【Research Article】

A Social-Material Approach to Teaching L2 Writing: Visual Analysis to Develop Rhetorical Knowledge in L2 Writing

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Abstract

In this paper, I will propose a teaching approach to develop EFL writers' knowledge of rhetorical situations, which can be applied to (potentially) facilitate writing and/or any other modes of communication. The approach capitalizes on visual analysis as a major activity. It is tightly intertwined with L1 rhetoric and composition research, which has made an extensive influence on L1/L2 writing instruction. It is also based upon a theory of social semiotics, and genre approach being widely adopted in various research fields (e.g., applied linguistics, art, education, and visual designs). The paper presents the results of an action research study, which examined L2 writers' responses to a visual analysis activity. It discusses the potential benefits of visual analysis as a means to facilitate L2 writing instruction in the context of higher education in Japan.

Keywords: *L2 writing instruction*, *visual analysis*, *rhetorical situations*, *rhetorical genre theory perspective*, *social semiotic approach*

Introduction

As we attempt to communicate in any form, we are undoubtedly under the influence—not necessarily drinking, however—from an indefinite number of factors. An act of communication is not an act of a person isolated from the rest of the world but deeply situated within with its all complexities. Writing, for instance, does not merely start in the mind of the writer trapped in a dark chamber with no light and sound. The proficient writer strategically uses available resources in the environment, including linguistic resources (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and other stylistic/mechanical 'visual notations'), to weave their thoughts into a text. Attributes of the writer—age, gender, and identity, and social and cultural contexts of writing—purpose, power, audience, and genre-specific conventions exert a powerful influence on the writer's decision making in writing (Hyland, 2007). Furthermore, a medium of written communication (e.g., handwriting or typing), which requires non-human objects (e.g., the pencil, paper, computer, and keyboard), is inseparably linked to a writing activity and ultimately to the final written product. Communicating in writing is then unequivocally a social act as many have contended over the years (Bitzer, 1968; Cooper, 1986; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984; Myers, 1985; Vatz, 1973). However, it is more than just social as it inevitably includes common materiality—non-human objects which make an act of writing socially and materially bound, and so it can be shared.

English Writing Education in Japan

In Japanese English language writing education at the secondary school level, the major contents and skills to be taught have been geared toward developing grammar and vocabulary knowledge since the introduction of the Grammar Translation (GT) method (Morita, 2017). The GT method used in teaching English primarily focuses on understanding the grammatical structure of the language, and by its extension, it is often coupled with a simple sentence writing and/or translation task

(English to Japanese or vice versa). Accordingly, many secondary school students are rarely exposed to essay writing, whether it is paragraph-level writing or beyond. In contrast, once students enter universities, the types of writing which they are expected to learn presents a sudden paradigm shift and a significant challenge—the shift from writing to learn grammar and vocabulary for various high-stake exams (e.g., university entrance exams) to writing to communicate to an academic audience.

Although MEXT's English education reforms are currently underway (see Nitta & Yamamoto in this volume, for an overview), many Japanese university students, if not all, can be seen as 'underprepared' to take on the kinds of writing tasks often required at higher education. In order to ease the burden on Japanese English learners as they make their way into writing in and to an academic community, providing a concrete conceptual framework for written communication (i.e., the rhetorical situation) may well be highly valuable.

In this paper, I will propose a teaching approach to ESL/EFL writing based upon the premise that writing is a social-material practice. In particular, the approach aims to develop English language learners' understanding of rhetorical situations via visual analysis. In an attempt to introduce the teaching approach, the current paper first provides an overview of the importance of understanding rhetorical situations in written communication. Then, it moves to discuss a major theoretical framework derived from two different theories—social semiotic approach (SSA) and rhetorical genre theory—which underpins the proposition. Finally, it presents the teaching approach and explores its potential benefits along with an example of classroom activity and relevant data from an action research study conducted in a writing class at a Midwestern university in the US.

An Overview: The Rhetorical Situation

The Greek word 'rhetoric' is as old as 2,000 years. While the meaning of the word has gone through a radical transformation, it originally meant 'strategies to persuade' as Aristotle proclaimed (Kennedy, 1991). In the fields of L1 composition and rhetoric, and later in L2 writing, the concept of rhetoric underwent a close scrutinization, and now it is a well-established framework of reference, particularly in relation to understanding what it means to write (Johns, 1990).

In writing, rhetorical situations are often considered an essential domain of knowledge in order to lay a solid conceptual and perceptual ground for novice writers to engage in effective writing practice (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004). The term 'rhetorical situation' was first introduced in the late 1960s by Lloyd Bitzer, a philosopher, and scholar. Bitzer (1968) views that the writer (or in his word, 'rector') is fundamentally constrained by a variety of situational factors, and he developed a framework to overview the nature of such constraints. In contemporary rhetoric and writing studies, the framework has been influenced by Aristotle's original proposition of rhetoric, and it is widely understood as containing five major elements[1]—the purpose, audience, stance, genre, and medium (see Bullock, Goggin, & Weinberg, 2019[2] for more details on the elements). However, we (the writer) are not necessarily aware of these elements if not formally taught. We may assume that there is freedom of speech or of writing (at least in some parts of the world), but whenever we write to communicate, we become inescapably social (hence, constrained) especially if we wish to convey the message

1 These elements have been variously defined and introduced in the process of ongoing debate/discussion, and additional elements may be included or some elements may be removed depending on how one defines the rhetorical situation (see, Johns, 2011).

2 In order to avoid overly scholastic discussions on the notion of the rhetorical situation, I intentionally refer here to a widely circulated composition textbook which incorporates the rhetorical situation as a central pedagogical framework.

as effectively as possible to the assumed audience. The concept of the rhetorical situation denotes writing as a social act, and it helps us effectively participate in the act by guiding us with essential landmarks throughout our composing processes.

Social Semiotic Approach

The SSA is a theory of social meaning-making in communication wherein sings (i.e., images) and texts are inseparably linked to one another. The theory stemmed from Halliday's highly influential theories of language as social semiotic and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) argued that meaning-making in society contains three essential metafunctions—the ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The theories were later extended to visual mode of communication by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) by highlighting that visuals or images can communicate ideologies and discourses as much as a verbal or written mode of communication.

A formal theorization of meaning-making potentials ascribed to images was further developed to what Jewitt (2009) referred to as a 'multiplicity of communication modes,' which includes a number of socially and bodily shaped modes of communication such as gesture, movement, and even music (i.e., social semiotic resources). Suffice it to say that one major contribution of the SSA is its broader conceptualization of meaning-making in communication, which is not limited to texts or speech.

The second important tenet of the SSA is 'social context.' In the SSA, a social context is viewed as a box of tools wherein communicators use available semiotic resources for meaning-making. What is to be noted is that a social context does not necessarily confine the ways in which people use semiotic resources, and the shape of the box itself and tools within maintain potentiality for transformation, as a society and its practice may change over a period of time. Accordingly, Jewitt (2009), for instance, argued that social semiotic practices are dynamic open systems rather than static and closed.

The third and fourth tenets of the SSA—'the motivated sign' and 'interest'—focus on the signifier/communicator who, with their own interests, beliefs, and values, decides how to use semiotic resources for a specific communicative purpose within the perceived conventions of a social context (Kress, 1993). A similar concept to these tenets is the notion of 'agency,' which has been receiving significant attention in applied linguistics and other related fields. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is defined as:

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (p. 963)

In summation, the most notable contribution of the SSA is its extensive conceptualization of what communication is and how it is conducted. It includes not only conventional written (i.e., textual) and spoken (i.e., verbal) modes of communication, but also additional modes of communication via visual images and/or other non-human objects, which provide an important theoretical ground for research and teaching practice in increasingly multimodal society.

Rhetorical Genre Theory

Another important theoretical ground for the to-be proposed approach to teaching L2 writing is the rhetorical genre theory, which has been widely adopted for research and education (e.g., Johns, 2002; Macbeth, 2010; Tardy, 2009). Hyland (2007) succinctly defined the genre as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language" (p. 149). Genre theories are not a uniform theory, as there are at least three different schools of genre theory: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Sydney School, and Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) (see Hyon, 1996, for discussions of the three different schools and their orientations). While the notion of genre holds multitudes of perspectives, one common ground for most genre theorists is that they view the genre as a social practice. This view is comparable to the SSA. In relation to writing practice, the genre theories can illuminate our understanding of what it means to be skilled at writing. And in relation to teaching writing, it demystifies our (often) overly simplified understanding of what it means to teach writing—it is certainly not only about teaching linguistic norms and/or conventions.

In relation to the point above, one of the most pervasive and perhaps neglected issues in teaching L2 writing at higher education in Japan is the questionable assumption that there is a uniform agreement to and practice of academic writing regardless of disciplinary differences. The notion of genre, however, challenges the reductionist approach to teaching writing, as one of its essential tenets postulates writing as a form of socially specific communication practice; it is situated in the context where writing happens (Tardy, 2012).

Genre theory also has an important implication for L2 writing development or, more precisely, what constitutes writing ability. Tardy (2012), for example, offers one of the most explicit discussions on the essential components of writing ability from a perspective of genre theory. According to her, writing ability consists of four major domains of genre knowledge: (a) rhetorical knowledge, (b) subject-matter knowledge, (c) formal knowledge, and (d) process knowledge (see Figure 1). She further describes what each of the domains represents as follows:

> A multidimensional model of genre knowledge must include at least a knowledge of the processes of carrying out the genre (process knowledge), the content or subject-matter of the genre (subject-matter knowledge), the rhetorical dynamics at play (rhetorical knowledge), and the conventional discursive and linguistic forms (formal knowledge). (Tardy, 2009 as cited in Tardy, 2012, p. 168)

Figure 1. Writing expertise from a genre perspective. Adapted from Tardy (2012, p. 169).

In relation to the overview of the rhetorical situation presented earlier, what I would like to highlight here again is that the writing expertise encapsulates the rhetorical knowledge as an important domain of knowledge for effective written communication.

Teaching the Rhetorical Situation via Visual Analysis

In this section, I will propose an approach to teaching rhetorical situations to novice L2 writers in an accessible and potentially engaging manner. The approach uses visual analysis as a major activity through which students are expected to learn five different elements of the rhetorical situation to lay a solid foundation to engage in effective L2 writing practice. The section also discusses how the two theories—the SSA and genre—are relevant to the approach as its pedagogical rationale.

Visual Analysis Activity to Develop Rhetorical Knowledge

Visual analysis is widely practiced in multimodal discourse studies, which attempt to analyze and interpret how text and image are integratively used to communicate an intended message (e.g., Dreyfus, Hood, & Stenglin, 2011; Ventola & Guijarro, 2009). Studies conducted from a perspective of the SSA examines, for instance, a product advertisement, by describing both the visual and textual elements present in the advertisement while paying attention to the specific cultural and social context in which the subject of the research is situated (Wong, 2018).

The SSA's basic theoretical tenet functions as a bridge between text and image relationships. However, the analytical approach used in the SSA does not necessarily contain explicit rhetorical analysis. This is where the rhetorical genre theory becomes important, as the goal of the visual analysis in L2 writing classrooms aims to develop L2 writers' rhetorical knowledge; the SSA provides a theoretical backdrop to highlight visual-text connectivity, and the rhetorical genre theory provides an analytical framework to interpret visual and/or textual materials. These two independent yet related theories of communication together provide the theoretical rationale for the use of visual analysis to enhance L2 writers' rhetorical knowledge, which feeds into their L2 writing activity.

Visual Analysis Activity in L2 Writing Classrooms

In rhetorical genre analysis, researchers often use predetermined elements of the rhetorical situation as an analytical framework to interpret a text and/or image. As a potential classroom activity, students can examine different types/genres of visual images from the perspectives of five rhetorical situations—the purpose, audience, stance, genre, and medium. As a practical example, Table 1 below provides concise definitions of each of the five rhetorical elements and guiding questions to conduct a rhetorical analysis of any visual/textual material. After students are introduced to the basic concept of the rhetorical situation and its elements, they can start searching for an image, whether it is digital or printed. Then, they can proceed to analyze the image by using the guiding questions.

In order to further describe the activity, see below for an advertisement for a popular fast-food franchise (Figure 2), and let us consider how each of the guiding questions above can help analyze the rhetorical situations of the advertisement.

The first rhetorical situation is the purpose. In this advertisement, the primary purpose is to promote the McDonald's new delivery service (i.e., McDelivery). Since it is about food delivery service, the expected audience—the second rhetorical situation—is most likely *hungry* customers.

Table 1
List of Rhetorical Situations and Guiding Questions for Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical Situations	Definition	Guiding Questions
Purpose	What authors aim to achieve with the visual/textual materia	What is the intended communicative purpose of the visual/textual material?
Audience	The intended audience of the visual/textual material	Who is the intended audience of the visual/textual material?
Stance	Position of authors in relation to audience, topic, and situational context	How do authors position themselves in relation to audience, topic, and situational context? How do these three elements affect the way in which authors communicate?
Genre	Generally accepted form and category of communication to a specific audience/community	What is the genre of the visual/textual material?
Medium	Platforms in which visual/textual materials are delivered to the audience (e.g., email)	How is the visual/textual material delivered to the audience?
All of the above	The collective impact of the five rhetorical situations upon how authors attempt to communicate their intended message	How do all five components of the rhetorical situation collectively affect the way in which the intended message is communicated?

The third rhetorical situation is the stance. A stance is determined by the interrelations between the author, topic, situational context, and audience. In the center of the image, you can see McDonald's signature nuggets stacked up with a small plastic cup of ketchup—notice one of the nuggets in the front is sliced in half to show that your familiar nugget is ready for your mouth. To slightly left in the image is another signature product—McFries, and behind the nuggets is a large paper bag with three logos—McDelivery and its two associated delivery companies: Uber Eats and DoorDash. Finally, the right to the center is a cup of soda.

This fairly straightforward description of the image above can tell us that the topic is about McDonald's products, which can be delivered to you. In addition, since rhetorical stance is about taking a position to develop an argument to persuade an assumed audience to agree with the position, the stance, in this case, is to persuade the audience (i.e., customers) to use McDelivery service and order food.

As for the situational context, it can be analyzed from both the audience's and rector's situations. Although the image itself does not provide any meaningful indicator of the situation, on the same

Figure 2. A popular fast-food restaurant delivery service advertisement. Reprinted from *McDonald's*, 2020, https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us.html. Copyright [2017–2020] by McDonald's. Reprinted with permission.

website from which the image was retrieved, there was a statement in regard to the ravaging COVID-19 situation. From the statement, it is possible to infer that the new delivery service is advertised in response to the lockdown order being implemented across the nation to contain the wildly spreading epidemic, which serves as a shared social pretext for both the rector and audiences.

Onto the fourth rhetorical situation, the genre of the image is a commercial product and service advertisement. One major convention of the genre is to promote a product or service so that customers purchase it. To signify the aspect of the genre, communicators in this genre often highlight the potential benefits of their product for the audience. In the example presented above, notice the statement on the right-hand side of the image, which states, "Get all your McDonalds' favorites delivered right to your doorstep …" This is one potential benefit of the service—you can receive your "favorites" without ever leaving your home.

The last rhetorical situation is medium. The advertisement above is delivered through a digital medium—the internet. Every single element of the website—the layout, images, and texts, has to be integratively used to communicate to an intended audience. The choice of medium places certain restrictions/constraints on communicators and audiences. For instance, web designing is fundamentally different from designing a physical commercial advertisement (e.g., flyer and poster) without any digital tools. From color scheme to use of images, choice of font types to layout, it is far less (physically) restricted; as far as the platform allows, you can use an indefinite number of colors, text styles, images, and layouts. However, from the audience's standpoint, platforms they use to access the website may differ significantly—they may access the website via smartphones, iPhones, PCs, laptops and/or tablets with a variety of specifications (e.g., screen size and resolution). Under such conditions, communicating to audiences on different platforms may become a cause of concern—the communicator needs to ensure the original website's integrity when it reaches the eyes of different audiences so that the intended message is faithfully communicated to them.

As briefly demonstrated above, a visual analysis from a perspective of rhetorical situations provides us with a systematic means to explore the roles of images and texts in communication, and their intended message (i.e., co-constructed meaning). However, it is important to note that a rhetorical analysis does not always yield the same result—there is a possibility for alternate explanations and interpretations. The visual analysis exercise then is not about finding definitive answers but seeking potential ones with the available information. Such analytical activity can help students to engage deeply with the communicator in the process of critically analyzing an object to understand how an image and/or text co-constructs potential meaning. This particular analytical lens can then be adopted to understand various genres of written texts (e.g., academic essays) with which we, as instructors, often need to help students become familiar. Furthermore, students can use the same analytical lens to better manage their writing with clear directions in regard to what to consider when writing to communicate.

As a summative task of the visual analysis activity, students can share the results in various formats. For example, you may direct your students to give an individual presentation or conduct a group discussion to share their findings.

Table 2 below summarizes a possible step-by-step flow of the visual analysis activity and its associated tasks.

Table 2
The Visual Analysis Activity: Possible Activity Flow

Activity Step	Task Descriptions
Step 1	**Introduction to the rhetorical situation:** it can be done as a reading task, discussion, brief lecture, or all of the above. Explain/Demonstrate how to conduct a rhetorical analysis of visual materials.
Step 2	**Visual analysis preparation:** Assign students to find any visual materials on the web or in the field (e.g., stations, restaurants, and stores). Print out if the material is from the web or take a photo if the material is from the field.
Step 3	**Visual analysis:** Direct students to analyze the material in terms of five rhetorical situations: purpose, audience, stance, genre, and medium.
Step 4	**Post visual analysis:** Give a short presentation, write a brief report/reflection, and/or hold a discussion to share the results of visual analysis.

Voices From Students: Visual Analysis in Action

I conducted an action research study in a freshman ESL composition classroom at a Midwestern university in the US. The purpose of the research was two-fold: one was to examine my own feedback practice, and another was to understand students' perceptions of a visual analysis activity in developing their rhetorical knowledge and writing skills. As for the former, the results have already been reported in the form of a research brief (see Mishima, 2013). The following presents the previously unpublished results from the latter portion of the study, which examined students' responses to a visual analysis activity in relation to their rhetorical knowledge and writing skill development.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from a total of 15 students—14 Chinese and one Indian—in a freshman ESL composition class. In one class session, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to all students and asked for voluntary participation. All 15 students signed a consent form and participated in the study.

Study Context

The freshman ESL composition class required students to attend two 90-min lessons every week during the entire course of the semester. One lesson period was reserved for regular classroom sessions, and the other was for individual writing conference sessions at which each student discussed their writing with the instructor.

In the 1st week, all of my students were introduced to the concept of the rhetorical situation. In addition, as an ice-breaking activity, they were assigned to create and present a slideshow with their personal photos to introduce themselves to the class. In the following week, students presented their slideshows and conducted a rhetorical analysis of their visual products. After the analysis, they were directed to write a short report using the guiding questions presented earlier in Table 1.

Data Collection

In the 3rd week of the individual writing conference session, the researcher conducted a semi-

structured interview with each of the 15 study participants. The primary purpose of the session was to discuss their first writing assignment—personal narrative essay writing. For research purposes, however, the researcher asked the following two questions at the beginning of each writing conference session:

a. What do you think about the concept of the rhetorical situation? Do you think it helps you write better?
b. Is the rhetorical analysis you did of your slideshow helpful in writing your personal narrative essay in any way?

With the permission and consent from all 15 students, the entire conversations during the conference sessions were voice-recorded. Each interview lasted for 5–7 min—a total recording time of 89 min.

Data Analysis

The researcher first screened the entire recorded conversations to identify any portion of the data relevant to the concept of the rhetorical situation and visual analysis activity. After the initial screening, a total of 63 min of recorded data were excluded from analysis, as they did not contain any relevant information to the purpose of the study; the remaining 26 min of interview data were transcribed and analyzed. In order to conduct a systematic analysis of the interview data, the researcher used a form of qualitative thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis contained six major analytical processes: 1. pattern identification, 2. initial coding, 3. theme extraction, 4. theme refinement, 5. theme establishment, and 6. research narrative generation (see Braun & Clarke, 2006 for more information on the thematic analysis). In addition, throughout the analytical processes, the researcher kept a reflexivity journal to keep a record of the analysis. Table 3 below provides a summary of the six phases of analysis and their descriptions.

Table 3
The Thematic Analysis Procedures

Phase	Procedures
1. Pattern Identification	The researcher repeatedly read the transcript to familiarize himself with the data and to find any notable patterns across participants' responses.
2. Initial Coding	The researcher coded the transcript without any top-down categories.
3. Theme Extraction	The researcher repeatedly examined the coded transcript to extract overarching themes of participants' responses.
4. Theme Refinement	The researcher compared and contrasted the themes extracted against the participants' responses. Any themes which show a weak linkage to participants' responses were discarded or subsumed under comparatively more representative themes.
5. Theme Establishment	The researcher examined the refined themes in relation to the purpose of the study and then formalized the descriptions of the themes.
6. Research Narrative Generation	The researcher used the results of the thematic analysis and interview data to generate a research narrative in relation to the purpose of the study.

As the results of the thematic analysis, two overarching themes and four sub-themes were identified as follows:

a. The rhetorical situation and L2 writing
   I. A strategic approach to writing
   II. Viewing writing beyond linguistic norms
   III. Conflict with a prior learning experience and social pressure
b. Visual analysis and L2 writing
   VI. Blurred boundary: visual materials and written texts

Based on the identified themes above, the following section reports and discusses the results of the study with select excerpts from interview data.

Results and Discussion

The Rhetorical Situation and L2 Writing

One of the most recurrent themes emerged out of the interviews with my students centered around the relationship between the notion of the rhetorical situation and L2 writing.

A Strategic Approach to L2 Writing. One immediate pattern that I noticed in their response was that since the introduction of the rhetorical situation, my students seemed to have developed a strategic approach to writing in English:

Excerpt 1

Researcher: What do you think about the concept of the rhetorical situation? Do you think it helps you write better?
Student: Hmm…I think it does.
Researcher: How so?
Student: I didn't know about the rhetorical situation before. When I write [in] English, I now think about different things.
Researcher: What different things?
Student: I mean…there are different things like stance or purpose. I never thought about that before.
Researcher: Ah, you mean the five elements of the rhetorical situation that I talked about last week?
Student: Yes, yes. Before I learned that, I was writing without thinking much. But now I think about it before I begin to write.
Researcher: Does it help you write easier?
Student: Not really (chuckle). But it helps me to think more before I write and choose words carefully. So I think it helps.

As many studies have previously reported (e.g., Lei, 2008), L2 writers use various strategies at the different stages of their writing process. An interesting point to note in reference to the excerpt above is that the newly learned concept—the rhetorical situation—seemed to have led to the development of a new cognitive strategy—"think more before I begin to write." This strategic approach to writing was not aimlessly practiced but was tied to the rhetorical situation, as the student explicitly mentioned the two of them—"stance" and "purpose." Hence, it seems that the concept of the rhetorical situation served as a cognitive framework for the student to premeditate before writing.

Viewing Writing Beyond Linguistic Norms. The learning of the rhetorical situation alternated the way that students view writing. As the vast majority of students in my class were from mainland China, they mentioned how their view on writing changed from what they were taught back in China. Consider the excerpt below—one Chinese student's response during the interview:

Excerpt 2

Researcher: What do you think about the concept of the rhetorical situation? Do you think it helps you write better?
Student: I don't know if it helps, but I see writing in English differently now.
Researcher: Can you tell me more about it?
Student: Before coming to the US, English writing was all about grammar. I had to be always accurate because I needed to write in good English. My teachers were telling me not to make any [grammatical] mistakes.
Researcher: Why did you have to be accurate?
Student: I was learning to write for exams.
Researcher: That's not fun, was it?
Student: No. It was like Math, so I didn't think it was something to enjoy.
Researcher: How do you see writing in English now?
Student: I see it now that it's not just about grammar. I think about my purpose and audience.
Researcher: Does that change the way you write?
Student: I think so. I still care about grammar, but now I think more about what I want to say [write] and how I can best express myself to my audience.
Researcher: Who is your audience?
Student: You and my classmates, but I also think about others.

In Excerpt 2, the Chinese student explicitly mentioned about two elements of the rhetorical situation—purpose and audience. It appears that their view of what it means to write had radically shifted from "all about grammar" to what is more social with the consideration for the audience and purpose of writing. That is, writing was no longer about being accurate for "exams," and their focus was on how to better express themselves in writing to the assumed audience. The student's view is a representative of writing as a social act—an important tenet of the rhetorical genre theory, as presented earlier.

Conflict With a Prior Learning Experience and Current Social Pressure. Whilst learning the rhetorical situation seemed to have influenced the students' perspectives of writing as demonstrated in Excerpt 1 and 2, a few students mentioned a tight grip on their belief that grammatical accuracy proceeds any other aspects of writing.

Excerpt 3

Researcher: What do you think about the concept of the rhetorical situation? Do you think it helps you write better?
Student: I understand the concept, but I feel it's hard to apply it to my writing. I'm used to focusing on grammar, so that's what I do.
Researcher: But don't you think it's important to consider, for example, your audience or purpose of writing?

Student: I think they are important, but grammar is more important. So, in the end, I just can't help worrying about my grammar.
Researcher: Why do you feel that way?
Student: Because that's how I learned English writing back in China. My teacher told me that writing in incorrect English would be embarrassing, and I think so, too. Now that I'm in the US, I feel more strongly to be accurate in my writing.
Researcher: What makes you feel that way?
Student: Well, I heard from my friends [in other classes] some professors don't even look at poorly written papers.
Researcher: What do you mean by "poorly written papers"?
Student: I guess it's just bad papers with many grammar problems.

Writing activity is socio-historically situated; prior writing experience affects the writer considerably (see Prior, 1998 for more discussion on writing history and its impact upon writing). Furthermore, there is no escape from social pressure when writing (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2009). In the case of the student in Excerpt 3, learning of the rhetorical situation did not seem to affect the way they view writing, which is contrastive to the examples in Excerpt 1 and 2. While the student claimed that they understood the concept, their focus was still fixated on grammar—"grammar is more important." Also, they attributed the particular belief to the past learning experience in China, which was further reinforced due to the social pressure that "some professors don't even look at poorly written papers."

The student also mentioned that the concept was "hard to apply." If the student were to accept the new notion and incorporate it into their writing, it would make their writing activity more complicated since consideration for various rhetorical situations demands an explicit awareness of the writer's choice in every aspect of their writing. Perhaps, the student may have perceived the elements of the rhetorical situation as too abstract to guide their writing in a concrete manner. I suspect that the student may have decided to hold onto a comparatively more simplified view of writing—a good piece of writing is free from grammatical errors, which provides a much more concrete pathway to writing, as your attention is dictated solely by grammatical accuracy.

Visual Analysis and L2 Writing

To help students develop their rhetorical knowledge, I assigned students to create a slideshow with their personal photos. After they presented their slideshows, they conducted a rhetorical analysis of their visual product. During the interviews with my students, I attempted to explore if the visual analysis affected their writing in any way. One pervasive theme of their response was an increasingly blurred boundary between visual materials and written texts.

Blurred Boundary: Visual Materials and Written Texts. One of the most interesting outcomes of the visual analysis, which my students reported, was that they began to see textual materials as partly visual in relation to the formatting requirements of the writing assignment.

Excerpt 4
Researcher: Is the rhetorical analysis you did of your slideshow helpful in writing your personal narrative essay in any way?
Student: Yeah, it is.
Researcher: Can you explain how it helps you?

Student: Well, when you told us about the narrative essay [assignment requirements], I was wondering why I had to follow so many rules.
Researcher: What rules?
Student: It's like you have to set your paper in this way that way.
Researcher: You mean like font type and font size?
Student: Yes. I mean, we are writing anyway, so I just wondered why it's so important to make it all generic.
Researcher: Ha Ha (genuine laughter). Now that you mention it, it's true following the rules makes it look all generic.
Student: But I think the visual analysis helped me to see writing is also visual. Like how you format your paper. Like margins and line spacing and…um, font type, and stuff. It is about visuals.
Researcher: That's a very interesting observation.
Student: So, after I realized that, I kind of understand why following those rules are important. I mean…after I formatted my paper, it looked more professional.

The student candidly shared that they felt somewhat troubled with the rather tedious aspects of the assignment. In particular, there were very clear formatting requirements for the assignment following the APA conventions—Times New Roman, 12-point font size, and double-spaced. However, the student's qualm was solved (at least partially) through the visual analysis, which helped them see the importance of the visual aspects of writing—"after I formatted my paper, it looked more professional."

In a similar vein, one of my students' responses indicated the connectivity between three of the rhetorical situations—audience, medium, and format. Consider the excerpt below:

Excerpt 5
Student: I really liked the visual analysis activity. It was fun.
Researcher: Did you learn anything from it to help you write better?
Student: I think I learned that to think about your audience is really important. When I made my slideshow, I carefully picked my photos and organized them.
Researcher: Can you explain a little more about how you made your slideshow and how that's connected to your audience?
Student: Well, my audience was mostly my classmates, and because I was going to present myself, I didn't want to choose embarrassing photos.
Researcher: You said you carefully organized your photos. What do you mean by that?
Student: It's about the layout like where to put my photos in each slide. I also paid attention to how many photos to put in one slide. I wasn't sure about the screen size and resolution [in the classroom], I decided not to put too many photos in one slide, or they may get too small to see. Ah, I thought about the order, too.
Researcher: I see. You mentioned that to think about your audience is important. Does that awareness help you write better?
Student: Yes, totally. It's not just about this class [ESL composition], but in my other classes, professors give us very specific format requirements. I just needed to do what my professors tell me to do. So I wasn't really thinking about why they all tell me to set up my paper to a specific format. But now I see the point.
Researcher: What point?
Student: I think it's about your audience, and the format requirements are there to make sure that

your paper is set up properly for your audience.
Researcher: Can you explain a bit more?
Student: I mean, like who decides the format? Um...I don't know how to explain it. My English is not good.
Researcher: No, your English is fine. Do you mean your audience decides the format?
Student: No, but I mean. It's like localization.
Researcher: Localization?
Student: I noticed there are a lot of Chinese restaurants in the US. But many of them are not authentic Chinese food. They made it so the locals would like it.
Researcher: You mean adapting it to the local taste? So you adapt your writing to your audience?
Student: Yes, you need to use the format normal to them [the audience]. So, it's acceptable.
Researcher: Ah, I think I understand.

This particular student was highly conscious of their audience. When they did the visual analysis activity, they carefully attended to the selection of photos to the layout for the audience's sake. Through which, they also saw the relevancy of the audience to various format requirements they needed to follow in writing papers in my and other classes. In addition, the audience awareness was not only tied to how to present their photos but also on what medium the slideshow was to be presented. The student mentioned that they deliberately chose not to use too many photos in one slide, as they did not know the screen size and resolution of the screen in the classroom. They were fully aware of potential physical constraints brought by the media, which are, in this case, PowerPoint and the projector screen in the classroom. The student's response is demonstrative of their attention to the connection between two different elements of the rhetorical situation—audience and medium.

What I thought particularly interesting was that they mentioned, "you need to use the format normal to them." This view is highly insightful, as it points to formatting conventions, whether it is MLA, APA, or otherwise, are, in fact, a form of cultural practice (see Hyland, 2004). Although I am not certain that they actually saw it as a cultural practice, they were clearly aware that they need to use the format, which is considered "normal" or standard by a specific academic community (i.e., audience). The activity seemed to have functioned as an outlet for them to realize the importance of audience awareness and of the need to follow conventionalized format to communicate to a specific academic audience in an "acceptable" manner.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a visual analysis activity as an approach to facilitating L2 writers' rhetorical knowledge and thereby improving their L2 writing. From the perspectives of two communication theories: the SSA and rhetorical genre theory, it has discussed the obscure boundary between visual and written materials. It also argued that conducting a rhetorical analysis of visual materials potentially leads to the development of L2 writers' rhetorical knowledge, which can be transferred over to their writing activity.

To explore the potential benefits of the visual analysis activity in L2 writing, the paper presented the results of an action research study conducted in a university-level ESL composition classroom in the US. The findings suggest that the visual analysis can be of an asset to L2 writers in developing their rhetorical knowledge and subsequently helping their L2 writing. Through the visual analysis, participants' views of writing transformed substantially. For instance, participants began to view

writing as more of a social activity rather than a means to demonstrate their grammatical accuracy. Some also mentioned the visual analysis of their slideshows helped them see why conforming to academic writing conventions (i.e., format requirements) are necessary.

The visual analysis activity presented in this paper is certainly not a novel approach since a similar analytical framework is often adopted in visual studies, as introduced earlier. In addition, although the number is scarce, some proposed the use of visual rhetoric to facilitate L1 composition instruction (George, 2002; Hill, 2003; see also Hocks, 2003 for more information on Visual Rhetoric). Also, related to the notion of genre, Yasuda (2011) examined the impact of genre-based tasks on Japanese undergraduate writers' genre awareness, linguistic knowledge and writing competence. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no existing research that has actively sought to explore the potential application of visual analysis to facilitate L2 writing.

On the last note, the participants of the study were highly proficient in English compared to most Japanese English learners at the university level. Hence, the applicability and effectiveness of the proposed approach to the Japanese higher education context require further investigation. Future research should explore if the proposed approach can be of any value to Japanese English learners in developing their L2 writing skills in a higher education context.

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