

Developmental Changes in a Japanese Learner of English Writing

Masayoshi SUGIURA

(Department of Foreign Languages)

I. Introduction

Among the so-called "four skills", writing has been most frequently talked about in *ELT Journal* (Sugiura 1998). The statistics indicate that numerous attempts have been made to investigate how L2 writing skills are developed. One of the problems about this area of studies, however, is the quality and quantity of the data available for analysis. Most of the past research has dealt with a group of students who are engaged in writing within a fixed time limit. It goes without saying that this approach is no less helpful in discovering the nature of language and of the language learning process. What is also needed to go one step further in this direction is a longer perspective. This paper attempts to make a comprehensive analysis of a considerable number of essays written by one student in a much longer span of time.

It so happened in one of my English classes in 1997-98 that I had a Japanese returnee student who graduated from a local public high school in the United States. Since she was not proficient enough in English in the beginning of her school life there, she was requested to learn English as a second language at a language school nearby. At these two educational institutions, she wrote more than 50 short essays until she was found proficient enough. The present research is intended to analyse what developmental changes took place in the essays written over a period of four and a half years.

II. Research Design

Before going into details, we should like to clarify the participant and the data available for this research. Then comes the question of what research methods to be employed in investigating how the participant's writing skills developed.

1. Participant

The participant or subject in focus moved to Maryville, Tennessee, on her father's business in December 1988 and stayed there with her parents for approximately five years. When she arrived there, she was only 13 years old. First, she spent half a year at a local middle school, and then was enrolled in a four-year public high school (Maryville High School) in September 1989. In order to catch up with other students in English proficiency, she also attended English lessons conducted at a language school affiliated with Maryville College in the afternoon.

Her ESL class at the language school consisted of mixed nationalities: Thai, Indian, Korean, Chinese and Japanese. The number of students was not fixed: it varied from five to ten students at most. When a student proved competent enough in English, he or she was mainstreamed to ordinary English classes at a local public school. Since most students were supposed to acquire listening and speaking skills by mixing with local people in their daily life, the main emphasis in English lessons was placed on reading and writing skills.

The student attended ESL lessons for two hours five days a week. She was taught by two ESL teachers throughout the course. One of the main components of the English lessons at Maryville College was writing short essays on a regular basis. She was asked to hand in three entries in a journal every week. The journal was collected by the teachers every Friday and returned on the following Monday. She was also assigned to write two essays a month on the average. Some rough guidelines on what to write were provided on each

occasion.

The turning point came in August 1992. She proved proficient enough in writing skills, and thus graduated from ESL classes. At the beginning of the new academic year, she was mainstreamed to ordinary English classes at Maryville High School. It follows that the essays written thereafter were given in at Maryville High School.

2. Data

The participant wrote her first essay on 12 October 1989, soon after she entered Maryville High School at the age of fourteen. She wrote more than fifty short essays largely on topics of her own choice over a period of four and a half years. Some of them were omitted here because they were too short to analyse. The following is a list of 19 topics to be dealt with in this paper. Her essays can be classified into three types of composition: expressive writing, book report and expository writing. The figures in the brackets indicate the year and month in which each essay was written.

Dear E.S.L Teachers (1989. 10)	expressive
Japanese Student (1990. 1)	expository
Okazaki City and Maryville City (1990. 1)	expository
Foreign Language (1990. 9)	expository
20,000 Leagues Under The Sea (1990. 12)	book report
The Ghost in the Third Row (1991. 2)	book report
The Trumpet of the Swan (1991. 5)	book report
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1991. 8)	expository
Me (1991. 9)	expressive
Dating in American High School (1991. 9)	expository
Environmental Problems (1991. 10)	expository
War (1991. 11)	expository
Culture Shock (1991. 12)	expressive
Women's Movement (1992. 4)	expository

(The student was mainstreamed to the local high school classes in August.)

Best and Worst (1992. 9)	expressive
Piano Recital (1992. 11)	expressive
Health Fair (1993. 2)	expository
The Tragic Hero (1993. 2)	book report
My Last Spring Break (1993. 4)	expressive

3. Analysis

The above-mentioned process of teaching writing can be classified as journal writing in a broader sense. It is one approach that “views writing more as a means of communication and devalues the importance of error correction” (Gallagher 1997: 59). One of the advantages about journal writing is that learners are encouraged to write without paying too much attention to grammar. In other words, journal writing makes it possible to measure how competent students are at “use” rather than “usage”. If this method is carried out on a systematic basis, it can be used as a useful means to measure how students have developed their writing skills throughout the term of a writing skills course.

This is a case study of one Japanese student learning how to write in English in the ESL environment. A case study is useful in that we can get detailed information by conducting an “intensive study of an aspect of

behaviour, either at one period in time or over a long period of time, e.g. the language development of a child over one year" (Richards, Platt, and Platt 1992:47).

The present research aims at finding how the language development of one Japanese learner of English was attained in an English-speaking environment over a period of time. This basic framework necessitates us to take the lapse of time into full consideration.

III. The Development of Grammatical Features

It may be worthwhile to observe how and when the learner begins to use individual grammatical items in her essays. She learned English grammar in ESL classes at the language school, which she attended until the summer of 1992. It should be noted, however, that to know grammar is one thing and to use it another. What accounts is not how much grammar she knew but how much grammar she was able to use in writing English.

The examples listed hereafter have been typed exactly as they appeared in the student's original. Thus the extracts below include spelling and grammatical mistakes. They are arranged largely in chronological order in each category.

1. Comparatives and superlatives

The student begins to use comparatives and superlatives in the early stage of the writing course. She writes an essay under the title of "Okazaki City and Maryville City" in January 1990. When she compares various things between the two cities, she has much opportunity for using these grammatical structures.

- (1.1) Okazaki City is bigger than Maryville City. (1990. 1)
- (1.2) The biggest company of Maryville City is Maryville College. (1990. 1)
- (1.3) Okazaki City has buildings more than Maryville City, but Maryville City has trees more than Okazaki City. (1990. 1)
- (1.4) English is the most common language in the whole world. (1990. 9)
- (1.5) This book is the funniest book I have ever read in English. (1991. 5)
- (1.6) According to..., there was less freedom, so 1963, he said "I Have A Dream." to people. (1991. 8)

As is expected, the essays written in the earlier stages contain more mistakes. The first two sentences have spelling mistakes in the comparative and superlative forms of "big". The third example is ungrammatical in that the comparative form "more" comes after each noun. However, as time passes, her writing becomes freer from mistakes. She writes the sentence in (1.5) at the age of 15. This structure seems difficult for most Japanese high school students of her age to comprehend and produce in writing free compositions.

2. Passive voice

She was assigned to write three book reports in succession in a period of six months. These essays are significant in that she begins to use such grammatical features as the passive voice and relative clauses. It is presumed that she picks up these grammatical structures from the books she has read, and produces them on paper. In other words, she undergoes a process of "input" and "output" in carrying out book report assignments.

- (2.1) For example, if your native language is Japanese, you would not be understood. (1990. 9)
- (2.2) It is written by Jules Verne. (1990. 12)
- (2.3) First reason why I like this book was I excited when I was reading this book. (1991. 2)
- (2.4) And a boy named Sam help Louis a lot. (1991. 5)
- (2.5) He was taught by his parents to treat all people with respect. (1991. 8)
- (2.6) When I went to the mall, I heard a familiar piece of music played on piano. (1992. 11)

Extract (2.3) indicates that she does not know how to use the word "excite" in a proper way. Extract (2.4) is an example of a reduced relative clause, which has the same function as a 'full' relative clause though "who is" is missing. The last two sentences seem to be more difficult to produce than the rest.

3. Direct Speech

The learner has become aware of the dramatic effect of direct speech. Unlike most Japanese high school students, she places reporting clauses in final position in the last two examples.

- (3.1) Some of my friends said "You're so lucky!" (1991. 12)
- (3.2) "Did anybody recognize my mistake?" I worried. (1992. 11)
- (3.3) "How in the world can I play the piano in this situation?" I thought. (1992. 11)

4. Relative clauses

A considerable number of relative clauses are used here. It is interesting to observe what types of relative clauses the learner uses on each stage. As is mentioned earlier, she begins to use relative clauses in her first book report written in December 1990.

- (4.1) Nautilus is the ship hero was on. (1990. 12)
- (4.2) A person who can't speak or read English should read this book. (1990. 12)
- (4.3) One reason I didn't like this book was hard to read. (1990. 12)
- (4.4) Second, reason for why I liked this book was many interesting monster in this book. (1990. 12)
- (4.5) When I was reading first chapter I wanted to know what will happen next chapter. (1991. 2)
- (4.6) Second reason why I liked this book was it was scared book. (1991. 2)
- (4.7) I like how he gets his girl-friend. (1991. 5)
- (4.8) The first reason why I like the book is Louis learns how to write and read. (1991. 5)
- (4.9) He did not like violent movement, which means he wanted to change laws without violence. (1991. 8)
- (4.10) Now blacks could sit any seat they want. (1991. 8)
- (4.11) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is the person people should not forget. (1991. 8)
- (4.12) I guess they can do what ever they want in America. (1991. 9)
- (4.13) Finally, what people have to do is try to build less factories. (1991. 10)
- (4.14) As I was running in the MHS hall one day to get class, I suddenly remembered the days when I was running long distance in Japan. (1992. 9)
- (4.15) Indeed, swimming was the only one choice I had. (1992. 9)
- (4.16) My body was pulled where the sound was coming from. (1992. 11)
- (4.17) She nodded her head in support, which helped me relax a little. (1992. 11)
- (4.18) I was palyng the middle part of that piece which was followed by the hardest part of the music. (1992. 11)
- (4.19) Only problem we had was the weather. (1993. 4)
- (4.20) I had to play my match with who was seated number one in number two singles. (1993. 4)
- (4.21) We were happy because we were the only ones who were going to play the second day which is Saturday, April 3rd. (1993. 4)

What is noticeable is the types of relative clauses. We can find six examples of "contact clauses" or zero relatives above. If a distinction is drawn between relative pronouns and adverbs, only six out of 21 cases belong to the latter. It is evident from Extracts (4.4) and (4.6) that she is mixed up about how to combine a relative clause with such a connective as "Second(ly)". About five months later, she acquires a mastery of the usage, as is shown in (4.8). She uses a non-restrictive clause only in (4.9) and (4.17). In either case, relative pronoun "which" is used as a sentential relative pronoun.

The findings indicate that as she grows old, she tends to use more embedded or rankshifted clauses with relatives. Embedded clauses will be dealt with again in the later section.

A detailed contrastive analysis of relative clauses by native and non-native students was made by Tanaka (1998), who found that L2 writers use fewer relative clauses than L1 writers.

5. Subjunctive

The system of the subjunctive forms seems so complicated for Japanese learners of English that its related materials are omitted in English textbooks for junior high schools.

- (5.1) For example, if your native language is Japanese, you would not be understood. (1990. 9)
- (5.2) If you get to learn English, you would always wish English would be your native language. (1990. 9)
- (5.3) I wish I could be that smart. (1991. 5)
- (5.4) If I were that smart, I wouldn't have a difficult time trying to learn English. (1991. 5)
- (5.5) I thought if I had not been chosen, I did not have to have this kind of pain. (1992. 9)

It takes a little time for her to use the subjunctive in proper form. As are shown in Extracts (5.1) and (5.2), she tries to use the subjunctive past for the first time in September 1990. It is not until May 1991 that she learns how to use the subjunctive past correctly in her second book report. When it comes to the subjunctive past perfect, however, she is still confused about its forms, as is shown in (5.5).

6. Present perfect and past perfect

The perfect is an aspect which does not exist in the system of the Japanese language. The student uses the present perfect in May 1991, and the past perfect in November 1992. Strictly speaking, the sentences in (6.3) and (6.4) are not grammatical, but make sense in this context.

- (6.1) I have never seen that before. (1991. 5)
- (6.2) This book is the funniest book I have ever read in English. (1991. 5)
- (6.3) One day I realized I have changed in many ways since I came to America. (1991. 9)
- (6.4) I had been refusing to play many times. Now I recognized that being nervous is not so bad after I had played. (1992. 11)
- (6.5) This music had taken me back to a special time of my life. (1992. 11)

7. Adverbial-clauses

The learner uses adverbial-clauses from the beginning. It is evident from the extracts below that in the early stage she places adverbial clauses in initial position and all of them are when- and if-clauses. It is not until September 1991 that she begins to place some adverbial clauses in final position and use until-, since- and as-clauses as well.

- (7.1) If E.S.L. teacher teach me, I want teach how to write sentence. (1989. 10)
- (7.2) If you have a lot of rule like Japanese student can you follow thoses thing? (1990. 1)
- (7.3) When I think about foreign language, I imagine the word English. (1990. 9)
- (7.4) But if you understand English, somebody will understand you. (1990. 9)
- (7.5) I wouldn't be able to get a driver's license until I was eighteen years old. (1991. 9)
- (7.6) One day I realized I have changed in many ways since I came to America. (1991. 9)
- (7.7) I only realized this when I went back to Japan this summer and talked to my friends. (1991. 9)
- (7.8) As I started to play, I was uncomfortable. (1992. 11)

IV. The Influence of External Factors

We have listed and discussed some of the grammatical features found in her essays in the preceding section. We are now led to take the following four features into consideration: paragraphing, colloquialism, literal translation, and teachers' comments. All of these features are influenced by external factors in one way or another. The first three features are influenced by the difference between English and Japanese, i.e. the learner's mother tongue. The last feature has much to do with teaching strategies. These two external factors, which are closely interrelated, may have influenced on the developmental changes in her compositions.

1. Paragraphing

There is a marked difference between paragraphs and “danraku”. *OALD* defines the term “paragraph” as “a distinct section of a piece of writing, usu consisting of several sentences with a single theme” (Hornby *et al* 1995: 840). On the other hand, the Japanese term “danraku” is defined more loosely as “a coherent section of a long piece of writing” (Shinmura 1991). Thus, “danraku” is often used as a means of avoiding too long a stretch of sentences in Japanese writing. In fact, writers are encouraged to use “danraku” in order to “make their work easier to read” (Ozaki 1990: 53). It is important to note how different the notion of “paragraph” is between English and Japanese.

At first the student did not know the concept of paragraphing at all. She learned how to organize paragraphs for the first time in the essay written in January 1990, but she failed to indent the first line of each paragraph. It was not until December 1990 that she learned how to use paragraphs in proper form.

2. Colloquialism

The participant learned some English at junior high school in Japan before moving to the United States. But the learning period was just a little more than half a year. It is no exaggeration to say, therefore, that she was nothing but a beginner in communication in English.

(1) The influence of sounds

In the early stages of her learning history, she picked up bits of language in the English-speaking environment, e.g., by talking with her American friends. However, she may have failed to notice such functional words as definite and indefinite articles and prepositions since they are pronounced less distinctively. Besides, this type of error may be caused partly by the interference of the Japanese language, the student’s mother tongue. The following mistakes are found in her first essay written in October 1989. These are probably caused by her failure to recognize individual English sounds.

- (8.1) I am in nine grade. (1989. 10)
- (8.2) I want learn a lot of grammar. (1989. 10)
- (8.3) But I don’t like spelling test. (1989. 10)
- (8.4) So I have to stady. (1989. 10)
- (8.5) I like stady english bat I don’t like..... (1989. 10)

These are not typical mistakes made by Japanese learners of English alone. In Extract (8.1), the definite article “the” is missing before “nine”, and in Extract (8.2) the preposition “to” in the ‘to-infinitive’ is missing. In (8.3) she should use the plural form of “test” in this context. The last two examples in particular have much to do with the unpredictability of pronunciation in the English spelling system.

(2) Spoken language

She may have learned some colloquial expressions in her daily life. Japanese students are less likely to pick up the following expressions if they learn English in the Japanese-speaking environment. In (9.1), “he thought” is inserted between the dependent when-clause and the independent clause.

- (9.1) When he grew up, he thought, he would try to change things. (1991. 8)
 - (9.2) *Boy*, I sure have changed! (1991. 9)
 - (9.3) But *think about it*. (1991. 10)
 - (9.4) I was *kind of* surprised.... (1992. 4)
 - (9.5) I was *hanging on*. (1992. 9)
- (italics added)

3. literal translation

The following errors are caused by the interference of the student’s mother tongue.

- (10.1) Japanese people were only us. (1991. 12)
- (10.2) I was goal in. (1992. 9)
- (10.3) We went to... and went shopping to Lenox Square. (1993. 4)

The examples above should be rewritten respectively as “We were the only Japanese,” “I reached the goal line,” and “We went to... and went shopping at Lenox Square.” These are typical examples of literal translation from Japanese into English.

4. Teachers' comments

These comments are directed to the content or message of the entry rather than its linguistic features. What is particularly noticeable is that their comments contain words of encouragement, such as “Good work!” in (13.3) and “Great!” in (13.4).

- (11.1) “form and organization ok.” “not a sentence.” (1990. 9)
- (11.2) “Where is the plot summary?” “What happened in the book?” “Nero/Nemo? Which one?”
- (11.3) “Good work!” (1990. 12)
- (11.4) “Great!” “1st, 2nd, and 3rd paragraphs need to go into more detail.” “I’m glad someone likes them. I surely don’t.” (1991. 2)
- (11.5) “Good 1st paragraph.” “How does he repeat it?” “This sentence doesn’t have anything to do with rest of the paragraph.” “I don’t understand what you are trying to say.” “Why did you think it was funny? That could have been one of your paragraphs.” (1991. 5)
- (11.6) “Well done.” “Also, he was murdered because of his beliefs.” (1991. 8)
- (11.7) “This is very general.” “Not clear.” “I don’t understand.” (1991. 10)
- (11.8) “Tell me the name of the person you interviewed.” “Difficult problem. Maybe you could ask ‘Do you think the rising divorce rate in America is related to the women’s movement?’ Maybe in discussing the general question she might volunteer a personal story or reason. If she doesn’t she probably doesn’t want to discuss it.” (1992. 4)
- (11.9) “Pages 1 and 2 sound typical for an American teen; Pages 3 and 4 sound a little more like a Japanese learning English. Can you hear the difference?” (1992. 9)
- (11.10) “Surely you will visit back here in Tennessee—I hope.” “I’m so glad.” “You will.” (1993. 4)

The student said that she was much encouraged by the words of encouragement throughout the course. It is apparent from the above comments that communication took place between the student and her teachers.

V. Conclusion: Pedagogical Implications

There is no question that the student’s writing skills improved over four and a half years. I had several personal interviews with her, and found her comments extremely informative. She mentioned the three factors which have helped to develop her writing skills: the English-speaking environment, book reports, and teachers’ comments. These factors may provide suggestions for the betterment of English writing.

The first factor, however, should be excluded from a list of our suggestions because it is irrelevant to the Japanese environment. Most Japanese learners of English are exposed to a totally different learning environment in which she was placed in the United States.

The use of book reports is worthy of consideration. It is true that journal writing is effective in enhancing fluency, but it leaves something to be desired in terms of accuracy. Letting students write purely on their own initiative will get them hardly anywhere. If, however, book reporting is incorporated into journal writing, it may enhance accuracy as well as fluency. This type of writing has two aims: reading and writing. Students can “receive” what they have learned from reading books, and “produce” it on paper.

The third factor is teachers’ comments. They play a crucial role in raising learners’ awareness of writing strategies. Their words of encouragement in particular are essential to the development of language learning.

The analysis in this paper is limited to the essays written by only one participant. It is hoped that many similar and extended investigations will be pursued into the language development of learners in general.

References

- Gallagher, C. 1997. 'Journal Writing in EFL: A Systemic Functional Account' *ICU Language Research Bulletin* Vol.12. Tokyo: International Christian University.
- Hornby, A.S. and Crowther, J. (eds.). 1995. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oi, K. 1997. "Why do Japanese learners begin a sentence with 'I'?" *Modern English Teaching* Vol.33. No.12: 22-25.
- Ozaki, T. 1990. 'Danraku o Minaosou' [Let's Reexamine Paragraphs] in *Jissen Gengo Gijutsu Nyumon* [An Introduction to Practical Language Skills] . Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun.
- Richards, J.C., J. Platt and H. Platt. 1992. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Shinmura, I. (ed.) 1991. *Kojien*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Sugiura, M. 1998. 'An Analysis of ELT Journal Abstracts'. Paper presented at the 1998 Chubu Eigo Kyoiku Gakkai. JA Nagano -Ken Building, Nagano.
- Tanaka, S. 1998. *Kotoba no Hanataba: Varieties and Universals of Language*. Nagoya: Chubu Nippon Kyoiku Bunka Kai.
(平成10年9月7日受理)