Time-honored Tradition Meets 21st Century Literacies: Composition Instruction in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Two researchers, one from America and one from Japan collaboratively studied Japanese writing instruction in three elementary schools. We were interested in uncovering educators' beliefs and practices of writing instruction and sought to add to the general knowledge of written composition through the perspective of Japanese culture.

Research on Elementary School Writing

Scholarship comparing writing instruction in Japan to writing instruction in the U.S. found both similarities and differences. For example, writing workshop pedagogy is used widely in the U.S. (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) and has been compared to practices observed in some Japanese schools (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 1987). Teachers in both the U.S. and Japan incorporate journal writing in their instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2006, Richardson & Konishi, 2013). In Japan, both writing workshop and journal writing incorporate *seikatsu tsuzurikata,* life experience writing. "Seikatsu tsuzurikata basically means 'writing that comes from one's personal experiences or observations'" (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 2007, p.53; see also Satsuki, 2011). This method encourages students to write about everyday experiences, to report direct observations, and for teachers to give consistent written feedback in order to connect with the writer. The written comments are generally not corrective.

Other than the Kitagawas' studies, little research on writing instruction in elementary schools is available in the U.S. although some research on elementary education briefly touches on the language arts. We draw upon these studies as well as high school and college level composition studies to provide some background. In his research in Japanese elementary schools, Stevenson (1991) discussed the teaching of *kanji* (a Japanese writing system derived from Chinese characters), and described composition instruction focusing on purpose and effective expression. Cave's (2004) study of three elementary schools in central Japan found teachers relied on language arts textbooks, but often made modifications. Teachers focused on the development of children's minds, attitudes and emotions. Students wrote in response to fictional stories, and wrote non-fiction individual expressions and poetry. Students also researched topics of their own choosing and wrote reports, which they presented to the class. Research in high school and college classrooms describe a variety of genres including *seikatsu tsuzurikata*, life experience composition, *nikki*, journal writing, *tegami no kakikata*, letter writing, *haiku* and other forms of poetry, and *sakubun*, topical composition (Dyer & Friederich, 2002; Sato, et al.,1986).

Recent research on elementary school writing in Japan is extremely limited in English language venues. We, Spence and Kite in the current study attempt to fill this gap with observations of elementary classrooms and analysis of textual materials. This research collaboration between a Japanese and U.S. researcher adds to current scholarship on Japanese composition instruction, accessible in English.

Theoretical background

Composition theorist, Roz Ivanič (2004) developed an analytical framework based on teachers' beliefs and practices of writing instruction, which she calls *discourses of writing*. She found six discourses teachers used to describe their theory and practice. Since Ivanič developed this framework in Great Britain, we additionally drew upon Japanese culture and history to account for additional discourses of writing unique to Japan. Below, we describe Ivanič's six discourses of writing instruction, followed by a discussion of twenty-first century literacy practices. Then we describe our research method.

The skills discourse of writing involves learning how to use sound-symbol relationships and syntax in writing. In Japan, this means an emphasis on learning the two writing systems, *hiragana,* and *katakana*, which are phonetic based, and the Chinese derived characters of *kanji*. Once students have learned a great deal of *kanji*, a skills approach will focus increasingly on text type, rather than phonetics.

The creativity approach to writing instruction focuses on style and meaning making. Literature appreciation is often taught along with attention to writing style. In this view, writing develops implicitly through exposure to literature and numerous opportunities to write.

The process approach to writing instruction focuses on the process rather than the written product. Students prewrite then draft, and perhaps write multiple drafts. They revise and edit their work. Students also share their work with others. For example, they may read their work aloud, make it into an illustrated booklet, or hang it in the school hallway.

The genre approach to writing instruction focuses on text type, context, and purpose for writing. In this approach, genre refers to specific text-types, which serve particular social purposes. Rather than thinking of a genre in broad terms such argumentative writing, in this approach an example of genre could be a political opinion in a newspaper's editorial section.

The sociocultural approach to writing instruction involves writing for a purpose within a social context. Writing is integrated with social practices, collaboration, networks, and patterns of participation. Writing happens within a social context and in conjunction with other literacies such as reading, viewing, and speaking.

The socio-political approach to writing instruction is closely associated with the sociocultural approach. It too, is a view of writing embedded in social practices, but in a broader political context. Writing is embedded in power relations, and writers are affected by decisions made by those who hold powerful positions in society. This approach develops a critical awareness and considers historical and political factors.

21st Century Literacy

Research on written composition necessarily is impacted by new media used throughout the world today. Hypertext and visual literacies account for much of current literacy practices. People use both text and visual literacies in their transformative work and expression of meaning (Kress, 2003). Organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (2007) in the United States insist that students must learn to create, critique and analyze what they read and view. They must use traditional and new literacies to solve problems by communicating and collaborating with others. Students must design and share information for a global community. Furthermore, educators must "ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community and economic life." (The New London Group, 1996).

Research Method

Relying on Merrian's (1998) description of case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 27), we use case study to uncover the salient characteristics of three teachers' writing instruction. We visited three elementary schools over a period of three months, visiting ten classrooms in all. We video-recorded or took field notes during two visits to each of three focal classrooms. We interviewed one focal teacher from each school as well as each school's principal.

We collected analyzed samples of written materials related to composition instruction including lesson descriptions written by teachers across Japan and published in professional journals. We analyzed anthologies of elementary children's writing, curriculum plans developed by school districts, and four sets of language arts textbooks for grades one through six. These are some of the textbooks for compulsory education, grades one through nine, authorized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (MEXT).

Kite or another native Japanese linguist provided simultaneous English translation for Spence during each school observation and interview. The linguists also assisted in analysis of the journals, books, and curriculum materials. Qualitative coding of transcripts and materials was carried out using Ivanič's (2004) discourses of writing as an analytical framework. A table containing descriptions of each data source was created to organize the emergent findings. Data sources were crosschecked throughout the on-going data collection and analysis. We referred to books and articles describing Japanese education, history, and culture during the analysis in order to account for differences between Ivanič's findings and our emergent findings. When the analysis was complete, we wrote case studies in English then translated them into Japanese. The Japanese versions were given to the three focal teachers for member checking. We made changes based on additional information provided by the focal teachers and by going back to our data sources, books and articles on Japanese history and culture.

Context

The context of this study included three elementary schools in a large city in Japan: two public schools and one private school. In Japan, nine years of compulsory education is provided tuition-free in public schools. Consumable textbooks are also provided free of charge.

One of the schools was in the city center. This city school served grades one through six. The school had served the community for approximately one hundred-thirty years. The community had a declining number of families with school-aged children, due to general young population decrease. However, the community continued to support the school through volunteerism. Local people who were devoted to the school maintained the buildings and grounds.

The second public school was located in a suburban region of the city. It also served grades one through six. The school was approximately fifty years old. The families appeared to be mainly middle-class and many of them lived in multi-family housing. Pleasant shopping areas and high-rise housing units surrounded the school. Compared with the city school, this community was thriving with middle class young people.

The third was a private school located in a smaller city adjacent to the large city. It was four years old and served grades one through six. A middle school and high school were located in the same multi-story building and a division of a large university was housed on the same property. Many of the students were from affluent families and commuted from other neighborhoods. In the section below, we provide case studies of writing instruction within each of these three elementary schools.

Findings

Case 1: City School

Green tennis balls on the chairs lowered the noise level, as twenty-five fourth grade students pushed back their seats. Some stayed in the classroom, talking with their friends while others drifted into the hallway. Large tempera paintings of friends playing their recorders hung on the back wall, with written impressions attached below. Math, science and art papers with writing or illustrations showing the students' thinking were displayed throughout the school. Students in this school wrote in every subject area. They wrote to reflect, summarize, clarify their thinking, and respond with their impressions.

After the break, the children returned to their desks and opened their language arts textbooks to a unit called "Move, think, and act." Ms. H. smiled encouragingly and began.

> Ms. H.: Today we are going to learn paragraph writing. What happened in the first paragraph? What is the main idea?
>
> Boy: I think the main idea is to make a plan because you have to think ahead.
> Girl: I think the main idea is to have a goal because you have to know what to do.
> Ms. H.: Yes, the first paragraph has the clue, or beginning.

Ms. H. wrote the main idea for each paragraph on the chalkboard using the wording from the textbook, while acknowledging the students' ideas. Then they turned the page to text and illustrations of track running.

After discussing several paragraphs, Ms. H. pointed at each phrase on the chalkboard, which the students read all together. Then Ms. H. asked, "Which is the sentence the author wants to stress?" Four boys raised their hands. Ms. H. called on one, who gave the correct answer. Ms. H. underlined the last sentence with bright yellow chalk saying, "Yes, yes, yes."

From this classroom observation and her interview, Ms. H. demonstrated a skills and genre approach to teaching writing. The students must understand the parts of a paragraph including the number of sentences and the main idea of the paragraph. They learned this skill through reading chorally, discussing the paragraph, watching Ms. H. write on the board, and taking notes. The genre approach involved Ms. H. guiding the students through an analysis of each paragraph's structure.

On other days, Ms. H. incorporated additional approaches. One day, the students were finding it difficult to think of what to write, and how to include descriptive details in their writing. They could not seem to get anything written on the blank paper in front of them. Ms. H., relying on her experience as a teacher, delivered an impromptu lesson to help them see they could write about anything. She said, "I am going to act out a scene for you to write about. Watch me carefully because you are going to write everything you see me do."

Ms. H. left the classroom then peeked back around the door to say, "Start watching now." Then she simply came through the doorway, sat down, opened a notebook and wrote something, closed the notebook and went back out of the room. She waited a moment before coming back then said, "Now please describe what you saw me do. Make sentences about what I did from my entering the classroom until I left."

Ms. H. gave her students many supports in learning to write. She drew from her experience and understanding of children to encourage them and teach them how to report their observations. At other times, she taught them to use the five senses and use quotations in writing. She carefully taught necessary skills and gave them opportunities to write in every subject area.

Ms. H. incorporated social practices into her instruction by always reminding the students to think about the reader. They not only wrote for assignments, they wrote for others. For example, the students wrote letters to school volunteers, thanking them for their work making repairs to the school and making gardens on the school grounds.

The students wrote every day in math, science, social studies, art, or music. This showed the children many purposes for writing. Ms. H. wrote reactions, gave feedback about the content of her students' writing, and responded to what they had to say (figure 1). These social practices combined with a skills and genre focus made up Ms. H.'s teaching approach.

Case 2: Suburban School

A warm breeze blew through the open windows of the fourth grade classroom. The whole school was alive with nature and the sound of children's voices in the garden. Pots of green plants stood in a row under the chalkboard, where Ms. N. stood in front of her twenty-eight students writing in the air, the *kanji* 順, which means "order." The children followed along, counting out the number of strokes in unison. They practiced writing the *kanji* in their workbook, which they took to Ms. N. to inspect individually. Within six minutes, the *kanji* lesson was complete and the class began a lesson from the language arts curriculum intended for developing skill in speaking and listening.

Ms. N. wrote the lesson goal and instructions on the chalkboard and the class read it aloud together. She wrote three questions they would be answering then questioned the class.

> Ms. N.: You have to be the guide. Show that you understand the audience. What do they need to know when they go to the dolphin show?
> Boy: When to go.

Ms. N. gave the students large pieces of paper. She continued writing on the board, asking the class questions as she described the three components for providing information: Confirming the question, responding to the question, adding useful information. The students wrote this on the large paper.

Next, the students answered questions posed by Ms. N. They watched and took notes as Ms. N. wrote information they would need in answering the three questions, such as how long the dolphin show lasted. They would use this information to write an original paragraph.

As the students wrote, Ms. N. circulated and helped those who were having difficulty writing their paragraph. One girl wrote the following.

> If you want to see the dolphins twice.
> There are dolphin shows three times a day.
> It will begin promptly.

On the day described here, Ms. N. exhibited a skills and genre approach to teaching writing. The textbook provided the skill and the genre, writing to inform. Ms. N. focused most of her lesson on explaining the elements needed when providing information to others.

Ms. N. clearly worked within the goals set by the regional teachers' group, who created a curriculum guide for their region. The goals are 1. Develop writing that is clear to the audience. 2. Write either a diary or group work based on daily living. 3. Be innovative in using a thinking tool in class. 4. Make comments about children's writing and encourage their writing. 5. Be innovative in how to teach *kanji* so it becomes automatized. On the day described above, she focused on the first and fifth goals. Developing writing that is clear to the audience, and automatizing *kanji*.

On other days, Ms. N. incorporated social practices by providing time for the children to talk with one another at different points in the lesson. The students in this

classroom were very relaxed and although they never disrupted the lesson, they spoke quietly to one another and broke into giggles when a large crow was heard squawking through the open window. At times, Ms. N.'s students wrote letters inviting their parents to school events and thank you letters. Ms. N. required the students to write journal entries every weekend at home. She collected the journals and wrote personal responses to each entry (figure 2).

This was Ms. Ns' first year teaching fourth grade, and had only taught a few years in total. Last year, she taught first grade, where she included social practices and creativity in her writing instruction, emphasizing writing based on daily living. She taught the children to write details about what they felt, what happened, and what was said. Ms. N. approached writing instruction through a skills and genre approach. She also included social practices and creativity at times.

Case 3: Private School

The large, open room filled with light from the second story windows. This four-year old building was state-of-the-art, with large digital screens, computers, and document projectors. Yet a warm feeling was added to the classroom walls with teacher-made posters of *hiragana* and student-generated lists of "spring" words.

The first grade class had been discussing spring every day for weeks. They had taken a field trip where they collected words related to spring and wrote in their journals about their experiences on the field trip (figure 3). The language arts lesson on this sunny day began with a discussion of what makes good writing. Projecting their journal writing onto the screen, some children read to the whole class. Mr. I asked the children to notice what was good in the writing.

> Child 1: He wrote about other vegetables, *goya* and cucumber.
> Child 2: It's good that they are growing.
> Mr. I: Where does it say it is growing? It says "we planted." He said what he did.

Mr. I encouraged the children to use action in their writing. Rather than only telling what they saw, he wanted the children to write about what they did.

After some students read their journal entry to the class, they each had a chance to read to a partner, receiving positive comments. As a whole group, they shared their experiences so each of the thirty-two voices contributed to the combined knowledge of the whole class. This segment of the language arts class lasted twenty minutes.

For the next segment, Mr. I. projected the textbook onto the screen. The children opened their books to an illustration and told their teacher all the things they saw. Mr. I. wrote the children's observations on the white board. Then Mr. I. said, "Let's read a sample to see what they wrote about." Mr. I. read aloud to the students, pointing to each word on the screen. Then the children read the next page all together, aloud. Throughout this segment, the teacher and students discussed important details about the writing sample in the textbook.

> Mr. I: Did she say she had fun?
> Child 3: It doesn't have the word, but it's there.

> Mr. I: It's better not to write that "I had a good time." How do you express that? It doesn't say "had a good time" but you understand when you read it. How do we do that? You write what you did. "I played jump rope in the park."

On the day of the lesson described above, Mr. I used the process approach in a writing workshop. The students read and commented on one another's writing and the teacher used the students' writing for teaching. A social practice and creativity approach was evident in these activities. Skills, such as "writing to inform" were embedded in the social practice of the workshop. The students wrote about their observations and experiences in a journal. They brainstormed ideas and vocabulary and used their field trip as writing material. The students came up with their own ideas and their writing was original.

On other days, Mr. I focused on teaching traditional aspects of Japanese language arts, such as writing *hiragana*, how to read orally with expression, and memorizing poetry. The language arts curriculum integrated with science, social studies, and field trips. A thematic approach and writing workshop served to combine process writing, social practice, creativity, and skills in Mr. I's first grade classroom.

Language Arts Curriculum

We found and analyzed many journals and books written by and for teachers. The journals were compilations written by teachers all over Japan and published at regular intervals each year. The books were both compilations by various teachers, or written by a single teacher. Additionally, we analyzed documents created by area teachers for their region, MEXT documents, and four of the five language arts series approved by MEXT for use in public schools.

Examples of skills found in the language arts series' included modifying verbs in sixth grade and writing a subject and predicate in second grade. Genres taught through the series' included narrative, poetry, expository, writing to inform, paragraph, invitation, opinion, news article, letter, research paper, speech writing, imaginary story, and life experience essay. The life experience essays included topics such as what you notice about spring, how your emotions change, and the thing you love.

The creativity approach was evident in the language arts series through unit headings, and phrases sprinkled throughout. "Let's expand your imagination." "Let's express." "Let's reflect on everyday life." The reading selections in the series' stressed an appreciation for literature, which according to Ivanič (2004) is often a catalyst for the creativity approach to writing. However, in these series', the writing lessons were seldom connected to the reading selections.

Examples of process writing found in the language arts series' included using semantic maps to generate ideas, giving feedback, peer revising, and sharing writing with the class. These aspects of process also provided a sociocultural element through working with partners and small groups. Interviews and research into students' communities broadened the sociocultural reach beyond the classroom.

The language arts series' addressed socio-political topics in both reading selections and writing. Several lessons in fifth and sixth grade included such topics. Examples of socio-political topics from the language arts series' were "sustainable resources," "gender differences," and "media in our world." The lower grade language arts series' seldom presented such topics.

Other textual materials described instructional practices used by teachers across Japan. They included skill, genre, sociocultural, creativity, and process in their descriptions. The only approach to writing we did not find in the journals was socio-political. There were also some references to using traditional Japanese practices and technology in the classroom.

Traditional Japanese Teaching Practices

We found traditional Japanese teaching practices throughout the data. These involved integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening through an appreciation of literature. During language arts lessons, teachers used classical poetry as a model and students were encouraged to memorize these and other reading selections from their textbook. They also memorized and collected proverbs, compiling them into booklets.

Choral reading of passages from the language arts textbook, and from the chalkboard was evident in many of our observations and in the textual materials. The students read these passages with expression and in unison. Another traditional practice was a focus on good penmanship. Students were encouraged to use the correct stroke order for *kanji*. They engaged in repeated writing of *kanji* in special textbooks, which included instructions and pages of square grid lines for practice.

Other traditional practices were related to creativity. Composition techniques such as using metaphor, and poetry structures such as *haiku, tanka,* and *renshi* were mentioned in interviews and found in the textual materials. Nurturing young children's language was emphasized in the lower grades, both by Mr. I, the first grade teacher, and the textual materials. Writing from the heart was a concept that appeared often and is a central tenet of *seikatsu tsuzurikata,* life experience writing. Students also wrote journal entries about daily life, either during the school day, or on weeknights or weekends. Ms. H., the city school fourth grade teacher gave her students a special notebook for conducting personal inquiry at home. Ms. N. assigned journal writing every weekend.

21st Century Literacy Practices

Technology was evident in the large digital screens in each of the three classrooms. The private school first grade teacher used a document projector to display student writing for class discussions. Digital photography was included in essays written by former sixth-grade students of the suburban school principal. In interviews, the teachers' and principals' aspirations toward incorporating 21st century literacies were clear. The principals of the three schools and several private school educators expressed their goals for students to develop personal expression through writing, develop creativity and higher level thinking such as a expressing opinions and developing arguments. They wanted students to be able to present their ideas using technology. These educators' aspirations were parallel with the expectations set forth by MEXT.

Discussion

We found the teachers, language arts curricula, and other textual materials combined skills, genre, creativity, process, and social practices of writing instruction in various ways. The only evidence of socio-political writing was in the language arts textbooks, mostly in fifth and sixth grades. That said, not every teacher evidenced all six discourses through our observations and the interviews. Socio-political topics were not mentioned in any interviews, however we cannot attest to whether such topics came up later in the school year, after our visits were completed.

In addition to the discourses proposed by Ivanič (2004), there was also evidence of traditional Japanese practices and 21st century literacy practices. The Japanese language arts are a vehicle for developing students' cultural identity through appreciation of traditional literature such as Japanese folk tales, Japanese forms of poetry, Chinese poetry, and informative articles on aspects of Japanese culture such as the performing arts.

Japanese identity develops, in part through elementary education. Befu (1986) as cited in Sato (1998) describes Japanese identity as a combination of "interpersonalism, self-discipline, and role perfectionism" (p. 122). These three aspects of identity are evident in the teaching and curriculum materials explored in this study. One way interpersonalism was developed was through teachers' response to student writing, emphasizing the content and their relationship with the student.

Self-discipline refers to a positive mental attitude. As such, a focus on self-reflection was evident across the data. For example, the language arts series' for fourth grade included making a collection of writing called, "Me at ten years old." In this project, the students reflect on the fourth grade year and write a letter to themselves to read when they become twenty years old. By developing a positive mental attitude, the students develop a vitality to live and to overcome obstacles.

Role perfectionism was encouraged by direct instruction to the whole class, which prevailed in many of our observations. Students were observed listening intently to the teacher, reading, responding, and reciting in unison. They practiced *hiragana, katakana,* and *kanji* through repeated writing and careful character formation.

Combining Traditional and 21st Century Practices

Traditional Japanese literacy practices connected students to their culture and developed self-identity. Japanese culture is perpetuated in part by passing along values and skills to the young through the Japanese elementary school system. Yet educators are faced with the dilemma of how to combine tradition with 21st century literacy practices as educators aspire toward developing writers who communicate effectively in a global society.

The MEXT approved language arts curriculum contains sociopolitical topics that have the potential for developing 21st century literacy practices. For example, in one fifth-grade book, the topic of gender differences in spoken Japanese is presented and students are encouraged to research gender differences in a variety of settings. This topic provides an opportunity for computer research, using hypertext and visual literacies to explore an interesting topic. If developed further it could provide opportunities to think critically about the roles of men, women, girls, and boys in a

variety of social contexts. Researching gender differences could lead to making judgments about whether gender inequities exist. Students could extend their research to other societies, thus developing the ability to think globally about common human experiences.

Traditional and 21st century literacy practices can develop students' ability to solve complex problems. For example, through studying about the gender differences in language, students can learn about traditional Japanese language and culture, as well as the way language changes in response to contemporary life. In order to utilize the MEXT curriculum in this manner however, teachers must go beyond the written curriculum. Teachers can be supported in this endeavor in the following ways:

- Provide professional development in critical thinking.
- Disseminate curriculum supplements focusing on development of 21st century literacies along with the language arts textbooks.
- Develop awareness of teaching practices that develop critical thinking among parents, community members, boards of education, business leaders, and administrators

Through the education and engagement of all stakeholders, teachers will feel supported in moving beyond the language arts textbook to develop students who are ready to take their place in 21st century civic and economic life.

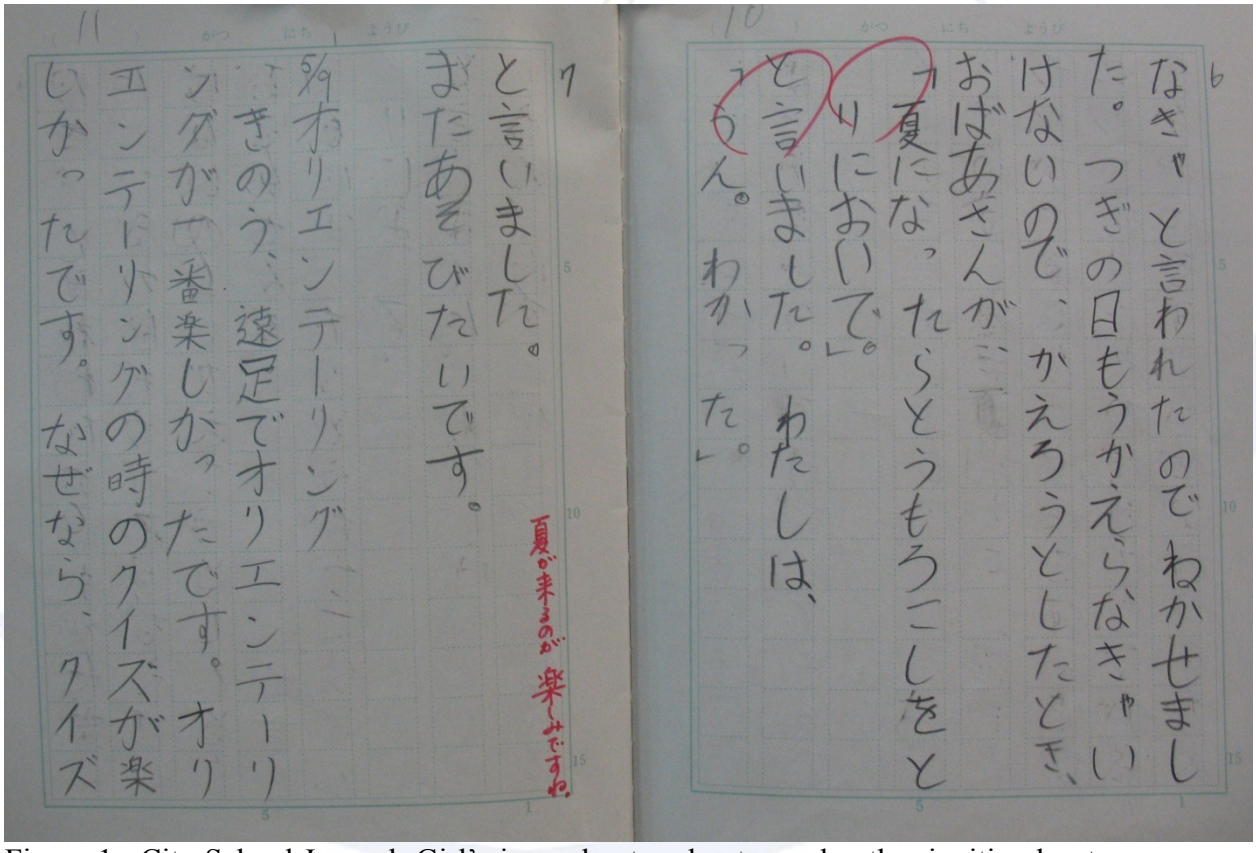

Figure 1. City School Journal: Girl's journal entry about grandmother inviting her to visit and pick corn in the summer. Ms. H. commented in red ink, "Summer is coming so you will be glad."

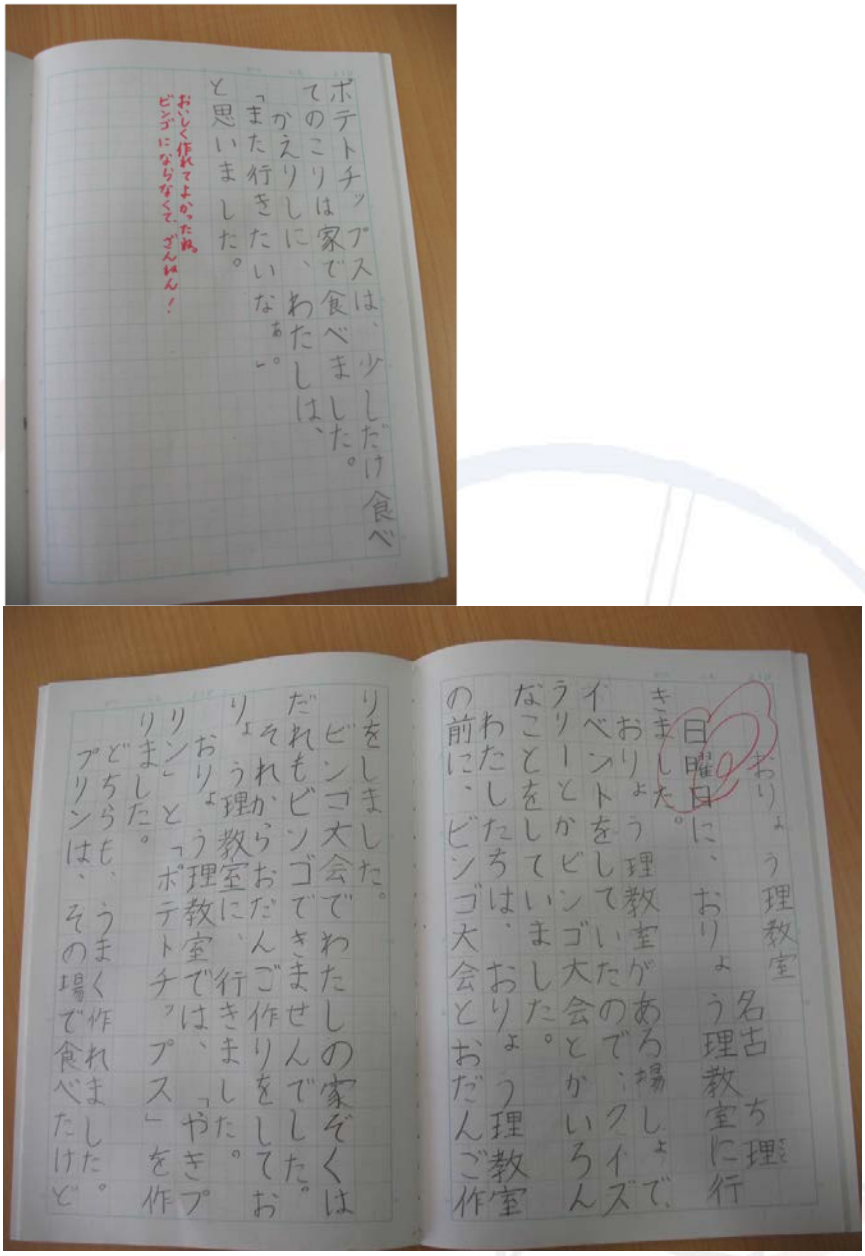

Figure 2. Suburban School Journal. “On Sunday I went to cooking class. At the place where they have the cooking class they have quiz and bingo. So first, we did bingo then we made sweets at cooking class. At bingo, none of my family won so they made sweets. Then we went to cooking class and we made pudding and potato chips. Both came out very good. We ate pudding then and a little bit of potato chips. I want to go again.” Ms. N. commented, “It’s good that your dishes came out well, and I’m sorry you didn’t win at bingo.”

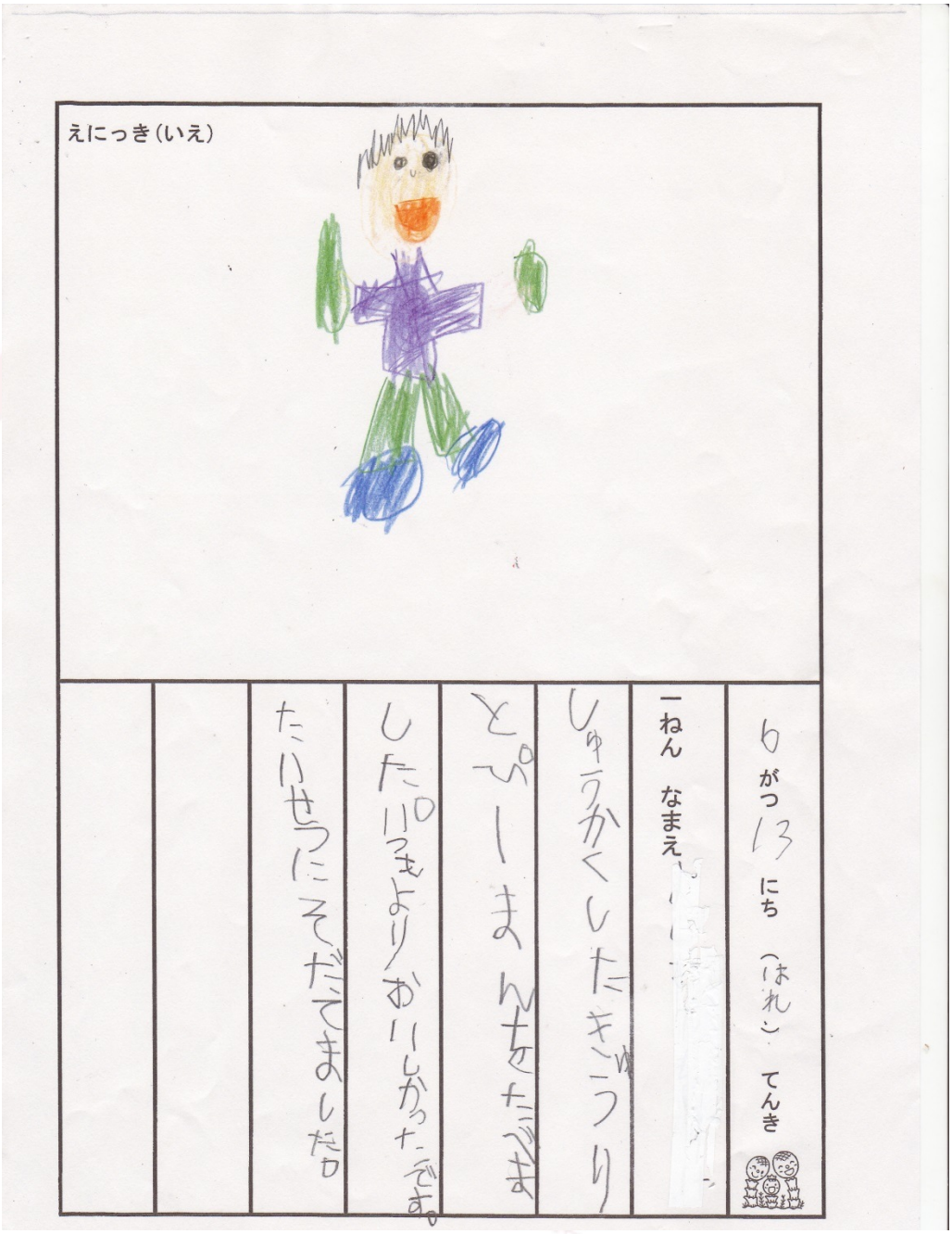

Figure 3. Private School Journal. “Cucumber harvest. Today we ate. It was delicious. I have carefully nurtured.”

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