights/social issues and how to read for topic related collocations for vocabulary building. Emphasis is placed on pre-writing work and students are exposed to planning techniques such as 'mind-mapping' and 'quick-writing' as a means to make them aware of options available to them in the planning process. Students work in groups of four and given that this activity is purely to generate ideas, are allowed to write and plan in Japanese if they don't know appropriate English expressions or words so there is little interference with the creation process through stopping to look up vocabulary. If anything this aids in raising awareness of what vocabulary they do need if they are to begin turning plans into a structured essay. By the end of the first semester students are expected to submit an 800-1000 word report planned, organized and structured using the study techniques covered over the term.

The second semester focuses specifically on essay structure with guidance given on forming an introduction leading to a thesis statement and how the thesis statement controls the information that comes in the body. The latter half of the semester exposes students to how to back up information with sources so that by the end of the year they should be able to compose a basic sourced essay, structured in a general academic style format with an introduction, thesis statement, body, and conclusion.

The evaluation criteria for end of term essay submissions in both semesters is the extent to which a learner can integrate the taught components of the courses into their text and formulate their writing to conform to a basic academic style report.

## Problems

One of the main and most consistent problems is class size given that the subject of writing seems to be assumed by learners to comprise of consistent individual feedback from the teacher. Indeed, preliminary needs analysis in previous classes has shown that when students first attend the writing class they expect teacher feedback on a regular basis. However, with a class usually comprising of around forty students, regular individual feedback is impossible given the time needed for individual responses were I to attempt to undertake that task on a weekly basis. This necessitates creating a realization with learners at the outset that teacher centered feedback will not be the prime modus operandi of the class and that the nature of the feedback they will receive when it is given will not primarily focus on grammar or such corrective advice. This approach comes from the fact that there is little evidence to suggest that the kind of corrective grammatical feedback students expect will have any significant impact on their writing and that such feedback might in fact be detrimental to their writing development (Winterowd 1980, Pringle 1983 in Zamel, 1985: 96) and that *“by reading for error, instead of responding to the substance of students’ writing, we create a situation in which genuine change even at the more superficial level is unlikely (Zamel, Ibid).* Indeed, studies indicate that *“highly detailed feedback on sentence level mechanics may not be worth the instructor’s time and effort”* (Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 1986: 83), as evidence suggests that students will make improvements in their writing regardless of the type of feedback they receive (ibid). This suggests that feedback when it is given should focus not on error based correction, but rather by the teacher ‘responding as a reader to the ideas and content of student writing’ (Reid, 1993: 219) and ‘responding to more global problems of planning and content’ (Griffin 1982, in Robb et al. 1986: 83). This is not to say that errors in student writing should not be addressed at all, but evidence suggests that learners retain feedback ‘only if they are forced to approach error correction as a problem solving activity’ (Brumfit 1980, ibid: 85) or make revisions on their work using an error code, sets of pre-determined signals determining that an error exists but not explicitly correcting or explaining what the error is, thus allowing the student to make the corrections themselves (Lalande 1982 cited in Robb et al. 84). My approach has always been to look at global aspects of student work focusing on elements of their writing structure they can adjust to match the framework of the writing genre of academic writing with the establishment of some form of error code a possible course of development in future classes. The philosophy is at this stage for learners to use their writing and general L2 language skills as a means of expression rather than restricting their focus on mechanical aspects of the language.

Another problem inherent with the split semester system is that for students who elect to take the second semester course as a follow on, the instruction they receive is a continuation of what they learned in the first semester. However, after taking the necessary credits for the first semester course almost half of the students drop out with about 50% taking the class for the first time in the second semester. The implications here are that topics covered in the first semester, which have

proved useful for student writing, are unfamiliar with half of the new members of the class. When discussing the planning stage of essay writing this makes it difficult to reference such techniques without repeating the previous semester's material, at least over the first few weeks. This is a problem that is still ongoing but one I hope to be able to solve through continued needs based analysis and possibly introducing the requirement that students cannot take the second semester course without first having attended the first. However, the fact remains that even if students were to take two full semester courses of writing, there is a limit to what can be effectively taught in such a short time frame. The teaching therefore needs to be focused on learning strategies that learners can practically apply to their L2 writing in the short term, provide the framework for more structured writing in the future, and at the same time expand their understanding of the L1 academic writing genre. Part of this process necessitated a needs based investigation into students' perceptions as to what teaching techniques were most effective and it is this process to which I now turn.

### **Moving towards creating a class research strategy: Needs analysis**

At the beginning of this particular academic year in the first semester, I was curious to find out to what extent learners felt were problem areas for them with writing, how they compared the process of writing an essay in Japanese compared to one in English and whether taking a writing class which focused on academic writing skills would be of benefit to them beyond university (questioning their motivation in taking such a challenging subject) and gave them a question sheet asking the following questions.

**Question 1:** *When you approach writing an essay or report in English, what are the main problems you face either with understanding the structure of the essay you are being asked to write, or with the language in general? Are there any similarities between difficulties you face in writing an essay in English compared to when you are writing an essay in Japanese or are they totally different? What practical steps would you like to be able to do to overcome any problems you might have in such instances?*

**Question 2:** *The general description for this class has always been 'Academic style writing' where you learn how to write an academic style report in English using sources both in the text and at the end with a bibliography section. How practical is this skill for you? Is learning this skill relevant to your university studies? Will learning such skills be useful for you outside your university studies when you graduate? Do you think that there is a more practical writing skill you would be better to learn other than the so-called 'academic writing' genre. (this is still the genre we will be learning this semester but I would like your opinions for future course development – and it also gives you an opportunity to write of course!).*

In response to the first question, nearly all of the 41 replies concerned a lack of knowledge of structure compared to Japanese, indicating that they were more than aware that differences exist, as well as features common to all L2 writers such as a lack of vocabulary and appropriate knowledge of grammatical features of the language such as proper paragraph construction, use of conjunctions and prepositions in addition to structural features such as how to write a bibliography.

With regard to the second question, 28 students thought learning some form of academic writing genre would be beneficial, 11 responses were either vague or directly stated they didn't know, and 2 didn't think it useful. So there could be said to be a strong tendency for students to know what they want to gain from taking such a course.

In addition to these initial questions, I asked students to provide a brief self-introduction and, as a homework task, to write about any contemporary news topic or social issue about which they had strong feelings or opinions. This was to get a baseline of the level of students' writing levels pre-instruction, and to consider whether there were any general areas that would provide a useful focus for class activities.

The results of this exercise were to prove the most revealing in that while their self-introductions showed that their writing contained common grammatical errors in verb tense and aspect and prepositional usage, they could express themselves quite well. What the homework activity revealed as a common structural flaw was that students tended to write about topics with the assumption that the reader shares the same information. In essence, while their writing had cohesion, they had difficulty in establishing exophoric reference features of a topic to orientate the reader through either not providing enough background information or writing purely from a personal perspective or "*from an egocentric point of view,*" often taking "*the reader's understanding for granted*" (Perl 1979: 332 in Raimes 1985: 250).

There was also no clearly defined thesis statement in nearly all cases and very often concluding statements about issues were written in the first sentences of the introduction where a short discussion of background information would normally be expected. This information was valuable in that it provided an area of skills development that could be part of the main focus of guided class work and modeling but also crucially reinforced the perspective that L2 writers were dealing primarily with the same structural difficulties that L1 writers tend to face when writing in the academic genre, although this could be said to apply to any genre whether it is a writing job application or a legal document. In other words, writing or adapting writing to any unfamiliar written register, whether the writer is an L1 speaker or L2 learner, takes practice and a process of assimilating the genre in order to more accurately reproduce it. The main differences between the two groups as previously alluded to, being that the L1 writer will have a greater stock of linguistic resources than that of the L2 writer to call upon.

## Needs analysis follow-up

Towards the end of December, I decided to compose a follow-up questionnaire to analyze whether students had a changed their idea of what an academic essay was, what elements of the teaching they considered useful/not useful and what they felt they still needed to take away from the class. I asked the following 4 questions, the responses to which are summarized in Table 1 below:

1. *In this class we are working towards learning how to write an academic style essay or academic report. In your own words, can you describe what you feel an academic essay is? For example structure, content, the kind of topic etc.*
2. *Whether you have taken this class in both the first and second semesters or are taking this class for the first time, looking back at the kind of things we have done in class concerning how to write an academic style essay, which things have we done in class which have been the most effective or the most useful for you in helping you to develop your writing and why? This could include a specific exercise, feedback you receive from me etc. If anything was particularly useful, please try to explain in as much detail as you can exactly why.*
3. *Is there anything in class we have done, either in the first semester or in this one that you would say has not really been that useful with your writing development? If there is, explain why it was not effective and how it could be improved?*
4. *Is there anything we have not done in class so far that you would like to cover before the end of the course that you feel will help you with your writing? Is there any particular skills area you feel we have not worked enough on?*

**Table 1**

<b>Responses to Q1</b>	<b>Responses to Q2</b>	<b>Responses to Q3</b>	<b>Responses to Q4</b>
<p><i>An academic essay is one which:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*has structure x 25</li> <li>*is logical x 5</li> <li>*has a set topic x 2</li> <li>*is researched x 2</li> <li>*is formal</li> <li>*is theoretical</li> </ul>	<p><i>The most helpful thing covered in class was work on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*structure x 9</li> <li>*free writing x 2</li> <li>*planning/brainstorming x 5</li> <li>*SPRE (Situation-Problem-Solution Evaluation) x 2</li> <li>*introductions x 5</li> <li>*social topics x 3</li> <li>*reading each other's essay</li> <li>*pre-writing discussion</li> </ul>	<p><i>The least helpful thing covered in class was:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*not getting homework checked every time x 3</li> <li>*doing the same homework as in the first semester</li> <li>*same level of group members</li> <li>*problem solution task (SPRE)</li> <li>*collocations because we just learn them in class x 2</li> <li>*writing a long essay at the beginning</li> <li>*only giving one topic for writing homework</li> <li>*correcting friend's essay x 2</li> <li>*repetition of materials</li> </ul>	<p><i>Perceived learning needs for the remainder of the semester are to learn:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*how to describe a graph</li> <li>*expressions x 5</li> <li>*long sentences</li> <li>*content after thesis statement</li> <li>*conjunctions</li> <li>*bibliographies x 3</li> <li>*pre-reading skills</li> <li>*writing body and conclusion</li> <li>*grammar</li> <li>*discussing writing topics</li> <li>*to choose a topic and write over several weeks</li> <li>*paragraph practice</li> <li>*how to quote and paraphrase</li> <li>*reading model essays and summarizing</li> <li>*how to write a conclusion x 2</li> <li>*to write many short essays</li> </ul>

## Interpretation and discussion

The total number of respondents in this case was 37 and where more than one person gave a response about a specific item, the number of responses are indicated by 'x' the number of similar responses. Several students didn't complete answers to all the questions and several gave multiple responses to single questions but the above list gives a fairly accurate representation of how learners have interpreted the effectiveness of the work we did in the class. Many of the responses are self evident but worthy of a few lines of comment.

Of particular note is the identification of an academic essay in Q1 with 'structure', a response which indicates a clear awareness of what students expect of an academic essay.

In response to question 2, students showed a preference for planning strategies that were primarily taught in the first semester such as 'mind-mapping' and 'quick writing' as well as indicating familiarity with writing an introduction as a useful exercise. The response concerning peer review work was mixed with some finding it beneficial and others not so. This would indicate that students were not given enough guidance on how to do this activity, or that its implementation needs to be clarified as an awareness raising activity in bringing learner's attention to variations in writing styles.

Responses to question 3 indicate that students who took the first semester class did not like the repetition I felt was necessary to bring new students in the second semester into the frame of reference concerning planning. This is of concern as clearly there is evidence to suggest that students found planning of benefit. There was also still a notable preference for consistent teacher feedback which is something that peer review work was intended to address and which apparently needs greater attention.

Question 4 revealed that students sensed they still needed advice and practice with cohesive elements of their writing such as learning how to write longer sentences and practice in paragraph construction and conjunctions. Although responses also show a perceived need for guidance in more global structure such as how to develop the body and conclusion after establishing the thesis statement.

Although much more investigation needs to be done in this area, through this preliminary albeit simplified investigation, I have been able to ascertain areas of concern where students can clearly benefit from more prescriptive instruction such as paragraph development and cohesive elements of writing such as clause construction etc. On the other hand there is clearly also a need to address structural aspects of the academic writing genre.

From my own perspective, from the initial essays that students wrote at the beginning of term, as well in subsequent draft essay submissions, I also see a real necessity to develop in students what Brown (1994: 326) has described as '*cognitive empathy*' where learners gain the skill to "*read their own writing from the perspective of the mind of the targeted audience*", and work towards the kind of learning outcome achieved by Reppen (1995: 33) where students learn to 'recognize features of writing



structure that would help them to view a perspective in writing 'other than their own' and to "anticipate an argument and generalize reasons that would support their stand" (ibid) whilst at the same time taking into account the limits of L2 students' linguistic resources (Silva, 1993: 671). As Raimes (1985: 251) postulates, "It would be interesting to examine if writers who establish an audience for themselves (and that audience can be the teacher as reader, but not as evaluator) and view the task as one of negotiation with a reader ultimately make more progress in their writing than those who see the task solely as a linguistic problem."

## **Conclusion**

What this study revealed was that while learners certainly recognized that academic writing necessitated awareness of structure in its formation, there was still a perceived need with some, that elements of grammatical instruction be included in the teaching schedule, whether this focused on traditional paragraph construction exercises, more knowledge of use of conjunctions and/or clause construction. Each perceived need will be valid for each individual student and the constraints of time will mean that not all needs will be met adequately, although not all perceived needs are necessarily ones that will contribute to students' overall writing ability. My own reflections on the work students produced also clarified that creating an understanding of audience awareness is an area that has the potential to reap rewards in the future and an area of research very much worth pursuing.

One, not unexpected finding was confirmation that trying to organize a coherent writing programme with inconsistent class participation over two semesters proved a big handicap in providing a stable developmental learning process in keeping with how I envision organizing a writing class over the year, both in terms of class work and syllabus design. Possible solutions come from providing a class in one semester which focuses on mechanical aspects of writing such as cohesion, while the second semester introduces the textual organization of the academic writing genre much in keeping with the Hallidayan approach. However, a more practical goal over the long term would be to introduce a requirement that students need to take the first semester course before being allowed to enter the second. Even if this meant a drop in student numbers in the second semester this would not necessarily be a bad thing as it would be more conducive to providing greater individual feedback that larger classes tend to constrain.

Finally, given that on average it takes a native speaker participating in higher education several years to learn how to adhere to academic writing conventions, there is undoubtedly a limit to what can be achieved with learners over the course of even two semesters. A constant needs based analysis with a more analytical perspective is therefore necessary as I strive to strike a balance between what is theoretically possible and ultimately practical in terms of classroom management, class size, feedback, student expectations and my own. It is an ongoing process which will change year by year as the class dynamics change with each new student and I manage to

refine my teaching to respond more effectively to student needs. Perhaps there is not so much the need for looking towards a comprehensive reference of L2 writing theory other than to look at each teaching situation as it arises and find out for myself the most appropriate path. The participation and perspective of students in this process cannot be overestimated. Needs analysis is a start, but it most certainly is not the end.

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