Written feedback in Japanese EFL classrooms: A focus on content and organization

Neil Heffernan,* Junko Otoshi,** Yoshitaka Kaneko***

Abstract

The exact nature of written feedback to L2 learners of English is often vague to both the teachers who provide it and the learners who receive it. However, this does not have to be the case. This paper describes a study carried out with 16 Japanese and 14 native English speaker EFL teachers in Japan who provided feedback on one L2 learners' academic essay. After analyzing and coding the feedback, the researchers found that the most common form of feedback given on the essay was in relation to the content and organization of the essay. Five of these teachers were subsequently interviewed in order to elicit their beliefs about the nature of feedback they gave on the learners' essay. The findings suggest a need for EFL teachers in Japan to specifically focus on teaching how learners can attend to the content and organization of an essay, all the while providing a rubric or checklist that allows for a transparent and easy to understand method of decoding the feedback process for our learners.

Keywords: Feedback, Japanese EFL writers, content, organization, checklist

1. Introduction

Providing written feedback to students' writing is one of the most important tasks for writing teachers (Ferris et al., 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). While there are various kinds of feedback including oral feedback, teacher-student conference, peer feedback, and the recent use of e-feedback (Quinla, Higgins, & Wolff, 2009), teachers' written feedback on students' writing assignments is still the most common approach; one that allows teachers to communicate with their students and also give teachers a sense of responsibility for their work. From the point of view of students, teacher's written feedback is expected and taken more seriously than other forms of feedback (Knoch, 2011; Zamel, 1985). This is especially true in Japan where the teacher is regarded as having the final – and most important – say on matters regarding corrections and feedback in the classroom.

The possible effectiveness of teacher's written feedback for further revisions of learners' texts has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Hyland, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Since the emergence

―――――――――――――――――――

* English Education Center, Ehime University, Japan. Email: neilhef@gmail.com Tel. +81-927-8343

** Language Education Center, Okayama University, Japan. Email: otoshi-j@cc.okayama-u.ac.jp

*** Liberal and General Education Center, Utsunomiya University. Email: jykaneko@hotmail.com

of the process writing movement, intervention by a teacher during students' writing process has been recognized as assisting students in advancing to more complete stages of the writing process (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), and considers teacher intervention and feedback at key points within the process (Goldstein, 2004, p.64). Additionally, from the perspectives of constructivists, having students be aware of readers can make the learning process more communicative and dynamic (Berlin, 1987). Students will, consequently, have more active attitudes toward their learning through the learning-to-write process (Lee, 2008).

On the other hand, in a seminal paper, Truscott (1996) asserted that teachers' feedback often receives skeptical views in terms of its effectiveness on students' writing accuracy, and stated that grammar correction can be not only ineffective, but also harmful to the second language (L2) learner. The long-term effects of error corrections have been questioned in several empirical studies (e.g., Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Semke, 1984; Sengupta, 1998; Truscott, 1996; Zamel, 1985), leaving it open to debate as to the efficacy of different types of feedback.

Moreover, teachers' feedback itself has become a target of criticism. Fathman and Whally (1990) argued that teachers' comments on student texts are often vague, contradictory, unsystematic and inconsistent. Their criticism on teachers' feedback is targeted at content feedback to L2 learners' texts. Fathman and Whally concluded that having L2 learners rewrite a text is important, while a teachers' intervention is not always necessary because of the poor quality of written comments by teachers.

Ferris (1997) also argued that teachers' comments on logic or argument on their learners' texts are not delivered well to the learners. Typical vague comments on those rhetorical features include "not logical", "not consistent" or "unclear" on students' texts. Those comments might make students more confused, thus, not allowing them to proceed with their revisions (Sengupta, 2000). However, it was found that students often prefer their instructors to give them feedback related to the content and organization of their writing, as opposed to feedback on grammatical errors and use of correct vocabulary (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2007). Receiving feedback on such rhetorical features might be less stressful for students than receiving corrective feedback on linguistic features. Nevertheless, the complexity of content feedback has not been sufficiently investigated to date. Ashwell (2002) regards content feedback a multiple sentence level issue, including features such as organization, paragraphing, cohesion, and relevance (p. 234). Conrad and Goldstein (1999) indicated that a vital element was the content of the feedback and "whether it related to subject matter information" (p. 149) of a piece of writing. Due to a lack of feedback training and unclear definitions of content feedback, teachers themselves, however, might not have a clear understanding of what written comments they are addressing when they provide written feedback on L2 learners' texts.

1.1. Content and organization

The purpose of teachers' feedback is deemed to provide learners guidance in writing, while considering the major elements of academic writing. Weigle (2002) classified these elements into two groups: rhetorical features (content, organization, development) and linguistic features (control of grammar and vocabulary). According to the ESL composition profile developed by Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981), there are five components in assessing academic writing: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. With respect to evaluation, however, the quality of the content and organization of a learners' essay often carries a larger weight than other linguistic features (Knoch, 2011), especially with regard to argumentative essays. It is therefore hypothesized that teachers' written feedback on students' texts focuses on more rhetorical features than linguistic ones.

For English as Foreign Language (EFL) students, the writing task for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a typical writing proficiency test for examining their writing abilities. Students who

are hoping to gain entrance into universities in America or Canada must write an academic-style essay for the TOEFL. Many of these students are well aware of the preferred rhetoric styles required in the TOEFL independent writing task from studying appropriate preparation materials: introduction, body and conclusion and main ideas, and topic sentences (Knoch, 2011). Indeed, Yang and Sun (2012) stated that argumentative writing requires writers to possess high cognitive demands of the process of forming an opinion to be capable of demonstrating appropriate linguistic and cultural discourse in the target language.

Even though the process writing approach facilitates a writer's creativity and idea generation (Lam, 2013), novice writers, including EFL students, might feel more comfortable with being given instruction on how to form a pattern for constructing compositions. Argumentative essays such as TOEFL independent tasks still require EFL learners' to form ideal logical development, which is necessary in academic communities (Cumming et al., 2002).

However, as Lee (2002) argues, rhetorical features, such as coherence, are more complicated and vague than linguistic ones due to a lack of clear definitions of terms. Based on her operational definition of coherence (see Connor & Farmer, 1990; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Halliday & Hasan, 1996), Lee (2002) considers the following six factors regarding the teaching of coherence in the classroom to be crucial: purpose, audience and context of situation, macrostructure, information distribution and topical development, propositional development and modification, cohesion and metadiscourse (p. 140).

In the EFL context, Miyazaki (2008) investigated the interrelationships among the components associated with rhetorical features: content, organization, cohesion, and voice, and – after conducting multiple regression analysis – argued that content and organization are two essential components for evaluating rhetorical features.

In sum, EFL teachers must be well aware of the importance of teaching such complicated rhetorical features – and especially content and organization – in academic writing. However, there is a lack of research on exactly how EFL teachers respond to students' texts, and particularly on how teachers respond to the content and organization of learners' texts. Therefore, it is important to explore how EFL teachers respond to students' writing, while focusing on the specific elements of the content and organization of a written text.

1.2. Purposes of the study

The current study explores EFL teachers' written feedback on a student's argumentative essay focusing on the rhetorical features of content and organization, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti's study (1997) became the basis for the current research in terms of methodology. They classified teachers' commentaries considering the length, purpose, syntactic form, use of headings, and text-specificity comments. While we grounded our work on the study by Ferris, et al. (1997), our exploration was situated in an EFL context, and took a closer look at EFL teachers' specific views. As Goldstein (2001) maintains, teachers' commentaries on learners' texts should be conceptualized while considering contextual factors such as the institutional and programmatic context (p.87) of their comments.

In order to undertake a close examination of teachers' written feedback, in addition to performing a quantitative analysis, the researchers also performed a qualitative analysis, as explained by Corbin and Strauss (2008):

A process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (p.1).

As argued above, teachers' written feedback is deemed to be crucial for developing students' writing ability during the writing process. Without identifying the characteristics of written feedback provided by EFL teachers, it cannot be ascertained
what written feedback should be given to students' writing. That is, the actual features of written feedback have to be discussed before examining the efficacy of teacher's feedback to students' writing. Therefore, the following two research questions were considered in order to explore teachers' written feedback on students' writing.

(1) What elements of content and organization are extracted in EFL teachers' written feedback?
(2) What factors do EFL teachers deem important when they provide written feedback on students' writing?

2. The study

2.1. Participating EFL teachers

The study was conducted in the academic year of 2012 in Japan. Thirty EFL teachers currently teaching in Japan participated in the study and provided feedback on a sample essay, while five of the teachers agreed to be interviewed for further analysis. Sixteen of the teacher participants were Japanese and fourteen were native speakers of English. The average number of years they had been teaching English in Japan was 11.7 years; the range was from one to 30 years. All of the participant teachers had a Master's degree or above in an English-language related field, and except for one of the Japanese teachers (who received a Master's degree at an Japan-based American university), the other 15 had experience either studying or living in America at some point in their lives; either at graduate school or on a work-related sojourn. All of the teachers were teaching EFL at Japanese universities in different parts of the country at the time of the research. Further, they all had experience teaching English writing to Japanese students at some point in their careers.
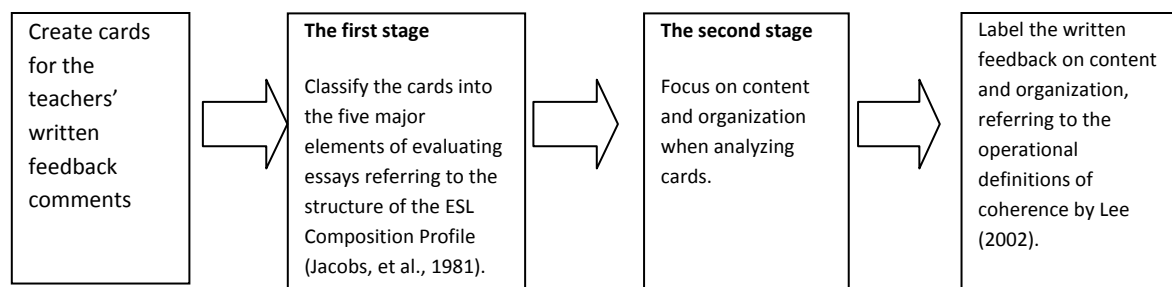
2.2. Material

A sample argumentative essay was distributed to all of the participant teachers in the study in order to determine the type of feedback they would provide on the essay (see Appendix 1). The essay was written by a male Japanese EFL undergraduate student. The essay prompt was taken from the prompt pools of the TOEFL writing independent task. At the time this research was carried out, the participating student was preparing to take the TOEFL iBT in order to gain entrance into an American university as a one-year exchange student. Thus, he had some prior knowledge of how to write an argumentative essay from his own studies.

2.3. Feedback analysis procedure

The participant teachers were provided a copy of the student's essay and asked to give feedback in a similar manner to how they usually did in their own writing classrooms. Seventeen teachers gave their feedback in hardcopy format while the remaining thirteen teachers gave their feedback using the comment function on a word processing file. All feedback was written in English, save for four Japanese teachers who chose to write their feedback in Japanese. In the case of feedback returned to the researchers in hardcopy format, the participant teachers gave their feedback in the margins and at the end of the essay. Those teachers who returned their feedback electronically gave their feedback at the end of the essay as well as using the comment function of a commonly used word processing software.

58

The teachers were given as much time as they needed to complete the feedback on the essay. That is, no time restrictions were placed on the participant teachers, who, as mentioned above, lived in disparate parts of the country at the time of the research. The researchers were fortunate that all thirty teachers who were contacted to participate in the study agreed to do so. The researchers then analyzed all of the feedback focusing on the content and organization comments by the teachers. Figure 1 indicates the procedure of analyses of classifying the written feedback based on open coding.

Figure 1. Analysis procedure

Create cards for the teachers' written feedback comments	**The first stage** Classify the cards into the five major elements of evaluating essays referring to the structure of the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, et al., 1981).	**The second stage** Focus on content and organization when analyzing cards.	Label the written feedback on content and organization, referring to the operational definitions of coherence by Lee (2002).

The analysis in this study utilized the open coding of "comparative analysis", as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Comparative analysis is explained as follows:

> Incidents that are found to be conceptually similar to previously coded incidents are given the same conceptual label and put under the same code. Each new incident that is coded under a code adds to the general properties and dimensions of that code, elaborating it and bringing in variation (p.195).

The coding occurred in two stages: classifying the five key elements in writing: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, and then focusing on content and organization; the primary focus of this study. All the written feedback comments from the thirty feedback essays were collected by the researchers in the study, and cards were made after the researchers broke down each comment into meaningful segments (i.e. a one sentence comment could have had two or three meaningful feedback comments in it). The cards then, as in the first stage, were classified into the major five elements for evaluating essays. For classification, the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, et al., 1981) was used, as it is an internationally accepted analytic scoring rubric.

In the second stage, the written feedback comment cards were further divided into groups focusing on content and organization, and then categorized into more specific elements of rhetorical features. The category was then labeled by referring to the key words of the definitions of coherence for classroom instruction by Lee (2002, p. 140), because these key words were deemed to be important for defining the complicated nature of content and organization in writing. The comment cards which could not be suitably named according to the criteria were then labeled by the researchers. The three researchers of this study carefully worked on all two stages together and confirmed the analysis in order to ensure the validity of the classification.

3. Results

3.1. Classification on written feedback

The system of open coding by the authors produced 128 cards, with each card containing one comment. Out of these 128 comments, 100 cards can be applied to one of the key elements of essay structure elements. They are classified into content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, as was pointed out in the ESL composition profile (Jacobs, et al., 1981). As for the remaining 28 cards, they

could not be included in any of the key elements of the essays, but could be considered as participant teachers' personal comments showing complements or encouragement for the student.

The results of the classification of feedback comments on the essay elements are summarized in Table 1. The breakdowns of the comment numbers between Japanese English teachers and native English teachers are indicated in brackets. The most frequent type of feedback on the essay was on content and organization, accounting for approximately 54% of the total number of all feedback on the five elements. The feedback for grammar is slightly lower, accounting for 24% of the total, followed by feedback for vocabulary (13%) and mechanics (9%).

Table 1. Classification of feedback comments on essay elements

Elements	Content	Organization	Grammar	Vocabulary	Mechanics	Totals
Number of cards	27 (J=14; N=13)	27 (J=13; N=14)	24 (J=14; N=10)	13 (J=8;N=5)	9 (J=5;N=4)	100 (J=54;N=46)
Frequency	27%	27%	24%	13%	9%	100%

Note. J stands for Japanese English teachers; N stands for native English teachers.

The fifty four comments on content and organization were further classified, referring to the definitions of coherence by Lee (2002). As a result, we made nine categories and labeled each as follows: Information distribution, Topic sentence, Cohesive devices, Clarity, Topical development, Thesis, Introduction, Conclusion, Macrostructure. Table 2 summarizes the results of the researchers' groupings.

Table 2. Further classification of feedback comments on content and organization

Label in the present study	Number of cards	Frequency (≒)
Information distribution	12 (J=5;N=7)	22%
Topic sentence	10 (J=6;N=4)	18%
Cohesive devices	9 (J=4; N=5)	16%
Clarity	6 (J=4; N=2)	11%
Topical development	5 (J=3; N=3)	9%
Thesis	4 (J=2;N=2)	7%
Conclusion	4 (J=3;N=1	7%
Macrostructure	4 (J=2;N=2)	7%
Totals	54 (J=29;N=25)	100

Note. J stands for Japanese English teachers; N stands for native English teachers.

As Table 2 indicates, Information distribution accounted for the largest amount of feedback from the teachers in this study, with about 22% of the total. Some examples of the type of comment in this category were "An inclusion of the clause as shown will make your message clearer", "You seem change the topic

here", and "Instead of beating around the bush here, it would be better to directly state your second point here". These comments are concerned with the manner in which information is placed in the essay in order to make it logical.

The category with the second largest number of comments was the Topic sentence category, accounting for about 18% of the total. Some common teacher comments here were: "Good topic sentence", "You do not state the main idea", and "Put the most important sentence in each paragraph".

Cohesive devices accounted for the third amount of written comments by teachers, with approximately 16 % of the total feedback. Some examples of teacher feedback in this category include: "Use transition phrases when ending paragraphs", and "Good use of sequential adverbs: first, etc.".

Clarity accounts for 11% of the total feedback in this study. Samples of comments on this category were: "Lack of clarity in some points", and "Some unclear points that make your writing confusing."

Next, comments having to do with the Topical development of the essay accounted for 9% of the total. Some examples include: "Your examples can support the main message" and "Move away from very personal examples to more general ones".

Thesis accounted for 7 % of the total feedback. Some teacher comments included: "A very straightforward introduction which sets up your 3 points well" and "Good thesis". The next most frequently occurring comments were regarding Conclusion, and account for 7 % of the total feedback. Teachers' comments on the student's conclusion included: "Good conclusion sentences" and "Conclusion is quite clear."

Lastly, Macrostructure also accounted for 7 % of the total feedback. The comments by teachers in this category included: "Your essay is well organized" and "Good organization/intro, 3 paragraphs in body & conclusion."

3.2. Interview data

In order to gain deeper insight into the thoughts and beliefs of the participant teachers, interviews were conducted with three native speakers of English and two Japanese teachers. The interviews were conducted immediately after the feedback data was collated.

The researchers used a semi-structured style of interview: some questions were prepared beforehand, but, generally, as each participant responded to the interviewer's questions, relevant follow-up questions were posed (Kumar, 1999). The main three questions asked were as follows:

Question 1: How do you approach correcting an essay?
Question 2: What factors influence your feedback on the essay?
Question 3: What do you expect of your students when they are writing an essay?

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed and presented to the other two researchers in this project. The participants' answers were then coded for relevant themes and patterns, which were then placed into a chart showing all five participants' answers. These were then cross-checked and compared with the data that was found in the original written feedback of the student's essay.

The insights gained from these interviews provided us with a more insightful sense of how each of the teachers approached giving feedback to their students' writing. Mainly, after the feedback each participant teacher gave on the sample essay, the researchers wanted to gain sense of why the teachers gave the comments they did on the essay.

For example, when asked about the importance of content and organization in students' essays – a point that gels nicely with the Information distribution category in Table 2 – native speaker teacher 11 stated:

Content and logic are paramount. I think Japanese students need more instruction on how to write logically. Is this how they are taught in high school to write (without much logic or supporting details for their statements)? For me, if an essay does not make sense, then I have problems giving students a good mark on it. An essay needs coherence in order to be considered a good piece of writing.

Teacher 11 then continued:

Further, they have to have a very strong topic sentence for each paragraph (one that fully supports the thesis). If, and only if, they have this, then they can start to develop their other ideas. This is how logic works when writing in English: Have a strong thesis, followed by strong topic sentences (maybe 3 or 4 in an essay of this nature/length), followed by examples illustrating what they mean.

Seeing as the need for distributing information within an essay correctly was a major finding of this research, these comments are seen as particularly significant. Indeed, it was a theme that ran through the interviews with all five participant teachers, but especially with the three native English speakers who were interviewed.

Native speaker 10 had the following to say regarding coherence and logic in Japanese students' writing:

As far as coherence is concerned, it is hard to get students (well, mine anyway) to submit a coherent essay. It takes many weeks of practice. Some don't get it until near the end of a 15 week semester. So this is very important. Logic is intertwined with coherence, and the same principle goes: Can a Japanese student write a logical essay? It seems to be very tough for most of them to do, as the Japanese way of thinking is clearly different than the way in which we were educated.

Similarly, native speaker 7 had the following to say:

There were some clarity issues in the essay (pointing to the second sentence of the essay). I think this a major problem of Japanese students' writing: they have many unsupported ideas and sentences in their writing. I usually try to point these out to them; although it takes a while for students to realize this concretely.

In relation to this point, and tied to Question 3 above, native speaker teacher 7 claimed his style of giving feedback is closely connected to the way in which he was educated:

I suppose I think of my own education when teaching my students writing and giving them feedback. I mean, we went through so much more than they did for our education, didn't we? So, I want our time together to be worth something. In that regard, my feedback on writing might be kind of harsh, but I think in the end it will make my students better writers of English.

In a similar vein, Japanese teacher 5 also related tales of his days studying at an American university:

When I look back on my history as a student at university and graduate school, I find I have not had much experience of receiving feedback in Japanese on my essays. So, I am not accustomed to giving feedback in Japanese. I think my style of giving feedback is much influenced by my past experience. I also feel my style is changing and evolving based on my experience.

Japanese teacher 7 takes a slightly different approach when giving feedback on students' written work.

He stated:

I first looked over the whole essay and started writing comments on grammar, structure, and content. I usually pay attention to the objectives of the essay writing. On this sample essay I commented on points of grammar, logic, and expressions in detail so that the student can write a better essay on the next TOEFL.

Another contrast can be drawn in regards to giving feedback on the content of an essay. Japanese teacher 5 had the following to say:

> I also make comments on content. Yet, I did not write much comment on the content of this essay because the student writing this essay seemed very motivated to study English. I thought comments on content are not necessary. I write some comments on the content of essays written by students who are not so motivated. Based on my experience of giving feedback on their essay, they are encouraged more or less by comments on content.

Clearly this teacher felt that content has paramount importance when providing feedback on his students' essays. The fact that he takes the motivation of the student (in this case, demonstrated in the writing sample) into consideration when giving feedback is a revealing point about his style: offering feedback related to content to students who seem less motivated is seen a way to encourage learners to fully develop their writing.

4. Discussion and pedagogical implications

The results gleaned from this study, and the subsequent contribution it can make to the existing literature, point towards the need for a more resolute method of teaching how Japanese EFL learners can address the specific tenets of the content and organization of their essays. With the importance of these elements of academic writing evident (Knoch, 2011; Lee, 2002), EFL instructors in Japan should make clear efforts to focus on these areas with the intent of bolstering their learners' writing abilities.

With regard to the two research questions posed in this study, the researchers can posit the following:

In relation to RQ1, both Japanese and native speaker English EFL teachers maintain that the most important issue for them when giving feedback is to concentrate on the content and organization of a student's essay. Within these strata of information in an academic essay, the need to distribute information correctly was given paramount importance among the teachers. Teachers provided specific feedback on the need to directly address the question when writing and to write in a logical manner. This points to the need for EFL teachers in Japan to focus on this component of an essay, and for learners to be made aware just how important it is when writing.

The second most important element of feedback was another difficult part of a paragraph for Japanese learners: writing a topic sentence. Traditionally, this is the most difficult part of a paragraph for Japanese learners of English (Hirose & Sasaki, 1994). Essentially, this is tied to their reluctance to state their opinions at the start of an essay, as Japanese students might not receive enough formal training in English writing in their studies in junior and senior high school. Explicit practice in writing topic sentences in university classrooms will certainly simplify the entire writing process and assist learners in becoming more proficient writers in English.

Next, from the data, cohesive devices had the third highest number of comments from the participant teachers. Once Japanese learners begin to learn to write in university English classes, EFL teachers tend to focus on these devices as ways of linking sentences and paragraphs – devices that make writing more logical to read to experienced writers of English. These beliefs were reaffirmed in the interviews with both the native speaker teachers and the Japanese teachers, who all suggested that the logic of a piece of writing is paramount to being able to understand the flow of said writing.

The clarity of a piece of writing was deemed to be the next most important category. The gist of these comments pointed to the need for the student to be clearer in his writing so that the reader would better understand the message he was attempting to communicate – another common problem for L2 writers who have undoubtedly become accustomed to different styles of writing and for different purposes. However, unless teachers clearly define how they want students to write with more clarity, we believe that students may be confused by such comments. Thus, we can suggest that L2 writers need to be well versed in the methods their teachers will use to provide feedback before the actual feedback is given. This will allow learners to process the feedback more smoothly and proceed with working on their revisions.

Such action will also induce learners in a "process-oriented classroom … to act upon teacher commentary" in order to revise their writing (Lee, 2008, p. 71).

Regarding RQ2, the different approaches taken by the native speaker teachers and the Japanese teacher were highlighted in the interview process. There were clear contrasts that can be summarized by saying the native speakers tend to focus on information distribution points such as the coherence and logic of an essay, all the while shying away from giving too much feedback regarding grammar, clearly an approach that would please Truscott (1996). In regard to coherence, teachers should focus on providing a clear explanation on what coherence entails, as L2 learners may be confused by the term if they are not given clear guidance (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). One of the Japanese teachers stated that at first he takes a holistic approach when assessing his students' written work. This then leads him to evaluate the objectives of the essay and whether it is logical or not. However, the one consistent factor raised in this study is the need to address content issues in a student's writing. The participant teachers saw this is a vital issue in the process of giving the student valuable advice on how to improve his writing.

One contrasting point between the two groups of teachers was illuminated in the interviews. Some of the Japanese participant teachers stated that while content and organization are paramount, they also tend to make specific corrections regarding grammar on their learners' written work, while the native English speakers exhibited their preference for giving feedback based on only the content and organization of a text. This finding indicates that Japanese teachers believe that giving grammar corrections helps to improve students' writing more strongly than their native speaker counterparts. Indeed, as Japanese teacher 7 stated, he focuses on the interrelationship between grammar, structure and content in order to assist his learners in writing successive drafts of their work.

Another difference between the two groups was established in regard to the purpose of giving feedback in certain areas. As we saw above, Japanese teacher 5 ponders his students' motivation for writing and whether he can facilitate their writing by providing them with constructive feedback based on the content of their essays; a point that was not raised by the native English speakers, who were more apt to want to see their learners write in a logical manner. This finding suggests that teachers take an affective side into consideration when giving feedback, which can be considered to influence the process of writing.

One major similarity between the two groups of teachers was in reference to their own schooling. During the interviews, both groups of teachers stated that they fall back on their own experience in university when giving feedback on their learners' writing. This is a significant finding, as it points to two vastly different systems of university education: the manner in which the participant teachers were educated (14 native English speakers and a vast majority of the Japanese teachers were educated in Western, English-speaking countries), and the current system of education in Japan.

In light of this discussion, we feel it pertinent to raise one final point in regards to the nature of English exposure our Japanese undergraduate students will be faced with in the future. With the recent discussion in the literature about English as the lingua franca (see Seidlhofer, 2001; Seidlhofer & Breiteneder, 2006), exactly what approach should EFL teachers in Japan take when providing written feedback to their learners? That is, who will our learners' future audiences be when writing in English: Other English L2 users in Asia, or both L1 and L2 users throughout the rest of the world? If the former comes to pass, then we can suggest that Japanese teachers may be the ideal archetypes of that audience. However, if it is the latter, then experience with both native and non-native teachers of English will give our learners the best possible opportunities for the futures. The authors believe that both are a distinct possibility, as Japan cannot afford to metaphorically rest on its laurels as an island nation in a world that is changing so rapidly.

The factors delineated in this study are evident, and EFL teachers need to carefully consider the feedback they give students, and to give explicit feedback on their writing based on a carefully considered

criteria, as this may be the "quickest, most appropriate, most useful way of helping" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 301) to ensure teachers can furnish their learners with the abilities to improve their writing.

From the results of this study, we can tender some suggestions for how to use this information to approach the feedback we give our students on their writing. Chiefly, it is important for EFL learners to understand the exact nature of the feedback that teachers will give them on their writing. For example, if teachers make their individual style of feedback available to students before the writing process begins, the students will be able to process this feedback much more easily and then use this feedback for successive drafts of their work. Providing students with a checklist (Lee, 2008) or rubric that includes the eight specific elements that will be evaluated (i.e. the elements in Table 2 above) will allow students to interpret the teacher's feedback with greater ease. Further, initiating such a system will also allow the teachers themselves to provide feedback more efficiently. In other words, instead of having to write long comments on their students' written work, teachers can refer to the checklist or rubric and write more concise comments that allow students to process them with ease. This dual approach of creating a shared understanding of the exact nature of each teacher's feedback provides both teachers and learners with a comfort zone within which to work and allows both groups to provide and receive feedback seamlessly. This approach will also foster more self-dependence on the part of the student, a method advocated by Brumfit (1977).

5. Conclusion and suggestions for future research

The present study focused on the feedback of thirty EFL teachers in Japan on a Japanese student's TOEFL essay. In accordance with past studies on EFL learners' writing, the results of this study indicate that teachers stress the importance of the content and organization of their learners' written work (Knoch, 2011). Indeed, the data from this study compliments this in more than one way: through the classification of the data from the 30 participant teachers' actual feedback and through the interviews with five of the teacher participants in the study. Seeing as these two elements were given so much importance by the participant teachers, from these results we can surmise that EFL teachers in Japan are inclined to teach their students in a manner in which they were taught themselves: by concentrating on these two key elements of writing, the teachers in this study clearly see the need for their students to produce quality writing that can be understood by speakers of English – regardless of whether these speakers be native or non-native speakers of the language. The teachers in this study saw a clear need for Japanese learners of English to be able to produce quality writing that will allow them to express their viewpoints through their words; a trait that is certainly applicable for any L2 learner of English in today's increasingly globalized society.

While the researchers believe the feedback given on the sample essay in this study was extremely valuable for the participant student, and represented a clear indication of what types of feedback EFL teachers in Japan tend to give students on their written work, we cannot make any sweeping generalizations about feedback on students' writing in general because of the small sample size. Indeed, future studies can utilize more than one sample of writing and a larger base of teachers with which to work from.

Another possible avenue of further research that lies within this current work is in asking teachers through stimulated recall to expand upon their reasoning behind the feedback they gave to the researchers and to define the precise terms they gave in this study. Specifically, we would like to investigate how these teachers explain the feedback they gave while actually looking at specific instances in their own feedback.

From the current study, we believe that EFL learners must learn about the process of writing by gaining a clear understanding that the quality of their writing is of ultimate importance. Further, a system of

shared understanding must be promoted among both teachers and students in order to for this understanding to be completely adopted. This kind of shared understanding can be based on the mutual student-teacher relationship, and can essentially help in building bridges between the two parties (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Thus, as teachers we must clearly explicate the reasons for the feedback we give to our students so that they are well informed of the exact nature and form of both native and Japanese teachers' expectations in an EFL writing class. With this knowledge, we believe it is important for teachers to create a seamless system of evaluation by creating the aforementioned checklist or rubric in order to provide our learners with the best possible learning opportunities.

Biodata

Neil Heffernan is an Associate Professor in the English Education Center at Ehime University, Matsuyama, Japan. His research interests include second language writing and CALL.

Junko Otoshi is an Associate Professor in the Language Education Center at Okayama University, Okayama, Japan. Her research interests include second language writing and independent learning.

Yoshitaka Kaneko is an Associate Professor in the Liberal and General Education Center at Utsunomiya University, Utsunomiya, Japan. His research interests include teacher education and motivation.

References

Ashwell, T. (2000). Patterns of teacher response to student writing in a multiple-draft composition classroom: Is content feedback followed by form feedback the best method? *Journal of Second Language Writing, 9*(3), 227–257.

Berlin, J. A. (1987). *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges, 1900-1985.* Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Brumfit, C. (1977). Correcting written work. *Modern English Teacher 5*, 22-23.

Cohen, A.D., & Cavalcanti, MC. (1990). Feedback on compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports. In. B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 155–177). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Connor, U., & Farmer, F. (1989). The teaching of topical structure analysis as a revision strategy for ESL writers. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 126-139). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Conrad, S.M., & Goldstein, L. M. (1999). ESL student revision after teacher-written comments: text, contexts, and individuals. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8*(2), 147–179.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*: *Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fathman, A., & Whalley. E. (1990). Teacher response to student writing: Focus on form versus content. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 178-190). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Ferris, D. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly, 31*(2), 315–339.

Ferris, D., Pezone, S., Tade, C., & Tinti, S. (1997). Teacher commentary on student writing: descriptions and implications. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 6*, 155–182.

Goldstein, L. (2004). Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: Teachers and students working together. J*ournal of Second Language Writing 13*(1), 63–80.

Goldstein, L. (2001). For Kyla: what does the research say about responding to EFL writers. In T. Sylva & P. K. Matsuda (Ed.), *On Second Language Writing* (pp. 73–89). New Jersey, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Association, Inc., Publishers.

Grabe, W., & Kaplan, R.B. (1996). *Theory and practice of writing*. London and New York: Longman

Halliday, M.A.K., & Hasan, R. (1989). *Language, context and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Hedgcock, J. S., & Lefkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 3*(2), 141–163.

Hirose, K., & Sasaki, M. (1994). Explanatory variables for Japanese students' expository writing in English: An exploratory study. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 3*(3), 203-229.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. & Hyland, F. (2006). Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing. Hyland, K. & Hyland, F. (Eds.) (pp.1-19). *Feedback in second language writing: contexts and issues*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jacobs, H., Zinkgraf, S., Wormuth, D., Hartfiel, V., & Hughey, J. (1981). *Testing ESL composition: A practical approach.* MA: Newbury House.

Knoch, U. (2011). Rating scales for diagnostic assessment of writing: What should they look like and where should the criteria come from? *Assessing Writing, 16*, 81-96.

Kumar, R. (1999). *Research Methodology*. London: Sage Publications.

Lam, R. (2013). Two portfolio systems: EFL students' perceptions of writing ability, text improvement, and feedback. *Assessing Writing, 18*, 132-153.

Lee, I. (2002). Teaching coherence to ESL students: A classroom inquiry. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 11*(2), 135-159.

Lee, I. (2007). Feedback in Hong Kong secondary writing classrooms: Assessment for learning or assessment of learning? *Assessing Writing, 12*(3), 180–198.

Lee, I. (2008). Understanding teachers' written feedback practices in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 17*(2), 69-85.

Miyazaki, K. (2008). Construct validity of analytic rating scales used in EFL essay writing assessment: reconsidering components in rhetorical features. *Journal of Foreign Language Education*, *5*, 1- 22.

Quinlan, T., Higgins, D., & Wolff, S. (2009). *Evaluating the construct-coverage of the e-rater® scoring engine*. (ETS research report January 2009). Retrieved from http://www.ets.org/research/contact.html

Scrivener, J. (2005). *Learning Teaching: A Guidebook for English Language Teachers*. Macmillan Education, Oxford.

Seidlhofer, B. (2001). Closing a conceptual gap: The case for a description of English as a lingua franca. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 11*(2), 133-158.

Seidlhofer, B., & Breiteneder, M.L.P. (2006). English as a lingua franca in Europe: Challenges for applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *26*, 3-34.

Semke, H.D. (1984). Effects of the red pen. *Foreign Language Annals, 17*(3), 195–202.

Sengupta, S. (1998). From text revision to text improvement: a story of secondary school composition. *RELC Journal*, *29*(1), 110–137.

Sengupta, S. (2000). An investigation into the effects of revision strategy instruction on L2 secondary school learners. *System, 28*(1), 97–113.

Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning, 46*, 327–369.

Weigle, S.C. (2002). *Assessing Writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Yang, W. & Sun, Y. (2012). The use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners at different proficiency levels. *Linguistics and Education, 23*(1), 31–48

Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*, 79–102.

Appendix 1. A Sample of Student's Argumentative Essay

> There is an opinion that priority should be given to raising teacher's salaries, rather than to improving classroom facilities when educational budgets are limited. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Discuss your ideas giving specific reasons and examples.

Although, there is an opinion that priority should be given to raising teacher's salaries, rather than to improving classroom facilities when educational budgets are limited, I disagree with this statement. There are three reasons why I think so.

First, there is no guarantee that student's academic performance improves rather than before when teacher's salaries are raised. Also there is a possibility that only teachers take some profits thanks to this policy. The point is that student can spend good condition in the classroom. So it doesn't make sense to raise teacher's salaries.

Second, summer is very hot in Japan. So student can't concentrate on studying without air conditioner. If it is introduced in the classroom, they can study comfortably there. It will be linked improving their academic performance. Furthermore, when I was high school student, building of my high school was very old. If there had been big earthquake, it would have broken immediately. Because of it, we had to study having fear of it. It will not be linked improving their academic performance. So we have to prepare a comfortable and safe environment in the classroom that student can concentrate on studying without feeling fear.

Third, these days, the spread of the Internet advanced all over the world. Also in Japan,　using Internet is expanding. By using Internet, we can communicate with people in the whole world easily. So the students using personal computer can learn to have a global vision and some knowledge about things all over the world. Moreover, I had used the Internet when I was primary school student. I had researched various things all over the world then. Thanks to this experience, I learned to have a global vision. So we should introduce personal computer in each school.

For these reasons, I believe that student's academic performance improves when priority are given to improving classroom facilities, rather than raising teacher's salaries when educational budgets are limited. So I disagree with this topic. (327 words)