The Effectiveness of Summary-Writing Activities on the Improvement of Japanese High School EFL Students' Writing Abilities

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Abstract

This study intends to determine whether summary-writing activities using a high school English I textbook could be an effective method of real-life classroom instruction to improve students' writing ability in the context of Japanese high school. In total, 148 students from four different tenth-grade homerooms participated in the study; two homerooms engaged in summary-writing activities (Summary Group), while the other two dealt with traditional Japanese-to-English translation activities (Translation Group). Each group was provided with weekly instruction for almost ten months. A pretest and posttest were conducted on the instructions in order to determine the effects of the classroom practices. The results suggest that summary writing activities improved the learners' writing abilities, while Japanese-to-English translation activities did not. It is anticipated that these results will help develop a feasible teaching model for a writing course with integrated reading activities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In this increasingly global age, knowledge of only one's native language may not always be sufficient to communicate with others. Given that English is a language spoken worldwide and that the number of non-native English users outnumbers that of native English speakers (Crystal, 2003), it is becoming increasingly difficult to deny or ignore the fact that English plays a central role not only in business transactions but also in our private lives (i.e., browsing web pages to obtain information for a trip, exchanging e-mails, etc.), even if it is not our first language. In particular, the ability to write in English seems to have become increasingly important for youngsters. If one intends to study abroad, even in countries where English is not the first language, English is often the medium of communication used in lectures or required for writing assignments. In recent years, an increasing number of Japanese companies have made English their official language; hence, even after a student graduates from school and begins working for a company, he or she has to use English not only to communicate with people outside Japan but also within the country (i.e., in writing business reports or proposals).

This being the case, how confident are Japanese high school students about their English writing skills? The author conducted a survey before the present study among 200 third-year high school students from the same school as the participants in the present study (but who did not participate in the present study) on what they felt were their best skills. According to the survey, 33 percent of the participants were least confident about their English writing skills, while 27 percent were least confident about speaking English. In particular, the students said that they faced difficulty in

vocabulary, grammar, formulaic or idiomatic expressions, and translating their Japanese thoughts into English.

How is English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy generally being practiced in Japanese high schools? English learning is often divided into different subjects such as Oral Communication, English I, English II, Reading, and Writing and taught by focusing on only one or two skills out of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Furthermore, in numerous high schools, the subject of Writing is usually introduced in the eleventh grade, after the students study English I and Oral Communication in the tenth grade. Even in Writing, not many lessons teach students how to write documents; most classes instead consist of grammar drills or mechanical training on sentence-level translation from Japanese into English. It is assumed that the reason these traditional drills are still popular in Japanese high school classrooms is that teachers are too busy to check individual students' expressive writing skills or, perhaps, because they believe that these types of drills are the most effective method to improve students' writing ability.

However, considering the results of the questionnaire mentioned above and the fact that current methods of teaching writing mainly deal with grammar drills and verbatim sentence-level translation, it is desirable that some kind of writing activity should be introduced (in combination with the other activities) from the first year (tenth grade). In short, English I and English II should contain more practical writing instruction than at present, because they are in principle designed to be skills-integrated subjects.

As previously mentioned, English I and II mainly deal with reading instruction in real-world exercises. Hence, we should

rework these two courses to include more writing-related instructions. The subject of (English) Writing is usually introduced in the eleventh grade along with English II. English I is the first English subject that Japanese high school students learn, and it involves attending more classes than for other courses; hence, English I should include more writing-related instruction.

Since traditional grammar and sentence-level translation drill have been widespread in Japanese high school classrooms, the effectiveness in fostering students' writing abilities through more relevant writing instructions should be compared with that brought about by traditional grammar instructions and sentence-level translation drills.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The study described here focuses on summary-writing activities as classroom instruction intended to improve Japanese high school students' writing abilities. Specifically, the effects of these activities were compared to those of Japanese-to-English translation activities, which have been widely practiced in high schools throughout the country.

2. Review of Recent Literature
2.1 Writing in classrooms

Writing instruction in a second or foreign language has been traditionally synonymous with grammar practice, because the primary purpose of writing activities was the practice of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, which has often been referred to as guided writing (Leki, 1991). This guided writing—more precisely, Japanese-to-English translation activities that focus on particular grammatical features or formulaic expressions—has been widely practiced in Japanese high schools. It is undeniable that knowledge

of grammar, vocabulary, and formulaic expressions is quite useful and sometimes crucial, especially when writing in a second or foreign language, as Park (2000) notes. Certainly, a few research studies have indicated that writing skills improved without instruction or correction of grammar (Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). However, fluency and content should not be overlooked. As Zamel (1983) argues, in process writing, the meaning or content level should be addressed before grammar. This quality or quantity problem is extremely controversial. It is obvious that learners in Japanese high schools are lacking in both these aspects—the quality of their English writing and their access to English writing practice—and, therefore, that they need more opportunities to produce writing in English. For this reason, the imitative process can be an effective method of improving students' writing in terms of both accuracy and fluency. With regard to fluency in particular, Saito (2007) argues that an activity where students write comments after reading a passage is an extremely effective training method to cultivate the ability to write long texts. In addition, regarding accuracy, as Tan (1997) suggests, if the original text is not too difficult, it should serve as a good model of both expression and lexico-grammar. Furthermore, Matsuda (2003) claims that writing should be taught in integration with other skills. Clearly, reading textbooks is the most frequently practiced activity in second- or foreign-language pedagogy; in this respect, it should be quite natural for students to receive writing instruction combined with some kind of reading activity. It has often been pointed out that summarizing is a process that integrates reading and writing (Sarig, 1993). Hence, summarizing can be considered an appropriate activity in the context of Japanese high schools.

2.2 Summary writing

Summary writing is an activity that involves reading and writing concurrently, and it is a skill that is considered essential in an academic setting. It is crucial not only for university students, who have to write papers or assignments, but also for Japanese high school students, who intend to pursue tertiary studies, because they need to clear university entrance examinations.

Summary writing has been considered a useful means of assessing reading ability and has frequently been used in second- or foreign-language reading instruction (Alderson, 2000; Cohen, 1993, 1994; Murakami, 1981). Summarizing is closely connected with reading, and the teaching of several reading strategies that involve summarization can improve learners' reading ability; these include finding the main idea of a text, and in particular, less proficient readers can benefit from this approach (Song, 1998). Although summary-writing activities include not only reading but also writing, not many successful or appropriate instruction methods have been reported in the latter context. For example, Garner (1984) reveals that even when experienced teachers devised summarization lessons, only a few of them discussed the rules of summarization, while the rest devised lessons that focused on words and facts; this implies that summarization instruction in real classrooms often tends to be insufficient or inadequate.

According to Frey, Fisher, and Hernandez (2003), the purpose of a summary is to convey correct information through a much shorter text than the original in order to allow the reader to determine the main idea and essential details of the text. They divided summary into two types: précis and evaluation summary. They defined a précis as "a brief summary of another text that contains the main points but little embellishment" and an

evaluation summary as a summary that is "brief and focuses on the thesis of the reading" and "unlike the précis, it concludes with a statement of the student writer's opinions and insights." (p. 44). In a classroom activity, both précis and evaluation summary are considered valuable.

Summary writing is considered a complex process: Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) argue that as a process, it includes the activities of comprehension, condensation, and production and the following three macrorules (macrostructure): deletion, generalization, and construction. In addition, Brown and Day (1983) list six more detailed rules: deletion of trivia, deletion of redundancy, use of superordinate item terms, use of superordinate action terms, selection of a topic sentence, and invention of a topic sentence.

With regard to second and foreign languages in particular, Corbeil (2000) shows that first-language summarizing skills and second-language proficiency affect second-language summary. Among the abovementioned macrorules, Johns and Mayes (1990) suggest that irrespective of which English proficiency level they are at, ESL students have difficulty with generalization and invention, and that students with lower proficiency tend to copy sentences from the original text verbatim. Keck (2006) also reports that L2 writers are much more likely to directly copy the original text than L1 writers.

In the present research, the comprehension stage of the summarizing process, mentioned above, is the reading of the English I textbook. As Kirkland and Saunders (1991) suggest, the familiarity, complexity, and length of the text affect comprehension. The use of the textbook should be appropriate in this regard, because complexity, including vocabulary and the length of the text,

have already been modified, and the problem of familiarity can be addressed after the students have learned the content in class. Furthermore, in Ohno's (2005) study, high school students at both high and low proficiency levels were able to successfully identify the important part of the text and include it in their summary. Ushiro et al. (2008) demonstrate that university students can judge the importance of the information in a text—whether the information is explicit or not—and include it in their summary. Hence, reading ability should not be greatly affected when high school textbooks are used; however, in order to minimize the impact of the students' varied reading levels and focus on the writing activity, as suggested by Irwin (1986) and Winograd (1984), the adoption of a textbook for the comprehension stage should be effective.

Sugita (2010) points out that the reported amount of classroom instruction using summary-writing activities is still insufficient. Therefore, a plausible, feasible teaching model involving summary activities is definitely needed. The summary-writing activities in the current study are presented as an effective model intended to improve learners' writing abilities using a process integrating both reading and writing skills.

3. Method
3.1 Participants and Classes
3.1.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 148 tenth-grade high school students (male: 73; female: 75). All the participants were native speakers of Japanese. They were assigned to one of the two following groups, each of which included two homerooms: Summary Group (male: 39; female: 36) and Translation Group (males: 34, females: 39). Different teachers of English taught the respective

groups.

3.1.2 Courses

The participants were enrolled in two English subjects: English I and Oral Communication I. They had four classes in English I and two classes in Oral Communication I per week; in all, they attended six classes of English a week. The duration of each class was 50 minutes. The activities specified for writing, such as summary writing and Japanese-to-English translation, were conducted only in the English I classes. This is partly because in the Japanese curriculum, English I was considered a more integrated subject than Oral Communication I, which primarily deals with listening and speaking, and partly because English I included a higher number of classes than Oral Communication (four and two classes a week, respectively). Approximately a period of 15 minutes per week was allocated for summary-writing activities in each groups; this was not always on the same day of the week. This arrangement continued for almost ten months. However, during summer and winter vacations, exams, and other school events, these activities were sometimes cancelled. The class procedures for Oral Communication I were identical for both groups and so were the procedures for English I with the exception of the writing activity in English I. Hence, it was assumed that both groups would receive equivalent amounts of English instructions, except for the weekly 15 minutes of writing activities.

3.2 Materials

3.2.1 Textbooks and handouts

Two textbooks were used as resources. One was the *Crown English Series I* by Shimozaki et al. (2008), which was used across four 50-minute classes a week in English I. Because this was the main text for English I classes, all the students used it; however,

only the Summary Group wrote summaries on it. The other textbook was *Eigo Kobun 80* by Fujimoto (2005), which is a training book that introduces English formulaic expressions. For both groups, handouts made by the instructors on the basis of the contents of the textbooks were used, so that the instructors could easily control the focus of the materials, distribute and collect the handouts, and provide feedback to the students.

3.2.2 Global Test of English Communication (GTEC) for Students

The GTEC for Students (Benesse Corporation, 2008, 2009) is a widely used standardized test throughout Japan, especially at the high school level. The test is composed of three sections: reading, writing, and listening. This research uses the writing section of the test, where the maximum score is 160 points, in order to ensure homogeneity of writing ability in English between the two groups. The test was conducted in May 2008 at the school that the participants attended. As a posttest, another GTEC for Students was conducted after the completion of the course (in April 2009) in order to compare improvement in the writing ability of students in each group.

3.3 Procedure

The two groups (Summary Group and Translation Group) each consisted of two homerooms and were taught in their respective homeroom units. Class procedures were almost identical for both the English subjects, except that the writing training or instruction period was only part of the English I class for which approximately 15 minutes were allocated almost every week. The Summary Group and Translation Group were each taught by a (single) different Japanese teacher of English (JTE).

A single unit of the Crown English I textbook consists of four sections, each comprising approximately 200 words. The

Summary Group undertook the summary-writing activity that applied the content of these sections; more precisely, the students were asked to write a précis, followed by their opinions separately at the bottom of the sheet, immediately after they completed studying the content of each section, which usually took three or four class periods. This means that it took almost a week to finish each 200-words section, and so the group attempted summary writing almost once a week.

It is useful for learners to employ their own words or paraphrased expressions; therefore, the participants, particularly the more proficient students, were encouraged to do so. However, at the same time, the participants were allowed to use expressions from the original text because, as Seidlhofer (1995) argues, forcing them to paraphrase may intimidate them, which will hamper their performance in the writing activity

In the attempt to minimize the influence of the students' reading ability in a foreign language on the summary-writing activity, the English I textbook was used. Since the students learned the content of the text in class, it is quite certain that almost all the students understood the text, even though the points that each student considered important might be slightly different.

Approximately 15 minutes were allocated for the activity. First, the students spent ten minutes writing a summary for each section of the unit. Simultaneously, the instructor wrote down some questions pertaining to the important points in the text on the blackboard as supporting text for the less fluent writers. On completing the writing of their summaries and opinions, the students read their peers' work in groups of six to eight before submitting their summaries to the instructor. The summaries were returned to the students in the next English class after being scored

on a scale from one to six and checked for grammar, and the examiner also inserted some encouraging comments; this was intended to maintain the students' motivation to write. In all, the students practiced summary writing 17 times. There was no word limit set.

The Translation Group studied the English I textbook using the same procedures as used by the Summary Group; however, they used different materials and handouts for the writing activities, which were held almost once a week for approximately 15 minutes. On an average, these students studied three formulaic English expressions in the handouts, which contained three types of English writing activities. The first type was a fill-in-the-blanks activity with short English sentences containing the target expressions, which were accompanied by their Japanese equivalents. The second type was an activity involving rearranging words and completing sentences including the target expressions; a Japanese translation of these expressions was given. The third type was translating Japanese text into English by using the target expressions. The students had approximately ten minutes to complete these tasks and five minutes to check their answers. The handouts were then collected by the teacher and returned to the students in the next class after making grammatical corrections and adding some encouraging comments.

This process began in June and continued for almost ten months, until the end of the academic year (in March). The posttest was conducted in April in order to determine whether there was any significant difference in the level of improvement of the two groups' writing abilities.

3.4 Scoring

The pretests and posttests were both sent to the Benesse

Corporation to be scored. The process of calibration took almost one month to complete on each occasion. There were initially 158 participants; however, the data of ten participants were eliminated because they did not take either the pretest or the posttest or both tests; therefore, the final number of participants was 148.

3.5 Data Analysis

A two-way ANOVA (instruction type (summary writing/translation) x time (pretest/posttest)) was conducted to examine the effects of the different instruction methods and time taken for the improvement of the participants' writing ability. Instruction was a between-subjects factor and time was a within-subjects factor.

4. Results

The results for the GTEC's writing section (maximum score: 160 points) are presented below, and they include the means and standard deviations of the two groups for the pretest and the posttest (Table 1).

The results of the two-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant effect of time [$F(1,146) = 6.80$, $p < .01$] and a significant interaction between instruction type and time [$F(1,146) = 8.42$, $p < .01$]. Since there was a significant interaction, a test of simple main effect was carried out. There was a significant difference between the pretest ($M = 104.59$, $SD = 13.86$) and the posttest ($M = 110.27$, $SD = 14.05$) for the Summary Group only (Figure 1).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Marks for the Two Groups for the Pretest and the Posttest (out of 160)

	Summary Group (*n* = 75)		Translation Group (*n* = 73)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Pretest	104.59	13.86	107.07	15.34
Posttest	110.27	14.05	106.77	14.23

Note. For all tests, *n* = 148.
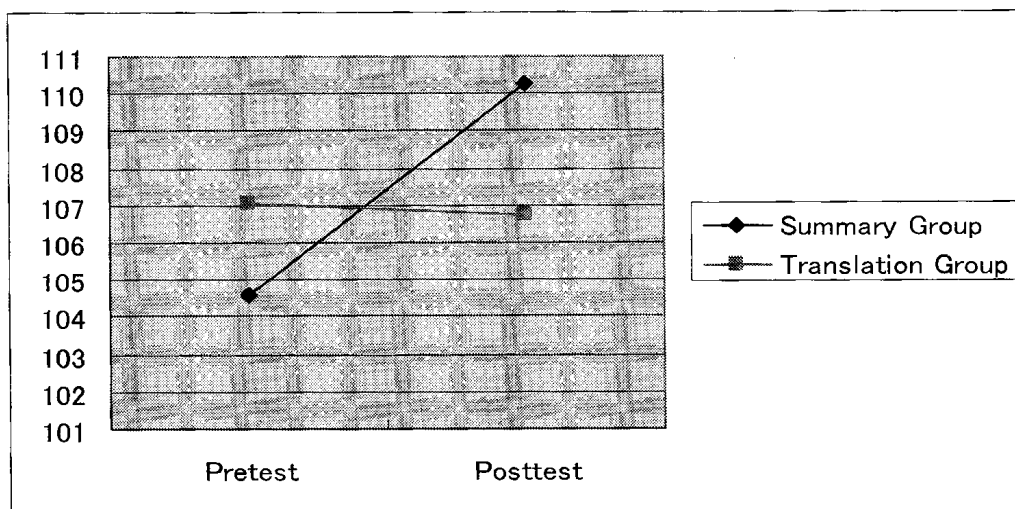
Figure 1. *Pretest and posttest means for the two groups*

5. Discussion

The chief goal of this study was to determine whether the summary-writing activity employed was effective as a realistic means of instruction in Japanese high school EFL classrooms meant to improve the writing ability of students. This study compared summary-writing activities with traditional Japanese-to-English translation activities.

The results of this study strongly indicate that the

summary-writing activity improves the writing ability of Japanese high school students, while Japanese-to-English translation activity does not necessarily do the same. The results also indicate that despite the fact that the time allocated for each summary-writing activity was no more than 15 minutes and that the activities were conducted only once a week, they could have positive effects on students provided the training period was long enough.

The results revealed that only the Summary Group improved its writing abilities and there are three possible explanations for this. The first is concerned with the nature of the summary-writing activity itself. Since the students' task was to complete a summary, it was assumed that their output should be based on the original texts; thus, it assumes that the content of their writing could not be truly original. However, the textbook contains many different texts; therefore, in the course of the activities, the participants read and summarized a variety of texts. It is possible that this experience of writing a number of sentences each time helped the students improve their writing ability. It is established that Japanese high school students, especially those in their first year, do not have many opportunities to write long paragraphs in English in their classes. Regular activities of this sort could have a positive impact on the improvement of their writing ability. At the least, it is likely to be better than the mere repetition of out-of-context drills, as Greaney (1997) asserts. As is often argued, writing ability can be improved by writing (Hedge, 2000; Ur, 1996).

The second explanation is connected with the material or content used. A number of researchers argue that the products of summary-writing activities can be affected by writers' reading

abilities (Irwin, 1986; Winograd, 1984), claiming that good and poor readers differ in their perception of what is important. Indeed, L2 proficiency is said to be a more important factor than the length of the target text in determining the level of difficulty of a summary-writing exercise (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). However, the use of the specific textbooks adopted for the present study may have minimized the influence of English reading ability, because the content of the texts had already been covered in class; that is, all the students had already studied the content of the texts in class before writing the summaries. The use of the textbook could have enabled the writers to complete the task with less cognitive work involved, as Folman (1988) suggests, and the modified or not-too-difficult expressions used in the textbook could serve as a good model of writing (Tan, 1997). In this situation, the participants should have been able to concentrate on the writing activity without the additional burden of reading and comprehending the texts; in other words, they should have paid more attention to the structures and formulaic expressions appearing in the original texts and learned them by trying to paraphrase or use them in the summaries.

The third explanation pertains to the additional requirements of this particular activity, for which the students were asked to include their opinion on the content of the original text at the end of their summaries, although such exercises have generally been prohibited in pure summary-writing activities (Johns, 1998). Because of this requirement, students might have had to train themselves to be more critical as readers or writers. They probably had to consider the content of the texts in a more in-depth fashion to develop an opinion of what they read. This might have better prepared them for writing in general and led to the improvement of

their writing ability.

Finally, the reasons for the subtle decline in the mean scores of the Translation Group might be understood as follows: the number of formulaic expressions they learned in class might have been insufficient; the expressions might not necessarily have matched the content they were asked to write about; or the expressions might not have been internalized, meaning that the students would not have been able to make adequate use of what they had learned.

After the posttest, the author informally asked some students from both groups about the classes and their test results. The following were the typical responses. With regard to the first possible explanation mentioned above, the students answered that they were first overwhelmed by the amount of text they had to write; however, after engaging in the activity several times, they overcame this barrier and later felt no pressure in writing long paragraphs. As for the second possible explanation, they said that they understood the important points in the texts and that the expressions in the textbook helped them write in English. Regarding the third explanation, they said that gradually they learned how to respond to the original text; this meant that they felt they had to read carefully in order to give a good opinion. Some of the Translation Group students answered that they were able to use only some of the learned formulae; they felt that the number of expressions learned was insufficient and that they would have to study further.

6. Concluding Remarks and Further Studies

This study is significant in that it attempts to demonstrate the effectiveness of summary-writing activities as a form of real

classroom instruction. It is hoped that the results of this study will have an impact or at least some implications for building effective EFL pedagogical models for writing from the early stages of high school. It is difficult to exemplify the effects of a certain type of classroom instruction, since it can be hard to eliminate other possible variables. However, it should be worthwhile to attempt to conduct further research into developing teaching practices that are more effective in a real classroom context (Komuro, 2005). In pursuing the realization of better pedagogical approaches, language teachers will have to continue making decisions about what should and should not be done in their classrooms, under conditions of perpetual uncertainty (Truscott, 1999). However, we believe that attempting this challenging process will surely yield results someday.

The scope of future research can be determined on the basis of the following points: which types of texts with respect to summary writing will improve which type of writing ability (or whether they will improve general writing ability) and what level of proficiency students need to have in order to benefit more from summary-writing activities. However, as Matsuda (2003) suggests, more important and in fact indispensable in improving students' writing abilities will be the integration of further research on writing instruction with training in other language skills. The author sincerely hopes that this study will be beneficial to other classroom pedagogy across Japan and elsewhere.

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