

# **L1 Japanese High School Literacy Training: Student and Teacher Perspectives<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

The importance of university students' previous educational training has increasingly been recognized in higher education in two academic contexts, Japan and North America. In Japan, many researchers and educators have been concerned with how to articulate high school education to the university level, in an attempt to deal with the recent problem of declining academic ability among university students (Arai, 2000). To improve the connection between the two levels of higher education, many efforts have been made to clarify the nature of university students' previous educational training (Sato, 1996; Yamamura, 2000). Yamamura (2000), for example, identified oral presentation skill as being least acquired in high school, yet necessary for academic work at university, and also three other abilities (ability to explain one's ideas, ability to write coherent texts, and ability to present one's opinion logically) as next least acquired in high school. Similarly, Sato's (1996) study, which investigated first year college students' academic skills, found that they lacked the abilities to discuss ideas, to write papers and reports, and to formulate one's opinion, all of which were perceived by teachers to be important particularly for work in liberal arts fields. These findings imply that those students did not have chances to develop such high-level communication skills in high school.

Whereas these new interests in students' previous L1 educational training have been evoked to deal effectively with the difficulties

students may encounter at the university level in Japan, similar efforts have been made in North America to respond to the needs of ESL (English as a second language) students. When these students pursue higher levels of education in their new academic setting, they often encounter serious problems with their reading and writing. McFeely's (1999) report, for example, shows that at one state university in California, the passing rates for Chinese, Korean and Japanese who took the mandatory English Writing Skills Test given in 1998–1999 were conspicuously low (less than 15%), as opposed to nearly 60% of speakers of most European languages having succeeded in the test. In her case study, Spack (1997) documented how one Japanese student was coping with her academic work during her first three years at a U.S. university, and found that she had a great deal of difficulty with writing assignments particularly in her first year of study. Spack explained that in the initial stage the student's first-language educational background affected her approach to learning in a second language as well as the way she theorized about that learning (p. 47).

Considering the needs of such L2 writers, English writing teachers and researchers have attempted to find ways to help them by assessing their academic writing requirements (e.g., Leki & Carson, 1994) or examining the writers' processes of making adjustments to the new academic discourse community (Fujioka, 1999; Riazi, 1997). At the same time, they have begun to realize the importance of their students' previous educational background in order to help them effectively with academic difficulties they are likely to face at the university level (e.g., Johns, 1997; McKay, 1993). Thus, they are increasingly concerned with obtaining information about the L1 educational background of their students to find their specific needs.

This study attempts to provide a clear understanding of Japanese students' L1 (first language) literacy background by looking at a large number of both Japanese students' and teachers' perceptions of current reading and writing instruction given in high school. At the same time, to attain such understanding, the study also involves American

students for comparative purposes, particularly in terms of how Japanese students' perceptions of L1 literacy training would differ from those of their American counterparts. The ultimate goal of this study is to offer some useful information to university teachers in Japan and ESL teachers in the United States.

### **Theoretical Background**

The need to investigate the nature of students' L1 background can be theoretically justified by the recent view of learning to write as a social act. This view emphasizes the importance of the social context, which determines the particular writing purposes, and argues that writing is not a product of a single individual, but can be understood from the social perspectives (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 94). Although the cognitive-based approach, which views writing as problem-solving, still remains important in providing insight into the composing processes of first and second languages writers (e.g., Cumming, 1989; Hayes, 1996), this approach ignores the social aspect of writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 94). For this reason, the view of writing as a social act has been accepted among writing researchers and teachers, and has exerted a great influence on the current writing research and pedagogy (e.g., Candlin & Hayland, 1999; Lockhart & Ng. 1995).

This social-oriented view has been influenced by the social constructionist's perspective, "knowledge is socially constructed" through interaction with other people (Journet, 1990 p.162), and does not embody some kind of objective reality. That is, unlike the cognitive perspective of knowledge as "something stable (a collection of concepts, episodes and sensory representation)" which could be transferable to a variety of contexts (Roca & Murphy, 2001, p. 27), the social constructionist's view is understood as situated knowledge, that is, knowledge that can be obtained through interacting with a particular context.

The constructionist's view of knowledge has influenced the current study of genres (Swales 1990) and L1 and L2 literacy theory (Johns,

1997). The term *genre* traditionally referred to “categories of text types” (Johns, 1997, p. 21) such as novels and poems, but it is now defined as a set of “communicative events” that share the same communicative purposes within a given discourse community. That is, by being in the same discipline, members of the community share knowledge, style and discourse structure, as well as intended audience (Swales, 1990, p. 58). In order for students to enter such a community, they are expected to be familiar with “patterns of discourse” (habitual ways of communicating) by interacting with an academic adviser or peers in the same community. Through this interaction, they can learn how to write, for example, an academic research paper, which is characteristically required in specific disciplines (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 160). This approach implies that for students to cope successfully with academic work within their particular discipline, teachers should help them construct such “patterns of discourse”, and at the same time should become aware of the previous educational background of their students who would draw on such background particularly at the college entry level (Spack, 1997).

The current L1 and L2 literacy theory, which is referred to as the “socio-literal theory” of academic literacy (Johns, 1997), holds a similar view as the genre theory. According to this theory, “literacies are acquired through exposure to discourse from a variety of social contexts” (p. 14), which indicates that the roles, the communities of readers and writers, and the immediate context are important for literacy development. At the same time, the theory clearly attaches importance to students’ previous experience with literacy training including L1 and L2, suggesting that ESL teachers need to encourage their students to research their own literacy as well as current approaches to literacy practices in classrooms (Johns, 1997, p. 21). In all, the genre and L1 and L2 literacy theories stated above imply that a clearer understanding of incoming L1 and L2 university students’ prior writing experience could help considerably in determining how to help

them acquire academic literacy.

## The Study

The purpose of the study was to clarify the nature of L1 literacy instruction in Japanese high school from the perspectives of students and teachers. Although L1 writing experience and instruction in Japanese high schools have been previously reported, most of these reports were based on educational theory and curricular guidelines (e.g., Carson, 1992; McFeely, 1999) or on personal accounts by a relatively small number of individuals (e.g., Autrey, 2000; Ochi & Davies, 1999; Sasaki, 2001). In contrast, the present study adopted a questionnaire method to obtain responses from a large number of participants. Although the question items constructed were not exactly the same in the two questionnaires administered to students and teachers, the following four questions guided the analysis in this quantitative study:

1. What do Japanese students and teachers perceive to be the goals of literacy instruction in high school?
2. What kinds of activities are provided in high school *kokugo* classes?
3. What kinds of writing instruction and experience are offered in high school?
4. What are the prospects for future writing instruction in Japanese high schools?

## High School Students' Perceptions

### Procedure

After considerable refinement of the wording, the final questionnaire was constructed to consist of 10 questions, containing 66 separate items. In this questionnaire, Japanese students ( $N=389$ ,  $M$ , 233;  $F$ , 156) were asked about high school *kokugo* (Japanese) classes and experience with Japanese writing instruction and practice, including the kinds of activities, amount of writing, types of writing

instruction, and perceptions of goals and important features of writing in L1 language classes, based on 4-point Likert scales (see Appendix 1 for a sample of selected questions asked in the Japanese questionnaire).

The Japanese questionnaire was sent to a convenience sample of teachers in various regions of the country, from Hokkaido to Kyushu, through a network of teachers from November 1998 to January 1999, and 456 questionnaires were returned from 8 high schools (from relatively rural to urban, all mainly middle class, half private and another half public). Of these questionnaires, 67 (15%) were judged invalid and thus excluded. A small group of American students ( $N=66$ ,  $M, 25$ ;  $F, 41$ ) from three high schools located in New York, New Jersey, and California were also asked corresponding questions about their high school literary training during the same period of time; however, their responses had to be seen as only suggestive due to the small sample size. Finally, after the analysis of the questionnaire data, interviews were conducted with a total of 21 Japanese university students from April through July 2000 in order to gain further insight into Japanese L1 literacy training in high school through individual student experiences.

## **Results**

### **Abilities emphasized as goals of language instruction**

Five questionnaire items addressed students' perceptions of abilities that were emphasized as goals in their language classes. As shown in Table 1, developing the ability to read and comprehend modern prose (essays) was similarly perceived by both groups to be a relatively important goal (mean scores:  $J=3.28$ ,  $A=3.37$ , where 1=not at all important and 4=very important). All the other abilities were judged to be significantly less important by the Japanese as opposed to the U.S. group. Most notably the ability to write compositions (3.62) and the ability to evaluate the content of what they had read and then form their own ideas (3.41) were ranked as the most important goals by

the Americans, and the least important by the Japanese (2.29 and 2.40, respectively).

**Table 1** Abilities Emphasized\* as Goals in Language Classes

ABILITY	Japanese Students			American Students		
	Mean	(SD)	Rank	Mean	(SD)	Rank
Read and comprehend modern prose	3.28	(0.73)	(1)	3.37	(0.70)	(3)
Increase knowledge of vocabulary/grammar	2.58	(0.81)	(2)	3.03	(0.72)	(5)
Appreciate literary work	2.42	(0.80)	(3)	3.17	(0.80)	(4)
Evaluate content of reading and from own ideas	2.40	(0.86)	(4)	3.41	(0.74)	(2)
Write compositions	2.29	(0.88)	(5)	3.62	(0.60)	(1)

\*1=not at all emphasized, 2=not emphasized much, 3=somewhat emphasized, 4=very much emphasized

**Table 2** Mean Reported Frequencies\* of Classroom Activities in High School L1 Language Classes

ACTIVITY	Japanese Students			American Students		
	Mean	(SD)	(rank)	Mean	(SD)	(rank)
Read/interpret literary classics	3.60	(0.63)	(1)	3.05	(0.71)	(6)
Read/interpret modern prose	3.46	(0.68)	(2)	3.05	(0.77)	(6)
Read/interpret modern literary works	3.20	(0.72)	(3)	3.83	(0.38)	(1)
Learn to read older literary classics**	3.13	(0.82)	(4)	2.39	(0.88)	(12)
Learn how writers organize writing	2.57	(0.93)	(5)	3.00	(0.83)	(8)
Write summaries of reading	2.48	(0.98)	(6)	2.74	(0.88)	(11)
Learn new vocabulary	2.45	(1.01)	(7)	2.85	(0.73)	(10)
Formulate own opinions in writing	2.10	(0.90)	(8)	3.23	(0.87)	(4)
Write personal impressions of reading	1.95	(0.74)	(9)	3.17	(0.80)	(5)
Write essays or reports	1.93	(0.87)	(10)	3.82	(0.46)	(2)
Evaluate content of reading	1.82	(0.80)	(11)	3.50	(0.61)	(3)
Collect information from outside sources	1.25	(0.53)	(12)	3.00	(0.77)	(8)

\*1=never, 2=not very often, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often

\*\*In Japanese version: Chinese classics; in English version: old or middle English classics

### **Types of activities offered in language classes**

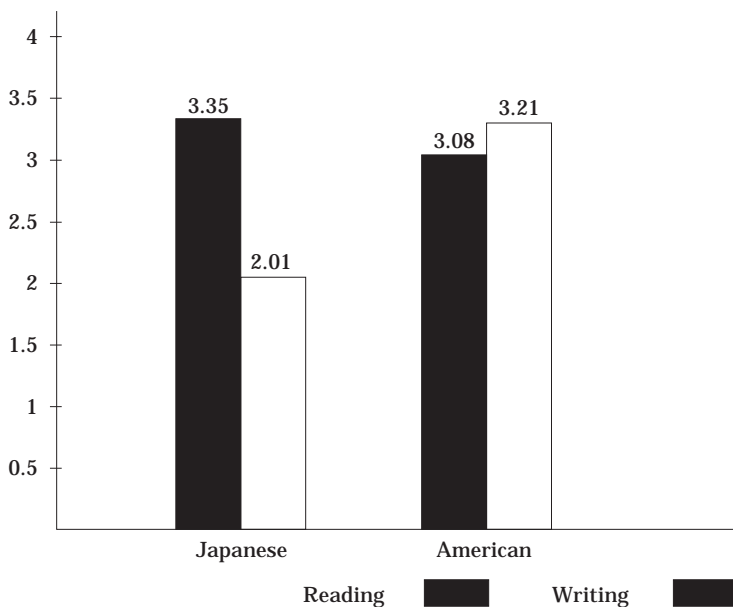
Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations by group for each of the 12 questionnaire items reporting on the frequency of activities in high school language classes. The frequency ratings were based on a 4-point scale: 1=never, 2=not very, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often. As shown in the table, the four most frequent activities for the Japanese students all involved reading (mean scores 3.60 to 3.13). In contrast, the American students' top four were *read/interpret modern literary works* (3.83), *write essays or reports* (3.82), *evaluate content of reading* (3.50), and *formulate their own opinions in writing* (3.23).

For statistical analysis, the 12 items were subjected to principle axis factoring analysis using SPSS Version 6.1 (SPSS Incorporated, 1994a, 1994b). Eliminating one item (learning new vocabulary, see Table 3) that had low communality, and thus little relation with the other items, and subjecting the remainder to Varimax rotation yield two factors with Eigenvalue higher than 1: Writing (W) and Reading (R). The results of this analysis indicate that the items that loaded highest on Writing were *evaluate content of reading*, *formulate your own opinions in writing*, *write essays or reports*, and *collect information from outside courses*; those loaded highest on Reading were *read/interpret modern prose*, and *read/interpret literary classics* (such as the *Tale of Genji* or Shakespeare's works).

Further in order to compare the two factors statistically across the two cultural groups, Japanese (J) vs. American (A), the scores for each factor were averaged for each participant, and the averaged scores were subjected to a 2 (group: J vs. A) by 2 (factor: W vs. R) multivariate analysis (MANOVA). The results showed significant effects for group ( $F=91.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ), factor ( $F=156.16$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and the interaction between group and factor ( $F=232.70$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

As represented graphically in Figure 1, the mean score for reading was higher for the Japanese than for the American group (J=3.35, A=3.08), whereas the opposite was true for writing (J=2.01, A=3.21).





**Figure 1** Mean scores for two factors (reading and writing) by country

A post-hoc simple effects analysis, which is generally used when there is significant interaction between the factors in a (M)ANOVA analysis (Tabachnik & Fidell, 1996), revealed that reading was significantly more frequent than writing for the Japanese ( $p < .001$ ), as opposed to no significant difference between the two skills for the Americans ( $p = .051$ ) (although this value is near-significant probability, it could be considered to be indicative of a marginal tendency toward more writing). Thus, it can be concluded that Japanese high school students spend significantly more time on reading than writing for their language classes. In addition, they spend significantly less time on writing and more time on reading than the American students, whose writing and reading skills appear to be more nearly equally emphasized.

These findings parallel those regarding goals of language

instruction above. That is, much more emphasis is reportedly placed on developing reading than writing abilities in the Japanese language classes, as opposed to a more balanced emphasis on both reading and writing in the American classes. Additionally, more emphasis on reading comprehension for the Japanese students can be seen as contrasting with a greater emphasis on writing for the U.S. students. In relation to the specific writing activities, another noteworthy finding was that Japanese students spent much less time than the Americans on formulating their opinions in writing and evaluating ideas. The difference between the two groups was markedly large in these two activities (*formulating*: J=1.82, A=3.5; *evaluating*: J=2.1, A=3.23).

### **Amount and Kind of Writing Instruction and Experience**

The questionnaire data indicate that Japanese high school students generally do little writing for their high school L1 Japanese classes and receive limited writing instruction, particularly as compared to American students. A total of 165 Japanese students (43%) reported having received some kind of L1 writing instruction (e.g., essay organization) as compared to 98% of the American students. However, opportunities to write compositions in class were limited; almost half of the Japanese students reported writing no short papers, whereas most of the others wrote two or fewer; and 80% reported no long papers. As shown in Table 3, the only kind of writing activity the Japanese students reported as occurring “somewhat often” was writing summaries of what they had read, while writing personal impressions of a book was infrequent. Given so little writing experience, the Japanese students appeared to have few chances to incorporate their knowledge of organization, which they indicated being taught at the highest frequency (mean=2.93, SD=0.84, corresponding to “sometimes”). In contrast, almost all the American students received writing instruction, for example, on how to write a topic sentence or thesis statement or how to outline one’s ideas before writing. Furthermore, they reported having written short and long papers

**Table 3** Kinds of Writing by Frequency\*

KIND OF WRITING	Japanese Students			American Students		
	Mean	(SD)	Rank	Mean	(SD)	Rank
Summaries of reading	2.23	(1.07)	(1)	2.68	(0.93)	(4)
Personal impressions of reading	1.78	(0.76)	(2)	3.00	(0.78)	(3)
Compositions	1.75	(0.83)	(3)	3.21	(0.77)	(1)
Reports	1.52	(0.75)	(4)	3.21	(0.77)	(1)
Letters	1.36	(0.65)	(5)	1.53	(0.50)	(7)
Creative writing	1.19	(0.49)	(6)	2.30	(0.91)	(5)
Journals or diaries	1.05	(0.28)	(7)	1.59	(0.78)	(6)

\*1=never, 2=not very often, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often

frequently, mostly doing three kinds of writing including compositions, reports and personal impressions of materials they had read.

The interview data confirmed the main finding of the questionnaire study that Japanese students have little writing experience in regular *kokugo* classes in high school. At the same time, unlike the questionnaire study, they showed that there was a notable trend for many Japanese high schools: intensive writing instruction and practice were frequently provided outside of regular *kokugo* classes for students preparing for university entrance exams (reported in detail in Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). Of the 21 students interviewed in our sample, 16 (76%) reported having received such intensive writing training in their senior year, 13 taking tutoring sessions, and 3 receiving an elective writing course. In these tutoring sessions, students said they received one-to-one based training, which emphasized the process of collecting information about a given topic, writing about it, and revising them based on the teacher's feedback. According to their report, a relatively large number of students (10–15 per class of 40) appear to receive this kind of special training.

### High School Teachers' Perceptions

Following the earlier study, the second component of the study attempted to clarify the current status of Japanese education in high

school, particularly reading and writing instruction, from the teachers' perspectives, including their view of future instruction for the development of the two abilities in high school.

### **Procedure**

After careful pilot testing and rewording, the final questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, containing 86 items. Nine items elicited personal profile information such as gender, age, years of teaching, individual schools where they were teaching. The remaining question items focused on four major topics: (1) kinds of *kokugo* classes offered in high school, (2) goals of *kokugo* education in high school, (3) current writing instruction, and (4) prospects for future instruction of reading and writing (see Appendix 2 for a translated sample of selected questions asked in the Japanese questionnaire).

For the first topic, teachers were mostly asked to identify which kinds of *kokugo* classes they were in charge of among the 8 kinds (e.g., *Kokugo I*, *Gendaibun*, *Koten I*) in the Ministry of Education guidelines (1989). For the second topic, they were specifically asked to evaluate 15 abilities related to knowledge and attitudes they would like students to acquire based on 4-point Likert-scales, and then asked to choose, from among the 15, the five most important abilities and also the five most difficult abilities for students to acquire from the teachers' perspectives. For the third topic, teachers were requested to evaluate whether the current instruction was adequate or not and give reasons for their evaluation, and for the final topic, their opinions and ideas were elicited to indicate which ability should receive more emphasis (writing, reading, or both), and to state reasons for their choice, along with their ideas on the kinds of writing instruction they think should be offered in their school. In the Results section, the questionnaire results concerning only the second, third and fourth topics are reported in relation to the research questions stated in this paper.

For the study, 1000 questionnaires were sent in January, 2001 to

200 high schools all over Japan, with 5 questionnaires per school. The method for the selection of these sample schools adopted a stratified random sampling, by which we first obtained a list of high schools on the Internet and determined the number of schools for each prefecture<sup>2</sup>. As a result, 129 public schools and 71 private schools were selected with an average of 4.26 schools per prefecture, ranging from 2 to 17 schools. From January 15 to February 20, 2001, a total of 180 questionnaires were returned from 79 schools located in 37 prefectures. Thus, the samples represented 78.7% of all the prefectures in the country and the return rates for individual participants and schools were 18% and 39.5%, respectively. These rates appear to be sufficient for possible generalization of the findings of the present study.

### **Participant Profile**

The total population for this study consisted of 109 males (61%) and 70 females (39%), with one case of missing information. As for age, the majority of the participants (70%) fell in their 30s and 40s, with the remainder spread over their 20s, 50s and 60s. They had 17.25 years of teaching experience on average, with nearly all the participants (93%) holding a full time position, and had an average of 7.63 years working in the current high school where the questionnaires were distributed. Finally, the college entrance rate for the sample schools were considerably high, with more than 80% of the students in over 60% of the schools entering 2-year and 4-year colleges.

## **Results**

### **Goals of *Kokugo* Education in High School**

#### ***Abilities to be acquired***

Table 4 shows the rank order with means and SDs of 15 abilities that *kokugo* teachers would like students to acquire in high school education<sup>3</sup>. According to the table, the five highest abilities with means over 3.60 (out of a possible 4) were as follows: *ability to read and*

**Table 4** Desirable Abilities/Attitude/Knowledge for Acquisition

Rank	Means*	S.D.
1. Ability to read and understand text	3.88	(0.36)
2. Ability to formulate your own ideas	3.78	(0.49)
3. Ability to think logically	3.65	(0.57)
4. Broadened perspectives	3.63	(0.61)
5. Ability to express your own ideas in writing	3.61	(0.61)
6. Positive attitude toward understanding human feelings	3.53	(0.59)
7. Rich vocabulary	3.49	(0.63)
8. Ability to appreciate literary work (poetry and fiction)	3.35	(0.61)
9. Ability to read Japanese and Chinese classics	3.33	(0.57)
10. Ability to summarize ideas in text	3.27	(0.67)
11. Ability to evaluate ideas critically	3.18	(0.68)
12. Ability to present ideas orally	3.17	(0.77)
13. Ability to collect information	3.08	(0.66)
14. Knowledge about text structure	2.99	(0.71)
15. Ability to discuss ideas with others	2.93	(0.76)

\*1=not at all desirable, 2=not very desirable, 3=somewhat desirable, 4=very desirable

*understand text, ability to formulate your own ideas, ability to think logically, broadened perspectives, and ability to express your own ideas in writing.* These abilities parallel the top five most important abilities chosen by teachers under a separate question, which are presented later in Table 5.

Following the same statistical procedure adopted for the first component of the study, the 15 abilities were subjected to factor analysis to find out whether these abilities could be subsumed into any groupings or not. The results of this analysis indicate that the 10 abilities are subsumed into three factors (groupings): *oral presentation, writing, and reading.* The abilities that loaded highest on oral presentation were *ability to discuss ideas with others, ability to present ideas orally, ability to evaluate ideas critically, and ability to collect information;* those that loaded highest on writing were *ability to*

*formulate your own ideas, ability to think logically, and ability to express your own ideas in writing*; and the abilities that loaded highest on reading were *ability to read and understand text, ability to read classics, and ability to appreciate literary work*. (In this analysis, the other 5 abilities - *rich vocabulary, broadened perspectives, positive attitude toward understanding human feelings, knowledge about text structure* - were found not to be related to any one particular factor, and thus were eliminated). Further, the results of a one-way ANOVA show that there was a significant difference among the three groups of oral presentation, reading, and writing related abilities ( $F=67.77$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and those of a post-hoc simple effect analysis indicate that the group of oral presentation abilities differs significantly from each of the other two groups of reading and writing abilities (means: 3.10 for oral; 3.52 and 3.68 for reading and writing, respectively). These findings suggest that overall, high school *kokugo* teachers would like students to acquire reading and writing related abilities more than those related to oral presentation.

### ***Most important and most difficult abilities***

Table 5 shows that the most important abilities chosen correspond to those five highest abilities shown earlier. It should be noted that three out of the five (*ability to formulate your own ideas, ability to think logically, and ability to express your own ideas in writing*) were all related to writing. Given this importance, however, it is noteworthy that two of the three abilities (*ability to think logically, and ability to express your own ideas in writing*) were perceived to be difficult for students to acquire; approximately one half of the teachers showed these concerns.

Regarding the importance of reading, the results show that there were differences among the three reading-related abilities: *reading and understanding text, reading classics, and appreciating literary work*. Sixty-seven percent of the teachers chose *reading and understanding text* as the most important ability for students to acquire; the other

**Table 5** Top 5 Most Important and Most Difficult Abilities: Number (and Percentages) of Teachers Selecting Each

Most important abilities	Number of teachers	Most difficult abilities	Number of teachers
1 Ability to formulate your own ideas	122 (68%)	1 Ability to discuss ideas with others	106 (59%)
2 Ability to read and understand text	121 (67%)	2 Ability to think logically	91 (51%)
3 Ability to think logically	114 (63%)	3 Broadened perspectives	89 (49%)
4 Broadened perspectives	112 (62%)	4 Ability to express ideas in writing	87 (48%)
5 Ability to express ideas in writing	95 (53%)	5 Ability to present ideas orally	78 (43%)

Total number of respondents: 180

two, *reading classics* and *appreciating literary work*, were perceived to be less important, with only a small number of teachers (16%, 17%) choosing these abilities (see also Table 4 for their low rank order). However, regarding the degree of difficulty, all three reading abilities were perceived to be not so difficult for students to learn, as shown in the following low ranking: 12<sup>th</sup> for *reading and understanding text*, 8<sup>th</sup> for *reading classics* and 14<sup>th</sup> for *appreciating literary work*.

Lastly, regarding oral presentation, the results parallel those shown in Table 4. None of the related abilities identified in the factor analysis (*ability to discuss ideas with others*, *ability to present ideas orally*, *ability to evaluate ideas critically*, and *ability to collect information*) were identified as being among the most important, except by a small number of teachers (ranging from 9% to 19%). Of these four abilities, *ability to discuss ideas with others* and *ability to present ideas orally*, in particular, were perceived to be very difficult for students to acquire, as they were ranked as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> position, respectively, among the most difficult abilities. All these results suggest that unlike the other two groups of abilities, oral presentation abilities are low in terms of importance and high in terms of degree of



difficulty in the teachers' perception.

### Current Writing Instruction

Table 6 shows the number of schools and percentages for 9 settings where writing instruction is given. First, the most frequent settings for writing instruction were outside *kokugo* classes, offered through individual tutoring (85% of the 79 schools), instruction by outside specialists (68%), and a summer vacation assignment/school essay contest (77%). The next most popular settings were inside regular *kokugo* classes, such as *Modern Prose* (65%) and *Kokugo I* (63%) followed by *Japanese Expression* (43%) and *Kokugo II* (39%). Further, writing instruction reportedly takes place somewhat frequently during homeroom hour (34%) and in supplementary classes (48%) after actual class periods. These results appear to suggest that writing instruction in high school is oriented for two groups of students. One is geared for

**Table 6** Settings for Instruction on Writing Compositions and Essays

Places/situations	Number of schools	Percentages*
<i>Gendaibun</i> (Modern Prose) class	51	65%
<i>Kokugo I</i> class	50	63%
<i>Kokugo II</i> class	31	39%
<i>Kokugo Hyougen</i> (Japanese Expression) class	34	43%
Homeroom hour	27	34%
Individual tutoring	67	85%
Supplementary class (after classes)	38	48%
Summer vacation assignment or school-essay writing contest	61	77%
Essay writing training by outside specialists (essay writing exam practice/corrections)	54	68%
Others	12	15%

Total number of schools from which at least one teacher responded to the questionnaire: 79

\*Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of responding schools by the total number of schools

all the students in regular *kokugo* classes, while the other is for those who need special writing training to prepare essay-writing exams for college entrance. For the latter purpose, many schools offer such training outside *kokugo* classes, which was confirmed in the interview component of the study reported earlier.

Regarding how *kokugo* teachers perceive the current writing instruction in their own school, almost all the teachers (97%) answered that the current situation is either “somewhat inadequate” or “inadequate” by choosing reasons related mostly to actual problems they faced in regular *kokugo* classes: “not enough time for individualized instruction including detailed feedback” (63% of the teachers), “too many students per teacher” (45%), and “few opportunities to teach writing” (28%).

### Prospects for the Future Direction of Reading and Writing

Regarding which abilities should be emphasized more in future *kokugo* education in high school, Figure 2 shows that two-thirds of the teachers (66%) preferred equal emphasis for reading and writing, one-fifth (22%) opted for more emphasis on reading, while the remainder

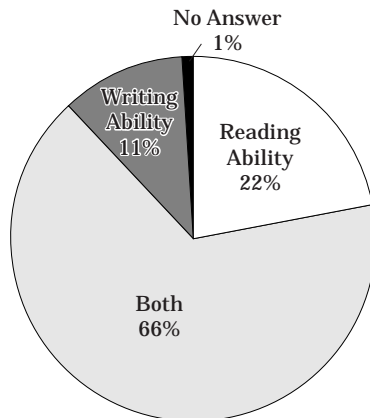


Figure 2 Ability to be Emphasized in Future *kokugo* Instruction

(11%) preferred more emphasis on writing. To explain their preferred emphasis, teachers gave many practical problems such as college entrance preparation, large class size, not enough time for individualized attention, and a substantial reduction in instructional time and content for *kokugo* classes (Ohno & Ueno, 2001). At the same time they revealed their beliefs, assumptions, views or approaches toward *kokugo* education. The section below introduces some of these reasons, focusing on the teachers' assumptions and views (all the teachers' comments quoted in the section were translated from Japanese into English by this author).

### ***Reasons for writing emphasis***

Twenty teachers (11%) asserted that writing should be emphasized more than reading in future *kokugo* education. One strong reason is related to the age of internationalization, where ability to express one's ideas either orally or in writing is perceived to be very important by many teachers; as one teacher put it, "I want my students to present their opinions clearly and logically in any situation they find themselves in." At the same time, the teachers' choice of writing appears to come from their positive view of writing or their basic attitude to the teaching of writing. For example, as one teacher put it, "writing can get students involved in active construction of the world through formulating one's ideas about nature or the society we live in, and expressing these ideas." In terms of the relation between reading and writing, the teachers thought that the development of writing precedes that of reading, as indicated in the following statements: "once students can express themselves, they become able to read others' text and understand them," and "when writing ability reaches a certain level, reading ability also attains a certain level."

### ***Reasons for reading emphasis***

The teachers who answered that reading should be given more emphasis do not necessarily devalue the importance of writing.

Almost all of them (37 out of 40) reported their perception that the current writing instruction in their own school is “inadequate” or “somewhat inadequate.” In spite of such recognition, however, the realities *kokugo teachers* face in their own situation (e.g., college entrance exams emphasizing reading comprehension) compels them to direct more attention to reading than writing. Nevertheless, stronger reasons are seen in the teachers’ view of reading. Many of these teachers believe that reading is a basic human ability which allows students to learn and interact with others in everyday life, and *kokugo* class can help students develop this ability, particularly those underachievers who tend to lack such basic comprehension skills. In these teachers’ view, reading instruction precedes that of writing; one teacher stated “First, it is essential to develop the ability to understand others’ texts. With this development, the abilities to think, judge and formulate your own ideas will develop. Finally you can begin to express ideas.”

### ***Reasons for balanced emphasis***

Two-thirds of the teachers (119) opted for balanced emphasis on reading and writing instruction in future *kokugo* classes. Similar to those preferring more emphasis on writing instruction, these teachers also perceived the current situation to be leaning too much toward reading instruction. However, unlike the first group, they viewed the two abilities to be “both constituting the wheels of a vehicle” or “the two sides of a coin,” or said, “both develop together through interaction with each other.” In their view, writing ability should not be treated solely as linguistic expression, but rather as a comprehensive ability including a wide range of sub-skills. In order to write, one teacher said, “[we need] a collection of abilities to understand text, others’ feelings, and our own ideas in addition to rich vocabulary,” and another stated, “[we need the] abilities to collect information, analyze and interpret it, and also to think logically.” The development of these multiple abilities and the accumulation of knowledge can be achieved

through rich reading experience. One teacher's own teaching experience made it clear to her that reading and writing are correlated with each other, developing together simultaneously; she said, "when I was teaching writing, whether free composition or essay, I noticed that students' writing often shows unity or overall coherence when they come to understand what is written in the text, whether it is fiction, editorials, or newspaper articles.... I think this provides evidence that the two abilities are not separate, but rather the two sides of a coin."

### Discussion

The present study investigated students' and teachers' perceptions of the current L1 literacy instruction in Japanese high school. Many of the findings show parallels between the two groups' perceptions, particularly in that the most important goal of *kokugo* instruction is to develop an ability to read and understand '*bunshou*' (texts) and much more time is spent on reading than writing instruction in *kokugo* classes. Although the findings indicate that two-thirds of the high schools provide writing instruction in *kokugo* classes such as *Kokugo I* and *Modern Prose*, it appears that writing has not been seriously treated in these classes. These findings support reports that Japanese students have little writing experience in high school (Liebman, 1992; Mok, 1993).

At the same time, the findings of the teachers' questionnaire confirmed what the majority of students interviewed reported having experienced, indicating that a large majority of schools (85% out of the 79 schools) provide special writing training, such as individual tutoring, outside regular *kokugo* classes to students aiming to write short essays as part of college entrance exams. In this kind of training, according to those interviewed, students write essays stating their opinion, in which they are expected to persuade the reader with a logical argument, and teachers take time reading students' essays and commenting on them in detail. This implies that students taking the training have better chances to develop writing ability than those in

regular *kokugo* classes have. In all, the above findings suggest that the present L1 language education offers two kinds of writing instruction, one for all the students in regular *kokugo* classes and another for a selective group of students.

Given such a situation, the findings of the study clearly show that almost none of the teachers are satisfied with the current writing situation in their own school, particularly in regular *kokugo* classes. Many of them think that the current situation leans too much toward reading instruction, and thus equal emphasis should be given to both writing and reading in the future *kokugo* instruction. This balanced view is in part a result of the teachers' view of the two abilities as developing in parallel through interaction with each other. It is also perhaps due to the teachers' assumption that writing can help students develop abilities that they consider to be very important for students to acquire in high school, including ability formulating one's ideas, and thinking logically, and expressing one's ideas in writing. In fact, the present study supports this assumption by giving evidence that writing is a complex ability entailing all those three abilities. In spite of these teachers' perspectives, however, the realities of the current situation the teachers face, particularly the realities of large class size and university entrance exams for the *kokugo* subject giving the most weight to reading comprehension, make it extremely difficult to bring changes to writing instruction in regular *kokugo* classes.

Regarding oral presentation ability, the findings of the present study lend support to previous report that oral presentation skill was least acquired in high school (Yamamura, 2000). This ability, which included related abilities identified in the study (e.g., *ability to discuss ideas with others, ability to present ideas orally, ability to evaluate ideas critically*), was perceived by high school teachers as being much less important than the other two abilities of reading and writing, and at the same time, as being highly difficult for students to acquire. Whereas further research is needed to clarify why teachers hold such views, one possible reason is a lack of continuity in training students to

develop oral ability. In elementary school, students often get actively involved in a variety of communication activities, but as they advance to a secondary level of education, the amount of such activities decreases (Ogasawara et al., 1999). Among many reasons to explain such tendency, one strong one is knowledge-oriented education, where students are constrained to expressing themselves just by responding to multiple-choice questions, and college entrance exams, in particular, strengthen this tendency (p. 123).

In this light, as many university and high school educators note, college entrance exams “play a decisive role in determining the content and quality of high school education” (Ogasawara et al, 1999, p. 113), including L1 literacy instruction. To increase chances to develop writing and oral abilities in regular *kokugo* classes, more efforts should be made to improve the current college entrance exams, for example, by giving more weight to essay writing than reading comprehension, as well as by giving debate, group discussion or oral presentation tasks. On the other hand, improvement can be also made within high schools. As many teachers in this study recommended, writing can be taught through the cooperation of teachers of other subjects to include more writing across the curriculum, and introduction of debating and discussion leading to writing. In order to give strong support to teachers trying to move toward better L1 literacy education, however, it can be hoped that a serious attempt will be made by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences to solve hard problems that high school teachers face, at least making smaller classes by increasing the number of teachers.

Lastly, some pedagogical implications can be offered for L1 and L2 writing. First, whether in Japan or North America, it is necessary for L1 college teachers and ESL teachers to check their students’ background. Against the commonly held view that Japanese students have not learned to write in high school, it appears that an increasing number of students experience intensive L1 writing training (e.g., Kotou, 1999), in which they reportedly learn how to express opinions

clearly and logically in L1 writing. Although the experience they gain in such training differs among individual students, it may facilitate their L1 and L2 writing, particularly in terms of generating and organizing ideas for their compositions. Furthermore, both L1 and L2 teachers should be aware that many of their Japanese students, particularly those at the college entry level, having problems with formulating their own ideas, and presenting them orally, as well as with evaluating the content of their reading critically, due to limited opportunities given in high school for the development of these abilities. Thus, becoming aware of the lack of such experience in the students' background can help us deal effectively with how to prepare our students to do academic work at university.

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### **Notes**

1. This is a revised version of a part of the study report on "The Role of Academic Writing in Higher Education in Japan: Current Status and Future Perspectives."
2. The number was calculated based on the proportion of the number of high school students currently enrolled in a particular prefecture against the total



number of students in Japan. Then, some adjustment was made to give consideration to the two factors of area and type of school. Accordingly, the number of sample schools for Hokkaido was, for example, 8, which consisted of 6 public and 2 private schools.

3. For statistical purposes, scoring for evaluation was reversed from that of the questionnaire; that is, higher mean scores show the teachers' higher degree of concern with a particular ability.

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## Appendix 1

A sample of selected questions asked in the Japanese questionnaire on high school students' perceptions of *kokugo* instruction (translated by the author from Japanese into English)\*

Directions: Please answer the following questions based on your experience as a student at your high school.

1. Personal information (selected)

Name of your high school

Your gender

Your year in high school

2. How often did the following activities take place in your Japanese classes?  
(Circle the best number for each: 1=never, 2=not very often, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often)  
(See 12 question items in Table 1)
4. What abilities do you think were emphasized as goals in the Japanese classes you took?  
(Circle the best number for each: 1=not important at all, 2=not very important, 3=somewhat important, 4=very important)  
(See 5 question items in Table 2)
5. How often did you do the following kinds of writing in your Japanese classes?  
(Circle the best number for each: 1=never, 2=not very often, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often)  
(See 7 question items in Table 3)
6. How many pieces of writing (including all the types of writing above) did you write on average in your Japanese classes? (Circle the best number for each)  
Short pieces of writing (1 to 3 pages)  
1<sup>st</sup> year    (1) none    (2) 1    (3) 2    (4) 3    (5) 4 or more  
2<sup>nd</sup> year    (1) none    (2) 1    (3) 2    (4) 3    (5) 4 or more  
3<sup>rd</sup> year    (1) none    (2) 1    (3) 2    (4) 3    (5) 4 or more
7. Did you receive instruction on writing in your high school Japanese classes?
8. Did you receive instruction on writing in your high school *kokugo* classes?

\*The corresponding English version administered in the U.S. was constructed with slight modifications.

## Appendix 2

A sample of selected questions asked in the Japanese questionnaire on high school teachers' perceptions of *kokugo* instruction (translated by the author from Japanese into English)

Directions: Please answer the following questions based on your experience as a *kokugo* teacher at your high school.

1. Personal information (selected)
  - Years of teaching at the current school
  - Location of your school

Rate of students advancing to higher education (including junior college)

2. About *kokugo* classes in your school

Classes you teach: 1. Kokugo I 2. Kokugo II 3. Kokugo Hyougen  
4. Gendaibun 5. Gendaigo 6. Koten I  
7. Koten II 8. Koten koudoku 9. Others

Classes being offered in your school: the same as above

3. About *kokugo* instruction

- What abilities (including knowledge and attitude) would you like your students to acquire in your *kokugo* classes? Please circle the best number for each item.

(1=very desirable, 2=somewhat desirable, 3=not very desirable, 4=not at all desirable)

(See 15 question items in Table 4)

- What abilities do you consider to be the most important among those you would like your students to acquire? Please choose the top five and enter each number.

4. About the development of writing ability

In order to develop writing ability (meaning the ability to formulate one's own ideas and express them in writing), what opportunities are given to you to teach Japanese compositions or essays in your school? Please circle all applicable numbers.

(See 10 question items in Table 6)

5. About the future instruction of reading and writing

In future high school *kokugo* instruction, which ability do you think should be given more emphasis, reading (ability to read and interpret texts) or writing (ability to ability to formulate one's own ideas and express them in writing)?

- 1) more emphasis on writing than reading
- 2) more emphasis on reading than writing
- 3) equal emphasis on reading and writing

Your reasons: