

The Effectiveness of a 15-minute Writing Sample for Assessing Writing Ability¹

Melvin R. Andrade, Ed.D.
*Sophia Junior College and
Aoyama Gakuin University*

Introduction

This paper describes on-going research concerning the preparation of a test of English writing ability to be included in a placement examination for Japanese high school graduates entering a college in Japan. The examination, which included tests of reading, grammar, vocabulary, and error recognition in addition to writing, needed to be limited to one hour to fit the examination day schedule. Based on the observation of test takers in previous years--primarily variation in reading speed--it was concluded that at least 45 minutes would be needed for the non-writing portions of the test. Thus, 15 minutes was allocated for writing. Another factor was that the writing test had to be short enough to be scored quickly by a limited number of scorers. This paper presents preliminary data describes an on-going study to determine the practicality and effectiveness of short writing samples.

Research Questions

With the constraints above in mind, the research questions became the following:

- 1. Can a 15-minute test of writing ability tell us enough about the students' ability to distinguish between high, medium, and low ability writers?**
- 2. Can such a short test provide information about writing ability beyond sentence level grammar and syntax? That is, can it indicate, for example, coherence, unity, and organizational competence?**

¹ A paper presented at the Tenth Annual Conference of the Japan Language Testing Association. Ryukoku University (Fukakusa Campus), Kyoto, Japan, October 28-29, 2006.

Participants

To answer, these and related questions, a pilot study is being conducted with six groups of Japanese learners of English in Japan. Descriptions of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Group	N	School	Major	Year in School	Semester	Ability level
A	24	Junior college	English	1st	Spring	TOEIC 300-400
B	22	Junior college	English	1st	Fall	
C	24	Junior college	English	2nd	Spring	TOEIC 350-450
D	24	University	English	2nd	Spring	TOEFL 500+
E	19	University	English	2nd	Fall	
F	25	University	Edu. & Psy.	2nd	Spring	Mixed
Total	138					

The Task

A 15-minute writing task was completed in class during the either the first or second class of the semester. The instructor introduced the assignment with the following explanation:

I would like to get an impression of your English ability and find out something about you. This is not a test and will not affect your grade for this course, but please do it by yourself. Do not talk to other students.

On the blackboard the following instructions were written:

Write a letter to a pen pal that you have not met before. In the letter (1) introduce yourself, (2) tell something about your hometown, and (3) tell what you did during your vacation. Begin your letter with “Dear Mary” or “Dear John.” Do not use a dictionary. You have 15 minutes.

Students wrote by hand on paper distributed by the instructor. Time announcements such as “you have five minutes left” were not given.

Rationale for the Task

Time for completing the task was short—just 15 minutes. In that time, I wanted the students to write as much as possible. Thus, I chose topics that students were familiar with and would not require much planning or forethought. We also wanted the students to use a variety of tenses, so the task requires the student to write about both the present and past. I did ask about the future (e.g., “tell about your plans for this coming weekend”), but will do so in a follow-up study. Within these parameters, the tasks naturally fell into the genres of description and narration—the genres commonly thought to be the easiest and taught first to beginning composition students. Although the writing sample would not be used for placement purposes, we hoped it would give us an idea of the range of ability among the in-coming students.

Data Analysis

The analysis, which is still in progress, consists of three parts.

► **The first part is a discrete point analysis of each writing sample for research purposes.**

As a measure of overall **fluency**, there is a total word count for each sample. As a measure of **sentence complexity**, the analysis includes

- **the number of sentences,**
- **average sentence length, and**
- **sentence type (e.g., simple, compound, complex, compound-complex).**

This analysis is based on the assumption that fluency and sentence complexity are correlated with ability level and the students’ ability to use English productively. For the purpose of this action research, these statistics provide an easy way to objectively compare writing samples. Of course, a more detailed analysis of grammar and vocabulary usage is possible and would provide

additional comparative data.

(**Note:** Only complete sentences were counted when calculating average sentence length.)

► **The second part of the analysis involves evaluating each writing samples for placement purposes using a holistic scoring rubric.**

The rubric evaluates the writing samples in three areas: (1) **contents and vocabulary**; (2) **sentence structure, grammar, spelling, organization**; and (3) **the estimated number of words**. Taking the writing sample as a whole—not by subcategories—students are scored as above **average**, **average**, or **below average**.

In undertaking a holistic analysis of contents, one feature of writing to pay attention to is the **degree of elaboration**. In other words, how superficially or deeply does the writer treat each topic? Does the writer jump from topic to topic without say much about any of them, or does the writer provide details and examples as well as express opinions and feelings?

Note: For placement purposes for first-year students, the rubric did not put emphasis on **rhetorical organization** for two reasons:

- ◆ One reason is that paragraph and essay writing in English have not normally been taught in the high school English curriculum.
- ◆ Another reason is that within the constraints of **time** (15 minutes), **topic** (a short letter with specified subtopics), and **genre** (description, narration), there is little chance to plan and display many rhetorical skills.

(Nevertheless, results show that higher ability students can display a strong organizational sense.)

►The third part is a comparison of **within-group** and **between-group** differences.

Between-group comparisons include:

1. **first-year students vs. second-year students,**
2. **first-semester students vs. 2nd semester students, and**
3. **junior college students vs. university students.**

Within-group comparisons consider to what extent the use of TOEIC or TOEFL scores are successful in grouping students of similar writing ability together. That is, are the within-group differences smaller than the between-group differences?

Examples from the Writing Samples

STUDENT 1: Junior College Student, 1st year, Spring Semester

Dear John, Nice to meet you. My name is (). I was born in Setagaya. Setagaya has many green. Kinuta Part, Roka Park, Komazawa Park. Setagaya is very good town. Because it is perfect to people enjoyed in my life. I went to in Kyoto. My grandfather and grandmother live in ().

[51 words, 8 sentences, 6.4 wps]

STUDENT 2. Junior College Student, 1st year, Spring Semester

Dear John, Hello. My name is (). I'm eighteen years old. I live in Yokohama. Yokohama has a lot of people. So, I didn't go anywhere during my vacation. But, my grandmother and cousins came to my home, and we enjoyed speaking, playing, watching movie together. I'm very fine.

[48 words, 7 sentences, 6.9 wps]

STUDENT 3: Junior College Student, 1st year, Spring Semester

Dear John, Hello. My name is (). I live in (). It takes about one hour from my house to my school (). I like watching movies. My favorite actor is Johnny Depp. He is cool. How about you? I live near () Station. There're many cherry blossom tree in my town. It is very beautiful. I want you to come my town and see them.

I have one sister. She is 14 years old. She goes Junior high school. She and I take ballet lesson. We like ballet, very much! And my grandmother has pet. Her name is "choco." She is yellow bird. She can speak very well. For example, "choco! choco!" "give me bread!" "give me bread!" of course she flys around the room.

My vacation, I went to Meguro to take ballet lesson.

[137 words, 22 sentences, 6.2 wps]

STUDENT 4: Junior College Student, 2st year, Spring Semester

Hi, John. My name is (). I'm 19-year-old and Japanese girl. I'll tell you about myself. I like shopping, eating, sleeping, and making new friends. I love to watch movies. My hometown is Chigasaki, Kanagawa. There is the sea and it's maybe beautiful. And I want to talk about my vacation.

[51 words, 7 sentences, 7.3 wps]

STUDENT 5: Junior College Student, 2st year, Spring Semester

Dear Mary, Hello, nice to meet you! My name is () and live in Tokyo. Where are you from? I'll introduce myself, first. I'm 19 years old and on May, I'll be 20 years old, so my teenage will finish soon. I like spring the best, because there are a lot of cherry blossoms near my house and I can see them from my room. I think they are the most famous tree in Japan, aren't they?

Have you ever been to Japan? I recommend you to come my hometown. It spends fifteen years that I have lived in (). There are many flowers and greens. My hometown is good for elder to live, because they can make friends with many elders and people help them, I think.

By the way, I went to Hakone in this spring vacation in Japan, as you know. The best spot you want to relax and enjoy is Hakone. I meet () and

[164 words, 14 sentences, 10.9 wps]

STUDENT 6: University Student, 2st year, Spring Semester

Dear Mary, Hi, my name is (), twenty years old now. I go to the university to study English. It's hard for me to write or speak English, but I have a lot of fun to do it.

Now, I introduce myself. I like to play with my band member. I belong to the band club at the university. At April 23th, I'll sing a few songs in front of the freshmen join our club. Sometimes I play the bass-guitar and key-board. It's so interesting to play the various music. I love music very much.

Then, I'll talk about my home town. I'm from Yamaguchi, now I live in Tokyo. Yamaguchi is not famous in Japan, but it's so nice place, I think. Yamaguchi has many famous historical people, for example, Ito Hirobumi, Takasugi Shinsaku, etc. They made a big revolution to change the old Japan. I like to study Japanese history, so I have a lot of interests about that.

Last month, I had spring vacation. I went to Yamaguchi to stay my home. I talked a lot about my school days to my family. And I went back to Tokyo and play with my friends. All of my friends are so funny. Everytime I don't notice the time spending.

[212 words, 21 sentences, 9.5 wps]

Some Preliminary Findings

Preliminary analyses of 15-writing samples using the task of writing a letter to an imagery pen pal, suggests the following:

► Between-group comparison suggests that (1) **the average number of words per sample** and (2) **the average number of sentences** are:

- related to student ability as measured by TOEIC and TOEFL
- vary according to year and semester of study (first year vs. second year students, spring semester vs. fall semester), and
- vary according to the type of school (junior college students vs. university students with the same major).

In other words, **for groups as a whole**, the writing samples showed that higher standardized test scores, more semesters of English study, and higher competitiveness and the English department to which the students belong are associated with better writing samples. **However, the within-group gap between the higher and lower ability students can be wide.**

► On the other hand, **the average length of sentences** and does not appear to be associated with the overall quality of the writing samples for first-year students. Higher rated writing samples of first-year students **displayed more elaboration** rather than more sentence complexity. That is, discussion of the subtopics included more details (who, what, where, when, why, how), opinions, and expression of feelings.

Preliminary Conclusion

For the purpose of obtaining a quick impression of a student's ability to communicate in writing, a 15-minute writing sample appears to be effective.

The limitations are that the writing task is restricted (1) to topics close to the student's personal experience that require little forethought and (2) to "easier" genres such as narration and description that require little planning.

References (forthcoming)