

A Cross-Sectional Contrastive Analysis of Japanese Students' English Composition Skills

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Recent studies of Japanese EFL student writing have revealed characteristic weaknesses in a variety of language areas: compositions that were organized as one extended paragraph, a discourse structure that appears illogical to a native speaker reader, a lack of credible support or an over-reliance on an emotional response to the topic. This study collected English writing samples from a cross-section of Japanese high school and college learners and considered them in terms of a native speaker's expectations. Features such as composition organization, paragraph structure, transition signals, vocabulary, collocations, and style were analyzed across a wide range of language proficiency with the aim of identifying students' difficulties in writing and exploring how these are resolved in tandem with English language development. Writing samples were collected from six levels of Japanese EFL learners and a group of native speakers. These were compared and any specific problem areas or patterns which may be generally applicable to Japanese students were

identified. The results revealed that some features develop naturally and others require conscious learning under formal writing instruction. Possible implications of the results are discussed as they pertain to assisting teachers in creating a more precise and effective composition writing curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Producing a coherent and fluent piece of writing is an intimidating endeavor for most ESL/EFL students. Writing demands not only the integration of a wide variety of largely unfamiliar skills and strategies (Matsuhata, 2000), but success is often dependent on shared writing conventions between writers and readers, and familiarity with genre type and rhetorical conventions (Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2003). For Japanese EFL students, writing in English appears to be particularly challenging. Kroll (1990), for example, has shown that Japanese rank worst in rhetorical competency, had the most errors, and collectively generated the smallest corpus. Izzo (2002) echoes her findings in his studies and asserts, "Japanese students have great difficulty developing the level of English writing skill that is expected of university EFL students." Critically, despite many years of English instruction, students do not effectively learn how to write in English.

In general, English grammar rules are emphasized in Japanese junior and senior high schools, and English linguistic forms are introduced through composition textbooks which stress the reproduction of accurate English sentence patterns. High school students are seldom required to produce paragraphs; consequently, by the time students reach college, they find it difficult to convey their ideas and opinions effectively in written English. It is common for students to simply transfer the characteristically ambiguous Japanese writing style into English (Hirayanagi, 1998; Takagi, 2001).

To compensate for this omission in instruction and to encourage more appropriate English writing production, it would be helpful for English teachers to know where and how their students' writing efforts deviate from

standard English organizational patterns and how these gaps narrow as students accrue English learning experience. The objectives of this study were (a) to investigate previous research and identify the weaknesses revealed in Japanese students' writing, and (b) to collect writing samples from students at different English levels in order to investigate which weaknesses are corrected and which remain as students' exposure to English instruction increases year by year. It is hoped that the results of this study may assist Japanese teachers of English in creating more precise and effective English writing curricula.

WEAKNESSES FOUND IN ENGLISH WRITING SAMPLES OF JAPANESE STUDENTS

It is often pointed out that Japanese students are unaware of the differences of composition organization between Japanese and English. Kobayashi (1984), Oi (1986) and Takagi (2000) examined this characteristic and discovered that the flow of ideas in Japanese students' English compositions was a reflection of Japanese compositional order (introduction, development, turn, and conclusion¹) as opposed to the conventional English pattern of introduction, body and conclusion. A study by Nishigaki and Leishman (1998) revealed a prevalence of compositions that were organized as one extended paragraph, or just "body" paragraphs with no introduction or conclusion. In an earlier study, Harder and Harder (1982, p. 23) reported that impressionistically the discourse structure of Japanese college students' essays seemed "disorganized and illogical, filled with nonrelevant [sic] material, [and] developed incoherently with statements that remain unsupported," and that instead of objective explanation and support, the writers' personalities often dominated the content. In light of this research, composition organization was identified as one weak element in Japanese student writing of English.

¹ For an illustrative discussion of the introduction, development, turn, and conclusion (ki, sho, ten, ketsu) structure, see Hinds (2001).

Other studies have shown that English compositions by Japanese students tend to be made up of a large number of paragraphs, with many of the paragraphs consisting of only one, two, or three sentences (Nishigaki & Leishman, 2001; Sato, 1988). Taniguchi (1993) found that 42% of the 213 compositions she analyzed did not use the paragraph form. Rather, students' compositions resembled paragraphs in a Japanese composition with most sentences beginning at the margin. Thus, paragraph structure was identified as a second weak element in Japanese student writing of English.

Since readers expect signposts in writing, transition signals which help readers follow the logical thread of a writer's ideas, are very important in English. This contrasts expectations in Japanese writing where determining the links between parts of a composition and the composition as a whole is the reader's responsibility, and an absence of signposts is not considered a flaw. In a 1998 study, Nishigaki and Leishman found that Japanese students showed little variety of transition signals. The top five most frequently used transition signals (*and, but, so, because, and when*) made up 81.7% of the total used in their compositions. The repeated use of these same transition signals made the student writers' ideas seem simplistic and often obscured their meaning. Therefore, a limited variety of transition signals was identified as a third weak element of Japanese student writing in English.

Choosing a word with the appropriate nuance is difficult for EFL student writers in general and no less so for Japanese students. Oi (1986) compared words used in the compositions of Japanese and American students and found that Japanese students used the same words repeatedly while American students used more synonyms. One factor that contributes to this weakness is a limited vocabulary. Another factor in accurate word choice is pointed out by Nation (2001, p. 323) who reminds us, "...fluent and appropriate language use requires collocation knowledge." Although there has been little research to date investigating the usage of collocations among EFL students (Hasegawa & Chujo, 2003), a lack of productive knowledge of collocations is a factor in having fewer lexical choices. Thus, vocabulary and collocation usage were identified as a fourth weak element for Japanese student writing

in English.

Another challenging feature for Japanese students is writing in an appropriate style, particularly, academic discourse. Shaw and Liu (1998) have drawn attention to the prevalence of spoken conventions found in ESL/EFL writing. Nishigaki and Leishman (2000) had similar findings for Japanese students in their study; for example, 14.5% of the students' sentences included spoken conventions such as "Second, I am going to tell you their histories," "Why do we feel so? Let's search for the reason," and "To my surprise, the condition they can divorce is different." Other studies have examined the style of Japanese students' compositions by focusing on common expressions found in their writing. For example, statements beginning with expressions such as "I think," "I feel," and "I suppose" were ubiquitous and functioned to avoid bluntness and to soften statements while unintentionally mystifying English-speaking readers (Harder & Harder, 1982; Oi, 1986, 1997; Takagi, 2000). Therefore, style was identified as the fifth element in need of improvement for Japanese student writing in English.

In short, based on this research of areas in which Japanese students appear to need improvement, five elements considered critical to understanding the flow of students' ideas in written English were chosen to be analyzed for this study: (a) composition organization, (b) paragraph construction, (c) transition signals, (d) vocabulary and collocation, and (e) style. The English writing samples collected from a cross-section of high school and university students were analyzed in terms of the factors that influenced these five elements.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 192 English compositions from seven different groups ranging from high school freshmen and college sophomores to English native speakers were collected (see Table 1). We felt that this sampling was

representative of a progression of English writing proficiency from group S1 through S6 based on two factors: (a) how many years the six Japanese student groups had studied English; and (b) the results of their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores. The data here provides a general picture of developmental levels from which, given the similarity of curriculum at each level, we can infer progress over time.

TABLE 1
Participants

S1:	29 public high school freshmen (10 th graders)
S2:	40 public high school sophomores (11 th graders)
S3:	31 public high school seniors (12 th graders)
S4:	36 freshmen and 28 sophomores from a private technical university
S5:	8 national university freshmen
S6:	13 national university sophomores
NS:	7 native speaking high school or college English teachers in Japan

The high school freshmen, sophomores and seniors (S1, S2, and S3 respectively) attended the same school.² The S1 freshmen studied English for three years in junior high before taking the high school's entrance examination. The S2 sophomores had one additional year of high school English and the S3 seniors had two additional years. Although all three groups took what is technically termed an English composition class, students were asked to produce sentences and practice grammar structures and had yet no experience in completing extended English compositions.

S4 was comprised of college freshmen and sophomores from the same private technical university, all of whom had studied English for six years in high school before taking the university's entrance examination. The college

² We understand that the English level of students in these groups is very low and linguistically they belong to the same English level under an international ELT standard such as described by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language* by the Council of Europe. However, for a local schoolteacher, the differences between the grades are critical to understanding students' developmental stages of writing. Therefore, we kept the grade division in this paper.

freshmen had taken two English courses and the sophomores had taken one additional English class as a liberal art subject. The average TOEFL score for the S4 freshmen was approximately 350 and for the sophomores, 360. Since there was not significant difference in the average TOEFL scores between these two groups, and since neither group had received any formal writing instruction, it was decided to merge the data of the freshmen and sophomores into one group.

The freshmen of S5 and sophomores of S6 attended the same national university and had studied English for six years in high school before taking the university's entrance examination. The average TOEFL scores for S5 and S6 were 485 and 492, respectively. Although the TOEFL scores for S5 and S6 were not significantly different, S6 had taken Basic English Writing, a course that focused on process writing and introduced paragraph structures such as comparison, cause and result, and so forth. Therefore, we hypothesized that the formal paragraph writing instruction S6 received might make the writing samples between S5 and S6 qualitatively different, and hence these two groups were separated.

In addition, writing samples were collected from a group of native speakers of English who taught English at university and high school to present a target goal for EFL writing instruction.³ The comparison between S6, who had taken a one year writing course, and NS showed how formal writing instruction improved students' writing skills and in what ways their writing still deviated from standard English rhetorical and organizational

³ Under the notion of "World Englishes," English has a number of standard varieties, not only the two globally used versions of British and American English. This fact has led ELT researchers to advocate language variation in classroom instruction and testing (Jenkins, 2006). However, Timmis (2002) explores the trend that most students show a preference for British or American native-like varieties on grounds of "authenticity" and "non-artificiality." Taylor (2006, p. 52) points out that "applied linguists may see things differently but we should not ignore or override the attitudes and perceptions of learners themselves." Based on these arguments, we chose NS writing samples as typical examples of the norm for EFL/ESL writing practice.

patterns. We believe the results of this comparison would illustrate the distance students need to cover toward their further improvement of writing in English.

Data Collection

To produce the writing samples to be analyzed in this study, the students were given an extra-curricular writing assignment. Due to the wide range of proficiency and cognitive levels of the students, special consideration in planning the topic was required; that is, it was important to find a topic that would be of interest to all students, but would also be within the skill level of each group. The topic chosen for the writing assignment was to describe and justify three things the student would bring to a deserted island in order to survive for one month. Additionally, specific instructions for each group of students were geared to that groups' English level. Since high school students generally lack both experience and skills in writing English compositions, they (S1, S2, and S3) were instructed by their teacher (one of the researchers) to state and explain the reasons for their three selections. The college students (S4, S5, and S6) were instructed to begin their compositions with the sentence head, "If I were stranded on a deserted island... ."

As composition writing is a process that includes consulting references and revision, providing the students with sufficient time to develop their compositions was an important aspect of the study. As White and Arndt (1991, p. 3) point out, "[w]riting is a thinking process in its own right. It demands conscious intellectual effort, which usually has to be sustained over a considerable period of time." Without a *considerable* period of time students are not able to draft, structure, and review their output. Therefore, the students were assigned two weeks to complete the task as a take-home assignment, and they were encouraged to use a dictionary and other resources and to understand the task as a process with multiple recursive steps.

Data Analysis

To identify some of the weaknesses of the students' writing, for example, characteristics such as "listing" versus "paragraph organization," initial evaluations were conducted independently by each researcher and then compared. Discrepancies were investigated by reviewing the work in question until a mutually satisfactory agreement was reached. The quantitative data was produced by scanning the compositions into a computer, and using software such as MS Word and WordSmith Tools to calculate percentages of use of occurrence for specific writing elements.

Composition Organization

In general, compositions produced in ESL/EFL writing classes should involve a series of related and well-organized paragraphs on a given topic, and contain an "introduction + body + conclusion" format (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1990). To examine if students had acquired this standard English writing pattern, the sample compositions in this study were initially analyzed and categorized as being either in "list" or "paragraph" form. As was found in previous studies, rather than being able to produce paragraphs, lower level students often produced lists. Here is an example of a list composition from S1:

I take the book and apples and a fishing tackle.
Because I like to read books.
And I like apples.
And I like fishing.

As can be seen, a list composition is a collection of itemized sentences. Of the total number of compositions, the percentages of list and paragraph compositions were calculated. The paragraph compositions were further divided into groups based on the following five patterns: (a) introduction + body + conclusion; (b) introduction + body; (c) body + conclusion; (d) body;

and, (e) no breaks (compositions containing only one paragraph without any indentation). Finally, the percentage for each pattern was calculated.

Paragraph Structure

The structure of a paragraph is commonly understood to consist of three parts: an introduction made up of one or two general sentences about the topic or the main idea; a discussion made up of three to eight sentences using specific examples, explanations, or definitions; and a conclusion made up of one or two sentences restating the main idea (Lites, 1989). As has been discussed, however, paragraphs produced by Japanese students often consist of only one or two sentences, a characteristic not uncommon in Japanese writing. Therefore, the number of one-sentence paragraphs and the total number of sentences contained in a paragraph were determined to be indicators of the degree of Japanese students' familiarity with paragraph structure and were tabulated.

Transition Signals

Transition signals function as signposts to connect sentences and clauses, allowing the reader to easily follow the writer's ideas. In this study, all the sentence connectors (coordinators and subordinators) were identified and classified according to the Chart of Transition Signals by Oshima and Hogue (1991). Since previous studies had shown that students heavily depend on only a limited number of transition signals in their compositions, the ability to use a variety of transition signals is a sign of more advanced writing skills. Thus the percentage of use for the top five most frequently used transition signals was calculated as an inverse measure of writing fluency.

Vocabulary and Collocation

In order to analyze the level of vocabulary proficiency, the words used in

the students' compositions were compared to those that appear in the most widely used Japanese junior high school textbooks: *New Horizon 1* (1997), *New Horizon 2* (1998), and *New Horizon 3* (1999). If the number of the junior high school words relative to the overall number of words appearing in the students' compositions decreased, it meant students had learned more precise and accurate vocabulary use. Therefore, the percentage of the junior high school words included in the students' compositions was calculated.

Since there is currently no fixed definition of "collocation" (Kjellmer, 1994), the authors have accepted the interpretation described in the *Guidebook for the Course of Study* (Japanese Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 61⁴) which is that collocation is "a series of words which functions as one word such as 'a piece of,' or a combination of words which functions as one word such as 'get up,' 'have to,' or a set of words which connects two sentences such as 'so... that.'" There is no known computer program to extract collocations automatically, therefore expressions entered as an "entry" or "sub-entry" in one of the three major students' dictionaries widely used in Japan, *Light House* (Takebayashi *et al.*, 1996), *The Super Anchor* (Yamagishi *et al.*, 1996), and *Sunrise Quest* (Inami *et al.*, 1999) were identified as a collocation and were counted for frequency. Since the counting of the number of collocations can be subjective, the researchers repeated the same procedure three times on different days.

Style

In general, it is understood that "there is a perception that the [sic] more formal expressions are more suitable to writing whereas speaking is better for more informal and more personal exchanges" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 76). As was found in previous studies, Japanese students frequently used expressions more common to spoken language in their writing such as "By the way, which do you like...?" resulting in compositions that sounded overly

⁴ It was renamed the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2001.

casual (Nishigaki & Leishman, 2000, 2001). The students' compositions were therefore analyzed for characteristics of informality in their language, that is, the use of spoken expressions in their compositions.

Spoken language differs from written language in three broad areas: grammar, lexis, and discourse (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001). Grammatically, since there is not enough time to construct long and complex sentences in the immediacy of conversational give and take, short and simple structures are more common. In terms of lexis, spoken language tends to use general vocabulary (Spratt, Pulverness & Williams, 2005), for example, "use" as opposed to "incorporate," "utilize," "apply," or "exercise," and written text shows longer average word length (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). According to Chujo and Nishigaki (2006), more technical and professional words which refer to specific and exact meaning are likely to be longer in word length than more general ones. It can be understood that formality of language affects word length to some extent, and that formal language is likely to be longer than casual language. Finally, in terms of discourse, conversation is interactive and commonly incorporates prompts for responses and devices for calling or keeping attention (Biber, 1988). Based on these areas, elements of style were analyzed by tabulating the occurrence or frequency of use for the following features: (a) the number of simple sentences containing one subject-predicate pair (grammar); (b) the average length of words (lexis); (c) the occurrences of exclamations, questions, question-answer pairs, and sentences that directly address the reader (discourse); and (d) the occurrences of colloquial expressions more commonly used in conversational English, such as "I think," "I feel," "I suppose," and "I guess" (discourse).

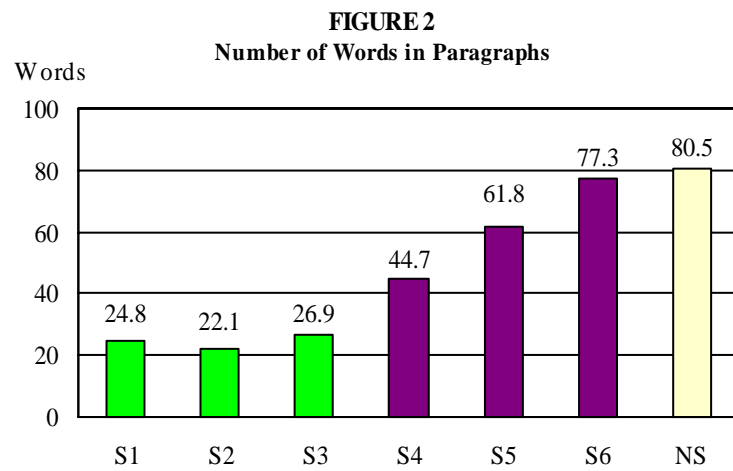
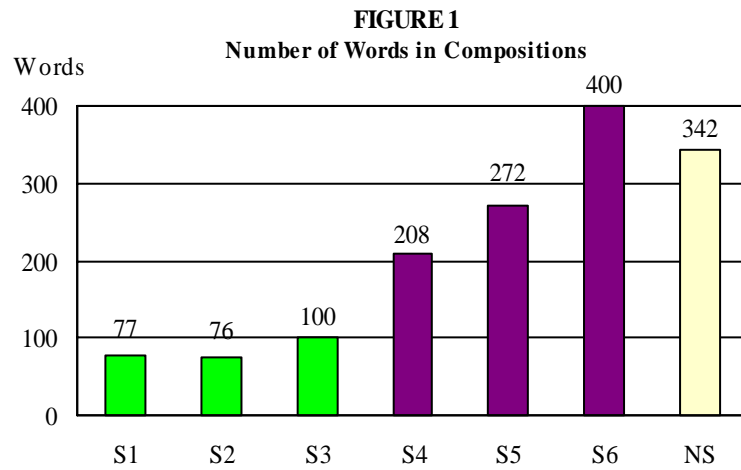
RESULTS

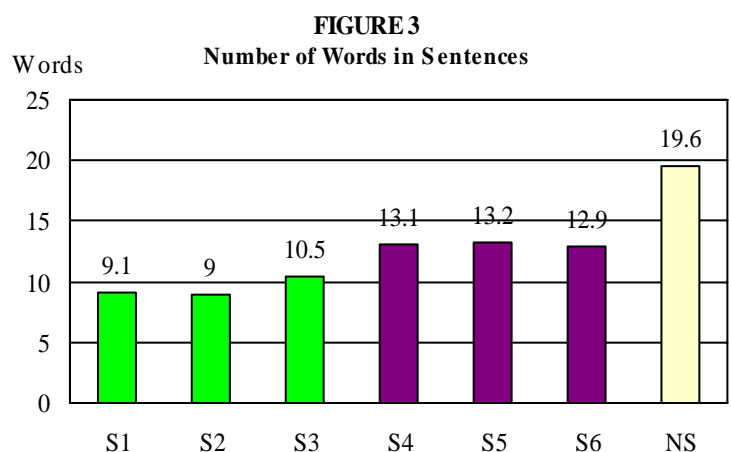
Overview

To gain a general picture of the students' overall writing production in the

collected writing samples, we first examined the average number of words included in the compositions (Figure 1), paragraphs (Figure 2) and sentences (Figure 3). The color of the bar distinguishes the students' level of English with the light color representing the high school students, the dark color representing the university students, and the white bar on the far right showing the target level, that is, the native speaker samples.

Figures 1 and 2 show that compositions and paragraphs became longer as students' English experience and level increased. The average number of words in the compositions written by S6 exceeded those of the native speakers' by 58 words (Figure 1) and their paragraphs were almost as long as those of the native speakers (Figure 2). Sentence length, shown in Figure 3, however, leveled off at an average of 13.2 words compared to an average NS sentence length of 19.6 words. It is also interesting that a considerable improvement in the length of compositions, paragraphs, and sentences was found between high school students (S1, S2, and S3) and college students (S4, S5, and S6). This improvement can be attributed to the highly competitive entrance examinations high school students must pass to get into university in which English is one of the major subjects. High school students study English intensively to prepare for these examinations.





S6 showed a notable increase in the length of compositions and paragraphs, although not of the sentences themselves. This may be due to the previous year’s formal writing instruction in which S6 practiced expressing themselves in written English and wrote longer compositions. If we consider sentence length as an indicator of the complexity of grammar or density of information communicated, it may be that the writing class S6 took put more emphasis on process over production, and organization patterns over well-structured sentences, and hence a lack of improvement in overall sentence length. We can conclude that one requirement in learning to produce more appropriately complex sentences is focused instruction on sentence structure.

Organization

Composition organization was categorized initially as “list” or “paragraph” and the results are shown in Figure 4. Nearly half of the high school students did not produce paragraphs, but instead only itemized sentences. This tendency, however, steadily decreased from S1 to S5, (S1’s 48.3% to S5’s 0%, respectively) as students’ English proficiency levels improved. Although organization by list was still seen in S4 (21.6%), no lists were found in S5

and S6. These results indicate that about half of the high school students had no clear concept of how to create a paragraph. However, as their exposure to English increased and their English level improved, students appeared to become more familiar with the paragraph format and by S5 began constructing paragraphs.

FIGURE 4
Percentage of List and Paragraph

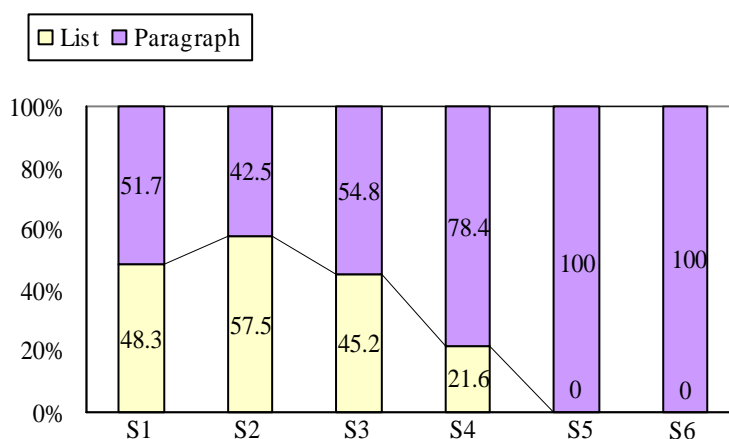


Table 2 indicates the percentage of compositions that followed a conventional composition pattern (introduction, body, and conclusion). No steady progress can be found from S1 to S5. However, a noteworthy improvement was observed between S6 (53.8%) and previous groups. This remarkable improvement can be attributed to the freshmen writing class students had taken the previous year. After one year of formal writing instruction, more than half of the S6 students began to grasp the introduction-body-conclusion pattern of English composition. From this, we might infer that conventional organizational patterns of composition do not improve as a natural course of English learning, but that they require formal and explicit

instruction. However, 46.2% of the S6 students still lacked the ability to write an introductory or concluding paragraph or both. This indicates that the acquisition of the English organizational pattern of “introduction, body, and conclusion” is difficult for EFL learners whose first language has a different organizational pattern such as the Japanese “introduction, development, turn and conclusion.”

TABLE 2
Percentage of Compositions Containing an Introduction, Body, and Conclusion

Groups	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
%	13.3	5.9	26.8	23.1	12.5	53.8

Paragraph Construction

Figure 5 shows the percentage of paragraphs that consisted of a single sentence and Table 3 indicates the average number of sentences in a paragraph. While a paragraph comprised of a single sentence is relatively uncommon in compositions of native English speakers, they were a prominent feature of students’ compositions though declining in frequency as students’ proficiency level increased. Paragraphs produced by S1, S2, S3 and S4 were two to three times as likely to consist of only one sentence, compared to the percentage of one-sentence paragraphs for S5 and S6. Table 3 shows that on average the paragraphs of S1, S2, and S3 (high school level) included fewer than three sentences; S4 averaged 3.9 sentences; S5 averaged 5.4 sentences; and S6 averaged 6.3 sentences. From Figures 5 and Table 3, we can conclude that as the length of study of English increased and students’ proficiency level improved, students seemed to have learned to produce paragraphs of a more appropriate length.

FIGURE 5
Percentage of One-Sentence Paragraphs

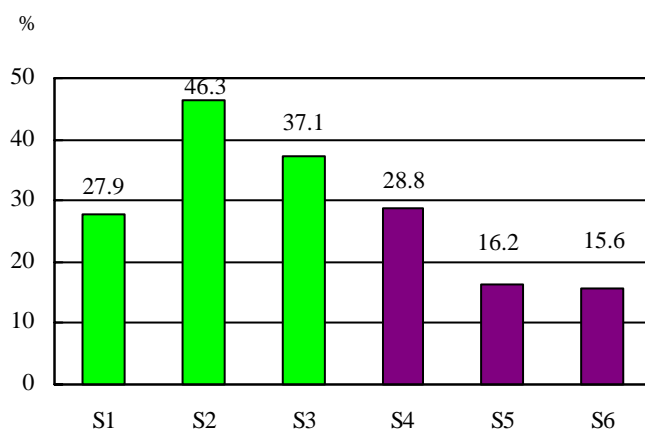


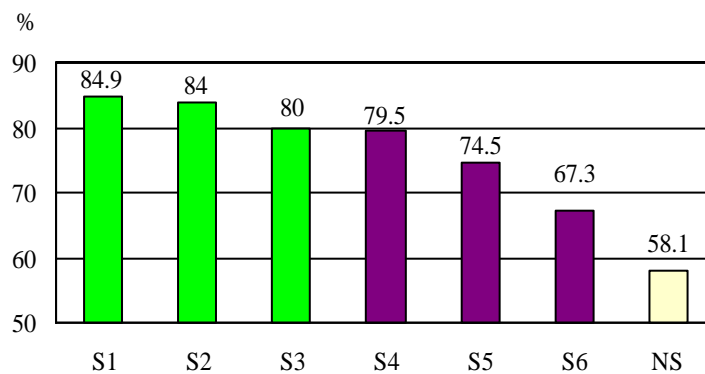
TABLE 3
Average Number of Sentences in a Paragraph

Groups	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
#	2.6	2.3	2.6	3.9	5.4	6.3

Transition Signals

The top five frequently used transition signals in the students' compositions were: *if*, *because*, *and*, *so*, and *but*. Figure 6 illustrates the usage of these top five transition signals among the total number of transition signals identified in the students' compositions. As can be seen, the top five frequently used transition signals comprised 84.9% of all transitions used in S1 and this percentage decreased gradually to 74.5% in S5 as students' exposure to

FIGURE 6
Percentage of the Top 5 Frequently-Used Transitions



English and skill in English increased. The percentage of use for these five transition signals then decreased markedly to 67.3% for S6. This indicates that because of the paragraph writing instruction S6 received, they acquired a wider variety of transition signals and learned to avoid repeatedly using the same transition signals. However, there was still a limited variety of transition signals used by S6 compared to the variety used by NS. Therefore, to convey students' ideas more logically with a wider variety of transition signals, students may benefit from more explicit instruction in this area.

Vocabulary and Collocation

To analyze the level of the students' vocabulary proficiency, the words used in the students' compositions were compared to those appearing in junior high school textbooks. Table 4 shows the percentage of junior high school words used in the students' compositions. The percentage gradually decreased from 88.9% to 83.2% as students' English proficiency increased. From this we may infer that students improved both their vocabulary and their skills for using a dictionary. However, even for S6, the percentage of

junior high school vocabulary was still much higher than that of the NS (83.2% and 77.1%, respectively). Since the words used in junior high school textbooks tend to convey a more basic and general meaning, we can conclude that to write more fluently, students need to learn to use more specific words to communicate their intended meaning more precisely.

TABLE 4
Percentage of Junior High School Words

Groups	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	NS
%	88.9	88.5	87.1	86.3	84.8	83.2	77.1

The use of collocations was examined in terms of (a) the percentage of students who used collocations in compositions (Figure 7), and (b) the average number per 100 words of different types of collocation found in the compositions (Table 5). As can be seen in Figure 7, only 58.6% of S1 used collocations in their compositions. Steady improvement is observed from S1 to S4, and by S5 all students were using collocations. Although students had been introduced to collocations in junior high school textbooks, many of S1 (41.4%) did not use this knowledge at all in their writing. As students' English proficiency improved for S2, S3 and S4, more students started using collocations. These results suggest that the use of collocations in production requires time to take hold, thus teachers at junior high school need to help students become more familiar with the collocations learned in class through activities and practice.

From Table 5, we can also see that the number of collocations that the students used in their compositions gradually increased from S1 to S3, but stopped and leveled off between S4 and S6. The gap in the frequency of collocation usage between NS and S6 remained large. The use of collocation has a direct impact on clear and communicative writing, therefore collocation knowledge and use, along with vocabulary study, should be targeted actively. As research on EFL students' use of collocation is currently limited, the results in Figure 7 and Table 5 provide an interesting picture of the transition of students' use of collocations to their writing.

FIGURE 7
Percentage of Students Who Used Collocations

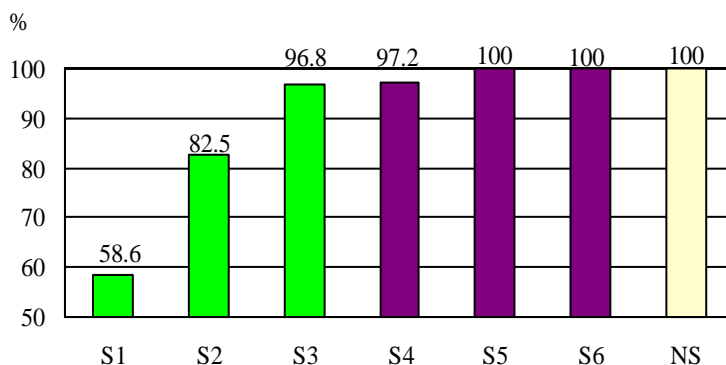


TABLE 5
Number of Collocation Types per 100 Words

Groups	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	NS
#	1.3	2.7	3.1	3.5	3.6	3.5	5.7

Style

In examining the structure of students’ sentences, first, “simple sentences” were identified and the percentage of use was calculated (see Figure 8). Overall, when compared to NS compositions, the Japanese students’ compositions contained a far greater number of simple sentences. Table 6 shows the average length of words used in students’ compositions. The word length leveled off between S2 and S6. It is clear that Japanese students used shorter and more basic words.

FIGURE 8
Percentage of Simple Sentences



TABLE 6
Word Length

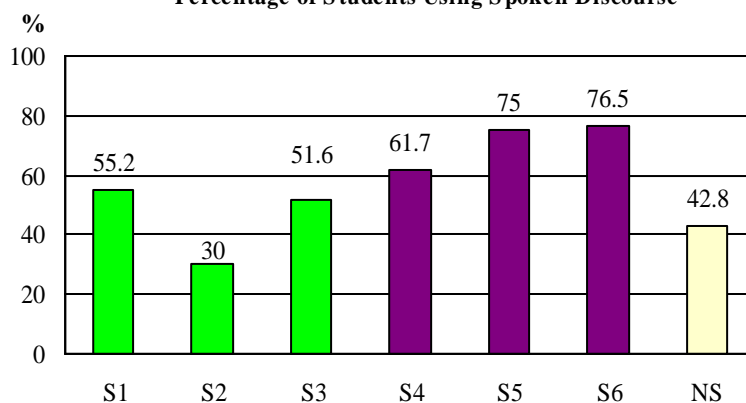
Groups	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	NS
# of letters	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9	3.9	4.3

The number of students who used (i) either an exclamatory sentence, a question, a question-answer pair, a direct address to the readers or (ii) a hedging sentence beginning with “I think,” “I feel,” “I suppose” and “I guess” were identified, and the percentage of use was calculated. Interestingly, the results shown in Figure 9 indicate that the percentage of students who used spoken discourse elements increased along with progress in students’ overall English skills. Since the more advanced students wrote longer compositions, the potential occurrence of colloquial expressions increased. However, there was a considerable gap between S6 (76.5%) and NS (42.8%). Although the assignment topic of this study was more creative than strictly academic, the majority of NS writers nonetheless employed a recognizably formal written discourse style, whereas the Japanese student writers quite often *spoke* to the reader, for example:

- S1: But, anyway, I will not join the plan.
- S2: But, I think..., I don't take part in this experiment.
- S3: And then, don't be surprised. Number three is a "soccer ball".
- S4: Why do I bring a shampoo? The answer is keep of a hair's quality.
- S5: Great! What a good idea! Am I a genius in making any plans? But in this case, I get a big and fatal problem.
- S6: If I actually faced with this situation, I cannot decide easily as I did this time I suppose. Do you understand my ideas?

With little awareness of genre or style differences between spoken and written English, students simply wrote what they knew. From these results, it is clear that students need formal instruction to be attentive to the differences in style that characterizes written and spoken English.

FIGURE 9
Percentage of Students Using Spoken Discourse



CONCLUSION

This study is based on a relatively small sampling of different groups and covers a cross-section of ability and skill levels. The findings apply to the students in this study and while progress over time may only in a general way

be inferred from the different levels, the findings may be helpful none-the-less in targeting writing elements that need attention.

First, among the writing skills observed in this study, composition length and paragraph length improved with increased exposure to English and reached the same level as NS compositions after one-year of formal paragraph writing instruction (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Second, the production of complex sentences (Figure 3 and Figure 8), and the use of more precise and accurate words and collocations (Table 4 and Table 5) leveled off after entering college and remained unchanged. We concluded that college students (S4, S5, and S6) need further instruction to produce more complex and accurate sentences, a greater variety of collocations and more meaning-specific words than general words. Third, the use of the composition organization pattern of introduction-body-conclusion (Table 2), correct paragraph structure (Table 3 and Figure 5), and variety of transition signals (Figure 6) appeared to have improved along with students' increased exposure to English. However, even S6, the most advanced group of students, still showed the need for improvement to reach the level of fluency as exemplified by NS. Finally, the Japanese students' compositions often sounded overly conversational. This might be attributed to their propensity for using simple sentences (Figure 3 and Figure 8), their choice of general vocabulary (Table 4 and Table 6), and their excessive application of spoken discourse elements such as direct address to engage readers, or hedges to soften opinions (Figure 9).

In summary, the findings in this study suggest that different elements of writing require different approaches to instruction. In order for EFL instructors to most efficiently address the students' needs within writing instruction it is helpful to be aware that some writing elements, such as the length of a composition or paragraph, develop in the natural course of learning English. For the improvement of other writing elements, such as the organization of a composition, the complexity of sentence structure, and the effective use of transition signals, students might benefit from formal instruction.

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