

Understanding Students' Perceptions of Difficulty with Academic Writing for Teacher Development:

A Case Study of the University of Tokyo Writing Program

Nancy Shzh-chen Lee

(College of Arts and Sciences, the University of Tokyo)

Akira Tajino

(Center for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education, Kyoto University)

Summary

This paper examines students' perceptions of difficulty with academic writing in English. Writing seems to be one of the most important, yet difficult, academic skills for university students to learn. This is particularly the case with foreign or second language (L2) learners. While it is often claimed that the understanding of students' difficulties is a necessary condition for becoming an ideal L2 teacher, few implications have been offered for teacher development in the literature of academic writing. The present study aims to deal with this issue using data obtained from 95 first-year Japanese university students. The results of the study show that the students tended to perceive academic writing to be difficult. In particular, they perceived language-related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components. Moreover, it was found that a great number of students expressed a high degree of difficulty with research design. This paper concludes with a discussion of some of the implications for teacher development.

Keywords: academic writing, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), students' perceptions of difficulty, teacher development

1. Introduction

Like a doctor who diagnoses a patient's illness, Calderhead (1987) implies that a teacher's duties include understanding students' difficulties. This becomes critical in the field of foreign or second language (L2) learning and teaching, since "the difficulties of second language learning are a common-sense fact which is universally recognized" (Stern, 1983: 400). In fact, Strevens (1977) argues that possessing the ability to identify and understand students' difficulties is a necessary condition for becoming the ideal language teacher. If this were indeed true, it would be incumbent upon all teachers to investigate their students' difficulties so they could aid their students and develop themselves as teachers. Strevens (1980: 28) comments:

"... the best teachers *know* their pupils, *encourage* them, *show concern* for them, *find out their interests*, *discover their learning preferences*, *monitor their progress with a sympathetic eye*, *unravel their difficulties* – *cherish them* as a human being engaged in a collaboration of learning."

The literature of L2 learning and teaching has seen that the notion of 'difficulty' has received different interpretations from different perspectives (e.g., Jing, 2005; Tajino, 1997). As will be discussed below, Tajino (1997; 1999), for example, argues that it has been treated as a matter of the difference between learners' first language (L1) and second language (L2), a matter of learners' errors, and a matter of the notion of markedness. The critical question addressed by Tajino (1997) is 'Does no error mean no difficulty?' As teachers, we know that this is not always the case in reality. A low frequency of errors can be the result of learners' avoiding tasks that they perceive to be difficult (Schachter, 1974). All this leads to the belief

that difficulty is a subjective judgment (Corder, 1967) and, thus, any examination of difficulty must incorporate students' perceptions of difficulty. This paper therefore aims to investigate students' perceptions of difficulty with academic writing by borrowing some research techniques from Evans and Green (2007) for teacher development (see Hyland, 2002; Lee, 1997).

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher development

The notion of teacher development can be clarified by being compared with similar concepts such as teacher training and professional development (Mann, 2005). Training is related to the transfer of strategies and techniques whereas development is related to the acquisition of awareness and attitudes. Training happens externally; development occurs internally. Teacher development also differs from professional development. Professional development is often career-related and is therefore more instrumental and utilitarian-orientated. Teacher development, in contrast, has a personal and moral perspective. Professional development is often a requirement for teachers whereas teacher development is voluntary. Teacher development is important as teacher instruction has a great influence on students' L2 learning including writing outputs, writing behaviors, and attitudes toward writing (Piper, 1989). At the same time, when students improve their L2 writing skills, significant changes may occur in teachers' attitudes and beliefs.

Teacher development is an evolving process of learning based on experiences and reflections of teaching (Farrell, 1999; Liou, 2001; Mann, 2005; Sengupta, 1996). Reflections can occur both 'in-action' and 'on-action.' In-action reflections can occur during teaching and on-action reflections can occur afterwards (Liou, 2001). These reflections refer to teachers' communication with their inner selves which may foster the development of self-awareness toward their own practice (Mann, 2005). Therefore, they are related to the emotions, passions, intuitions, and logical thinking of language teachers (Liou, 2001). Reflections can serve as the basis for constructing teacher knowledge and beliefs. Compared with non-reflective teachers, reflective teachers tend to be more responsive to the changing needs of students.

2.2. Students' perceptions of difficulty

The notion of student difficulty has been defined and examined in various ways. According to Tajino (1997, 2003), the definition involves at least three aspects: 1) linguistic difference between L1 and L2; 2) errors made by students; and 3) markedness or linguistic complexity. The first aspect dominated research in the 1950s and 1960s when L2 learning was perceived to be naturally difficult because of structural differences between L1 and L2. However, it is possible to argue that 'difference' and 'difficulty' are two separate concepts; that is to say, the former is related to the linguistic structure of the language, whereas the latter is related to psychological matters. Therefore, students' (perceptions of) difficulties cannot always be predicted by L1 and L2 differences. A similar comment or criticism can be applied to the third aspect, the notion of markedness, which is a linguistic matter. The second aspect of difficulty focuses on the frequency of student errors as an indicator of difficulty. However, this is not always the case because student performance and their perceptions of difficulties are not necessarily correlated with each other (Tajino, 2003; Tajino & Woodall, 1995).

Given this, students' perceptions of difficulty may not always be the same as the actual or performance difficulty that they encounter. A high level of difficulty may be perceived by students who have produced a small number of errors because they could avoid using items they found difficult. Difficulty is therefore a subjective concept (Corder, 1973), and if difficulty is perceived, what will happen then? Attribution theory, for example, would suggest that since (task) difficulty is an external and stable factor (e.g., Weiner, 1980), it is difficult to control. Therefore, students should avoid attributing their negative attitudes or performance to task difficulty in some cases (e.g., Tajino, 1999; Tajino & Woodall, 1995).

Table 1 below presents four possible difficulty/error relationships (Tajino, 1997). It indicates that difficulty does not always correlate with errors because it involves factors such as motivation, intelligence, and expectation of success (Jing, 2005; Tajino, 2003).

Table 1 Relationship between difficulty and error

	Error	No error
Difficulty	A	B
No difficulty	C	D

Note: Case A: learners perceive difficulty and make errors

Case B: learners perceive difficulty and make no errors

Case C: learners perceive no difficulty and make errors

Case D: learners perceive no difficulty and make no errors

(Tajino, 2003)

From teachers' points of view, Case B (i.e., difficult but with no errors) would be the most problematic since student difficulty cannot always be identified by their performance. It is possible, as we have already discussed, that students may make no errors while perceiving difficulty. Therefore, teachers should not rely totally on student performance to understand their difficulties (Tajino, 2003). Students' perceptions of difficulty can function as an affective factor and determine the development of their expectations for and commitment to L2 learning. A high level of difficulty may decrease their motivation and cause anxiety or negative attitudes toward L2 learning (Tajino, 1997). From the perspective of risk taking, on the other hand, difficulty may facilitate L2 learning. Students may exert a greater amount of effort if a task is perceived as moderately difficult (Prabhu, 1987). All this suggests that, as Tajino (2003) argues, whatever the result of perceived difficulty may be, it is important to understand students' perceptions of difficulty from a pedagogical perspective.

2.3. Difficulties in second language academic writing

Second language (L2) writing is a rapidly growing research area in applied linguistics (Matsuda *et al.*, 2003; Reid, 2001; Petric & Czarl, 2003), and has been examined from two main theoretical perspectives: cognitive and socio-cultural (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Katznelson, Perpignan & Rubin, 2001). The cognitive perspective is goal-oriented and emphasizes the process of writing and revising whereas the socio-cultural perspective is context-oriented and emphasizes the product of writing for a particular audience.

The development of students' L2 writing can be influenced by multiple factors such as L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, and writing experiences in both languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998). In addition, it can be influenced by L1 in such a way that writers from different L1 backgrounds tend to write differently depending on how they learn writing styles in their L1 culture (Kubota, 1998). Some studies suggest that L2 learners' L1 writing ability is the primary determinant of their L2 writing performance (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998; Petric & Czarl, 2003; Piper, 1989). It is often assumed that a writing-skill transfer can take place between L1 and L2 (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998). Thus, L2 writing difficulties can be closely related to L1 writing difficulties. On the other hand, others argue that although L1 and L2 writing share some common writing strategies, they are fundamentally different from each other (see Grabe, 2001; Petric & Czarl, 2003). Thus, the development of L2 writing could be more attributable to a combination of exposures and experiences in L2 rather than a transfer of culturally preferred rhetorical patterns from L1.

With the development of L2 writing research and demand for English as an international academic and professional communication tool, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has rapidly flourished as a new arena for L2 learning and teaching research (Hyland, 2002; Reid, 2001). For example, it is claimed that more than 65% of professional international journal articles are written in English (Hess & Ghawi, 1997). The ability to write academically is indispensable for the academic lives of L2 learners at research universities (Dalsky & Tajino, 2007). This is particularly important for students at postgraduate levels because their academic writing skills are crucial for their success (Pecorari, 2006). Academic writing can serve different purposes and audiences in different discourses and requires students to assume different social roles (Reid, 2001; Zhu, 2004). Academic writing not only develops the writing skills of students but also turns students into more critical and perceptive readers of their own work and the work of others.

Evans and Green (2007) argue that students may perceive all aspects of academic writing to be difficult. They further argue that while earlier research has confirmed L2 students' perceptions of academic writing as difficult, much of the information presented was at the macro level rather than at the micro level, and the nature of their problems (e.g., problems with cohesion, writing styles, and research planning) was not discussed. They found that students perceived language-related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components. The former type includes difficulties in communicating ideas 'appropriately,' 'accurately,' and 'smoothly,' while the latter type includes 'writing the method sections,' 'writing references,' and 'writing results section.' This is supported by the results of Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) and Dalsky and Tajino (2007), in which students experienced problems and difficulties in organizing ideas and arguments, using appropriate styles of writing, and expressing thoughts clearly in English. On the other hand, other studies (Marshall, 1991; Kubota, 1998) have demonstrated different results. Marshall (1991), for example, suggests that students may have difficulties with the structure of a paper more often than the language-related components. Kubota (1998) suggests that L2 writing difficulties may be caused by teachers' instructional emphasis on accuracy at the sentence-level rather than on discourse organization. Since different results or claims are available for L2 learners' writing difficulties in the literature (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Evans & Green, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994 and Silva, 1993), this paper aims to investigate students' perceptions of difficulty with English academic writing to obtain more data and suggest implications for teacher development.

3. The study

3.1. Course description

Beginning in the spring semester of 2008, a new mandatory one-semester academic English writing program was introduced to first-year science students of the University of Tokyo. The present study was conducted during the course of this program. Classes in this program had an average of 18 students and were taught by six native-English-speaking teachers. Two of these teachers had a science teaching background. English communication between students was encouraged throughout the course. The students were required to submit a science research paper by the end of the semester. As one part of the program, they had to decide a research topic, design the research, conduct the research, and write up a research paper. The aim of this program was to facilitate students' scientific thinking through writing academic papers.

Peer review was a key component of this program. The students were asked to bring two copies of their composition each week. One copy was submitted to the teacher and the other copy was peer-reviewed by one of their classmates. Teachers mainly gave group feedback to the whole class instead of personal feedback. Based on peer review comments, the students were required to rewrite their compositions and submit revised drafts in the following weeks. This process was repeated throughout the semester. No textbook was used in this course. All teaching materials were designed collaboratively by the teachers.

3.2. Instrument

In the study, a questionnaire was used to obtain the students' perceptions of difficulty (see Appendix A). A total of 18 Likert-type scale items (5=*very difficult*; 1=*very easy*) were used together with four open-ended questions. Among the 18 items, 15 were borrowed from Evans and Green (2007) and three were added for the purpose of investigating students' perceptions of difficulty with writing the method, results, and references sections. These items were organized into two groups: language-related and structure/content-related. All of the 18 items were translated into Japanese by the researchers and then proofread by a Japanese-English bilingual teacher to ensure the accuracy of translation. These items were presented in both English and Japanese in the questionnaire to avoid students' confusion. As the course was taught in English, it was expected that some students would be unfamiliar with the Japanese item key words. The open-ended questions were presented in Japanese. Students were allowed to answer them in either English or Japanese.

3.3. Participants

A total of 95 first-year science students of the University of Tokyo participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old. All students were expected to have relatively high reading and writing English ability after passing a highly competitive entrance examination. However, students were assumed to have limited knowledge and skills of academic writing before starting this course. The participants came from six different classes taught by two teachers.

3.4. Procedure

A questionnaire was distributed to students in six classes during the last class of the spring semester 2008. All of the participants completed the questionnaire in class under their teacher's supervision. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed to calculate the mean score of the students' responses to each item. Their responses to the open-ended questions were recorded and their Japanese comments were translated into English by the researchers. These responses were used to supplement the quantitative data.

4. Results and discussion

The results of the study show that the students perceived all aspects of academic writing to be difficult (see Table 2). Since a '5' represents 'very difficult' and '1' represents 'very easy,' it is possible to assume that a score over '3' can be interpreted as difficult. Table 2 shows the mean scores for the items in descending order. As shown in the table, all of the items received scores over '3'.

Table 2 Students' perceptions of difficulty with aspects of academic writing

No	Question item	Mean	SD
18	Using appropriate academic styles	4.02	0.97
12	Expressing ideas clearly & logically	3.99	0.91
17	Expressing ideas in correct English	3.99	0.87
8	Writing the discussion section	3.91	0.97
14	Writing coherent paragraphs	3.86	0.87
11	Designing the research	3.81	0.99
9	Writing the abstract	3.78	1.03
15	Proofreading written assignments	3.74	0.95
5	Writing the conclusion	3.72	1.10
10	Summarizing	3.71	0.97
13	Synthesizing information/ ideas	3.68	0.85
16	Linking sentences smoothly	3.65	0.99
1	Writing the introduction section	3.48	0.95
3	Revising written work	3.42	0.93
2	Gathering information resources	3.31	0.93
6	Writing the method section	3.29	1.14
4	Writing references	3.27	1.12
7	Writing the results section	3.04	1.12

Note: 5-point scale; 5=very difficult, 1=very easy

Difficulty levels were categorized into three groups: difficult (points 4 & 5), neutral (point 3), and easy (points 1 & 2) (see Table 3).

Table 3 The percentage of students' responses in terms of difficulty

No	Question item	Difficult (%)	Neutral (%)	Easy (%)	Total (%)
12	Expressing ideas clearly & logically	80.0	12.6	7.4	100
18	Using appropriate academic styles	80.0	10.5	9.5	100
8	Writing the discussion section	75.8	13.7	10.5	100
17	Expressing ideas in correct English	74.7	18.9	6.4	100
9	Writing the abstract	68.4	18.9	12.7	100
14	Writing coherent paragraphs	68.3	26.3	5.4	100
10	Summarizing	66.3	21.1	12.6	100
15	Proofreading written assignments	63.2	26.3	10.5	100
11	Designing the research	62.1	28.4	9.5	100
5	Writing the conclusion	62.1	24.2	13.7	100
13	Synthesizing information/ ideas	60.0	34.7	5.3	100
16	Linking sentences smoothly	60.0	27.4	12.6	100
1	Writing the introduction section	54.7	30.5	14.8	100
3	Revising written work	49.5	34.7	15.8	100
2	Gathering information resources	44.2	35.8	20.0	100
6	Writing the method section	44.2	29.5	26.3	100
4	Writing references	42.1	33.7	24.2	100
7	Writing the results section	35.8	29.5	34.7	100

Some possible reasons can be offered for students' perceptions of difficulty with academic writing. First of all, a great number of students may not have realized that academic writing is different from general English writing. The majority of Japanese high school writing activities are translation-based and little instruction and practice is given to improve their writing skills (see Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). Consequently, they might have based their judgments of difficulty on their former experiences with English writing in general. Second, it is possible to hypothesize that the students expressed a high degree of difficulty due to their perceptions of low English ability. One student made the comment: "Because I am very weak at English, everything was very difficult for me."

As shown in Tables 2 & 3, the students expressed a higher perception of difficulty with the language-related components of academic writing rather than the structure/content-related component which agrees with Evens and Green's findings (2007). Items that were claimed to be the most difficult were language-related items, such as item 12 (expressing ideas clearly & logically), item 17 (expressing ideas in correct English), and item 18 (using appropriate academic styles), whereas the easiest items were rather structure/content-related, such as item 7 (writing the results section), item 4 (writing references), and item 6 (writing the method section). It should be noted that some of the items rated as among the most difficult may appear to involve structure/content-related components (e.g., writing the discussion and writing the abstract), but they also involve language skills related to summarizing and linking ideas for the entire research paper.

These results were supported by students' comments. When they were asked which component they should spend more time on, 14 students gave the 'language-related' response while only eight gave the 'structure/content-related' response. One student, for example, stated, "I think more time should be spent on the writing skills. I think it would be better if the teacher could spend more time looking at our writing in class." The former, language-related components included students' comments on 'proofreading written assignments'. The students claimed that they perceived 'proofreading written assignments' (item 15) to be more difficult than 'revising written work' (item 3). Proofreading is linked to the language-related components of academic writing because it is a process that involves the correction of grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, rather than improvement of content and organization by revising written work (Evans & Green, 2007).

Another interesting finding is with the students' perceptions of difficulty with research design. Student comments included:

"It was difficult to find a suitable topic for our research. It was difficult to find a topic that was interesting, significant, but easily attainable."

"Research planning was the most difficult. I couldn't decide what experiment to do."

"Planning an experiment was more difficult than writing English sentences. It was even more difficult to conduct an appropriate experiment."

"It would have been better if we had been given more materials or examples to help decide our research topics."

These comments suggest that the students needed more guidelines for topic selection. It seemed that the research topic design was difficult for these first-year university students because of their limited knowledge and experience with research design.

5. Conclusion: implications for teacher development

As noted above, an understanding of students' learning difficulties is crucial for teachers' professional development. The results of the study have provided some data that could encourage teachers of academic writing to take responsibility for their own professional development. Some suggestions can be offered from the results of this study.

First, it was suggested that many students claimed a high degree of difficulty with their learning tasks because they had limited knowledge of academic writing. Teachers should make more explicit explanations about the purposes of academic writing and emphasize how it is different from general writing. The results of this study also suggest that many students attributed their perceptions of difficulty to their English proficiency. According to Graham (2006), this tendency should be treated seriously because self-perception of low ability is an internal factor and thus it is most difficult to overcome. It is important for teachers to carefully consider the ways students attribute their perceptions of difficulty.

Second, the students perceived language-related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components. This finding implies that students have low confidence with the language skills required in English academic writing. It suggests that teachers should be encouraged to improve students' academic writing skills, including teaching academic English expressions and idioms.

Third, many students perceived research design as more difficult than other aspects of academic writing process (see Table 2 above). This suggests that teachers should spend more time on providing topic information and practice in the research topic selection process. For example, teachers may provide students with opportunities to engage in the critical thinking practices necessary to report a literature review. Teachers could also help students by narrowing down their research topics to a specific area so that the students can concentrate on one area more easily. For this purpose, teachers might be expected to become familiar with the subject area and the specific content knowledge (Hess & Ghawi, 1997) or to ask for help from subject teachers.

As Allwright (1986) claims, teachers, as well as students, should avoid making L2 learning any more difficult than it needs to be. From the perspective of attribution theory, Tajino (1999) argues that the problem of students' perceptions of difficulty is troublesome as it can be an external and stable factor and, if students attribute their failure to their perceptions of difficulty, they might lose self-confidence and become demotivated for future learning. It would be desirable for us to create more opportunities to foster communication with our students so that we may better understand their perceptions of difficulty in academic writing.

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Appendix A

英語アカデミックライティング・クラスに関する意識調査

2008. 07.

このアンケートは、英語のアカデミックライティング・クラスの充実を目的とした研究のために実施するものです。皆さんの率直なご意見をお聞かせ下さい。なお、本調査の結果が皆さんの成績に影響することは一切ありません。ご協力よろしくお願いします。

本アンケートは、A) 論文構成に関する難しさ、B) ライティング技能についての難しさ、および C) 当該アカデミックライティング・クラスについての意見の三つの質問から構成されています。それぞれの項目ごとに質問にお答え下さい。(A と B については、適切な番号を○で囲んでください。C は、自由に意見を述べてください。) なお、回答言語は、日本、英語いずれの言語でも構いません。

各項目に対して、自分の気持ちに一番近い番号に○をつけてください。

とても簡単	やや簡単	どちらともいえない	やや難しい	とても難しい
1	2	3	4	5

A：論文構成に関する難しさ

	とても簡単			とても難しい	
	1	2	3	4	5
1) Writing the introduction (序論を書く)	1	2	3	4	5
2) Gathering information sources (情報収集する)	1	2	3	4	5
3) Revising written work (書き直す、改訂する)	1	2	3	4	5
4) Writing references (引用をする)	1	2	3	4	5
5) Writing the conclusion (結論を書く)	1	2	3	4	5
6) Writing the method (研究方法について書く)	1	2	3	4	5
7) Writing the results (研究結果を書く)	1	2	3	4	5
8) Writing the discussion (考察部分を書く)	1	2	3	4	5
9) Writing the abstract (要旨・抄録を書く)	1	2	3	4	5

B：ライティング技能についての難しさ

	とても簡単			とても難しい	
	1	2	3	4	5
1) Summarizing (要約する)	1	2	3	4	5
2) Designing the research (研究を計画する)	1	2	3	4	5
3) Expressing ideas clearly & logically (自分の考えを明確にかつ論理立て表現する)	1	2	3	4	5
4) Synthesizing information /ideas (情報や考えを統合する)	1	2	3	4	5
5) Writing coherent paragraphs (一貫性のある段落を構成する)	1	2	3	4	5
6) Proof-reading written assignments (論文を校正する)	1	2	3	4	5
7) Linking sentences smoothly (文と文を円滑につなげる)	1	2	3	4	5
8) Expressing ideas in correct English (正確・適切な英語で表現する)	1	2	3	4	5
9) Using appropriate academic styles (学術的な文体を使う)	1	2	3	4	5

C：アカデミックライティング・クラスについて

以下の質問に対して、できるだけ具体的な例を挙げて詳しく自分の意見を書いてください。

- 1) このクラスにおいて、もっと時間をかけて説明・指導を行えばよかったと思われる点について、意見を述べてください。
- 2) このクラスで、自分にとってもっとも難しかった点（授業内容・指導方法など）について、意見を述べてください。
- 3) 論文の構成とライティング技能の指導の時間配分について、意見を述べてください。
- 4) その他（このクラスを充実させるために、どのような点を考慮、改善すればよいと思いますか。どんな意見でも結構です。）