

English L2 academic writing and Japanese student diaspora

Helen Marriott
Monash University

WORKING DRAFT; NOT FOR QUOTATION

Situations of contact between individuals with different language and cultural backgrounds occur increasingly within our globalizing world, and are receiving further impetus with the current communications revolution. While situations of face-to-face contact often occur within one's own country, increasingly these occur overseas as well. Individuals have moved across borders in the past for a multitude of motivations, among these, the purpose of study being a principal one. In this paper I am interested in what it entails to move from one academic language and culture to another and the focus is upon students rather than on teachers or researchers, and in particular, Japanese students who study in Australia. I draw upon perspectives arising from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and from different streams within these disciplines.

A number of reasons pertain to the selection of Japanese students as the focus of this study by members of the academic interaction research group. Firstly, in order to avoid the common tendency to refer to students who originate from different areas of Asia as if they constituted a monolithic whole, one national group was chosen, even though we are cognizant of the danger of making over-generalizations about Japanese students, irrespective of the variation found among them (cf. Marriott and Miyazaki 2000). Secondly, in the case of Japan, English is clearly a foreign language and those who were educated in Japan prior to their commencement of tertiary study in Australia will have studied English as a second/foreign language (L2) subject. This pattern contrasts with a number of other regions in Asia where English may, or may not be the language of the pre-tertiary curriculum. A third reason for examining Japanese students in Australia is because this cohort represents a small but growing group of students at Australian universities. While in comparison with the major groups of international students currently in Australia from Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, the proportion of Japanese students remains low, there has been a dramatic increase over the last three decades. In the 1970s it was very rare to identify Japanese background students in undergraduate programs at Monash University. This situation changed in the 1990s and now increasing numbers of Japanese students enrol in the Faculty of Arts and quite a few select specialized language or studies courses relating to Japanese at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A fourth and significant motivation for the focus upon Japanese students is that some Japanese postgraduate students and staff with personal experience in the Japanese academic community who are engaged in this research area constitute "insiders", thereby extending and enriching the research that could otherwise be achieved. Also related is the fact that as central participants in the learning and teaching process – either as students or teachers – all of us possess a serious commitment to further improving the learning environment for all participants. Finally, those non-Japanese among us who have specialized in Japanese language or area studies (or both) are able to build upon earlier research contributions through development of this area of study, which is of principal importance in terms of interaction between Australians and Japanese.

In accordance with Hymes's (1972) use of the construct of communicative competence, language users who move from one community context to another, for example, from home to school, school to university (including, undergraduate and then graduate), and university to the work place) need to master the ways of speaking, reading and writing that are appropriate within the particular community. Participants of the university community can thus be said to utilize academic (communicative) competence in regard to the knowledge and abilities needed for their participation in this community (Saville Troike 1984). In an elaboration of the concept of academic competence from the perspective of L2 participants, Adamson (1993, xi) proposes that it includes the possession of a critical mass of general language proficiency, background knowledge of the particular content material, and strategies for enhancing and utilizing this knowledge to complete academic tasks.

When students move from their home country secondary school or university to a university overseas either at the commencement of, or during their undergraduate period or else upon graduation, they take with them a range of knowledge and skills, including appropriate ways of writing and speaking. Nevertheless, significant cross-cultural differences in academic communities and their respective norms of behaviour and expectations requires these student to undergo an extensive socialization into the new educational context, including the specific disciplinary area or areas of inquiry into which the student enters. Thus, while actually participating in the academic community, the student is faced with the need to acquire or develop many new norms of interaction, including those of a linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural nature. This entails, not the least, the encounters by students of a vast range of registers (or language varieties) in both the written and spoken dimensions within the academic discourse community (Hyland 2000: Biber *et al.* 2002). Since the ways in which academic discourse across languages and cultures is a largely unexplored area, our aim is to make a contribution here.

Some previous studies

Over the past two to three decades a considerable body of research under the rubric of English as a Second (Foreign) Language (ESL/EFL) and other related fields, such as contrastive rhetoric or contrastive discourse, has grown up where the main focus has been upon non-English background students and the processes of their participation in an English-dominant society, though comparative studies of English L1 students and non-English L2 students also occur. Within these fields, a small number of research studies has examined differences in Japanese and English student writing at the tertiary level, or, more commonly, Japanese students writing in English as their L2. Nearly all these studies have been concerned with the level of written text and have frequently examined a small range of written textual variables. For example, Kobayashi (1984) investigated American and Japanese students' use of major rhetorical patterns (general-to-specific or specific-to-general pattern) and the major types of general statements in their L1 and L2 essay writing, concluding firstly that there are cultural preferences for certain rhetorical patterns and types of general statements, and secondly that Japanese L2 learners tend to transfer from L1. Takano (1993) was also interested in the transfer of L1 rhetoric, even though he only analyzed Japanese students' L2 expository essays. Exploring the explanatory variables for Japanese students writing in English, Hirose and Sasaki (1994) confirmed the relationship of the student's composing competence and

L2 proficiency but also argued that composing competence across languages is important with L1 and L2 writing ability correlating.

In relation to Japanese written texts, English scholars of contrastive rhetoric often refer to the work of Hinds for his elucidation of principal features of Japanese academic discourse (cf. Clyne 1994; Connor 1996). Despite Hinds's minimal contribution, also characterized by methodological problems, he is often acknowledged for his claim that the structure of Japanese compositions follow a *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* pattern, that Japanese texts are reader-responsible whereas English texts are writer-responsible and that Oriental writing styles (covering Chinese and Korean as well as Japanese) are quasi-inductive (Hinds 1984, 1987, 1990).

In the course of undertaking her own research on the rhetorical conventions in Japanese and English academic writing (covering expository and persuasive modes), Kubota (1992, 1997, 1998) has challenged Hinds's above-mentioned claims concerning Japanese, and also warns against stereotyping cultural conventions of writing. Emphasizing the historical influences of English language and writing on Japanese in conjunction with the dynamic nature of language, Kubota adopts a post-modernist approach and among her concerns is the need for critical consciousness concerning inequality between English and Japanese languages. Accordingly, she calls for the recognition of cross-linguistic similarities as well as differences in Japanese and English writing and for recognition of the multiplicity of rhetoric (Kubota 1997, 474). Following the lead of Pennycook (1998) and others, Kubota adopts a highly ideological viewpoint employing the idioms of Self and Others in examining different discourses, defined in this paradigm as "ways of thinking and doing" (Kubota 1998b, 397), in relation to the teaching of languages and in the descriptions of ESL students and comparisons between their home and USA classrooms (Kubota 1998b, 2001). Kubota's caution against idealizing the conditions of USA (in our case, Australian) classrooms while also creating negative images of Asian classrooms, and her suggestion that USA classrooms may not serve the needs of ESL students, among other topics, are worthy of attention.

Of the empirical research undertaken to date on Japanese ESL learners, Spack's (1997) longitudinal case study of a single Japanese student in the USA and her acquisition (in the sense of internalising and gaining ownership) of academic literacy (focusing upon writing as well as on the relationship of reading and writing) in L2 over a period of three years is highly insightful. Not only does it present the student's development from a variety of perspectives, including the student's own interpretations of her experiences, it also contains her teacher's views as well as insights provided by Spack herself.

Apart from Spack, many of the previous empirical studies within the contrastive rhetoric framework that focus upon Japanese students studying overseas (principally USA), are characterized by major limitations in their scope and focus. In particular, the common approach of utilizing discrete writing tasks, while facilitating the ease of comparative analysis, has little relevance for understanding how students participate in actual academic communities.

Needless to say, there are many other valuable studies upon which we can draw outside those treating an English-Japanese combination. Included among influential work to date is the contribution by Clyne in the 1980s. Working with natural texts and employing a more holistic approach, the early analysis by Clyne with regard to the

discourse structures of English and German academic texts has provided directions for subsequent research (Clyne 1987a, 1987b). In addition to his analysis of texts, Clyne identified a set of sociocultural and historical factors that could be responsible for promoting differences in discourse structures and expectations across cultures: (a) education systems with their differing priorities on written or spoken language (with Australia emphasizing the written language while oracy tends to be stressed in continental Europe) and their role in transmitting culture-bound discourse norms; (b) the possibility of communication systems passing through ‘developmental stages’ while still possessing some ‘national’ characteristic (after Neustupny); (c) varying intellectual styles (mainly in the tradition of Galtung); and, (d) attitudes to content and knowledge (where the German system awards prominence to knowledge whereas for English speakers, presentation of a written text is as important as knowledge or content). Such ideas deserve attention and illustrate the value of returning to the work of Clyne to test these and similar ideas more widely and fully.

New research directions

This section will briefly introduce some of the research being undertaken, firstly concerning the variation that characterizes the Australian and Japanese academic communities, and, secondly, how Japanese students manage their transition to studying in Australia. Our approach varies from those studies quoted above that concentrate exclusively on the analysis of written texts, and through employment of an ethnographic-oriented approach, our interest focuses upon the whole context or discourse community in which L1 and L2 learners participate. This attention thus encompasses both a cross-cultural perspective as well as in intercultural one, with the former dealing with variation between Australia and Japan, and the latter investigating how individuals participate in new academic contexts. Although different frameworks are utilised when investigating certain specialized topics, much of our work is influenced by Hymes’s (1972) ethnography of communication and its extension by Neustupny, particularly his management model and his other contributions to the study of intercultural communication (Neustupny 1978, 1989, 1985a, 1985b, 1995, 1997).

1. Cross-cultural perspectives

It was actually an empirical study by Mauranen (1994) of Finnish exchange students studying at a British university that directly triggered the commencement of research on the participation of Japanese students in their home country academic communities, partly for the purpose of identifying the similarities and differences between study genres (in other words, discourse types) at Australian and Japanese universities. Undertaking a case study of participation in university academic study in the Faculty of Letters at a major Japanese public university in comparison with her home university (Monash), Sprague (1996) identified fundamental differences in the structural organizations of the degree and individual courses at the respective universities, noting the larger number of subjects in a Japanese degree in comparison with a much smaller set at the Australian institution and the implications these differences had for the reading, writing and other discourse activities of students. Sprague also examined the main features of the study genres in the two discourse communities, covering lectures, seminar (known under different labels and involving some sub-types) in the case of spoken genres, and written texts/essays (*reppoto*), examination, (graduation) thesis and readings for written genres. Among her suggestions for further research is the need to

empirically investigate the types of texts written by students and the variation among them, in conjunction with the expectations of students and staff for such genres (Sprague 1996, 74).

Marriott (2001) subsequently investigated the types of study genre and accompanying patterns of interaction that characterize graduate (Master and PhD) education based a sample of graduate students covering different disciplinary areas at five Japanese universities. Not only do the findings of this study have implications for Australian university administrators and others who seek “equivalents” across countries when making decisions about overseas students’ entrance qualifications for graduate study or scholarship rankings, it also has implications for how Australian graduate programs could improve student involvement, through, for example, obligatory coursework seminars where students regularly make presentations and receive feedback, and the combination of Master and PhD students in the same class or seminar, which can promote peer interaction and learning.

Methodologically, it is easier to collect comparative data by drawing upon reports of current Japanese students in Australia of their previous Japanese experiences. However, reliance on this type of retrospective data is fraught with validity problems and should be avoided (Bernard *et al.* 1984; Foddy 1993). It is utilization of this kind of data, as well as other reasons, which has led to Ballard and Clanchy’s (1991, 1997), development, for example, of stereotypic images about Asian students (Marriott and Miyazaki 2000, 89). Kubota has also noted how the construction of research designs can influence the production of simplistic cultural dichotomies and argues for the necessity of carefully designed cross-cultural studies so that valid, balanced comparisons can be drawn (Kubota 1999a, 753).

2. Transition processes across cultures

As mentioned above, the second principal focus of our research is to examine the processes of communication and interaction that characterize the participation of Japanese students in Australian academic communities, which, as Neustupny observes, constitute academic contact situations. Here, the start of our inquiry must center upon defining the student participants. Yoshimitsu’s (2002) study has been essential in establishing the diversity that characterizes this group of students. Her classification of Japanese home-background students based on a consideration of their time of arrival and educational backgrounds has important implications not only for how they manage English but also how they can further develop and maintain their language proficiency in Japanese, given that some of them have not had the opportunity to develop their cognitive academic proficiency in that language during their secondary education as a result of moving overseas during that period.

Marriott’s research on how Japanese students manage their transition in an Australian academic community commenced with a study of their how they evaluated their own problems in conjunction with their management strategies (Marriott 1999, 2000). This was undertaken along side of consideration of the concept of academic competence and a critique of certain themes in the literature on Asian students abroad, especially as propounded by Ballard and Clanchy (Marriott and Miyazaki 2000). An important strategy that emerged from Marriott’s previous research was students’ engagement of a native speaker of English to check their written texts for discipline-specific subjects prior to submission (Marriott 2000). While cases of other-management sometimes

involved students receiving various kinds of support from language and study skills advisors at different stages of their writing, including some editing, other Japanese students would often enlist the help of an English peer to correct their final drafts. Subsequently, this topic was taken up in a case study involving two students in order to examine more closely the actual features of interaction and the editorial assistance provided, with one instance involving independent editing of the written text by an editor, and the other, an interactional event where both the editor and the student writer undertook the editing together using a computer (Marriott forthcoming). While peer editing has often been dealt with in the ESL literature, exclusively this has been based on teacher-directed, set tasks in ESL classrooms and not on naturally occurring situations. In contrast, my examination covers processes and products, as well as the roles of writer and editor, and their expectations and evaluations within the actual academic community. A further extension of this work will deal with a consideration of the legitimacy of editing in student writing in the light of university policies (or their absence) and academic staff perceptions.

In relation to writing, there appear to be a number of challenges, including the length of written texts, the variety of genres and the number of pieces required. Yasuda's (2002) case study of three Japanese ESL students' revising processes, along with the other studies confirm that many students experience a range of problems with their writing of English academic texts. One of the central components or stages of the writing process involves how writers integrate source material into their own texts. Comparing a sample of L1 and L2 (Japanese) students over the duration of one or two semesters, Allen (2002), too has been able to trace the processes and strategies that students use in this aspect of their writing. Also working with a comparable sample, Gilbert (2002) has examined how Australian and Japanese students manage argumentation in their essay writing. Nemoto (2002a, 2002b) is now investigating Japanese exchange students who possess concurrent dual membership in both the Japanese and Australian discourse communities, in relation to how they participate in the Australian academic community, the problems they encounter and their management of these.

Issues for consideration

Although most of the research introduced above is still in progress, a number of issues arise for consideration:

1. The validity of the L1/L2 binary categorizations

Although we have tended to replace the concepts of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) with the concepts of L1 and L2 learners (writers/speakers), the validity or relevance of these categories cannot remain unchallenged. For instance, Yoshimitsu has shown how problematic these terms are in contemporary society where individuals now increasingly reside in more than one country for long periods and who may be educated in more than one language and culture at different stages in their lives. From another perspective, Gilbert's (2002) research demonstrates that although some differences characterize the overall performance of Japanese and Australian students in their management of argumentation in essay writing, there are also similarities across L1 and L2 writers. Gilbert concluded that students from both groups (irrespective of the L1/L2 categories) bring different writing experiences and abilities, interests and other social factors to the tasks in hand. Her research thus suggests that another

categorization – high performing and lower performing students - may be more pertinent in the analysis of the argument variable in student writing and this claim obviously has much wider applicability. It highlights the fact that many L1 students are also novice participants in the university academic community and are struggling to master the relevant communicative practices.

Nevertheless, there still remains a powerful motivation for continuation of the use of the L1/L2 terms (despite their lack of clarity in some cases). Both the research of Yasuda (2002) on mature Japanese participants at the graduate level and Nemoto (2002a) on undergraduate exchange students in particular, highlight the difficulties that Japanese students without previous experience in an English academic community experience, especially during the early transitional phase.

What is needed seems to be more recognition of individual variation among students, whether they are from L1 or L2 backgrounds. The important implications this carries for our research is the necessity of sampling both groups, as in the research designs of Allen (2002), and Gilbert (2002).

2. The relative importance of language difficulties confronting students

Whereas according to popular interpretation, the problems of non-English background students are principally accorded to language difficulties, usually those of a linguistic nature, there is a danger that we will move to an extreme position and argue that non-language factors constitute far greater hurdles for such students given their socialization in academic communities with different sets of spoken and written practices and expectations. However, we obviously cannot ignore the significance of language difficulties, especially where the distance between languages, as exemplified by English and Japanese, is very large. Furthermore, recognition of the breadth of language problems is necessary, with one basic categorization being linguistic components and non-linguistic (or non-grammatical, previously referred to as sociolinguistic) components, after Neustupny (Neustupny 1985a; Marriott 2000). It is in relation to the non-linguistic components that Hymes's (1972) taxonomy of norms of interaction, and Neustupny's (1995, 2002) extension of them enables us to view communication and interaction in academic contact situations from a broad perspective. The fact that students' initiation into new communicative practices through their undertaking of tasks such as essays and other written genres, or oral presentations, also constitutes what they are assessed upon must contribute significantly to their problems.

3. The neglect of research on non-writing activities

As Nishizawa (2002) has correctly observed, there has been an overwhelming concentration of research on students' writing, and not many studies have examined other academic situations, such as lectures and seminar presentations in which students also participate (Robinson *et al.* 2001). Nemoto's research is therefore important because it seeks to examine the full participation of students in the academic community.

4. Agents of student transitions

A theme that permeates our research is the principal role played by students themselves in managing their own transitions, referred to by Neustupny as self-management. But who are the other agents and what is their responsibility? For instance, what is the role of the institution (university, faculty or department?). All Australian universities have language and learning/academic study skills units which perform important functions to facilitate students' transitions, such as individual consultation with L1 or L2 students, offering short courses to introduce basic academic written and spoken discourse practices, and to a lesser extent, advising academic staff, among other activities. But in proportion to student enrolments, especially L2 students, the number of advisors is low, obviously constrained by budgetary limitations. Numerous universities also have English language units (fee-based) attached to them which offer preparatory courses for students to raise their proficiency to pass the English test (IELTS) for university entrance, as well as bridging courses which provide training in English academic discourse and practices. Those participants in our studies who have taken courses of this type tend to positively evaluate such introductions to new communication patterns and academic norms. However, exchange students from Japan are unable to utilize such sheltered courses, partly due the timing of their arrival and also the nature of the exchange arrangements that do not involve students in paying fees.

Academic staff are another major agent in the discourse community who can assist in students' transition processes, though surprisingly little research has covered this perspective to date. Neustupny (1999) has discussed the power associated with staff roles and has argued that academics hold more power in Japan than they do in Australia. However, we could argue that in relation to staff engagement in the planning and delivery of subjects according to the needs of their students, Australian academics do have real power. It is unknown to what extent they have modified their own teaching in classrooms where L2 students may constitute the majority of participants, which now occurs in some cases, or in situations where L2 students represent a minority. It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that most academic staff perceive the university – primarily through its language and academic study skills units – as the principle agent responsible for facilitating students' transitions to active participation in the university context, and may be unaware of the influential role that they can – or should – perform themselves.

Students' own peers can also be considered important agents or facilitators, with our research showing that peers can play an important role in assisting the newcomer with various kinds of tasks, including clarification of task representation, guidance in using the rapidly changing technological tools, actually writing texts (in the case of group work), or editing, to list just a few. The type of network research undertaken by Kurata (2002) needs urgent expansion to examine the ways in which the social networks of L2 students can support their transition. How teachers can promote more peer interaction both in and out-of-class is another important topic. On the other hand, Kubota (2001, 31) refers to English peers' negative attitudes towards L2 students and to their lack of willingness to interact with the same, so this matter too deserves our attention.

5. Academic paradigms

A related topic of inquiry concerns perceptions towards academic norms. For instance, is there a common belief in Australia concerning the superiority of Australian or English academic norms by the various participants in the domain, such as students, teachers, language and study skills advisors or administrators? There is evidence from our research that some (perhaps many) Japanese students arrive in Australia with an interest in gaining the competence to participate fully and effectively as undergraduate or graduate students in the Australian academic community, without realizing initially how difficult this will be to achieve (Marriott 2000, 286). The students in our various studies appear to accept the clearly dominant status given to English academic norms in the Australian context, though perhaps we have not been clearly seeking contrary evidence. The high status of English language in Japan itself may also help explain why Japanese students accept the superiority of English norms. On the other hand, there is evidence of some L2 writers taking a stand against the dominance of English academic norms, even in the Australian setting (cf. Phan 1999).

This topic relates to whether, in fact, an assimilation policy is being implemented within the Australian academic community and thereby implicates the issues of power relations between languages and cultures, and relations between majority and minority groups. Furthermore, we do not know about the differences between nations using a pluricentric language like English, and how English academic norms differ from those in the USA, Britain or Canada.

6. Major intellectual styles

Inextricably linked to academic writing is the notion of intellectual styles and differences across cultures. Galtung (1981) has proposed that intellectual styles throughout the world can be categorized into four groups: saxonic, teutonic, gallic and nipponic, arising out of the cultures of Britain, Germany, France and Japan, respectively. Galtung's categorization represents an attempt to explicate differences and similarities in academic behaviour across different countries. However, Neustupny (1978) and Clyne (1994) have argued that such categorization should be based on areal rather than regional criteria, since common sociolinguistic patterns arise out of groups of languages and cultures in contact. Consequently, certain groupings of countries may thus constitute a "communication union" and share various communication patterns as the result of long historical contact. In this regard, it is likely that Japan, Korea and China form a "communication union" and that this notion, in conjunction with the learning environments found in different countries, may be relevant to considering the previous academic experiences of overseas students in Australia.

Globalization has also increased the kinds and degrees of contact between intellectual styles and academic paradigms, a trend which is likely to increase. Clyne, for example, suggests that at an international level, there are suggestions of differences in academic registers being alleviated, with some disciplines like the natural and behavioural sciences moving in the direction of Anglo-Saxon structures while other scholars in literary theory and some social sciences adopt more German-type academic registers (Clyne 1987b: 80). This topic also obviously needs further exploration.

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