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Reflections on Multiliterate Lives

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An Introspective Account of L2 Writing Acquisition

A native of Japan, **Miyuki Sasaki** received her BA from Hiroshima University. In addition to her two MA degrees, one in English education from Hiroshima University, the other in TESOL from Georgetown University, she has a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from UCLA. Her dissertation was published as a book entitled *Second Language Proficiency, Foreign Language Aptitude, and Intelligence: Quantitative and qualitative analyses* (1996). Currently an associate professor in the Faculty of Foreign Studies in English and Applied Linguistics at Nagoya Gakuin University, Seto, Japan, she has published in the areas of language testing and second language writing behaviours in journals such as *Language Learning, Language Testing, International Review of Applied Linguistics, Journal of Second Language Writing,* and *JALT Journal.* She is the mother of two young children.

One fall day in 1989, I received a letter from the editor of *Language Learning* stating that my paper had been accepted for publication (Sasaki, 1990). I was delighted, but surprised that my first attempt to submit a paper to an international journal was rewarded in such a way. Of course, the acceptance was under the condition that I revise it according to the reviewers' comments. But considering that I later received a number of other discouraging rejection letters, it was truly a lucky start for me as an English as a second language (henceforth, L2) academic writer. I was then a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the paper was one of the qualifying papers I had to submit for advancement to Ph.D. candidacy. In the paper I tested several hypotheses related to Japanese students' construction of English existential sentences with a locative topic (e.g. There are twenty-seven students in Taro's school.). The hypotheses were based on the results of the master's theses I wrote for Georgetown University and Hiroshima University.

Since that sunny fall day, I have written several papers in English, some of which have been published in professional journals (e.g. Sasaki, 1991a, 1991b, 1993a, 1993b, 1997, 1998a, 2000), but I can't judge whether people should call a person like me a 'successful' L2 writer. I only write an average of one paper a year in English, which is not always published. Moreover, although in the end those papers are written in English, all the other matters related to the writing process are conducted in my first language (henceforth, L1), Japanese. In order to overcome the disadvantages of an L2 writer, I often select topics that require full Japanese proficiency. That means that I usually conduct research in Japanese using Japanese participants. I also read background literature in Japanese, which English native speakers may find difficulty getting access to. Throughout the entire research process, I think in Japanese, take notes in Japanese, and write the first rough drafts in Japanese because I can't think thoroughly about any complicated matters in English. It is not until the last stage of the research process, when I put everything together into the form of a paper, that I start to use English. This may not be the most efficient way of writing an English paper (especially because I translate most of my ideas from Japanese into English when I write a second draft), but this is the only way I can write in English.

As a result of many fortunate encounters with wonderful mentors, in addition to my own efforts, I have become reasonably proficient in writing in English. I have also come to like writing in English (although not as much as in Japanese). However, if I can be allowed to be honest, the only reason for my writing the final draft of academic manuscripts in English is that it is almost the only means of communicating with other scholars in applied linguistics, the field where I work professionally. If I could choose, I would be happy to write everything in Japanese. In that sense, my motivation as an L2 writer is purely instrumental. Should we still call such a person a 'good' L2 writer? I don't know. I only hope my story will encourage some other L2 writers by explaining how a person like me has come to gather enough courage to keep writing in an L2.

Before I explain my development as an L2 writer, I should begin with the story of my development as an L1 writer because it has formed the most important basis of my L2 literacy. I was born in Kita-Kyushu, a middle-sized city in southern Japan, in 1959, as the second child in an ordinary middle-class family. My father was an office worker, and my mother was a nurse. If there was something special about my family regarding my L1 literacy development, it was my parents' love of literature. Not only did they enjoy reading all types of books and magazines, but they also enjoyed writing poems. My father wrote (and still writes) modern poems, and my

mother wrote haiku, a type of classical Japanese poetry. They belonged to different local literary societies, and sometimes had their poems published in the society magazines. From them, I learned how literature could make a person's life happy and meaningful. In addition to their regular jobs, they seemed to take great pride in their literary work.

Thanks to my parents, I came to enjoy reading and writing in my L1, and this has contributed a great deal to my life as a student, and later as a teacher and researcher. I have enjoyed reading all types of texts including novels, mysteries, documentaries, and poems. I have also enjoyed writing letters, reports, essays, and poems. My readiness to read and write in my L1 has not only helped me gain new knowledge and think analytically, but also has consoled me and brought me great joy. For example, when I was studying in the United States, reading books and magazines from a local Japanese bookstore had a great soothing effect on my homesickness. Even now, I sometimes 'take refuge' in reading and writing in Japanese when I get tired of working in English too long.

With such a positive orientation toward literacy in my L1, it was natural for me to like Japanese best of all the subjects during my elementary and high school years. Because Japanese language education in those days tended to be focused on literature appreciation (Kinoshita, 1981), I learned to enjoy novels, essays, and poems written not only in modern Japanese but also in classical Japanese. When I was a senior high school student, I was especially fascinated by novels, diaries, and essays written by women writers in the eleventh century. I thus read *Sarashina Diary* (by Sugawaranotakasueno Musume), Izumi Shikibu's Diary (by Izumi Shikibu), the *Tales of the Genji* (by Murasaki Shikibu), and *Makura no Soushi* (by Seisho Nagon), enjoying the beautiful sound and rhythm of the original texts alongside their modern Japanese translations. If there is one thing I now regret about my Japanese classes, it is the fact that the teachers never taught us how to use the Japanese language for more practical purposes than literature appreciation. The Japanese texts in those classes were always only a target to be analyzed and appreciated, and they were never used as examples of texts written for communicative purposes. We never learned how to write effective letters, reports, or research papers in systematic ways. The only occasion we had to write was for 'Kansoubun,' personal impressions of the literary materials we had read. On such occasions, those impressions were always written only once, and then only to be graded by the teachers.

In 1978, I entered Hiroshima University to major in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). I didn't choose Japanese literature as my major then because I felt a sort of moral resistance against making my living out of something I could enjoy so much. Instead, I chose English, the subject I

liked second best. Although I could not like English as much as Japanese, my story as a learner of English is also a happy one of a person blessed with many wonderful opportunities. As is typical with other Japanese learners of English as a foreign language, I started to study English when I was twelve. I was taught English three to six hours a week for six years by Japanese teachers in junior and senior high schools. Those English classes focused mainly on grammatical details and intensive reading. We had very few chances to speak English during those class hours. Because of the way English was taught, I always felt that studying English was similar to studying mathematics, in that it presented me with logical problems to solve. But I still liked English better than mathematics because English made me imagine foreign people and countries I had never seen. I dreamt that some day I would go to one of those countries and talk to the people living there. This dream later came true when I became a junior at Hiroshima University: I passed the exam to go to the University of Michigan in the United States as an exchange student for one year.

In that one year at the University of Michigan, I, for the first time, met people from different cultures, as I had dreamt, but I also learned a lot about using English for communicative purposes. This was my first step toward becoming a full-fledged L2 academic writer. Because I had not learned to write more than a paragraph in English before, I had much to learn in the freshman composition class I took during the first semester. In the first class, the teacher told us that there are some rules in English composition we have to follow, but that if we follow the rules, anybody can write a reasonably good composition. The teacher's statement sounded like God's blessing to me, as I was already struggling with the quantity of the writing requirements in the other classes. The 'rules' I learned in the composition class included the concepts of unity and cohesion, which have since helped my English writing a great deal. I also learned several effective patterns of paragraph development such as 'cause and effect' or 'comparison and contrast.' Although I later learned that not all writers of English follow such rules and patterns, these rules were truly helpful for a new writer like me. Another important thing I learned in the freshmen composition class was the idea of writing as a process. I learned that a good end product can only be achieved through a long revising process. I had never learned such things either in my previous English or Japanese classes in Japan. The knowledge I gained in the freshman composition class at the University of Michigan made me realize that writing can be treated as a 'skill' you can improve if you are provided with proper training. Until then, I had believed that writing ability was a natural talent that could not be developed through training.

Although the freshman composition class was helpful, it was not sufficient to enable me to write 'reasonably good papers' in other content courses. I was always asked by the professors to explain more. This was partly because I lacked sufficient English proficiency, but I also felt it was because writers are expected to 'explain more' in English than in Japanese. I noticed that leaving it to the readers to infer my intentions or making them 'read between lines,' a strategy I used in writing Japanese, is not desirable in English academic writing. When I wrote in English, I tried to make the relationship between sentences as clear as possible, even if it appeared too obvious to me. I also lacked writing fluency. I often got stuck while writing because I couldn't think of good expressions for my ideas. I tried to cover this lack of knowledge by doing as much reading of the given topic as possible. The big (three inch thick!) Japanese–English dictionary I brought from Japan was also helpful for finding appropriate expressions. I wrote and rewrote my drafts of term papers many times before I submitted the final draft. I went to a 'composition house' where advisors helped the undergraduate students cope with their writing assignments. When I spent a lot of time on a paper, the quality of the end product was relatively good (I actually got an A minus for the first term paper I wrote for my English literature class!). But when time was limited, such as in an in-class written examination, I tended to do very poorly. I always ran out of time, and often received the lowest score in the class. I realized that I could never compete with native speaking peers if I did only the same things. Consequently, whenever I could choose, I looked for some aspects of the given topic where I had more knowledge than American students did.

After I went back to Japan and graduated from Hiroshima University, I spent a total of eight years studying TEFL and applied linguistics in three graduate programs both in Japan and in the United States. When I became a doctoral student at UCLA, I further specialized in the areas of language testing and second language acquisition. During these eight years, I basically wrote papers in Japanese in Japan, and in English in the United States. Several things I learned during these years could be applied to writing in both languages, and other things to writing in only one language. One example of the things that have been useful for writing in both languages was my learning the K–J Method (Kawakita, 1967) just after I started my graduate program at Hiroshima University in 1983. The method was developed by Prof. Jiro Kawakita for collecting, classifying, and synthesizing necessary information for doing academic research. The method had originally been developed for getting insights from data obtained in fieldwork, but it was later revised to be applicable to other research activities. Thus, I learned to jot down whatever ideas came to my mind regarding whatever

research topic I was working on, and later sorting them out on cards so that one card would represent only one idea. Then I would spread all of these cards on the floor, and organize and reorganize them until these cards formed several meaningful groups. Finally, I would decide the sequential order of these groups to appear in my paper (this is a greatly simplified version of the actual procedure). I was especially inspired by Prof. Kawakita's idea underlying the K–J Method that the entire act of doing research can be treated as a collection of skills that can be learned by *anybody* given proper training. His idea encouraged me whenever I became skeptical about my ability to become a professional researcher. I faithfully followed the K–J Method for some time, and then gradually revised it so that it would best fit my research style (for example, Prof. Kawakita suggested using a certain type of card for taking notes, but I came to use regular notepaper simply because it was easier to obtain).

There were also other things I had to learn that could be applied to writing only in English or in Japanese. While reading books and papers published in journals in my field, I noticed that there are several typical ways of writing successful academic papers (especially ones based on quantitative studies) both in Japanese and in English. It was actually easier for me to learn the English ways of writing because the basic rules are similar to the 'rules' I had learned in the English composition class at the University of Michigan. I had much more difficulty learning the Japanese ways because I had never taken any academic writing classes in high school or at the university in Japan, and because there were very few 'manuals' for academic writing available for Japanese university students at that time (Kinoshita, 1990). I had to read a large number of published papers to find general patterns or 'rules'. This situation reminded me of the Japanese proverb 'skills should not be taught, but they should be *stolen* (by the disciple closely observing his/her master) to be successfully acquired.' I felt that this proverb could also hold true for the Japanese academic society I was in.

In contrast to the situation in Japanese, I found numerous manuals for academic writing in English. Some of them were especially useful for researchers in applied linguistics. For example, most of the professional journals in applied linguistics required the contributors to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. It is quite a thick book (the present fourth edition is 368 pages) which provides the details of what should be included in a good and understandable research manuscript. As an L2 writer, I was happy to know that there existed such 'rules' that I could follow. Those rules reminded me of what my freshman composition teacher at the University of Michigan said: 'When you follow these rules,

anybody can write a reasonably good paper'. This was still good advice. As in the case of general English writing, I have since found that not all researchers necessarily follow such 'rules' for writing good papers, and that the rules are somewhat different from subfield to subfield (e.g. second language writing, language testing, interlanguage pragmatics), but I still appreciate the fact that the field of applied linguistics appears to be tolerant of L2 writers' writing as long as it follow these 'rules'.

I also learned a great deal through actually writing papers. When I was studying in the United States, I had to take three or more classes a semester/quarter, and I usually had to write at least one paper for each class. Because the themes of those classes sometimes varied greatly, the topics of the papers I had to write also varied a great deal (although they were within the range of classes given for applied linguistics students). For example, in one language testing class I took at UCLA, I wrote a paper entitled 'A comparison of two methods for detecting differential item functioning in an ESL placement test', while at the same time for another class, I was writing a paper analyzing Americans' use of non-referential 'there' in spoken English. When I wrote those papers, I tried to look for some aspects of the topics for which I would have an advantage over American students, remembering the lessons I had learned at the University of Michigan. I thus used Japanese participants whenever possible. Being able to use the participants' L1 freely was especially helpful when I conducted case studies of children learning English as L2 (e.g. Sasaki, 1986, 1987), but even when I conducted experimental type studies, the qualitative data I could obtain in Japanese (e.g. through interviewing the participants after the experiments) provided insightful qualitative data to supplement the quantitative results (e.g. 1990, 1991c).

In addition to using such 'strategies,' I also rewrote my papers as many times as time allowed. When the final drafts were completed, I often asked a native speaker to proofread them. The papers always contained many grammatical mistakes even after I had made several revisions. At Georgetown University, I usually asked the advisors at the Study Skills Center for Foreign Students to help me. At UCLA, I was fortunate to be able to often ask Bob Jacobs, a colleague in the graduate program, to read my drafts. As a fine graduate student in applied linguistics himself, Bob checked not only the linguistic surface of my drafts, but also the overall organization and coherence. His comments were sometimes critical, but always constructive. After receiving his comments, I often spent a sleepless night before I was able to complete the corrected version of the final draft, but such efforts were often rewarded by good grades. Finally, when the professors returned my papers, I also learned much from their comments.

Their comments ranged from grammatical corrections to suggestions for better content and organization. Most of the comments were so encouraging that I sometimes further revised the papers even after the classes were over, and submitted them for publication in professional journals (Sasaki, 1991a, 1991b, 1997 are three course papers that were eventually good enough to be published after many such revisions.)

And that is the process that led to that lucky fall day in 1989 when my paper was first accepted by *Language Learning*. After the first happy feeling faded, I was overwhelmed by the quantity of changes I had to make. I went to Evelyn Hatch, the professor who supervised my writing for that particular paper, and showed her the reviewers' comments. She encouraged me to resubmit the paper, saying that it is very common to make many revisions before one's paper is published. On a computer screen, Evelyn showed me a detailed sample letter responding to each of the given reviewers' comments. She then tailored the letter so that it would better fit my case by adding some sentences that would 'sell' my particular revisions to the editor (winking as she explained this to me). Subsequently, the letter guided me throughout the entire process of resubmitting the paper. Without Evelyn's help and encouragement, I might have given up going through such a troublesome procedure. I have treasured that sample letter, and still refer to it when I have to resubmit my papers.

After such a long period of apprenticeship, I started to teach English and applied linguistics at a Japanese university in 1991. As a researcher, I have continued to work in the areas of language testing and second language acquisition, hoping to bridge the gap between these two areas. Thus, the topics of the papers I have written since 1991 include comparing two methods that measure English L2 students' speech act production ability (Sasaki, 1998a) and development of an analytic rating scale for Japanese L1 writing (Sasaki & Hirose, 1999). I have also become very interested in L2 writing (probably because I have had such difficulty acquiring English writing skill myself), and have conducted several studies on the product and process of Japanese students' writing in English (e.g. Sasaki & Hirose, 1996, Sasaki, 1998b). Based on these studies, I have written an average of one paper a year to submit for publication in professional journals.

Because I have sometimes been puzzled by journal editors' decisions (both their rejection and acceptance), I once wanted to know more about the publication processes in my field, and in 1997 took a weekend seminar at Temple University, Japan, on 'Writing for Publication' taught by Professor Sandra McKay, then editor of *TESOL Quarterly*. In the seminar, I learned more 'rules' of writing academic papers such as 'read and follow closely the specific guidelines for submission usually given in the front or

back page(s) of each issue', or 'read the articles in at least several back issues of the journal you want to submit your papers to, and look for its "tastes" (what types of papers it tends to publish) as well as the quality of the papers published there'. I was impressed by Professor MacKay's efforts to teach the students the most efficient way to publish their papers. The knowledge we gained in her seminar may be difficult to get access to unless explicitly taught at such seminars, because such knowledge usually remains tacit and exclusively the property of those who are successful. I have never heard of such a course given to Japanese L1 writers in Japan. Here again, Japanese researchers may think that such knowledge should be 'stolen' rather than given, as the old Japanese proverb goes.

One last thing I would like to add regarding my growth as a professional L2 writer is my recent experiences as a reviewer. For the past several years, I have been given opportunities to be on selection committees for journal publication or research funding. Being on the selecting side, the other side of the coin, has shown me yet another perspective. The most important thing I have learned is that even the most established researchers' papers are not perfect when they are first submitted. Just like my own manuscripts, they are often revised many times before they become the final refined products. Furthermore, I have learned that manuscripts or proposals can be accepted in spite of apparent shortcomings if they have a point (or points) significantly appealing to the readers. I have been amazed by some of those researchers' efforts to complete long and thorough revisions if their papers have the slightest possibility of being published.

Such experiences as a reviewer have not only encouraged me as a researcher, but also have taught me an important lesson for teaching L2 writing. As with my own experience, L2 learners are often shown only the almost-perfect-looking end-products of writing in their textbooks. Unless the teacher points out that those end-products can only be achieved through many hard-earned revisions, and that the first drafts are usually far from perfect, learners tend to make the mistake of assuming that those writers (especially native speakers) can write perfectly from the very beginning. Because L2 learners (as well as L1 writers) cannot write so perfectly from the beginning, this misunderstanding can have negative effects. I therefore think that L2 teachers should show their students the entire process of a good piece of writing, so that their students can see that the final product is actually the result of many drafting stages. If the text is written by a non-native speaker, and if the final draft looks as good as the ones written by a native speaker, it would be even more encouraging. Knowing that they can start with a rough, imperfect draft, L2 learners will surely feel less hesitant to write in L2.

Although I have now been studying English for as long as 28 years, I still have great difficulty putting my thoughts into acceptable English. I often get stuck because I cannot think of appropriate expressions. Because I don't read anything in English except academic papers, my vocabulary stock is still quite limited. In short, it takes me a long time to complete a refined final draft in English. On the other hand, when I write papers in Japanese, I am often surprised by the speed. I can finish one paper in about one fifth of the time I need for finishing an English paper. The time difference is quite shocking. Is it still worth the effort to write papers in English? I sometimes wonder. But then I think of the comments I have received from researchers around the world after my papers have been published in international journals. Those are the people I could not have reached if I had not written in English. Their comments have inspired me, and have sometimes opened a whole new world of research to me. Meeting those researchers at conferences is always fun and rewarding. All those things cheer me up, and so, I gather up all my courage again, and try to write another first draft in English.

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