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Learning English Writing in a Japanese University: Developing Critical Argument and Establishing Writer Identity

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Writing is one of the most challenging and neglected areas of English education in Japan, particularly with regard to developing critical argument and establishing writer identity. This problem requires exploration into English writing classrooms in Japan in order to uncover the problems students face in their practice with these features of writing, and to discuss possible solutions. The purpose of this study was to find out what one Japanese university's approaches were to English writing. This was achieved through classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and an analysis of students' written texts. It was found that students worked diligently with what was given to them in class, although most of them felt it was not enough, while the teachers felt uncertain about what to give their students. The analysis of the students' texts revealed that students were able to apply newly acquired skills, but were limited by only superficial understanding of the techniques.

As a comprehensive theory of writing has yet to be established (Cumming, 1998; Sasaki, 2005), writing education is left to the whim of the environment in which it is developed. Taking into consideration the social and cultural aspects of the environment, English writing education in Japan is often reduced to grammatical and lexical studies for the purposes of examinations,

since there is not much further need for English writing ability beyond this level. However, this level of writing education offers very little in terms of sustainability. It does not consider the development of thinking skills or strategies for creating logical relationships between thoughts (Shinoda, 2006). Critical arguments are often not required and therefore not developed, and no real consideration is normally given to issues surrounding writer identity. This realisation has led to the need for a study such as this one, in order to explore the social and cultural relationships of students to their English writing.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Critical Argument

A universal definition of critical argument has not necessarily been agreed upon, and it has been suggested that it is dependent upon social practice (Atkinson, 1997). For the purposes of this study, critical argument is defined as the assessment and evaluation of relevant supporting evidence for a progression of logical causes, accounts or facts aimed at establishing a point of view. The process is achieved through the application of *critical thinking*, i.e. effectively conceptualising, utilising, integrating, and/or evaluating information as a directive to understanding and engagement. The idea that Japanese students are not particularly adept with critical thinking is a familiar problem for scholars and researchers (Casanave, 2005; Stapleton, 2001). According to Atkinson (1997), critical thinking is a process innate to Western cultures that stress individualism and independent thinking, but not Asian cultures where social practices focus on collective concordance and compliance. Indeed, Japanese culture fits this description, but upon closer examination it can be seen that this social conformity is a psychological phenomenon that should not be considered a hindrance to critical thinking, but rather a frame for the purposes of Western understanding of Japanese

individual and cultural psyche (Doi, 2001).

The suggestion that critical thinking is a practice unachievable by Japanese students is highly problematic. It may be the Japanese students' lack of familiarity with the cultural context of the writing task that is leading them to write in a way that does not display critical thinking. In a study focusing on writing tasks on topics familiar to Japanese students, it was discovered that the students were able to successfully assert critical thinking skills and in doing so established individual voices (Stapleton, 2001). Several issues arise here. Japanese students' English writing is in a foreign cultural context, and to develop an argument within that context, they rely on sources from that context. Those sources are in many cases their only window into gaining a cultural awareness of a particular subject or topic. Although these students develop their own personal opinions on these subjects, their cultural awareness of the expectations of how to express these opinions in writing is limited to that which is offered by the sources. This is where the issue of establishing writer identity becomes pivotal and indeed inseparable from developing critical argument.

Writer Identity

Much like critical argument, writer identity has also not been given an agreed upon universal definition. It has been defined both metaphorically and qualitatively, focusing on a writer's *individual* perspective and presence in their writing (see Stapleton, 2002a). Writer identity or 'authorial identity' is also defined as the *voice* of the writer in the text, established through an understanding of the writer's relationship to the text (see Ivanic & Camps, 2001). This relationship is reliant upon an awareness of both the writer's social and cultural context, as well as that of the writing task. For the purposes of this study, writer identity or 'voice' is defined as the collective effect of an individual writer's choices, both of perspective and language, in a piece of writing. In the EFL writing classroom, voice has been described as a 'divergent aspect' of writing practices that has been neglected (see Matsuda,

2001). A common goal for EFL writers is to make their writing appear 'native'. In developing critical argument in essay writing, EFL student writers will often mimic features from their sources, both of language and perspective. This practice leads to both a loss of the writer's voice as well as an inability to display critical thinking skills.

It is necessary to consider cultural attitudes towards and expectations of language. It has been suggested that in Japanese culture, language is one of several means of communication, whereas in English-speaking cultures, it is seen as *the* means (Masao, 1976). In Japanese culture, there is more reliance on non-linguistic means to convey information. While an understanding of this difference can be addressed in the EFL writing classroom in Japan, it is not clear whether this is something Japanese writers need to *overcome* or simply a common understanding from which to build upon. For Japanese students, strategies for establishing voice are different in Japanese compared to English. In English, voice is difficult to construct because those strategies are unfamiliar. Although it has been argued that the case for focusing on voice in the EFL writing classroom is 'overstated' (see Stapleton, 2002a), it is the understanding of the researcher that writer identity is a particularly crucial element in that if ignored in writing classrooms, it can negatively affect the students' ability to develop critical argument.

Socio-cultural Awareness

Socio-cultural awareness in EFL writing is a relatively recent consideration that allows scholars and researchers to conceptualise the understanding students and teachers have of EFL writing in relation to their environment. Central to this study is the concept that writing is a communicative act, situated in a social, cultural setting (see Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2001; Casanave, 2003). This socio-cultural environment impacts heavily on students' exposure to critical writing as well as their motivation to learn it. It is the intention of this study that the students', teachers' and researcher's socio-cultural *positions* were used in order to come to a conclusion significant to

the area of research that has been considered by some to be limited by conflicts of socio-cultural positions (in this case Western teachers and researcher versus Japanese students). This study instead considers these different socio-cultural positions as advantageous to the outcomes, in that it is *informed* by this difference, rather than limited by it (see McKinley, 2005 for discussion).

The importance of this study is that it is student-focused, allowing Japanese university students' own perspectives to be used to allow a Western researcher to better understand their socio-cultural/ socio-political environment. The focus of the analysis from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics (looking at language as a resource for making meaning) brings Western linguistic perspectives into the Japanese learning environment, a relationship that has not yet been fully developed in a case study research project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies with Japanese students have been conducted mostly in English-medium universities, with little attention given to Japanese students' experiences with learning to write academic English in Japan before their overseas study (e.g., Inoue, 1997; McFreely, 1999; Yoshimura, 2001). Also, research in the area of L2 writing has been heavily marked by its consistent comparison with native English writing. This comparison, according to some, has led insight into L2 writing to be limited, promoting a negative stereotype on L2 writing as never being as good as native English writing (Kubota, 1997; Stapleton, 2002b). The areas of greatest contention in Japanese students' lack of writing ability are the development of critical argument and writer identity, considered by some Western researchers to be foreign concepts to the Japanese (see Stapleton, 2002a). Thus, results of a study *in Japan* into the experiences of students of written composition at a Japanese university can make a significant contribution to the area of L2 writing

research.

In Japanese EFL education, writing is the most problematic and neglected area of English language education (Davies, 1999). A lack of ability in composing extended written text, developing critical argument and establishing 'voice' in English academic writing has been recognised as significant academic obstacles for many Japanese students who go on to do postgraduate studies in English-medium universities overseas (Stapleton, 2001; Stapleton, 2002a). This has led to more consideration being given to the second language (L2) writer's sociopolitical perspective and identity (Casanave, 2003). In order to help people learn how to negotiate their identities through writing it is necessary to build the teaching of writing around writing tasks with real communicative purposes for real readers (Casanave, 2002). The task that fits this description readily and presents students the challenge of developing their skills is developing critical argument in essay writing. For Japanese EFL student writers, the task of developing a critical argument places them in an unfamiliar socio-cultural and socio-political context.

Critical argument is the key element of critical thinking. As a *critical* argument it is built on reasons, supported by evidence; otherwise an unsupported argument is only an opinion (Browne & Keely, 1994). Being critical means going beyond the factual level of writing (describing and/or explaining how things *are*) and expanding it into the analytical level (interpreting, evaluating or arguing how things should be *understood*) (Martin & Peters, 1985). The essential elements of argumentative writing include a claim, supporting reasons, evidence or proof, and a refutation of the claim (Browne & Keely, 1994). In expanding an argument with critical thinking, a further element is applied, what Stapleton (2001) describes as *fallacies*, which consider the variety of errors made in analysis of the argument based on logic or myth. Although fallacies cannot necessarily be standardised, since a reader will judge a text based on her/his own perspective, that judgement is made within a universally accepted standard for evaluating arguments (see Siegel, 1997).

In Stapleton's (2001) study on writing and the critical thinking abilities of

Japanese university students, it was found that the students were able to develop clearer critical arguments on topics that were more familiar such as Japan's import of rice from the US. The students were able to develop more appropriate and coherent arguments and counter-arguments and were able to use evidence more effectively. Although it appears that it was the familiarity of topics rather than culture that was the tool for enhancing students' application of critical thinking (see Casanave, 2005), the result was that the students managed to find their own voice and think critically about an argument topic.

Voice or *writer identity* is that element in argumentative writing that allows writers to assert their own claim on a topic. There is debate as to whether or not writer identity should be addressed in an EFL writing classroom (see Matsuda, 2001; Stapleton, 2002a). In 2001, Matsuda's *Voice in Japanese Discourse* described how 'divergent aspects' in writing practices, such as voice, have been neglected. In 2002, Stapleton's *Critiquing voice as a viable pedagogical tool in L2 writing* explains how too much emphasis is being given to voice, that students need to focus more specifically on argument. Matsuda's study emphasises that voice is not exclusively associated to individualism, nor is it an entirely foreign concept to cultures (like Japan) that stress collectivism over individualism. His conclusion that Japanese writers construct voice differently in Japanese than in English suggests that this is a point worth exploring in an EFL writing classroom, in order to isolate and utilise the existing strategies of establishing voice in Japanese writing, and to build on those strategies and adjust them for English writing. Stapleton's study argues that separating particular elements of voice, as what Matsuda described, is problematic because it has the potential to lead students to be "more concerned with identity than ideas" (p. 187).

For this study, the following research questions are considered:

1) How do English language students learn critical argument and writer identity in their second year required writing classes in a Japanese university?

2) Do they recognise these skills as important to their advanced writing education?

METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted in a four-year university in the greater Tokyo area. The university has a strong reputation for foreign language education, English being the largest department. The study was limited to only advanced English writing classes, compulsory for second-year English majors and for most students, their final writing class.

At the beginning of the semester a very short questionnaire was e-mailed to the seven teachers of these classes (all native English speakers from outside Japan). Based on the responses to those questionnaires, two teachers were selected for the study, in that both teachers planned to teach elements of critical argument and writer identity. In these two classrooms, observations were conducted followed by a short questionnaire to the students. Based on the responses in the questionnaire, students were selected as case studies. The case studies included fourteen students in two different classrooms (three from one, eleven from the other) over a period of one semester.

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study included classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and an analysis of students' written texts. These three methods of data collection provide *data triangulation* (the use of more than one method of data collection), a valuable strategy to augment the thoroughness of the research and counter threats to validity (Denzin, 1988). The question of *how* Japanese university students learn critical argument and writer identity was witnessed directly through *unobtrusive* classroom observations. This approach is most appropriate in the exploratory phase of a study to find out what is actually happening in a

particular situation (Robson, 2002), in this case an EFL writing classroom. The advantage of conducting observations is that I was able to watch and record (note form – in a field journal) the teachers' and students' use of class time in relation to the discussion of and practise with students' writing skills, and I was able to use that data to complement and reduce discrepancies in the data from the interviews. In order to better inform the data from the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted. As a flexible and adaptable data collection method, I was able to ask the participants directly about whether or not they understood the concepts of critical argument and writer identity, and whether or not they felt they were important to their writing skills.

There are criticisms of the validity of qualitative research methods including observations and interviews. Because the explanations are anecdotal, expressed as examples of the phenomenon, there appears to be no attempt to analyse less clear data (see Silverman, 2001). Therefore, for this study, the third method – text analysis – took a more quantitative approach, utilising *appraisal theory* from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a tool for categorising language choices. SFL is an understanding of language as a resource for making meaning. There are several key concepts in SFL deployed to explore discourse. For this study, the concept of *appraisal* was used as a system to uncover interpersonal meaning – attitudes negotiated in the texts, the strength of the feelings involved and the approaches the writers take to sourcing values and directing their readers (Martin & Rose, 2002). Appraisal theory concerns the linguistic choices of writers in order to express or negotiate their positions. The language features with appraisal theory will be explained later in this section (on *text analysis*).

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were made in both classes nearly every week through the semester (whenever possible). As the teachers of these classes were using the communicative approach, the observations were analysed

using the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching observation scheme (COLT) (Spada & Frolich, 1995). The scheme may be used to describe particular aspects of instructional practices and procedures in L2 classrooms (in this study, focusing on strategies for developing critical argument and establishing writer identity), or to investigate relationships between teaching and learning (in this study, focusing on the social and cultural context of the learners). Nunan (1989) describes it as ideal for analysing interactions in the language classroom. The COLT observation scheme is particularly beneficial to this study in that it provided the researcher with a framework in which to consider how the organisation of the classroom and dedication to particular aspects of classroom practices (see seven main features of COLT below) might have affected students' ability to apply their writing skills (in particular critical argument and writer identity) in the classroom.

This study used seven main features of COLT: 1) *Time* refers to 'real time', that being when the observer was present, and refers to the time in which students engage in communication with each other and with the teacher, as well as time spent on tasks. 2) *Activities* are the tasks set by the teacher, both written and communicative. 3) *Participant organization* includes three subcategories. It refers to how students are set for tasks into small groups or to work individually or as a whole group. 4) *Content* includes three sub-categories (management, language, and other) which is further divided into six categories: procedure (instruction), form (modelling) and function (purposes) belonging to management; discourse (language features) and sociolinguistics (relating language features to social context) belonging to language; and others (including related topics). It distinguishes between task instruction, language instruction and other communicative activities. 5) *Content control* refers to who chooses the content activities, whether it is the teacher or if it is negotiated with the students, or if the students choose. 6) *Student modality* refers to the skills being practiced in the class, either receptive (reading, listening) or productive (writing, speaking). 7) *Materials* are those materials (handouts) used in carrying out the classroom tasks.

Student Interviews

Student interviews were conducted towards the beginning of the data collection period (November), one before the winter break (December) and a final one at the end of the semester (January). All interviews were conducted in English, which may have had a negative effect on the results. However, the students were given the choice of having the interviews in English or Japanese, and all students chose English. Language and cultural barriers can affect the validity of responses (Neuman, 2003). Invalidity of responses in an interview is an important issue usually caused by some bias. Respondents may make an error in a response to a researcher-biased question that leads them away from their true answer, and their subsequent responses then may continue in that researcher-biased direction. In order to minimise bias, questions were designed to reduce the researcher's own attitude and opinion as much as possible. Since the interviews were semi-structured, there was great flexibility in interpretations of and discussions about the questions. Each interview was recorded and the time for each interview averaged about 9 minutes. The following questions were asked:

> November. The first set of questions was designed to get the students to think about their own awareness of their writing, to try to identify their strengths and weaknesses. These questions are deliberately vague in an attempt to reduce bias and to allow students to interpret them as they understand them and to ask questions. The questions were not always asked in the same order as it depended upon the response.
>
> 1- How do you see yourself as a writer?
>
> 2- What difficulties or problems do you have with writing?
>
> 3- How do you prepare for a writing task?
>
> 4- How do you take notes?
>
> 5- What kind of writer are you?

6- What structures have you used? How is academic writing different?

7- How do you express your own opinion in your writing?

December. The second set of questions was designed to get the students to focus more specifically on developing critical argument and establish writer identity. They were designed to incorporate the ideas discussed in the first interview while taking a more detailed look at the particular focus of the study.

1- What areas are the most important for advanced English writing?

2- How do you feel about developing critical argument in your writing?

3- How do you feel about your own writer *identity*?

January. The final questions were asked to give the students an opportunity to describe their satisfaction with their writing skills at the completion of their advanced writing course.

1- Now that you have finished your advanced writing course, do you feel you are an advanced writer of English?

2- Do you feel you have gained an understanding of different essay types, developing your argument and your own identity in argumentative writing?

3- What recommendations would you give to future teachers and students of advanced English writing?

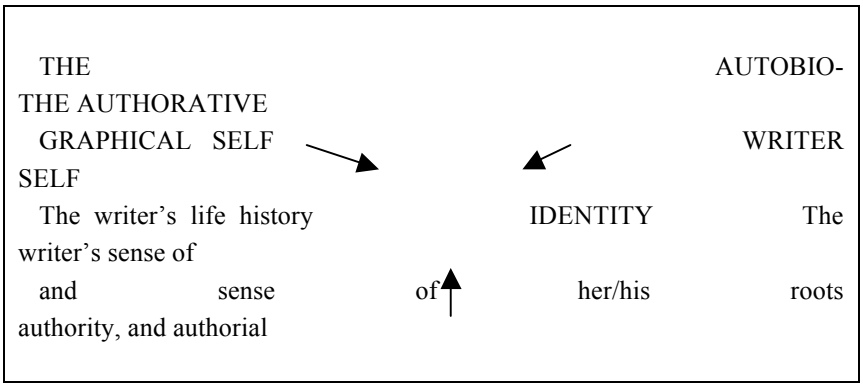
Text Analysis

Text analysis was conducted on students' written texts collected twice during the study. These texts were timed writings that students did at the close of lessons on writer identity and critical argument (see the end of the methods section for more information). The method applied in the analysis was *appraisal theory*. As mentioned above, appraisal theory concerns the linguistic choices of writers in order to express or negotiate their positions. The language features with appraisal theory include attitude, engagement and

graduation along with specific resources (for this study there were specific *language* resources only) that position the text (Christie & Martin, 1997). The language features considered in appraisal theory: 1) *Attitude* is the values through which a writer expresses affect (valuing of emotions or feelings), and judgement (valuing of others' actions). 2) *Engagement* is the use of means for positioning the writer's voice with respect to the various intentions expressed by a text. 3) *Graduation* is the values through which a writer intensifies (Force) and shapes (Focus) the content of their text.

Not necessarily associated with appraisal theory, an examination of which 'self' the writer used was also used in the analysis. The figure below from Clark and Ivanic (1997) shows three aspects of the identity of a writer (or 'selves') that are affected by a socio-cultural context. Certain 'selves' are used according to the writer, the task, and socio-cultural or socio-political aspect (see Ivanic, 1998). The autobiographical self makes use of personal language and evidence. The authorative self makes demands on the reader by asserting either personal or substantiated claims. The discoursal self takes an objective approach, with no personal language or claims.

FIGURE 1
Subject-positions/ Socially Available Possibilities for Self-hood
(Clark & Ivanic, 1997, p. 137)



presence in the text	
	THE
DISCOURSAL	
	SELF
	The writer's
representation	
	of her/himself in
the text	

The following features were used in the analysis: 1) Self – discoursal, authorative, or autobiographical; 2) Judgement – value of statement made (positive or negative); 3) Emotional – emotional/ affectual response; 4) Modality – modals (*can, could, may, might,* etc); 5) Reality phase – *it seems, it can be concluded,* etc; 6) Attribution – credit given to source or hearsay; 7) Proclamation – *In fact, It is true,* etc; 8) Expectation – *of course,* etc; 9) Counter-expectation – *surprisingly,* etc; 10) Force (Graduation) *slightly, very, surely, obviously,* etc; 11) Focus (Graduation) *effectively, truly,* etc; and 12) a count of the number of times sources were used as evidence.

The Lessons on Critical Argument and Writer Identity

Two lessons were conducted in the classes specifically addressing critical argument and writer identity, and timed writings were done at the end of each lesson. The writings were responses to the following statements: 1) *Japanese universities do not challenge their students* (writer identity); and 2) *I generally accept what my teacher tells me. In Japan it is not acceptable to question the teacher* (critical argument). The materials for these lessons were four-page handouts developed jointly by the two teachers in the study. In the lesson on developing critical argument, students were asked to brainstorm for definitions of critical reading and critical writing. This was followed by a short critical reading task in which students were required to make questions about the text. Then, an explanation of essay types (factual or analytical) was

given, with exercises in identifying different essay types. Finally, some strategies were offered for making writing more critical including selecting, reorganising and abstracting information for different purposes and extending, challenging and re-working other positions. In the lesson on writer identity, students began with a short reading in which they attempted to identify the author's presence in the text. Then three different readings were given, one each for the autobiographical, the authorative and the discoursal self. Strategies were then offered for students to practice developing texts using different selves, particularly making a shift from the autobiographical self to the authorative or discoursal self.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coding was used for the purposes of analysing the results. The function was to generate new ideas and group material by topic. It was used in different capacities for all three data collection methods. For observations, a pre-determined coding system adapted from a well-tested observation scheme known as COLT was used in order to quantify this otherwise qualitative method (Spada & Frohlich, 1995). These codes allowed for data to be set into seven categories and twenty-four subcategories. For interviews, *analytical coding* was used in order to allow for interpretation and reflection on meaning in context (Richards, 2005). This type of coding allows for the creation of categories that express new ideas about the data, and for the reflection on all the data related to the codes. For the text analysis, the codes were pre-determined by the categories set in appraisal theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Christie & Martin, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2002).

Observations

The following tables (Figure 2) show the results of observations through an analysis designed by the COLT Observation Scheme. The numbers below

each subcategory indicate the percentage of time spent on those items. The total percentage of time spent in the class for each component was based on those classes in which the entire class time was observed.

As can be seen in the table above, the greatest difference between classrooms A and B was in the content and content control. Classroom A was shown extensive modelling and explanations of the function of each writing feature practised in class, while classroom B spent more time on instructions for tasks, with very little modelling and no notable explanation of functions. Based on information gained from the initial questionnaires, it was evident that the teacher with more writing classroom experience was able to offer models and explanations of functions, while the teacher with limited writing classroom experience relied more on typical language classroom techniques.

FIGURE 2

Percentages of Time Spent on Classroom Activities

	Time			Activities		Participant Organization			Materials		
	Student to student	Student to teacher	Tasks	Written	Communicative	Whole class	Groups/pairs	Individual	Critical argument	Writer identity	Other
A	30%	10	60	35	65	30	50	20	50	10	40
B	30	20	50	25	75	20	70	10	40	0	60

	Content						Content Control			Student Modality			
	procedure	form	function	discourse	socio-linguistics	others	teacher	negotiated	students	reading	listening	writing	speaking
A	10%	25	25	10	0	35	75	15	10	10	40	30	20
B	40	10	0	25	0	25	50	25	25	15	30	20	35

Additional notes were used to further inform the data from the observations and to provide a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Those notes focused on the atmosphere of the class, and attitudes and reactions of the participants in interactions. It was noted that class size is certainly an important influence on a writing classroom's dynamics. A writing classroom requires teachers to constantly monitor students' work in order to check student understanding of, and ability to, execute the tasks. Both classes were exceptionally cooperative and regularly contained 24 students that were usually separated into 6 groups of 4, as long as all 24 students were present. The initial task was often something that allowed for student lateness, which was a regular occurrence by at least one or two students. Classroom A was slightly more teacher-focussed, requiring students to follow more instruction and spend more time actually *writing* outside of class time. The students in this class often showed very little reaction in the classroom and had limited communication in class time with the teacher. Classroom B was more student-focussed, often requiring students to complete writing tasks in class. The students in this class were slightly more expressive in the classroom and occasionally opened up dialogue and negotiation with the teacher during class time. Classroom A was able to complete more content in the semester, while classroom B was able to complete more actual writing practice. Reactions to these different classroom practices came up in the interviews.

Interviews

As this is a specific research question to one area of academic writing (i.e., critical argument), and the teachers were under no obligation to focus on this particular area in their classes, some students found it slightly difficult to discuss *how* they learned it, since they were not sure they had learned it at all. The teachers were in a similar situation, in that they had no prescribed curriculum to work with and therefore only included those things they deemed necessary in their writing classes. This did not, as it turned out, originally include a focus on writer identity, but the basics of developing a

critical argument were part of the practice students had in the class in preparation for the timed writing required of all students in the English department at this university.

All interviews were analysed following four steps in the procedures outlined by Sullivan (n.d.) i.e., a transcript of the interview was prepared, then analysed, then a personal log was written followed by an analytical log. Figure 3 below shows a section of one of the interview transcripts. The organization of the transcript is accredited to Sullivan (n.d.). Codes were used to categorise common themes in responses to interview questions (1 – like writing, 2 – issues with evidence, 3 – time constraints, 4 – issues with reading). An explanation of the qualitative coding procedure used in the analyses of this study can be found at the end of this section.

FIGURE 3

Section of Transcript from one November Interview

Question type	Non-verbal cues	Transcript: Researcher **Informant**	Codes	Reflections

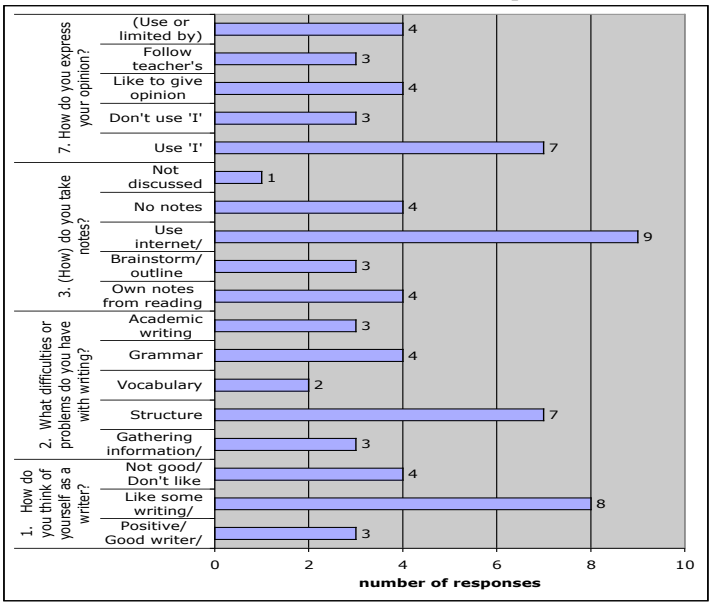
Exploratory		The… first question is… How do you think of yourself as a writer… Um… answer that any way… you like... What do you think.		This question is too vague,
	Hand placed on head	**Uh… as a writer…** [Mm] **F- first of all… I like to write**	1	but the informant handled it well.
	Hands rolling forward	[OK] **essay based on evidence** [OK] **like actually based on the… um… like professor or… the famous writer?** [Fantastic] **Yeah, I need- I need… evidence for every arguments what I said** [Good, good, good, good] **That's my- principle when I'm writing** [OK] **mmm…**	2	Informant may have been lacking some vocabulary to express herself.
Exploratory		What do you find- difficult about… that kind of writing.	2	
	Look of satisfaction	**I sometimes… Sometimes I can't find the evidence for my argument?** [OK] **Or… um when I search evidence I- I s- read- every… all kinds of evidence. Sometimes I get- I get… confused when I'm writing and looking for evidence… so… sometimes- I waste- I waste much time to read- the extra… not so important evidences** [OK] **I thought.**	3 4	Informant has discovered that reading is a weak point.

Interviews with the teachers were completely unstructured to allow the participants to feel relaxed and free to say anything about their classes. Notes were then made after these informal discussions about decisions on what to teach, on students' progress and how it had been assessed, and on general discussions about teaching EFL writing.

Following is a table developed from the November interview information. Only those questions that revealed particularly notable consensus in answer types are shown and are discussed in the discussion section. A complete list of the codes from responses can be found in the appendix.

FIGURE 4

Selection of November Interview Responses



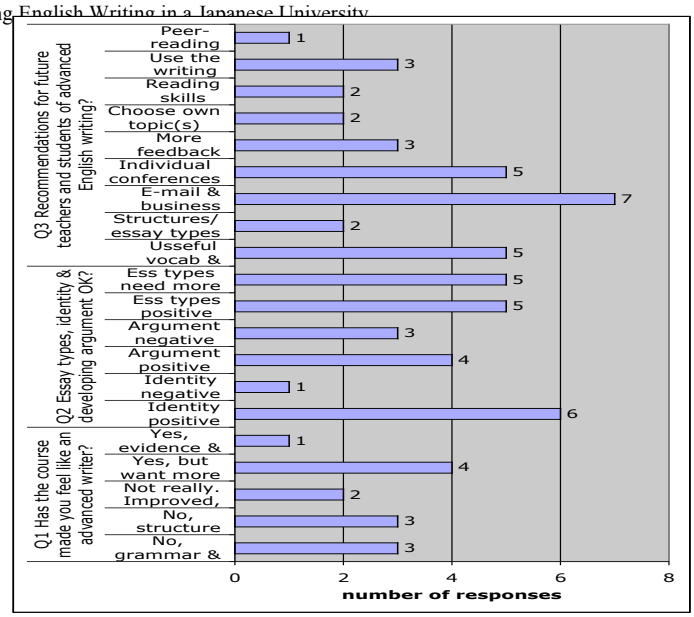
As can be seen in the above table, students were mostly positive about writing in general, although the majority leaned toward a neutral position. The problem most recognised by the students themselves was structure, in particular how each part of an essay is meant to develop an argument. Consistently the students commented on a lack of ability of using their readings to be able to build a successful argument, suggesting the need for better critical reading strategies as a possible solution to increase confidence in structuring writing. As for note taking practices in preparing for writing,

most students identified the Internet as their main source (where they typically printed out papers and highlight information, or simply "cut and paste" information from the web page directly into their texts), while four said they used no notes from reading at all to write an essay. This suggests that the students are not being shown the benefits of effective note taking in the development of their writing. The other notable set of responses was in the final question, in that most students relied on the personal pronoun 'I' in order to express their own opinions in their writing.

The December interviews found that for the most part students felt that providing evidence was the main focus of advanced academic writing. The differences in their feelings towards their ability to do this depended on the level of exposure to using evidence from their first to second years. Most students felt confident about what it meant to provide evidence but felt unsure about how to provide and use the best evidence. It was also revealed that most students were unaware of basic strategies for developing their arguments. Additionally, most had never considered their 'identity' in their writing, but thought it may be an interesting point that they would give more thought to in future writing. (The lessons on critical argument and writer identity had not yet been given.)

Next, the January interview information is given in full. As can be seen in the table below, most students felt they were not 'advanced writers' of English. Even those who felt they might be able to take that label felt they still needed more practice. On the specific areas of developing critical argument and establishing writer identity, students felt increased confidence about identity, since it was for the most part an entirely new concept. For developing critical argument, students were almost equally divided. As for recommendations from the students, overwhelmingly the ideas were practical, pointing out the obvious need for e-mail English and also suggesting business writing practice. Also practical, working with useful **FIGURE 5**

January Interview Responses



vocabulary and phrases were recommended as a confidence-building strategy. The other popular suggestion was more individual conferences with their teachers, to be able to discuss specifics about their writing skills development. In addition to the sets of questions described earlier, the student participants brought drafts of what they were writing at the time. For Class B that was a research paper. For Class A that was a critical review of an article. Copies were made of those drafts with my comments made during our meeting times with the permission of the students. Students had the opportunity to discuss concerns about their writing in these times and problem areas were worked on, which may have contributed to the recommendations in the January interviews of increased individual conferences.

The interview responses were varied but what was of particular interest was the students' ability to express their answers clearly in English. Also, most of the students did not need to be pushed for honesty or real reflection. Clearly these were students who wanted to share their opinions about their writing classes. In general students felt very much *unfinished* with their academic writing education, especially when discussing the feedback from their timed

essays on writer identity and critical argument. Nearly all of the fourteen students wished they had more time. The most overwhelming obstacle for many of them was the feeling of not being able to fully express their opinion or position with the vocabulary they had. Their consideration of how structure helps develop argument was new for the most part. Specific language strategies were what the students felt was the most useful, including useful expressions for avoiding personal language and bringing in evidence. Students also sensed the need for more feedback and the chance to speak to their teachers in individual conferences.

Although results had not yet been released, many students based their confidence in academic writing on their ability to perform on the standardised exam at the end of the semester. The exam required students to respond to a single statement in the form of a five-paragraph essay. The overwhelming concern for those students who lacked confidence was their lack of academic vocabulary and language structures. Classroom A students gave suggestions that although they did not necessarily *enjoy* their writing class, they felt they had learned a lot, and that when it came time to try the writing tasks on writer identity and critical argument in class they were confident. Classroom B students described an enjoyable class with a lot of student-to-student interaction, but felt they had not learned enough. They described feelings of uneasiness in executing the in-class writing tasks. The feedback on those writings they said verified their lack of confidence. The students from this class, almost unanimously, wished they had received the information about establishing a position and differences between essay types from the beginning of the year and had had the chance to develop these points. Regarding time, students expressed great difficulty in finding time to complete longer research papers. This was mostly due to the fact that many students had given themselves an incredibly heavy class schedule in their first and second years so that their fourth year would be free to go 'job hunting'. This is a rather interesting phenomenon in Japan where students in their fourth year have completed their required credits and focus more on securing employment to commence immediately after graduation.

With regard to the *students' development* of the concepts of developing critical argument and establishing writer identity, it was noted in the interviews that with increased confidence about using these writing strategies, students were also able to develop appropriate, critical questions about using them. These questions focused on aspects of critical thinking and the relationship of critical argument to writer identity.

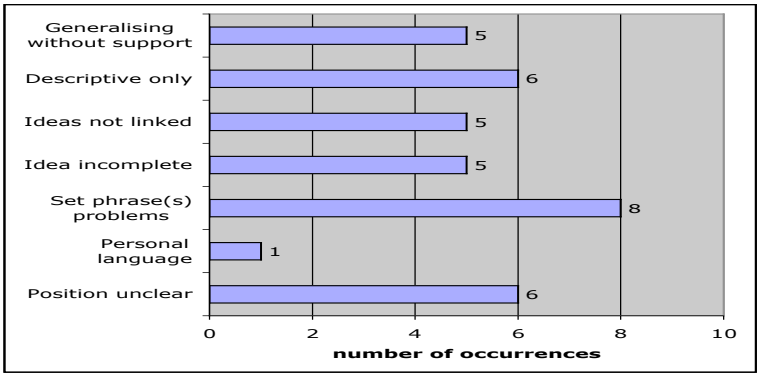
The teacher interviews mostly revealed uncertainty about the decided curriculum. Both teachers felt there was some marked improvement in those students who made an asserted effort, but felt that it was difficult to judge the class as a whole. There was agreement between the teachers that students did not seem to respond to their written feedback, although one teacher admitted that the feedback may not have been particularly instructional. Both teachers felt inspired by the experience in partaking in the research project and ultimately developed a concrete syllabus for their classes for the following year that incorporated instruction on essay types and developing critical argument. As they felt unsure about students establishing 'writer identity' they took a more simplified approach to focus on 'impersonality' as a feature of academic writing.

Text Analysis

For the first writing task, on writer identity, the codes were developed by noting the common problems apparent in the texts. For the second writing task, on critical argument, pre-set codes from appraisal theory were applied in order to analyse the language choices made in students' writing. These codes were used to build the following tables (Figures 6 and 7). The first writing task was: 'Japanese universities do not challenge their students.' Agree or disagree.

FIGURE 6

Problem Areas in Student Writing in Lesson on Writer Identity



In keeping with the 'self' they used – according to Clark and Ivanic (1997) there is the autobiographical, discoursal, or self as author – students attempted to use set phrases from the lesson as strategies for establishing their positions and developing their arguments. In most cases the choice of self was appropriate, although the students had been instructed that the 'auto-biographical' self may create a *weaker* argument. As can be seen in figure 6, nearly half the students found it difficult to move beyond the descriptive level of writing. Eight of the fourteen students had problems using the set phrases in order to avoid personal language (see sample from student D below), but only one student actually used personal language. Whereas many set phrases were used correctly, there were some problems with using that language with the idea that it then does not require evidential support, or that it allows for generalisations to be made without evidence (see sample from student J below). Following are two examples of student responses to task one.

Sample: Student J

Indeed at present Japanese people do not study hard working. It has been found that it is far difficult to enter Japanese university more than America's one.

College life is far easier than the process of entering university in Japan. However, American University is not. It has been discovered that Japanese college students seem to be stupid and unintelligent according to my American friends.

Sample: Student D

Nowadays the university students in Japan are lazy and they do not have the

passion and challenge to study. It has been suggested by Nagoya and Iketani (2004) in The Japan Times that a Japanese mother does not want her child to go to Japanese university because Japanese universities spend their school life playing. This article shows Japanese universities generally do not try to learn and they go to school to just graduate. It has been found that club activities and drinking with friends can be the main reasons for them to go to school.

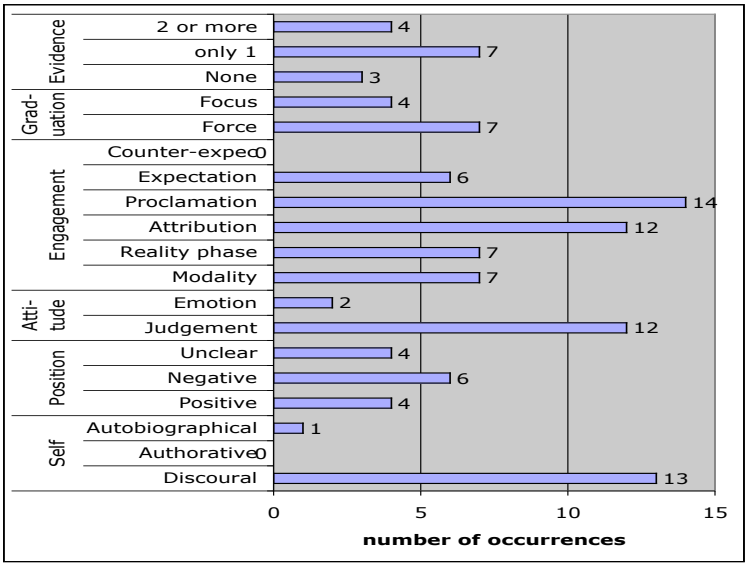
Figure 7 shows a more complete analysis, from the 'critical argument' lesson. The essay task was: Reflect on the following statement: 'I generally accept what my teacher tells me. In Japan it is not acceptable to question the teacher.' The following features were used in the analysis:

Self	discoursal, authorative, autobiographical
Attitude	Judgement = value of statement made (positive or negative)
	Emotional = emotional/ affectual response
Engagement	Modality = modals (*can, could, may, might,* etc)
	Reality phase = *it seems, it can be concluded,* etc
	Attribution = credit given to source or hearsay
	Proclamation = *In fact, It is true,* etc
	Expectation = *of course,* etc
	Counter-expectation = *surprisingly,* etc
Force	(Graduation) *slightly, very, surely, obviously,* etc
Focus	(Graduation) *effectively, truly,* etc
Evidence	information from reading

As can be seen in the table above, only one student chose an autobiographical self (see sample from student C below). This was most likely due to the emphasis that the teachers placed on the strength of the discoursal self in persuasive writing. Students were (except for four) able to establish a clear position, with the class being fairly evenly divided on positive or negative positions. Students were (except for two) able to use

FIGURE 7

Results of Analysis of Student Writing in Lesson on Critical Argument Table Developed through Use of Notes taken from Christie and Martin (1997) and Martin and Rose (2002)



judgement language in order to do this, although two students also used emotive language usually not appropriate for this type of essay. There were just seven cases where students successfully used modality as a persuasion strategy, while in another seven cases (some overlapping), they used a reality phase expression such as 'it seems'. The twelve cases of attribution were students' attempts at showing evidence, although in two of those cases, the evidence was not from any reading. All students made a proclamation such as 'in fact' to emphasise their positions, appropriate for this topic. Six students used expectation language such as 'predictably' while no students made use of counter-expectation. Graduation values were applied arbitrarily, with half of the students using force expressions such as 'slightly', 'very', or 'completely' and four students using focus expressions such as 'true' or

'pure'. The counts of evidence were minimal, with three having no evidence from the reading at all (see sample from student J below), and half the group providing only one piece of evidence. Student J's response (below) shows an ability to use critical structures and an interesting idea on the topic, that in the past it was a privilege to go to school and that led to a higher level of respect for teachers. The problems in this response are fundamental in that there is no evidence provided. It is apparent that this student did not prepare any notes from reading in that the choices of expressions are awkward – something that might have been avoided with good critical reading and note taking. Following are two samples of students' texts for the second writing task.

Sample: Student J

It seems foreigners tend to consider that Japanese are obedient. However, recently young people, who don't accept everything their teacher says, are increasing.

A long time ago, it is true that many students and parents respected teacher. Because it was difficult to go to school for poor people, only rich people could go. Therefore old people treated teacher as god and it was usual to accept what teacher said.

However, recently education changed dramatically. People must go to school. All 6 years old – 15 years old children are forced to study in school. Children don't have good images of school. It has been said that gradually children became disobedient.

Sample: Student C

According to some researchers, Asian students including Japanese are not able to use critical thinking in their classes (Stapleton 2002). In fact, I can say this is not fair. Maybe other universities don't make students critical thinking, but in my classes at ..., I have to think really hard and have good questions about what we are learning to pass the class.

A major issue on the topic of critical argument is the kind of evidence students are providing. Since the university library did not have an extensive collection of materials in English, students have no choice but to use the

Internet. There are a multitude of problems with this in that students are not selective with what they read on the Internet (see Stapleton, 2005). Most of the evidence provided by the students for this exercise was circumstantial non-peer-reviewed material. The sample from Student J, although lacking evidence completely, certainly shows signs of critical thinking by bringing in a contrast of past and present situations in Japan. However, a lack of clear expression and complete explanation in addition to the lack of evidence creates a failed piece of writing. When this was discussed with the student in the final interview, the student felt limited by the use of the discoursal self, that trying to remove personal pronouns from her writing was too difficult. Most of the students showed an ability to continue using a discoursal self, which proved for the most part to be effective for this particular topic in terms of creating a stronger argument. Student C chose to use an autobiographical self, causing the writing to be emotional and lacking in support, although one piece of evidence was provided.

It is obvious in the samples provided above that there are fundamental problems with grammar. The main reason for this is that the students are using their own thoughts, often loosely translated from Japanese, which are not explained clearly in English. When students provided evidence, those statements tended to be less grammatically problematic, suggesting that students who use reading in their writing were able to provide clearer writing. However, this point raises the issue of plagiarism. From the November interviews it was discovered that most students rely on the Internet as their main source of information. These students suggested that they will often "cut and paste" information from web pages directly into their writing, but do not always use appropriate referencing, especially if they feel the source is not particularly reliable. This strategy was noted in an earlier study in Japan (see Casanave, 2003). Stapleton (2005) suggests that lessons on evaluating the reliability of web sources is essential for any EFL or ESL student, to make sure they understand how and when it is acceptable to use web sources as evidence in their writing. As for the plagiarism issue, since students cannot be expected to ignore the Internet as an information source, students will

need to also be instructed on appropriate referencing strategies including quoting, summarising and paraphrasing. This would coincide with or be an extension of the lesson including useful vocabulary and phrases for bringing evidence into writing.

A consideration of the socio-cultural relationships involved in this study is where the three data collection methods come together. Casanave (2003) suggests that the area in which L2 writing scholarship can advance is in asking more difficult questions about familiar areas of inquiry, in particular writing processes and writer identity. The difficult question in this study is instead of *what* students are learning, it is *how* students are learning. This study has therefore endeavoured to explore the *development* of students' L2 writing skills through the lens of socio-cultural awareness, in particular the awareness of those socio-political and socio-cultural differences between the researcher, teachers and students. Through this understanding it was found that while the researcher and teachers may have expected more interactive communication and feedback in the classroom (as noted in the observations), it was in the interviews where students were able to express concerns or questions about their writing skills. Furthermore, this information aided in better conceptualising the analysis of the students' written texts, since the *process* of writing was based more on the data collected in the observations and interviews, rather than an analysis of multiple drafts of the texts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The concepts of writer identity and critical argument, it was agreed by the student and teachers in this study, are crucial to successful critical writing at university. The students felt markedly more confident about their writing with some fundamental introduction to these concepts through an understanding of different 'selves' as well as developing essay types, from factual to analytical. The results from their in-class writing tasks showed that the students were for the most part able to apply the strategies immediately.

For the most part, these university students saw little practical use for being particularly adept with academic writing, especially if they were struggling. The most beneficial elements of their writing courses were, according to them, the lists of useful strategies and phrases. Keeping this in mind, teachers of advanced academic writing should focus their courses much more on the skills required (including 'reading for writing') to complete extended research papers, rather than assigning the task itself. Shorter in class writing practice with follow-up at home using the feedback will be the best use of time, something that students in Japan have very little of since they take so many courses at one time. Also, reading strategies and practical writing tasks like e-mailing need to be incorporated.

Based on the results of this study, the following are recommendations for advanced writing course curriculum:

- Start the course with instruction of different types of writing. Particularly 'journal writing' as a place for students to explore with writing helps to get ideas out which should 'pick up' where their first year writing course left off. Make sure students understand why learning advanced writing skills are important. Try to incorporate their writing needs for other courses as much as possible.
- Show early on how the type of writing this year differs in that it should be extended beyond the factual level (descriptive, explanatory writing) to the analytical level (interpretive, evaluative writing).
- Discuss the appropriateness of using 'I' in students' writing. Introduce the idea of different 'selves' in writing (see Clark & Ivanic 1997) and get students to practice keeping themselves present in their writing without using 'I'. Explain how this strengthens the argument of the writer.
- Instead of focusing specifically on grammar, take students through features of academic writing so they can get a sense of appropriate forms and possibly start building a list of useful strategies and phrases. Spend extra time on this for lower proficiency students. Students' grammar tends to be better when their reading is incorporated into their writing.
- Take a close look at critical reading strategies (having questions for their reading) to help students find appropriate evidence to support their ideas. For most students this may be the first time to do this. Talk about

appropriate sources. Try to steer away from Internet sources (see Stapleton 2005).

- Practise reading for effective note taking to get students to build their essays on the evidence they have available to them.
- Quoting, paraphrasing and summarising needs to be clearly defined and practised in order to avoid plagiarism.
- Consider organisational structures by looking at the development of an argument. Work together to define 'argument' and 'position' and show students the advantages of taking one side of the argument.
- Work on a 'critique' and discuss the differences of that with critical writing. Show different organisational structures like thesis-antithesis-synthesis.
- Show students the benefits of analysing and evaluating their own writing. Go through the writing with a clear understanding of who the reader is and how they can focus the writing for the particular reader(s).
- Organise schedules so students can meet for individual conferences to go over specific writing skills.
- Give a practical lesson on e-mail English. Talk about 'rules' for e-mail writing and get every student to send e-mail. Consider functions like apologising, requesting, inviting, declining, etc. Also, feedback on drafts can be given via e-mail.
- Take advantage of the student-centred classroom and incorporate 'peer reading'.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Whether the students in this study will be able to apply their newly developed skills in future writing would be the next step in this study. A one-semester study where students are introduced to the target writing skills at the end of the semester is really only the beginning. Clearly the students who felt they did not get 'enough' writing skills instruction found value in these strategies learned at the end of the year and would have liked to have spent more time on them in class.

Interviews proved to reveal the most interesting results in that although the students may not have recognised their weak points, they understood that

there were some fundamental concepts that they wanted to learn to be able to move forward from this point in the development of their writing. Future interviews should be more structured and more deeply analysed in order to reveal more consistencies between student responses for which action could be taken. The questions and question order were developed from the researcher's own experience with the topic. Not all the questions revealed particularly informative results, and may need to be altered or asked at different times in future studies.

Future research can utilise the recommendations from the previous section with a final in-class writing task with (time permitting) student interviews to check comprehension. The text analysis was conducted on very short pieces of writing from the students. If the students had the opportunity to extend the writing into a full essay they may have been able to make their arguments clearer and stronger.

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APPENDIX

Codes from November Interviews

Q1 – How do you see yourself as a writer? 1- positive/ good writer 2- like some writing/ not confident 3- not good/ don't like Q2 – Difficulties/ problems? 1- finding & using evidence 2- structure 3- vocabulary 4- grammar 5- academic writing in general Q3 – (How) do you take notes? 1- own notes from reading (summary, etc.) 2- brainstorm/ outline before reading 3- use internet/ highlight on print-outs 4- no notes 5- not discussed Q4 – How do you prepare? 1- position first, then find evidence 2- brainstorm ideas/ make outline 3- find position from evidence 4- don't prepare 5- not discussed	Q5 – What kind of writer are you? 1- a lot of planning first 2- work from rough outline 3- work from notes 4- just start writing 5- other (problems) 6- not discussed Q6 – Familiar structures? Differences between academic and non-academic writing? 1- familiar/comfortable 2- limited but confident 3- less confident 4- other 5- not discussed Q7 – How do you express your opinion? 1- use 'I' 2- don't use 'I' 3- like to give opinion 4- follow teacher's instructions 5- (use or limited by) easy English