

## “Good” Writing for Intermediate Japanese Learners in Canada in the Technology Era

カナダの中級日本語学習者にとっての“Good” writing:  
テクノロジー時代を迎えて

Akiko Mitsui, York University  
三井晶子, ヨーク大学

### 1. Introduction

In Japanese language courses in North America, the teaching of writing is treated as a peripheral part of the course, and is not focused (see e.g. Reichelt. et. al, 2011; Kawamitsu, 2018). In particular in beginner and intermediate courses, writing is treated as part of homework, such as hiragana, katakana, and kanji practice, and maybe a couple of sentences or paragraphs. The focus is on orthography, grammar, and vocabulary. In other words, traditionally, writing is used for evaluation purposes. It is focused on checking how students have mastered the grammar and characters and so on, and the instructor judges it based on so-called *standard* Japanese. If there are any mistakes, they are marked with a red pen. As a result, students always have fear of making mistakes. As Park (2024) points out, many students view native speaker-like accuracy as the ultimate goal in writing, which results in reluctance to write or take linguistic risks.

With the rapid advance of technology, technological aids to writing expand the range of effective self-learning opportunities, but they can also lead to unintentional or intentional violations of academic integrity. Instructors need to develop appropriate ways of teaching and guidance to ensure that students benefit from these tools while maintaining academic integrity.

To address these issues, a written communication course was designed and implemented, adopting the genre-based literacy pedagogy (Martin & Rose, 2005) using an online platform among students in the course (who act as peer readers for one another) together with Japanese student readers. This study explores what “good” writing means for intermediate learners of Japanese in Canada through their experience as a result of technology use in that course.

### 2. Linguistic Diversity

Cook (1999) proposed the concept of *L2 users*, instead of L2 learners. Traditionally, L2 learners were considered incomplete learners. However, the concept of L2 users recognizes that they actively use L2 and have their own strengths, rather than being seen as deficient native speakers. L2 users possess a multi-competence, which is a unique integrated system where all one’s languages interact with each other rather than being separate monolingual competences. In addition, the idea of plurilingual competence (Council of Europe, 2021) highlights the flexible use of an uneven and interrelated

repertoire across languages. This perspective has shifted the focus from deficient learners compared to native speakers to valuable users with unique competences.

Reflecting this, the CEFR-Companion Volume (2020) emphasizes the value of linguistic diversity, and has removed the term, *native speaker*.

“.....the aim of language education is profoundly modified. *It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model.* Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place.” (CEFR-CV, 2020, p. 5, emphasis added)

Given the rapid advancement of technology, it is therefore necessary to examine how these resources should be incorporated into teaching practice.

### 3. “Good” writing for Intermediate Learners?

When discussing “good writing,” much of the focus has been on academic purposes such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Special Purposes). Similarly, in Japanese, “good” writing has mainly been studied in academic contexts. For example, Tanaka and Abe (2014) defined good writing as having a clearly defined and carefully considered reader, a clear and consistent message, a type of writing suitable for the purpose, a well-organized structure, smooth flow, and Japanese that is appropriate for the context and accurate.

They explain their idea of “good writing” as follows:

Good writing とは、言いたいこと（メイン・アイディア）が明確にわかり、それが文章全体を通して一貫している文章です。さらに内容のみでなく形式（構成）がしっかりし、読み手に対する配慮のあるものだと思います。ライティング評価の研究では、日本人は、文章の形式がきちんとしていなくても内容的に共感できる部分があると高く評価する傾向が見られます。（田中・坪根、2011）（田中・阿部、2014, p. 6) (下線は筆者)

Good writing is writing in which the main idea is clearly understood and consistent throughout the text. Furthermore, we believe that good writing is not only about content, but also about structure (organization) and consideration for the reader. *Research on writing evaluation shows that Japanese people* tend to highly evaluate writing that is easy to relate to in terms of content, even if the structure is not perfect (Tanaka & Tsubone, 2011) (Tanaka and Abe, 2014, p.6). (translated by the author with emphasis added)

Here, though it is not explicitly stated, they assume that Japanese people, who are presumed to be native speakers who speak Japanese perfectly, are chosen as evaluators of writing.

In North America, except in a very limited number of institutions, courses teaching such advanced academic writing are offered more and more rarely, and they are not aligned with our own teaching context as regards linguistic diversity. The question is then how we can fill this substantial discrepancy between findings in the literature and current classroom practice in the technology era.

#### **4. Genre-based Literacy Pedagogy as a Response**

In response to the limitations of such traditional accuracy-focused writing instruction, I adopted the genre-based literacy pedagogy (Martin & Rose, 2005) as a more functional and socially grounded approach to L2 writing. This pedagogy is rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics, which conceptualizes language as a resource for making meaning (Hyland, 2003; Martin, 1992; Swales, 1990). Within this framework, writing is understood as a social practice and a purposeful communicative act. Learners are guided by their specific purposes for writing and, in turn, develop their meaning-making abilities by choosing language appropriate to the particular context.

Building on this theoretical foundation, genre-based literacy pedagogy views writing not merely as the production of grammatically correct sentences, but as the creation of meaningful texts that fulfill specific communicative purposes within a given genre. Students are explicitly taught the stages, linguistic features, and rhetorical structures characteristic of each genre, allowing them to better understand how to shape their writing for different audiences and contexts.

#### **5. Background of study and method**

The Intermediate Written Communication course in 2024–25 was offered in a blended format. Incorporating Globally Networked Learning, led by York International, into the genre-based approach, the course facilitated online exchanges with a partner school in Japan. This included forming cross-institutional cohorts to build communities in writing and providing explicit instruction to develop awareness of genre, language use, and readers, with a particular emphasis on identifying and writing for a specific audience. Activities also included peer text analysis and the integration of feedback (Mitsui, 2024).

Table 1 shows the context of the course in 2024-25. Students produced two drafts of each task in an asynchronous class. Throughout the fall semester, they shared the first draft among peer cohorts and then shared the second draft among their cohorts including Japanese students. In the winter semester, they worked on a small project to expand on a topic of their choice, which included an asynchronous interview. All these exchange activities were conducted via Google docs.

Table 1. Context of the course, 2024-25

Format	Blended: In-person and asynchronous online sessions
Students	18 students (including an adult student and two PhD students) 19-23 students as audience from Japanese partner schools (volunteers, including a Japanese-as-a-Second-Language user/PhD student)
In-class	Writing Camp, brainstorming, feedback (from instructor & peers)
Materials	Handout (e.g. sample reading, language resources)
Tasks	Introductory piece, opinion essays, mini-report after interview
Asynchronous	Writing 2 drafts per topic, giving feedback on a draft by peer, biweekly portfolio, Reflection reports
Technology	Google docs, Google spreadsheet, Padlet

Rather than quantifying grammar and vocabulary errors, evaluation criteria focused on contents and appropriateness of language, and included timely submission of a handwritten final draft, incorporation of feedback, and transparency in the writing process. Students also submitted reflection reports on their writing experience after completing the full sequence of assignments and at the end of each semester. Given the nature of the class and our program’s emphasis on fostering autonomous learners, technological assistance in writing was considered legitimate if work could be independently reproduced, distinguishing learning from misconduct.

An unexpected but significant moment occurred when one student submitted an assignment evidently generated by AI. I framed this as an opportunity for an open class discussion at the beginning of the winter semester. By reading selected excerpts from Park (2024) on linguistic diversity and authorship, the class engaged in a discussion in English of what it means to ‘write well’ in Japanese, including AI’s role and academic integrity. Students were reminded to keep this topic in mind, as it would be revisited at the end of the academic year.

Besides this, “Writing Camp” was implemented throughout the winter semester. At the beginning of each class, students wrote by hand for ten minutes without devices but could ask the instructor questions if needed. Evaluation was based on participation, not quality, encouraging writing without technology and fostering confidence. It was an opportunity for students to consider their writing *their own*.

Based on this implementation, the following research questions arise: 1) How did students’ recognition about their technology use and their ideas of “good” writing change? and 2) What is “good” writing for intermediate learners?

In addition to the student survey given in the first week and reflection on the in-class discussion, students' end-of-semester written reflection reports and students' works served as the primary data for analysis, with their consent. For this study, the end-of-semester reflection reports were primarily used. All data were typed, coded and analyzed qualitatively using NVivo 15. As for data analysis, I used traits of good writing in Tanaka & Abe (2014) as conceptual categories and developed and revised them.

## 6. Findings

Analysis of the data revealed two central themes emerging from students' reflections: 1) changes in their perceptions of technology use, and 2) redefinition of their concept of "Good" writing.

### 6-1. Changes in perceptions of technology use

In the first semester reflection report, the following emerged: 1) technology as an *immediate solution* to compensate for vocabulary, basic grammar, such as conjugation, reading of kanji vocabulary, spelling and stroke order of kanji for handwriting; 2) technology as a *supplement*, in view of the effectiveness of online dictionary/materials instead of paper dictionary/materials; 3) developing awareness of the importance of appropriate vocabulary choice for the genre; and 4) developing realization of their authorship of vocabulary.

Many students expressed a feeling of lack of vocabulary and lack of grammar including basic grammar such as conjugation, and the use of technology for other mechanical aids such as the reading of kanji vocabulary, spelling and stroke order for handwriting kanji. They reported that using technology in learning is actually necessary for effective learning, and it served as an immediate solution to compensate for these gaps. Also, they mentioned that online dictionaries were a more effective supplement than a paper dictionary or textbook. Here is a quotation from a student's reflection:

“Indeed, *online dictionaries* have advantages for a language-learner *such as it will tell you meaning of the word in your language and shows the conjugation.*”

Some of my students' first language was not English, and they said that instructors in other subjects strictly directed them to use technology for avoidance of mechanical and grammar mistakes. Students automatically applied that ritual to the language class without thinking deeply about it, and they remained focused on avoiding mistakes as their primary goal. However, some students became aware of the importance of appropriate vocabulary choice for the genre and context. They realized that just searching up the words is not enough.

More interestingly, one of the students said that words they found via technology did “not actually belong to me”, expressing that they were *not their own words*. We can see this idea of authorship in the vocabulary choice.

“Those words I searched from (online) dictionary were only used once in my writing pieces. At that moment, I found out that those words have *not actually belonged to me*, because I do not know how to use them.”

In the end of the second semester, students gained an essential insight for vocabulary choice. According to students, technology supports the learning process, but it cannot replace practice, study and deepening one’s own understanding. Another student mentioned that they tended to remember better what they had learned from trial and error.

## **6-2. Redefinition of concept of “Good” writing**

In the first semester reflection report, students remained focused on avoiding mistakes as their primary goal. They tended to regard a text that included fancy vocabulary, maybe using kanji a lot, grammatically accurate. Also, their comments on their own texts were mostly negative, remarking on such features as mistakes, incorrectness, lack of vocabulary, and lack of grammar. Indeed, they seemed to aim at reproduction of an imagined, native-like “good” writing.

“Throughout this term, my writing in Japanese has slightly improved compared to how I did in JP 1000. Even though it is nice to see that, *there are some mistakes* I have repeated the most such as *word choices, incorrect grammar, and unnecessary words*.”

In the end of the second semester reflection report, ideas about “good” writing shifted toward connecting with the reader and conveying their meaningful message. Students emphasized audience awareness, engagement in meaningful communication, and drawing on their own experiences.

These were student responses to the question, “Tell me what your best writing was and why”:

“I learned many things about life in other countries that I had not considered before, such as differences in food or transportation prices. It was especially interesting during the interview because I got to hear their thoughts on a topic I am truly passionate about. I was also largely unaware of how Halloween is celebrated in Japan, so it was very informative to learn about their opinions on it.”

“... I learned a lot about how some Japanese people think about things. Sometimes their answers truly shocked me. I remember how some said for instance that they thought street art was wrong and how it reduced the value of

buildings and neighborhoods. I was shocked since the city I came from was filled with street art and I thought that was a great thing!”

Students engaged in their communication with Japanese students and reacted to the comments they received, which related to their experience. They were very passionate, having fun or being surprised about the contents. A lot of positive reaction was found. However, they did not particularly mention language *per se*. When communication went well, they probably did not feel a need to worry about it.

## 7. Discussion and implications

This study has explored how intermediate students’ recognition of their technology use and their ideas of “good” writing changed through their experience of a written communication course incorporating a genre-based literacy pedagogy. The findings show that technology shifted from being viewed as a tool for immediate form-polishing to becoming a supportive partner for expressing personal ideas. Through trial and error, students have autonomously sought individualized ways to learn language that are effective for their writing and language learning.

The second question concerned what constitutes “good” writing for intermediate learners. The findings revealed that while an unconscious “ideal model” oriented toward native-like replication was observed, students’ concept of “good” writing gradually shifted to focus on the meaningful expression of their own thoughts and experiences.

In addition to those findings, students brought up the following aspect of writing: Personal experiences and emotions are positioned as important elements that attract readers’ interest. One of the students summarized that writing is ultimately a tool for communication rather than perfection; when they stop worrying about minor mistakes and do not aim at perfect products, they can produce better writing as they can focus more on expressing their ideas.

From my study I drew two conclusions: (1) the concept of “good writing” for intermediate learners should be reconsidered towards *communicative effectiveness*, *self-expression*, and *the writer’s own voice*, and (2) learners need opportunities to express themselves from the early stages, as genuine communication fosters autonomy. When they want to communicate, they become autonomous learners.

These changes occur partly because students began with unconscious beliefs about writing shaped by prior educational experiences, and partly because in the course they were exposed to the realization of writing as a social practice in response to linguistic diversity in the technology era.

Therefore, I propose two points: first, writing should be treated as a social practice rather than merely an object of evaluation; and second, instruction should always be mindful of linguistic diversity.

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