

INTRODUCING AND IMPLEMENTING A NEW WRITING CONTEST AT A SIX YEAR JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract. *A voluntary English writing contest was introduced in a junior and senior high school. The number of entrants into the contest was more than double the initial target. The students' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the contest were assessed. Analysis of the data shows a high level of satisfaction with students identifying various perceived benefits gained from entering and indicating different reasons for participating. Suggestions on ways the contest could be improved are provided and other teachers are encouraged to consider introducing writing contests of their own.*

Key words: *writing, students' perceptions, students' attitudes*

1. INTRODUCTION

In East Asia, English speech contests are viewed as an important part of second language education. Consequently, many schools, colleges, and universities organize events in which students compete against each other. Entering these competitions can provide students with numerous benefits, such as gaining recognition of their English ability, having the chance to work autonomously, developing their confidence in using English, empowering them to use the language they learn in a fulfilling and rewarding way (Bury et al. 2012), and being introduced to topics not often encountered in the classroom (Bradley 2006). While these benefits are often linked solely to entering speech contests, many of the advantages can also be gained from entering writing contests. However, despite the potential merits of organizing writing contests and the possibility of attracting entries from students that are unwilling to participate in speech contests, writing competitions are a lot less common.

While the official curriculum in Japan emphasizes learner-centered activities (Ozeki 2011), such as task-based learning, the traditional view in Japanese high schools is that grammatical points and the main curriculum can be taught more effectively in Japanese (Burden 2001). Common issues that deter second language teachers in Japan from using student-focused writing activities include large class sizes, time constraints in the syllabus, and a focus on passing examinations which often results in a gradual but inexorable decrease in the use of English as students progress through junior and senior high school (Murphey and Sasaki 1998). As a result, students have few opportunities to improve their long-writing skills (Bury et al. 2012). Additionally, writing activities in general can be viewed as dull and time consuming by both students and teachers, and as a result, writing is often neglected and

not covered in class time (Al-Gomoul 2011), in spite of its apparent importance (Magrath 2003). A final issue that may deter some teachers from introducing long writing in English into their curricula is a lack of confidence regarding the most effective way to provide feedback to students during the writing process (Lee, 2003). However, despite various challenges teachers associate with the implementation of task-based activities, they nonetheless can help increase the communicative nature of a course, making it more fulfilling for the students.

The intrinsic case study (Stake 1995) described in this report was conducted in a Japanese six-year private secondary boarding school which is part of an organization that consists of three high schools and an attached university. Roughly one third of secondary schools in Japan are private (MEXT 2011) and, while both public and private schools follow the national curriculum, private schools have greater flexibility in recruitment and syllabus than public schools. The school employs twelve native speakers of English and stresses the importance of English communicative ability.

2. ESTABLISHING THE WRITING CONTEST

The writing contest was intended to promote writing as a communicative skill, offer students an engaging opportunity to practice and further enhance their writing skills, increase English use and exposure to English in general, and enhance overall English levels through improved cognitive and linguistic awareness (McDonough 2003). After the initial idea of the contest had been developed, a proposal was presented to the native teachers of English and feedback requested.

The introduction of new initiatives and ideas in schools can be viewed as a potential threat by teachers, affecting their perceptions of status and group allegiances (Blacker and Shimmin 1984). Furthermore, the perceived degree of effort required to successfully implement change impacts on teachers' responses and attitudes towards that change (Sparks, Guthrie and Shepherd 1997). Thus, introducing new approaches and ideas into a syllabus must be undertaken with great care. It is not unusual for teachers to feel that new requirements are an implicit criticism of their existing approach (Craig 2012), and consequently it was essential that all of the teachers in the English department were involved in the development of the contest in order to ensure its successful implementation. By working with the teachers, it could be ensured that the introduction of the contest was not seen as being imposed and that the teachers were psychologically committed to seeing the contest successfully implemented (Norton 2009).

Despite some positive comments, the contest was initially rejected. Reasons cited were an anticipated lack of student interest, extra work being added to teachers' schedules, fears that it was overambitious, and concerns regarding how the potential failure of the implementation of the contest would be perceived by Japanese teachers and management. Responding to these concerns, the proposal was adapted and presented a second time, successfully.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE WRITING CONTEST

The tasks of organizing, choosing the topics, presenting, promoting, and judging the contest were taken on by two teachers. Subsequently, the contest was introduced to all students in Grades 7 through 11. A list of two topics for each year group was developed.

The topics chosen were 'My Favourite Animal / Character' and 'Self-introduction' for Grade 7, 'Family' and 'What am I best at?' for Grade 8, 'My Hero' and 'My Happiest Memory' for Grade 9, 'The best thing about the school festival' and 'If I could change anything, I would change...' for Grade 10, and 'A Dangerous Sport' and 'The important things in life' for Grade 11. As students use cues such as the phrasing of a topic and how much detail it contains when deciding what to write (Polio and Glew 1996), it was felt that two topics was the optimal number; a longer list could lead to students being unable to manage the large amount of information (Moody 1983), inducing decision paralysis and resulting in them being unable to choose a topic or becoming demotivated by having too many possible options (Schwarz 2004).

Students were made aware of the contest via announcements in their English lessons, additional announcements made during their daily homeroom sessions, and via posters placed on the noticeboard of every homeroom classroom.

Submitted essays were each assessed by three teachers (to ensure that there would be no ties) and given a score out of 50 points. The scoring rubric assigned scores of one to ten in the categories of grammar, vocabulary, content, originality, and cohesion.

After the participating students had had their work marked and returned, the organizing teachers presented the top three students in each year group with certificates of recognition in the final daily homeroom class of the week.

The number of students in in Grades 7 through 11 totaled 644 (369 male, 285 female), and an entry rate of 5% (i.e. a total of 32 participants) was set as the criterion of success. A total of 72 students entered the contest, an entry rate of 11.2%, easily meeting the criterion of success.

4. PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

After the inaugural Writing Contest had been completed, semi-structured interviews with all 12 native teachers and 11 Japanese teachers of English were conducted in order to investigate their perceptions of and reactions to the contest. In addition, a 10-item questionnaire written in Japanese was distributed to all of the students who had taken part in the Writing Contest in order to investigate their perceptions of, and reactions to, the contest.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Native teachers of English

When interviewed, all of the native teachers of English identified writing as something important to teach, and all also stated the opinion that there is insufficient freer writing in the current curriculum. However, while the idea of introducing progressive writing activities as part of the general curriculum from Grade 7 to Grade 11 was often suggested, this was paired with the recognition of the fact that increasing the amount of writing in class must be carefully thought out to take time constraints into account.

It was felt that the students responded well to writing activities that are about them, rather than about unrelated subjects. Some examples outside of the Writing Contest identified were an extra-curricular poetry activity and an e-mail response activity, both also organized by the authors.

It was reported that the students generally responded well to the Writing Contest, but this could vary considerably among classes. It was indicated that some teachers did not introduce the Writing Contest to low-level students. This is disappointing as it discriminates against students in those classes, denying them the opportunity to gain the same potential benefits as students in other classes.

It was also found that the different approaches teachers took affected student motivation. The following methods were described:

- i. Seven teachers gave interested students time in class to work on their contest entries while other students did different activities.
- ii. Two teachers had all their students prepare essays, and then corrected and returned them to the students. However, entry into the contest was voluntary.
- iii. Three teachers had all their students first prepare a plan over five minutes, then write a first draft one week later, which they checked and returned to the students, with the students writing a final draft as waiting work. Finally, those students interested in entering the contest had their entries collected.

While all of these approaches have merit, it should be noted that the more time teachers devoted to the Writing Contest, the more entries they accrued, and the higher the quality of the essays produced. It was also found that students of the teachers who followed method iii, above made up over half of all entries, and placed first, second or third in all year groups.

Five teachers stated that they had been asked for extra help with checking grammatical structures and checking scripts. All native teachers of English reported a large increase in general interaction with the students in English, which they felt helped build bonds and improve their relationships with the students.

It was further reported that two students who had taken part in the Writing Contest had subsequently approached native teachers of English for daily university entrance test writing question practice. The students had stated that doing well in the Writing Contest had encouraged them to aim for better universities and to begin preparing for the writing questions earlier.

All teachers accepted the importance of recognizing the effort committed by the students. Many noted that the simple return of their marked scripts with feedback was well-received by the students. However, it was generally felt that better recognition of students' entry into the Writing Contest was needed. It was suggested that winners' certificates should be issued in either year group meetings or monthly school assemblies as the regular homeroom classes were not prestigious enough. It was also felt that all students entering the Writing Contest should be recognized and the idea was raised of publishing the names of all participating students, rather than just the winners, in the school newsletter.

Finally, it was suggested that the possibility of the participating students receiving extra credit should be investigated. Currently, students who participate in the school's speech and recitation contests are awarded with 10 bonus points to their end of term English test scores and it was stated that the Writing Contest should aim for the same.

5.2. Japanese teachers of English

The Japanese teachers of English also all stressed the importance of teaching writing and felt that more class time needed to be spent on it. They also raised the issue of time constraints, but it is clear that there is potential for collaboration between the native teachers of English and the Japanese teachers of English in the teaching of writing. Whether this would be in the form

of teaching (such as during the team-teaching lessons), or in jointly developing the curriculum will require further discussion within the English department as a whole.

However, it was suggested that the kind of freer writing most stimulating for students, i.e. about themselves, was not suited to the content of the Japanese teachers' classes, especially in senior high school classes, which must prepare students for the university entrance tests.

It was emphasized that not only spending more time writing, but teaching the students how to write is needed, such as planning, organizing ideas, and teaching the formats of different types of writing, such as letters and discursive essays.

While not all students will necessarily need to develop good writing skills, many do need good writing skills for university entrance tests, but are often unprepared when they begin their Grade 12 writing classes.

The Japanese teachers uniformly considered the Writing Contest to be worthwhile and a good idea, and expressed an interest in knowing more about it. While all but one of the Japanese teachers of English were aware that the Writing Contest existed, few knew much about it, and most had only become aware of it by seeing the posters, being asked for help by participating students, or when certificates were being awarded in homeroom. Many expressed an interest in receiving information prior to the start of the Writing Contest so that they would not be taken by surprise. This could be achieved by presenting the themes and announcing the start of the Writing Contest in the year group meetings.

With regards to student participation, the Japanese teachers generally expressed the opinion that their preferred format of participation would be to follow the pattern of the Speech Contest, in which all the students prepare for the contest but only volunteers actually go forward.

A clear desire to be informed of the names of all students who participated in the Writing Contest, and not just the names of the winners was indicated. In addition, an interest in seeing some of the participating students' entries at the end of each contest was expressed, with some teachers interested in seeing the winners' entries, some of seeing all the entries, and some of seeing the entries for their year group. However, the Japanese teachers of English stated that they did not wish to be involved in setting topics or marking the contest entries, but were willing to give students advice when asked.

Like the native teachers of English, the Japanese teachers of English stressed the importance of recognizing the students' work. Two reported instances of students who showed improved motivation and interest in English after their work for the Writing Contest had been recognized by them. All the Japanese teachers of English stated that they were happy to see the Writing Contest awards being given during the year group meetings, and some suggested that the monthly assembly might be more appropriate.

5.3. Students

A total of 68 of the 72 student questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 90%.

When asked "How did you first hear about the Writing Contest?" it was clearly indicated that the main channel of information was the native teachers, with 84% of respondents reporting learning about the contest via this source. Other answers included "I learnt about it in homeroom," "I heard about it from a friend," and "From the posters." In order to make future contests accessible to all students it may be prudent to add to the promotion of the contest with extra posters, by requesting homeroom teachers to further encourage students to enter, and to announce it in year group meetings.

When asked “Why did you enter the Writing Contest?” students reported a variety of motivations, including, “It seemed interesting / fun,” “To improve my English,” and, “To challenge myself.” However, the primary driver for entry was the encouragement of the native teachers (63%). This suggests that it is essential that the teachers believe in the validity of the Writing Contest so that positive presentations of, and support for student entry into, the contest are seen in their practice (Borg 2003).

When asked “How did you prepare your essay?” the highest three responses (totaling 66%) being “I wrote it on the print,” “I did it in class,” and “I didn’t prepare.” These responses indicate that the students may not have fully understood the intended meaning of this question, and it will need to be reassessed before reuse.

For the item “Please tell us how you feel about the Writing Contest,” there was an overwhelmingly positive response. For the students to enjoy writing their entries was one of the main aims of the project and the most common responses, “It is a good thing. / It is fun,” reflected that this aim was successfully achieved. Furthermore, a number of students reported a perceived improvement in their English abilities, stating “I learned English / new English words / how to write English.” Finally, some students commented on their positive views of writing following their entry into the writing contest, indicated in comments such as “It’s good to write.”

When asked “Would you enter the Writing Contest again?” 60% responded affirmatively. It is interesting to note that while many of the participants stated that they would not enter a writing contest again, most still gave positive responses to the previous item. The students also indicated a number of factors that would influence their future participation, including “If the themes are right,” “If I can write my own thing,” and “If we do it in class.” It is important to take these comments into consideration for future iterations of the contest as it could encourage more participation if more open themes were included and time were created institutionally to allow students to prepare their contest entries.

Some 57% of the students indicated that they felt that their English levels had improved as a consequence of entering the Writing Contest. While entry into a single writing contest is unlikely to lead to a major improvement in English ability by itself, it is pleasing that students were able to identify some areas of apparent improvement. When asked how their English had improved, important practical improvements were identified, such as “I understand how to write what I think a little better,” “I improved my word power,” “My grammar improved,” and “I learned how to check writing.” There were also other more creative and extra-curricular benefits mentioned, such as “My imagination improved,” “I felt my English got better because my teacher praised me,” and “I learned ‘non-lesson’ things.”

When asked “What was the most difficult part of the Writing Contest?” the most common response was, “Writing long passages,” followed by, “Planning what to write,” “Translating from Japanese to English,” “Spelling,” and, “Grammar.” These responses further indicate that the students need greater support in developing their knowledge of the writing process.

In response to the final item, “What changes would you make to the Writing Contest?” many interesting comments were received. These included, “Teach us how to write long passages,” “Have a prize [Like the school speech contest does],” “A free theme,” “More interesting/relevant themes,” and, “Allow more time for the contest.” Once again, the need for students to be supported in their knowledge of the writing process is highlighted, along with a desire for a change in themes and longer preparation time.

6. DISCUSSION

The response to the Writing Contest from both students and teachers has been very positive and a number of benefits have been identified, such as the opportunity to write and use English in a fun and engaging context and developing the students' English abilities in this way. However, there is a feeling that there is more scope for the Writing Contest to develop and become an established part of the school calendar.

It is suggested that for future contests, increased participation can be achieved by encouraging all teachers to present the contest in a positive manner, asking homeroom teachers to encourage more students to participate, promoting the Writing Contest in year group meetings, and increasing the number of posters displayed around the school. Ensuring that the topics are specific to students' interests and needs is of particular importance (McAdams 1993), as relating vocabulary in second language learning to students' own contexts and experiences strengthens their associations (Sökmen 1997) and can improve short and long term language retention. Consideration should be given to allowing the students a free choice of writing, at least for Grades 10 and 11, alongside suggested options. However, this might make it difficult to mark submissions fairly. Furthermore, linking entry into this contest with possible entry into more prestigious external contests could encourage more students to enter.

Further suggestions include presenting all certificates of recognition in year group meetings or during the monthly assembly and recognizing the efforts of *all* participating students. Also, acquiring a small budget for the Writing Contest would allow for the awarding of a prize to the winners. Finally, providing students with more standardized feedback could help aid their writing development (Hattie and Temperley 2007). Entries into the contest reported on were corrected and returned with some comments to the students.

Additionally, as students from some cultures, such as Japan, rarely seek feedback from teachers on their performance (Jeffrey 2003), it is important that students are proactively provided with valuable feedback where possible. However, this feedback must be carefully planned in order to enhance student engagement (Han and Hyland 2015). In the contest's current form, entries are corrected and returned to the students with some comments, but it may be worth considering developing a simple mark sheet that can be returned to the students with their work, providing feedback on their writing with regards to the key elements of creativity, grammar, and vocabulary.

Considering the many benefits students identified from entering the Writing Contest, some thought should be given to whether *all* students should be required to prepare a text based on the Writing Contest themes, with actual participation in the Writing Contest remaining voluntary. Doing so would require one to two lessons devoted to the task. These lessons could potentially be drawn from the post end-of-term exam lessons in the school's schedule.

7. CONCLUSION

For successful long-term language acquisition, classroom activities that develop students' communicative competence together with more general cognitive strategies, labelled by Ribé and Vidal (1993) as second and third generation tasks, should be implemented as they have more real value to the students and their language learning goals (Skehan 1998). In view of this, authentic output should be encouraged in English as a second language classes as a way of developing students' language acquisition. This case study described one attempt at this.

The primary requirement from teachers in establishing a writing contest similar to the one described in this article is scheduling sufficient time to mentor and facilitate the students' work. This investment of time is amply rewarded by the efforts and many hours of autonomous work applied by the students, and we strongly encourage interested teachers to try implementing similar contests for themselves.

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