

## My Literacy Experiences in Japanese and in English: With an Emphasis on L2 Writing<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In this article, I will attempt to describe via an autobiographical study how I acquired my second language literacy skills, especially my L2 writing skills. In the past, a number of studies looked at the relationship between students' L1 and L2 literacy. For example, Edelsky (1982) and Lanauze and Snow (1989) investigated Spanish-speaking children and found that language skills in L1 transferred to L2. However, as Carson (1992) points out, these studies pay little attention to the *process* of literacy acquisition. Therefore, I will focus on how literacy acquisition takes place over time, taking into consideration that L1 and L2 literacy are intertwined with each other. By including my literacy experiences in both L1 and L2, I hope this article will provide a comprehensive picture of what is involved in becoming an L2 writer and biliterate. To achieve the purpose above, I chose to employ an autobiographical narrative.

Narrative has begun to be recognized as an important approach to naturalistic inquiry among qualitative researchers, and narrative work has been increasing in a variety of fields, such as education and psychology (Hatch & Wisenieski, 1994). Narrative, according to Polkinghorne (1995), is "the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human experience as situated action," and its descriptions "exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world" (p.5).

Narrative has also been used as a research tool in the field of literacy (e.g. Nesper & Barber, 1995; Bell, 1995; Fu, 1995; Henry, 1995). Although it is a relatively new research approach, it has proved to be helpful to realize what is involved in reading and writing as a whole, including the social context of literacy acquisition as well as the emotional impact of studying reading and writing, while cognitivists may only focus on the act of writing and reading separated from a context (cf. Faigley, 1986).

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In this autobiographical narrative, I will first share my reading and writing experience of my childhood, then will go on to my adolescent literacy experience and my academic writing acquisition. As you will see, this autobiography does not provide much scholarly analysis. The reason is, as Barone (1995) contends, that autobiographies, like other life stories, should be sufficiently trusted and stand on their own without theory and critique.

## Literacy in Childhood

### Early Writing Experience

In the third and fourth grade, my homeroom teacher asked us to keep a diary. Every morning, we handed in our diary notebooks, and she gave them back to us before we left school. The kind of content I wrote was: "I went fishing today. I went with my father. I caught two and he caught five fish. I returned home at three in the afternoon. I had a good time." I just listed what I did chronologically, often concluding by saying "I had a good time" or "I had a bad day."

The teacher always made short comments on our daily diary, two or three lines in red pen. She never corrected my writing errors. It was rather a dialogue between her and me, although I do not remember exactly what she wrote. Actually, I remember I could not read her comments well, because she often wrote in a top to bottom running style with which I was not so familiar at that time.

I do not know how much the writing experience effected my writing. However, it certainly helped build rapport between the teacher and me. Being a teacher myself now, I understand how dedicated the teacher was to respond to some forty children in her class everyday. Through the written dialogue, she had a great impact on my life. I respect her and feel fortunate to have had her as my teacher.

### Learning Kanji

Reading kanji – the Chinese characters — is a difficult job for many Japanese children, since they have to memorize them. According to Carson (1992), we learn about 1000 kanji in elementary school and another 850 in middle school. What makes it more difficult is that the same kanji can often be pronounced in two ways: kun-yomi, the Japanese way, and on-yomi, the Chinese way. For example, my name is read "toshi" in Japanese and "syun" in Chinese. Using Carson's analogy, this is similar to "etc." It can be read "and so on" in the English reading and "et cetera" in Latin reading.

I learned to read kanji mainly in school. In addition, I learned to read many kinds of kanji through manga, or Japanese comics. Ever since I was a second grader,

I had been interested in them, and kept buying weekly manga magazines, monthly manga magazines, and comic books with my monthly allowance until I entered junior high school. Therefore, I had a huge collection of manga in my room. In manga, we not only enjoyed the pictures but also the languages spoken by characters. When kanji is used, hiragana is usually written on the right side of kanji vertically to show how to read the kanji. Many people seem to think manga is not educational, but I appreciate manga, since it helped me learn to read kanji.

When it came to writing, the teacher often gave us a kanji quiz, called "kakitori." That is, the teacher gave Japanese words, approximately ten, and the students wrote them down in kanji. So the students had to study kanji beforehand at home. Sometimes, when we could not get a certain number of kanji right, we had to stay in class after school and practice writing, say, twenty times per character as a penalty. I liked to practice kanji because I felt that my practice would pay off. Since kanji is a complicated character, you have to memorize it by drawing it. From elementary school through high school, the only part I liked about Japanese language tests was the kanji section. I never liked to interpret literature on the tests.

## Literacy in Adolescence

### Japanese

I found Japanese language classes in junior and senior high school the most boring of all. We read famous works, poems, classics, and some world-famous literature, such as Shakespeare, translated into Japanese. Usually, the teacher asked individual students to read aloud one paragraph each, and asked questions, which were related to the reading in the textbook. For instance, the teacher asked what the author tried to say in the last paragraph. First of all, I hated to read aloud in class, because I suffered from a serious nasal congestion at that time, and I felt so embarrassed to let other students listen to my stuffy-nosed voice. Adolescence was an extremely sensitive period of life. In addition to this, I rarely had high scores on the midterms or finals. I thought that studying Japanese was a waste of time because everybody in Japan knew Japanese anyway.

Concerning writing, little instruction was given. In class, we learned *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* as a traditional rhetorical pattern. According to Hinds (1983), *ki* refers to beginning one's argument, *sho* refers to developing the argument, *ten* means turning the idea to subthemes, and *ketsu* corresponds to conclusion. However, we never practiced writing by following the rhetorical pattern. Rather, the pattern was used to read and appreciate literature, not for the writing per se. However, when I was in ninth grade, we had a junior high school graduation project, which was given by a Japanese language teacher. All the students in my school had to write an autobiography of more than fifty pages. To me, fifty pages sounded like an astronomical number. After having had little writing instruction or practice in class, we were

given that big assignment. Although I was not sure what the real purpose was, I managed to write my autobiography of fifteen years. I remember the sense of fulfillment when I turned it in. Since graduation, I have probably read it a couple of times, but only very quickly because I had some resistance to reading it. I still do. I am reluctant to read my poor writing from those days.

## **English**

English is a foreign language in Japan, and consequently, the need to communicate in English is usually rare. In fact, students do not have to engage in writing in English in their daily lives. In this kind of environment, writing in English is more difficult than writing in Japanese.

English is a school subject in Japan. For three years in junior high school, every student learns English as a school subject. High school is not compulsory, but almost all junior high school graduates enter high school, which requires another three-year English study. Therefore, almost all Japanese students study English at least for six years. During these years of English education, they learn to listen, speak, read, and write in English.

English was my favorite subject. I tried to memorize all the sentences in the textbooks, imitating the words and sentences like a native speaker of English. In addition to studying formal English, I started to listen to English educational language programs on radio and watch an English conversation lesson on TV at home. English for me was actually not a mere school subject; it was rather like a hobby. I never studied for a grade. I enjoyed not only the language, but also the American culture behind the language. Studying the English language and American culture was a way to escape from my gloomy teenage reality.

## **Reading and Writing in English**

I was more interested in speaking and listening in English, but the emphasis in class was always on translation from English to Japanese and on grammar. The typical procedure my English teacher used was the following. First, he played a tape of a new lesson recorded by a native speaker of English. Then, he explained new words, which were listed at the bottom of the page. We repeated each word after the tape or the teacher. He then moved on to the grammar explanation, as each lesson contained one or two new grammar points, such as past tense and present participle. After that, the teacher often had us do choral reading. Finally, he called on students to read aloud a paragraph, and translate it into Japanese. When the students did not give an accurate reading, he corrected the mistakes right away.

In other words, I never learned to read and write English in junior and senior high school. Many people may think we read English through translation, and I

thought so too, at first. However, I found this not to be true. Many students translated successfully, but they did not understand what they were reading. They did not try to appreciate what the passage intended to say. When trying to understand English through Japanese, it becomes reading in Japanese, not reading in English.

Writing was the most neglected area in English classes in junior high school. Writing meant practicing to spell words correctly and copying English sentences in the notebook. I was never given a chance to express my ideas or feelings in English.

## Academic Writing

### Academic Writing in Japanese

In April, 1984, I entered a private university in Tokyo as an education major right after graduating from high school. Coming from a small city, I did not know what it was to live in a big city. I was very excited about going to school in Tokyo. At the same time, I was concerned whether I would be able to keep up with the assignments in my college courses. One of my main concerns I had was writing, since I knew college courses would require students to write research papers, something I had never done before.

In high school, all Japanese classes were literature oriented. We were not taught how to write nor given a chance to practice writing. Some of the Japanese language arts teachers gave us assignments to write something based upon a book we read over the vacation. However, no feedback was provided. As a high school senior, I had to take a Japanese test to pass the competitive college entrance examinations. So I studied Japanese hard, as well as other subjects. But I did not have to write anything for the exams, because all the tests were of multiple choice type. As a result, I was never prepared to produce any kind of writing before starting college.

In the first semester of college, when the time to write papers came, I was lost. I had no idea what to write or how to write. Unfortunately, there was no such course as "Japanese 101." What I ended up doing was copying from different books of related fields and putting them together. I am positive I was not the only one who did this. As I expected, I did not receive good grades, but managed to pass courses. During my four-year college education, I submitted numerous papers. However, I never felt I acquired writing skills even though I graduated from college. My academic writing experience reminds me of a criticism one Japanese comedian jokingly made about parents. He said, "Parents don't like to talk about sex with their child, but once the child grows up and gets married, parents expect him or her to have a baby soon." The school always expected us to write well although they did not provide much instruction.

## Academic Writing in English

I wrote my first academic paper in English when I was a junior at college. I took a sociology course offered by an American professor. I decided to enroll in this course because I was going to an American university as an exchange student the following semester, and I wanted to improve my English skills. Though English was my favorite subject in high school, I could not keep up with the readings, and most of all, with the assignments. The reason was simple. I had never written an English paper before.

I had a course called English Composition in high school. Strangely, though, I never wrote in English beyond sentence level in class. All of my English teachers used a grammar-based translation exercise called *wabun-eiyaku*. In this method, the students are given a predetermined Japanese sentence and told to translate it into English after receiving some grammar lessons. For instance, after we learned past participles, we were given a Japanese sentence, "watashi wa yoroppa ni ittakotoga arimasu" and asked to write "I have been to Europe." There is an assumption behind this method. That is, if students can write a good composition in Japanese and put it into English correctly, they can write a good composition in English. So I practiced translation, but my writing was never coherent.

From the academic year of 1984 to 1985, I attended a university in Missouri. Fortunately, I took introductory courses, which did not require writing, such as college algebra, economics, computer science, and PE. However, College English Composition class was a surprise for me. A Japanese friend of mine took the course, and told me about it. I wondered if, in this country, college students did not know how to write. Thinking about my writing experience in Japan, this should not have been surprising, because students need to learn how to write academic papers. However, for some reason, I assumed that people who live in a target language culture could easily acquire reading and writing skills. At that time, I thought that their literacy rate was much lower than ours, due to the rather simple writing system compared to the four writing systems in Japanese.

## More Academic Writing in English

After graduating from the university in 1988, I decided to go to graduate school in Tokyo to study English education. I moved to a different institution where English was a medium of instruction together with Japanese. During the two years of my master's program, I wrote a number of term papers in English. Since I had never learned how to write formally in English, I did not know how to write effectively and appropriately. Consequently, I did what I did in my undergraduate courses in Japanese. I copied and pasted from different sources. I kept getting only passing grades, which resulted in a low GPA.

Nevertheless, during the last two semesters of my graduate work, I had to write a master's thesis in English and worked with an American professor. I believe that was when I began to learn how to write an academic paper. I remember I went to see him regularly, showing him my research paper in progress, and receiving feedback from him. Not only did he correct my grammar and word choices, but he also often asked me to clarify what I meant. I sometimes wondered if I needed to be that detailed and explicit. I was writing a thesis on the relationship between motivation and oral proficiency in English, and he often wanted to know the definitions by asking "What do you mean by motivation?" or "What do you mean by proficiency?" If I wrote "motivation is important for students," he asked "What do you mean by students? Japanese students or American students? Junior high school students or college students? Low proficiency level students or high proficiency level students?"

My negative responses could be attributed to my culture as well as my weakness in writing. What I mean by culture is that many Japanese like an implicit way of saying things, and we think that it is the readers' responsibility to understand the writer's intentions. I always think the different degrees of explicitness found in American English and Japanese come from the society we live in. America is so diverse in terms of ethnicity and cultural values. Thus, writers have to be clear to avoid miscommunication. On the other hand, the Japanese can take it granted that they all share relatively the same value because Japan is a considerably homogeneous country. Thus, they do not have to express everything clearly. In the process of writing my MA thesis, I think I improved my English writing skills by becoming aware of the importance of elaboration and clarification.

### **Connection between English and Japanese Writing**

The year after earning my MA, I enrolled in another MA program as a summer part-time student in California. All the new admits were required to write a short paper on a foreign language learning and teaching experience at the very beginning of the semester. Later, I received a comment on my paper, saying, "Your paper is well-written." Some of my American classmates received a comment "You need a writing tutor." I was shocked. That was the first time my writing was praised. I had never had such a positive comment in Japanese either. I believe I tried to write in an organized way and tried to write as clearly as possible. There is no doubt that the experience of writing my MA thesis helped me develop my writing.

Concurrently, I started to teach at a college in Hiroshima. Since then, I have been asked to write some essays occasionally, mainly for college newsletters. I was so nervous when I was asked to write something in Japanese because I never thought I could write well. As a matter of fact, I submitted my first essay in English. I knew it was odd to write in English to a Japanese audience, but I felt more confident in writing in English. I also thought that people could not tell whether I was a good writer or not if I used English, since few Japanese readers could appreciate English

writing. The next time I had to write in Japanese, I realized I wrote much better than I used to because I used skills learned in English. I tried to write in a way that readers could follow easily. To do so, I wrote in an organized way. It is not aesthetic from a traditional Japanese point of view to write everything clearly, but that was all I could do. Later, I heard comments from some readers that my writing was good. Ever since, I have been building confidence writing in Japanese.

### Concluding Remarks

For the last several years, a number of universities in Japan have started Japanese writing courses, which are equivalent to English 101 in the United States, because many students cannot write papers well. Unfortunately, this weak writing ability is also seen in my college. As a college teacher in Japan, I often read student papers written in Japanese, and find they are full of wrong kanji, stylistic problems, and ineffective organization.

Now, I have a dream: to start a writing center at my college. I heard about writing centers for the first time in the summer of 1994 when I started my doctoral program in the United States. Nevertheless, I did not know how useful writing centers were for students until I started to work on my papers there myself. I sat with a tutor for 30 to 40 minutes, and he helped me improve the writing content as well as correct grammatical errors and wrong punctuation. I realized how helpful the third person's eye was. Since many Japanese college students cannot write well either in Japanese or English, setting up a writing center on campus would be meaningful. I believe that would be the first one in Japan.

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