

# Article

## Reflections on Freshman Writing at Chukyo University, 2018

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### INTRODUCTION

It is typical for students in Japan to enter university with minimal writing and computer skills. However, students make great strides in first year writing classes at Chukyo University. Students not only improve their writing skills, but they become proficient at using a word processor program and Internet browser program. In addition, they improve their grammar, vocabulary, typing speed, and analytical skills.

This paper carefully considers the tasks that students did in the first-year composition classes in the World Englishes Department at Chukyo University. It details activities that lead to the student's accumulation of writing and computer skills. Various tasks, refinements and results of this writing class are discussed in this paper.

### FIRST SEMESTER

In the first semester, the students are busy improving basic writing and computer skills. Students write three kinds of compositions: Self- Introduction, Narrative, and Comparison and Contrast. The class is taught in English to non-native students. Since the students enter university with only minimal writing skills that they learned in Japanese High School, they begin writing class by learning the basics of a paragraph: topic sentence, body and concluding sentence. Then they learn the parts of a composition: opening, body and closing. The first paper they write is a multi-paragraph composition. The length and difficulty of the compositions progress throughout the semester.

The students use process writing to write their compositions. Process writing is a way of breaking down the task of writing into its smaller phases. These phases include the prewriting phase, the writing phase, and the editing phase.

The prewriting phase consist of two steps: brainstorming and organizing. First, students select a topic and brainstorm ideas on the topic. They can get more ideas if they discuss the topic with their partner. Then students organize the ideas by putting them into categories

of main ideas with details. There are many ways to organize the ideas, but students make outlines in my class. When all their ideas are on paper, students can visualize the connections between the ideas. Prewriting is the most difficult phase of process writing. (Reid 34)

The next phase is the writing phase where students use the outline they have made to write a rough draft. The rough draft is the first time they write their composition. They turn each note of the outline into full sentences. Students add transitional words or phrases to help connect ideas and support to form cohesive paragraphs. Students usually write the main body first. Each paragraph in the body should begin with a topic sentence, followed by ideas and support, and ending a concluding sentence. After finishing the body, the students write the opening with a clear thesis statement and the closing. It is desirable that the rough draft be handwritten to avoid problems with plagiarism. (Reid 84-9)

The third phase is the editing phase which consists of three steps: proofreading, peer editing, and teacher correcting. The first step is proofreading. Students edit their rough draft for both content and mechanics. During this step, students are encouraged to read their compositions aloud to their partner. This often makes it easier for them to find errors. Also, proofreading checklists can help students find errors. These checklists should include specific skills which students are studying or have studied. Some examples might be underlining the topic sentence, circling adjectives, and circling prepositions. Proofreading helps students to become more aware of their own writing skills. (Hyland 198)

The second step is peer editing. Using their proofread rough drafts, students type a second draft. The second drafts are collected and redistributed to different students. The students now become peer editors and write their names on top of the second draft. The peer editors check for things their peers should already know or have learned in the class. For example, the editor might circle and correct misspelled words and/or verbs with the wrong verb tense. Also, the editor should use all resources, such as the teacher, other students, a dictionary, etc. (Ferris and Hedgecock 223)

The final step of the editing phase is teacher correcting. After the writers have made corrections to their second draft, I collect the compositions and makes comments and corrections for organization, content and mechanics. Then the students use the teacher corrections when writing their final draft. (Hyland 185)

Most students expect teachers to correct their grammar mistakes. However, research shows that grammar correction in second language writing courses does not work. In fact, in a study by Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986), writings by Japanese students were corrected using four types of grammar corrections. The students were told to write their essays again using these corrections. Results showed that at the end of the course, students made no significant improvement in terms of accuracy. Thus, correcting grammar mistakes on the student's writings is probably not worth the trouble for teachers to make, and may even be

discouraging for students.

One possible solution to this problem is to give a short grammatical lesson before they peer edit. I call this grammatical lesson "Grammar Checks" and this task is discussed below. Grammar Checks generally satisfies the students need for grammatical correction feedback.

To assist their writing, students are given specific tasks to accomplish in class: speed-typing, timed writings, grammar checks and a student-created dictionary. At the beginning of the year, the students were given sheets to record their typing speeds and timed-writings. They were required to bring these sheets to every class and keep it up-to-date. Students reviewed grammar by doing grammar sheets. In addition, the students were required to create their own dictionary and bring it to class every week. These sheets and student-created dictionary were collected at the end of each semester to assist in student evaluation. These four tasks are examined in detail below.

### TASK 1: Speed Typing

Speed typing is taught in computer class. However, students are given a chance to practice typing in writing class. The class usually started with a ten-minute speed typing exercise. I found that students would come to class early, so they could turn on their computers, open their word processor program, and be ready to speed type. At the beginning of the school year, students were only typing between five and ten words per minute. In a computer-based writing class, this really slows down the entire writing process. The target typing speed for the first semester was 20 words per minute.

At the beginning of the year, students were given a record sheet for speed-typing to record the students' individual progress. The record sheet included the date, total words typed, total errors made, and words per minute. This gave the students something concrete by which to gauge their typing progress. At the end of the year, the target typing speed was 25 per minute.

Students were motivated to type faster by comparing their speeds with the speeds of other students. While the students were completing their record sheet, the teacher would walk around the classroom and randomly check how they were doing. The students then would begin the next task: timed writing or grammar checks.

### TASK 2: Timed Writings

Upon completion of the speed typing, the students closed their browser program and took out a sheet of blank paper to prepare for a timed writing. Timed writings are a type of low stakes writing. They are informal writings that are written only once. Students do not get

bogged down in correcting their grammar and spelling mistakes. They are told to write as much as they can about a particular topic in a specified time period. (Howrey 2000)

I would write an easy topic on the board, such as "Favorite Sweets". I introduced the topic by writing some wh-questions on the board about the topic. Then I briefly modelled by talking about the topic. After that students would discuss the topic with a partner for a few minutes. Then students would write about the topic for a period of 8-10 minutes. Students were encouraged to write without stopping to make corrections and they are dissuaded from using their dictionaries.

At the end of the exercise, they were told to record the date, timed writing topic, time period, number of words, and words per minute of the timed writing. Every time a new topic was chosen.

The activity can be extended by putting the students into groups of three. Students read their writings aloud in groups. The two listeners must ask a question to the reader. This extension takes only about 10 minutes. The timed writings benefit the students in many ways. They learn to write faster without worrying about making grammar or spelling mistakes. Because the atmosphere is lively for a writing class, students become friendly and more energetic.

### TASK 3: Grammar Checks

Before peer editing a composition, students reviewed basic grammar through Grammar Checks. It is an exercise that consists of ten sentences. One sentence is correct, but the other nine sentences contain a grammar error that Japanese students often make. Some of these grammar errors include articles, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, agreement verb tense, preposition selection, spelling, and fragments (because, and, or, so, but).

First, students work individually to find the grammar mistakes and try to correct them. Then they compare their findings with their partner. After that, I go over each mistake with the class. Finally, I discuss one or two common grammatical problems (e.g. articles and prepositions) that I encountered in the students' homework. This activity has been positively received and generally satisfies the students need for grammatical correction feedback.

### TASK 4: Creation of a Personal Dictionary

The main function of a personal dictionary is to give meaning to words. To build meaningful vocabulary, the students created their own dictionary. They were required to add ten new words to their dictionary each week. Although a word might have many meanings, the

students recorded only one definition per word for this task. Still, students were aware that words might have multiple meanings. In addition to definition, the word had a collocation and a label. The label usually shows the part of speech of the word being defined. For example, n. stands for noun, v. for verb, and so on.

The personal dictionaries were collected every other class, checked while students were busy doing timed writings or grammar checks, and returned to the students in that class period. Since there are approximately 30 classes per year, the students would add at least 300 words to their vocabulary through this simple task. The students were free to choose the ten words, but the words had to be new to them. Also, students were encouraged to review these words from time to time.

## SECOND SEMESTER

In the second semester, students wrote three compositions: Description, Reason and Example, and a Research composition. Because students developed proficiency in computer skills in the first semester, they were able to use these skills to write longer, more complex compositions. These compositions gave students a chance to develop and improve their critical fundamental writing skills and analytical skills. The final composition helped the students to transition into the second-year writing class. However, students continued to have Speed Typing, Timed Writings, Grammar Checks. They also continued to add new vocabulary to their Personal Dictionary.

In the second semester, student also realized that the grammar checker on Word does not always find grammar and spelling mistakes. Students were beginning to find their own mistakes and attempted to correct the mistakes by themselves. In fact, students gained confidence to ask the teacher what was wrong with the sentence they had written.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, students in the first-year composition classes at Chukyo learned valuable computer and writing skills. They entered university with minimal writing skills and made considerable progress in only one year. Much of their development can be attributed to tasks they accomplished in class such as speed-typing, timed writings, grammar checks and a student-created dictionary. At the end of the course, I surveyed the students about the task. All feedback was positive. Students said the timed writings helped them to write faster. They said the grammar checks helped them to have a better understanding of grammar and reduced the number of grammar mistakes in the final draft.

Their analytical skills developed and improved over the year course. Students seemed

more willing and eager to communicate their feelings and ideas than at the beginning of the course. Students could see a direct, immediate value in using English and English writing.

#### CITATIONS

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