Using the "FAQ" Approach to Student Report Assignments in Academic Writing and EAP Classes

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The rapid increase in EAP and academic writing courses in Japanese universities has outstripped the ability of many students to reach the kind of proficiency necessary to produce written academic discourse of the type usually demanded by an EAP curriculum. In combination with the explosive growth and easy access of the World Wide Web, this development has made plagiarism—especially by intermediate and lower-intermediate students—almost axiomatic when students are asked to produce an academic paper. An approach to academic writing based on the Internet "FAQ" or "Frequently Asked Questions" can help students at the lower proficiency levels produce written work which has an academic component, develops critical thinking skills, but yet is cognitively and intellectually more appropriate to their developmental stage. In comparison with the conventional academic paper, the FAQ approach to academic writing has the potential to markedly reduce the tendency towards plagiarism by intermediate students within an EAP setting.

日本の大学において、EAPやアカデミック・ライティング・コースが急増しつつある一方で、多くの学生は、そのEAPのカリキュラムで通常求められる論文作成に必要な技量に到達できないでいる。ワールドワイドウェブ(WWW)が急速に広まり、また容易にアクセスできることから、とりわけ初中級から中級レベルの学生の間で、論文作成時の盗用がごく一般的となってきている。インターネットのFAQ(よくある質問)をベースにしたアカデミック・ライティングのアプローチは、初中級レベルの学生がアカデミックな要素のある論文やレポートを作成する際の助けとなり、かつクリティカル・シンキング・スキルを向上させる。しかも、知的側面においても彼らの実際のレベルにより適しており、このため、従来の論文の場合よりも盗用がはるかに起こりにくい。

Regular introductory or lower intermediate-level writing classes in Japanese universities can be a challenge for teachers. However as long as assignments require students to focus on basic aspects of their own lives, a typical student will not be in a position to plagiarize to any great extent, and with some guidance will usually be able to resist the temptation to mechanically translate from Japanese. However, once the instructor chooses, or is asked, to teach writing that goes beyond topics with a clear personal dimension, the work of students becomes increasingly problematic and those instructors responsible for content and/or academic writing classes, find a host of problems, of which plagiarism and direct translation are among the most common. The table below attempts to break down the types of writing assignments that might be given to EFL students at various levels in a Japanese university and—based on the author's twelve years of experience in a wide range of settings—suggests the likelihood of students choosing to plagiarize or translate directly:

Table 1. Types of Writing Common in Lower Intermediate (A) and Intermediate or Upper Intermediate (B) Composition Classes and the likelihood of Plagiarism (on a 1-5 scale)

Type of Writing	A	B	Comments
Personal Writing: Interests, activities or experiences; Journal writing, blogs, e-mail exchanges	1	1	Minimal or no plagiarism
Creative and Narrative Writing: Short stories, personal anecdotes etc	1	1	Plagiarism unlikely but machine translation is possible
Book or Movie Review: Summarizing and offering opinions about books or movies	3	2-3	Possible to copy information from numerous Web sites
Descriptive Essay: Explaining how to do something	2-4	2-3	Can be designed to make plagiarism difficult
Academic: Writing about issues, events, people, problems etc., in which factual information is presented, explanations given, and comparisons made	5	4	High probability of copying because of difficult level and array of available info

Key: A = Lower Intermediate students B = Intermediate students
1= Plagiarism is impossible or highly unlikely
2= Plagiarism is rare but occurs with less diligent students
3= Plagiarism is not routine but quite common among less diligent students
4= Plagiarism of some kind is common though not universal
5= Plagiarism is routine even among diligent students

As the table suggests, a composition teacher who focuses on process writing with a personal dimension—clearly the most appropriate type of writing for lower-intermediate students—should not have to face any widespread systematic problems with plagiarism and direct translation from Japanese. To the extent that these problems do arise, the solution usually lies in carefully selecting the type of personal writing that is assigned and giving students a chance to develop their work through process writing with adequate brainstorming, peer editing and feedback, and multiple drafts and rewriting (Furneaux, 1993). Even "False Beginner" Japanese university students, given clear enough guidelines, will usually have enough grounding from their high school English education to write a paragraph or two about their immediate lives or everyday experiences and many can write a short report about a hobby, an area of interest, or a recent activity. This is not to say that teaching lower-level composition classes in the Japanese context is anything but a highly challenging and labor-intensive task for any instructor. However, as long as the main focus is

on the personal dimension, there are a plethora of excellent academic articles and books available with ideas and strategies that can be used to supplement a growing body of well-designed textbooks. Furthermore, in recent years numerous online writing laboratories and workshops, such as Purdue University's OWL and the University of Kansas' Writing center (See Appendix 1), have become easily accessible and collectively, these contain a wealth of step-by-step instructions, worksheets, and assignment guidelines that can help the instructor develop these skills. These resources are particularly useful for those teaching content and academic writing classes. However, being largely designed for native speakers and advanced ESL students, they do not necessarily address the particular problems that many Japan-based academic writing instructors face.

Academic and EAP Writing Classes: The Japan Context

When carefully designed for students who are ready for, and can directly benefit from it, traditional academic writing and higher-level content classes requiring an academic report are a valuable and necessary component of any good university EFL curriculum. However, for such classes to work effectively, students should ideally be at or close to the upper-intermediate level. As such, one would expect such classes to be relatively rare in Japanese higher institutions where upper intermediate and advanced students make up just a few percent of those taking mandatory English writing classes. A look at the curriculums of several humanities and English faculties in the Kansai area, however, suggests that EAP and content-based teaching of rather academic subject matter is quite routine, and in some cases mandatory, for those majoring in English and some other disciplines within the humanities (Asaoka & Usui, 2003). While one reason for this may be the tendency of native speakers to create content classes that reflect their own personal interests or political views, the main reason is a byproduct of pressure for educational reform from the Ministry of Education. Anxious to bolster their image as serious institutions capable of producing students who can study overseas, administrators and educators in many of these institutions or Faculties have created academic writing and other EAP content classes that are either mandatory or recommended for English majors, often regardless of the students' actual levels, or the likelihood of them studying overseas (Asaoka & Usui, 2003). This in turn has produced a mismatch between the writing tasks given to students and their ability to produce academic discourse at the level that instructors hope or expect of them.

As Fig 1 suggests, the main problems facing content or academic writing instructors are the difficulties intermediate students experience when attempting the rigorous challenge of writing a structured and expository essay or report with relevant citations and references. In a study of first year intermediate-level students required to take a one year intensive EAP course, Asaoka & Usui (2003) found that students ran into a host of problems with planning and organizing their work. Students were "expected to formulate the cognitive framework of an academic discourse with the expectation of transferring it to writing tasks in other disciplines" (p.164). This extremely challenging task led many students to suffer from writers block, a problem which

the authors suggest was a result of the demands of taking on "two intellectual tasks simultaneously: writing critically and writing in an academic discourse" (p.165). It should be noted that the students in this study had an average TOEFL score of 506—well above the average score of English majors in most Japanese universities. Despite this, they had great difficulty producing work that matched the goals of the instructors and official curriculum. With lower proficiency students, the gap between curriculum goals and student output can become almost insurmountable, leading to work that falls into one of the following two patterns:

> (a) writing that reflects L1 patterns of discourse and/or the *kansoubun* (personal reflection) style of writing that is a common feature of high school written work
>
> (b) reports containing sections that are directly copied from a Web site or published source.

Much has been written on the contrast between Japanese and western written discourse and rhetorical patterns. In his comparison of Japanese and English writing styles or "genres" among first year Junior College students, Jarrell (1998) suggests that the Japanese *kansoubun*—in which students write their personal impressions of and reaction to an issue, event, or other experience is a "necessarily reactive discourse." As such he argues, it "does not prepare them for the kind of factual writing that western students are expected to use in academic settings" (p.3). He goes on to suggest that "because the system of English secondary education in Japan seldom if ever requires students to engage in writing tasks above the level of the sentence," most high school students entering university "lack one of the fundamental tools of academic writing, organization" (p.3) As a result, when given a non-personal assignment that has an analytical or academic imperative, even intermediate level students will tend to full back on an approach that is largely a restatement or description supplemented by some vague or generalized personal reactions. While this arguably could be considered a reasonable first step, it falls far short of any kind of logical exposition, analysis, or evaluation of differing viewpoints. Perhaps more serious than this kind of deficiency, however, is the problem of students copying directly from a secondary source.

While some EAP proponents may continue to argue that content-based and academic writing classes are still appropriate for Japan-based intermediate students, few if any instructors can accept direct plagiarism. Indeed, in the non-ESL academic world, a number of university programs use commercial websites such as turnitin.com and ithenticate.com to check student work and, in some cases, this has been extended to the EFL context, too. Yet, with L1 plagiarism still relatively acceptable in some contexts in Japanese academia, it is clear that, when faced with difficult academic content in their L2, many Japanese EFL students, like their counterparts from other cultures, will not hesitate to plagiarize, even when warned against doing so by instructors. This is particularly the case among students with some knowledge of Web resources. In an online discussion of his experiences of plagiarism with Chinese, Saudi Arabian, and other nationality ESL students at the University of Strathcylde, Morgan (cited in Stanley, 2002) suggests a reason for this practice. "What [teachers] are dealing with here" he argues "is largely a case of students whose

linguistic competence simply is not sufficient to address the course they have signed on for in the language in which it is taught"(Para. 4). If this is true in an ESL context among long-term overseas students who have passed some kind of standardized test to enter a program, it is entirely logical to assume that it would be even more routine for students at a lower level studying in Japan. Given the macro-educational tendencies and pressures described earlier and the resultant problems that occur when EAP and academic writing are so broadly and uncritically adopted by universities, how can writing instructors charged with teaching academic writing classes to intermediate students assist them in the production of written work with some kind of academic and expository component? One method, designed by the author, is through the so-called FAQ.

The FAQ as an alternative to the Academic Report

As any Web user knows, FAQs are lists of "Frequently Asked Questions" with the corresponding answers to those questions. FAQ writers on any topic must try to anticipate or guess the likely questions of someone who does NOT know much about the topic, issue, or procedure being discussed. As such, it usually begins with short, basic questions designed to be understood by those with little or no background knowledge, followed by more detailed questions that are anticipated by the writer based on experience or logical thinking. In some cases, questions on one subtopic can be grouped together using a note-style layout, i.e., Question 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, followed by 2.1, 2.2, and so on. FAQ questions are, by definition, limited in scope. They do not attempt to answer big complex questions, but instead posit short and simple answers that then build together to develop a larger answer to a question or explanation of a phenomena. It is for this reason that they can be readily applied to the EFL content or academic writing classroom. Figure 2 shows some of the differences between conventional reports and the FAQ approach. As the chart suggests, conventional academic reports usually involve a paragraph structure in which the writer logically builds up an argument or explanation, introduces evidence at the appropriate point, and then works towards a conclusion. By contrast, FAQs focus mostly on the process of posing basic questions and finding relevant data. Instead of building up and developing an argument in a systematic way—a difficult undertaking for many students, even in their L1—the FAQ merely requires the student to identify what information or explanation a reader would need in order to understand an issue or problem. The main pedagogical goals thus become the development of critical thinking skills involved in asking logical and appropriate questions and the research skills involved in searching for data using keywords in search engines. From the writing or language point of view, students develop the all-important skill of paraphrasing and restating, a skill that is rarely taught systematically at the school level in Japan. These are considerably more appropriate and manageable for intermediate students than the academic expository and persuasive skills that higher-level students may need in an intensive ESL setting. They are also of more interest to most students since they involve Web searching through using search engines and the process of extracting the key data, rather than the more intellectual discipline of shaping arguments from conflicting sources.

Figure 2. Comparison of Conventional Academic and FAQ Approach for Expository and Persuasive Types of Writing Assignments

Comparison Category	Conventional Academic-Style Report or Essay	FAQ Report
Goals and Purpose	Explain or prove something through presentation of data or evidence	Pose basic questions, the answers to which can help provide insight into an issue or problem.
Structure	Paragraphs: Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. Paragraphs usually focus on one point with supporting evidence	Question and Answer. Answers can range from a few words to one paragraph
Writing Style	Analytical with logical order and conclusion	Primarily factual with answers being mostly paraphrasing of research data
Quotations	Used to back up arguments	Not usually necessary as emphasis is on paraphrasing
References	Follows academic guidelines—APA or other styles	Mostly short Internet citations which can be taught quickly

After choosing topics or issues that were manageable in size and likely to be researchable using web-based sources, students in an Academic Writing students were given the following set of guidelines and a model report.

Figure 3. FAQ Writing Guidelines

- Think about whom you are writing this FAQ for and how much they already know.
- Brainstorm and write a list of very basic questions about the topic or issue.
- Put the questions in order from General or Basic to Specific or Detailed.
- Answer your own questions in a few sentences. Looking at the answers, decide which questions will probably require additional questions (sub or follow-up questions) and answers.
- Write the additional questions and answer them.
- Read through your work to decide if you have missed something, and if necessary rearrange the order and add or remove questions.
- Make a list of keywords to be used in search engines.
- Find 5-10 articles and other written data and save them, or if necessary print them out.
- Skim the articles and identify the most useful information.
- Refine or reword your questions based on the information you have found.

- Begin writing answers to your questions without using any original phrases from the articles or data you have found.

Although students may have seen an actual Internet FAQ in Japanese, the guidelines above were accompanied by a model FAQ outline. The topic was one that was used with students in an academic seminar entitled "Understanding Globalization." By focusing on a well-known popular culture topic (*Starbucks* in Japan), the instructor was able to solicit answers of some kind without any prior student research, thus allowing learners to quickly grasp the concept. Once they had generated the basic questions in a class discussion, they were given time to find data to back up their educated guesses, as well as to answer the more difficult or follow-up questions, such as questions 4.2, 5.4, and 8.

Figure 4. FAQ Model Given to Students

Topic: *Starbucks*

Main Question, Issue, or Problem: Why has *Starbucks* become so popular in Japan? Is it popular with everyone and if not, why not?

1. What kind of shop or restaurant is *Starbucks*? [Chain restaurant]
2. When did it come to Japan, and how many shops are there now? [1996: over 300]
3. Are there *Starbucks* shops all over Japan, or only in big cities? [One in every major town]

4.1 Is *Starbucks* more popular in Japan than in other countries? [Yes, it is the second biggest market]

4.2. Why is *Starbucks* especially popular in Japan? [Research using keywords "*Starbucks,*" "popularity," "Japanese customers," "history," etc]

5.1 Who is *Starbucks* most popular with? [teenagers, college students, younger people, coffee lovers]

5.2 What are some things these people like about *Starbucks*? [Atmosphere, novelty, non-smoking, sofas]

5.3 What does *Starbucks* do that is different from other coffee shops? [Range of coffee, special cups, refill system, food]

5.4 Are there any people or groups who do not like *Starbucks*? [maybe smokers, older people? Research using keywords "*Starbucks,*" "anti," "oppose," "negative," "campaign against"]

5.5 Why do these people or groups dislike *Starbucks*? [No smoking. Older people, especially men prefer local coffee shops where they know the owner?]

6. Who are *Starbucks*' main rivals in Japan? [*Dotour*, *Seattle's Finest*]
7. How do the rivals to *Starbucks* compete against it? [Imitation, lower prices, smoking permitted]
8. What is the likely future of *Starbucks*? [Research using keywords "*Starbucks*, Sales, Business, Trends, Rivals"]

9~X. Additional questions

Conclusion

The recent trend towards making EAP and academic writing a regular component of mainstream English curriculums in Japanese universities has numerous implications. Without considerable rethinking and reformulation, it may be a disservice to students who are far from ready to undertake the rigors of academic discourse in their L2. In the face of this trend, educators in Japan need to find ways to bridge the conceptual and cognitive gaps described in this paper by designing research and writing assignments that allow students to slowly develop the skills involved in persuasive or expository writing. The FAQ approach to report writing offers students an opportunity to conduct real research and confront issues without become stymied or bogged down by the demands of academic report writing that are more appropriate for upper level students or those writing in their L1.

References

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Appendix 1. Online Writing Labs

Purdue University and the University of Kansas have created two of the best free online writing resources for university students on the Web. See

- Purdue Online Writing Laboratory: <owl.english.purdue.edu>
- University of Kansas Writing Center: <writing.ku.edu>

Appendix 2. Example of Student FAQ Outline

Topic: Rika-chan doll

Main Question: Why is Rika-chan more popular in Japan than Barbie?

1. What is Rika-chan [Japanese doll]
2. Who made it and when was it released? [Takara Co. 1967]
3. Why was it made? [Barbie was popular in America. Japanese company made it for Japanese girls.]

4.1 What was different between the appearance of Rika-chan and Barbie [Hair, body shape, clothes]

4.2. What was different between the character of Rika-chan and Barbie? [Rika-chan's height, hobby, weight, birthday, favorite color and character, family size was fixed in detail. Barbie did not have decided information]

5. 1 How popular was Rikan-chan? How many dolls have been sold? [Rika-chan was Japan's popular doll. 46 million dolls have been sold from 1967]

5.2 Why was Rika-chan so popular with girls? [She is a pretty schoolgirl, so girls feel close to her. She has detailed information about her favorite things. There are many accessories to collect]

5.3 Why is Rika-chan more popular than Barbie? [Barbie was like an adult and too old. Her legs were long. Japanese girls wanted a young doll. Rika-chan was a girl-11 years old]

6. In what ways are Barbie and Rika-chan similar? [Both of them are popular for a long time. Mothers give them to daughters. Rare doll was bought for 50,000 yen by collector. Many old Barbie dolls are collected.]

7. What is the future of Rika-chan? [She will be popular but these days girls like television games.]