"I Think, Therefore I Write": Structured Reaction Papers As A Focused Approach to Writing in Academic and Non-academic Contexts

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Following brief introductions to the authors' academic context and the general literature on reaction papers, this paper introduces a novel approach to the reaction paper, the Academic Reaction Paper (ARP). It is argued that ARPs are a valuable training tool developing both criticality of thought and writing skills that are applicable to a wide variety of contexts, academic and non-academic, and levels of student need. It is hoped this paper will provide impetus for the further development and adoption of ARPs in second language writing programmes.

この論文は、まず著者が教鞭をとるアカデミックコンテキストを簡単に述べたあと、リアクションペーパーの新しいアプローチ(ARP)を紹介する。ARPは批判的思考とライティングの手段として、アカデミックな状況をはじめとするさまざまなコンテキストにふさわしく、またどんな学生のレベルにも応用できる。第2外国語のライティングプログラムにおいてARPがさらに幅広く用いられることに、この論文が役立つことを望んでいる。

This paper seeks to examine one tool in the writing teacher's arsenal, the reaction paper, detailing attempts to clarify and implement reaction papers in the classroom. Importantly, though the authors themselves teach on an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme with highly motivated students, they have used and developed materials incorporating the ideas in this paper with students of widely differing levels of ability and motivation in a number of universities. It is therefore argued that the concept of the Academic Reaction Paper (ARP) is one widely applicable and beneficial across differing levels of English ability and in contexts that are not primarily focused upon *academic* writing skills. Reaction papers, in their interpretation as ARPs, provide a pedagogical approach to the development of critical thinking, reading, and writing skills arising from the authors' professional reflection on their own classroom practice, their own perceptions of student need in the particular academic context in which they find themselves. ARPs remain, however, applicable and beneficial to the wider language learning community.

Authors' Academic Context

Both authors of this paper teach on an intensive EAP programme at a Japanese university. This is a general, topic-based programme that seeks to integrate academic reading and writing skills. For many years the *five-paragraph essay* (Gallagher &

McCabe, 2002) common to college composition courses in North America has provided the means to accomplish this. However, in practice, many essays received displayed little or no evidence of student engagement with the ideas contained in assigned readings, merely presenting the students' own views and perspectives on an issue with little if any reference to the readings or support for claims made.

Students lacked awareness of the academic task confronting them, in particular the connection between reading, reflection, and writing. Whilst the students emphasised the final form of their work, the essay, at the expense of content, we perceived their work to lack academic rigor and content, being merely *statements of opinion* thinly stretched over an *essay structure*. Additionally, where use of material from the assigned texts was made, it was frequently insufficiently focused and documented. The need was for students not only to bring their own ideas and experiences to their writing, but also the ideas they had read and, most importantly, their reactions to those ideas, the comparisons, contrasts, and criticisms they felt able to make. The need was for a different type of writing assignment, one that would specifically focus attention upon and more actively require students to make reference to their readings (Fearn & Bayne, 2003).

Four prominent features of the essays assigned in the authors' academic context can be identified. Students are expected to demonstrate:

1. Knowledge of readings—especially extraction of the main points

2. Thought given to readings

3. Awareness of and ability to use academic parlance or genre, etc.

4. Ability to write in a controlled, focused, and concise manner

To address these needs a compact writing task was sought that:

a. could be carried out a number of times within a term

b. would permit quick formative feedback

c. would build student awareness of the nature of academic English and

d. would develop a range of *micro* level skills, equipping students with a *battery* of skills appropriate to the demands of academic writing.

The Reaction Paper: An imprecisely-defined task

The reaction paper is found in a wide range of academic disciplines and is also referred to as a *response paper*, a *reflection paper*, a *reflection and reaction* paper or a *summary and response* paper. Although each of these is imprecisely defined, all stress the notion of personal response. As Swales and Feake (1986) note, the reaction paper is "a more personal and informal style of writing" wherein "students are encouraged to draw on their own experiences, feelings, and ideas as well as make methodological and analytical comments" (p. 148). Based on a cross-section of the numerous Internet sites referring to *reaction paper*, among the possible elements recognized are:

- an emotional, informal, personal response, reaction, or reflection

- a certain level of analysis

- limited summary of source (sometimes not required)

- limited length (almost universal, 1~2 pages being the norm)

- fairly rigid and short time to submission

- multiple papers in a semester

- one-off drafts

- no agreement on academic features

In the authors' EAP classrooms, the informality and personal nature of reaction papers noted above was felt to be inappropriate to the academic needs of our students. Instead, a more prescriptive approach was felt to be required, one emphasizing both the development of critical thinking skills and the development of writing skills appropriately academic in style, format, and convention. Hence the preference for the term *Academic* Reaction Paper (ARP).

ARPs do utilize some of the components and parameters listed above. They (i) react to something (ii) include a summary of source material, (iii) are relatively short, (iv) are set and due at relatively short intervals, and (v) are one-draft multiple tasks during a semester. However, ARPs are more formalized, seeking specifically to promote criticality of thought via reaction, and also to highlight and hone features of academic formality.

Components and Features of Academic Reaction Papers

As interpreted and applied by the authors, an ARP should consist of two components—a *Summary* and a *Discussion*. In the Summary the student's sole task is to identify and present the main ideas of a text, and in so doing, to refrain from personal comment. In the Discussion the student analyzes, comments on, and reacts to an idea or ideas *within* the text—the logic, support, evidence, and bias therein. That is, the student is expected to demonstrate in a logical and reasoned manner the application of critically reflective thought to the *ideas* in a reading, *engagement* with an issue *and the ideas of others,* not simply reiterating the content of a text, or expressing his or her own views on a topic. By separating the tasks in this way, the student is presented with a far more manageable series of writing tasks than the complexity of organization and thought required of a full essay. The specific requirements of each stage are clearly understood and the specific skills focused upon easily identified. Furthermore, in both the Summary and the Discussion the students receive practice in skills applicable across academia and also more widely in their daily lives, both now and in the future.

In addition to the two main components of Summary and Discussion, ARPs from the outset stress academic conventions. It is argued that many of these can be easily introduced during the early stages of academic writing and that the sooner students understand their use and necessity, the sooner and more easily students are able to incorporate these into, and to the benefit of, their own written work. ARPs therefore not only follow standard

academic conventions, they specifically emphasize their use. In different academic contexts the conventions or elements the teacher chooses to stress may vary widely. This is one of the strengths of ARPs. They do permit the teacher to fine tune the expectations of particular writing assignments, to focus upon different features, academic or non-academic at different times, and to regularly monitor student need and development. Among the features introduced during the course of the academic year in the authors' classrooms are the following:

1. Cover or Title Page

2. Running headers and page numbers

3. Subtitles

4. Standardized typed page formatting, font size, etc.

5. Paraphrasing

6. Use of quotations

7. Citations

8. Vocabulary use associated with using sources or authors (e.g. *states*, *argues*, etc.)

9. Hedging (e.g. *it seems to be...*, *it appears that…*, *it could be said…*)

10. Vocabulary use—*upgrade* and *activate* (e.g. *big* ➜ *significant*)

11. Cohesive and coherence devices (e.g. transitions, conjunctions, etc.)

12. Works Cited page

For an example of the use of the above in a student ARP please refer to Appendix 1.

ARPs perform the vital role of raising student awareness of the nature and conventions of academic writing in a more focused way than is achieved by writing only one or two essays a term. Multiple ARPs provide a series of short and focused writing tasks with specific learning goals easily comprehended by the student. Importantly, they focus student attention on the essential requirement to relate writing to reading, to text and author(s), and not solely the expression of their own views on an issue. ARPs are thus a valuable tool in the teacher's arsenal, one raising student awareness of, and ability to use, features of critical thinking and writing common to a range of contexts.

Academic Conditions

From the outset it was felt that skills should develop over a number of ARPs rather than through the repeated reworking of one paper. Students are provided with detailed guidelines and a model ARP. By doing so, students new to the demands of formal academic writing are able to rapidly raise their level of awareness. The demands made are progressive, building upon previous work. Importantly, a strict word limit is set of roughly 350-380 words, the Summary comprising 100-120 words. The overall limit may vary upwards according to the number of sources, the depth of Discussion, and the level of student ability. In the first term students redraft and resubmit ARPs following peer review and conferences with their teacher. Thereafter ARP submissions are *one-off*, though students are expected to review each other's work. Submission dates can be quite close together, requiring students to be organized and effective with their time.

One feature of ARPs that does need to be stressed is that they are in the main based on common readings, that is, all students react to the same reading. In the case of models this permits the students to compare different models to the same original text. In the case of student work, they are able to directly compare their own work with that of other students, having the same reading in common. They are thus much better able to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses in their own and other students' work. Models also allow for analysis-type activities and, where multiple models are provided, allow for comparisons to be made. Finally, models can be tailored to focus on specific academic conventions and stylistic features, and these can be added to over subsequent ARPs.

ARPs lend themselves well to peer review. In most cases students have the reading in common, making a peer review of the Summary relatively easy. A review by a student of the Summary of another student also allows for reflection on his or her own attempt. This is arguably of even greater value in the Discussion, students encountering points of view different from their own, and possibly conflicting, deeper levels of critical thinking. Via peer review the student can, in fact, compare and evaluate his or her own attempts. In seeking to develop student critical thinking skills, we owe it to them to provide opportunities to perceive critical thinking in action. Peer reviews, in the same way as model ARPs, perform a valuable formative role.

Non-Academic Focus: Interest, choice and level of difficulty

In the authors' context an early version of an ARP brief required a summary and discussion of information provided by an audio-visual source, an on-line academic article, and a novel excerpt. A more recent exercise involved students in a library search in which they were required to find definitions of a key term (*race*) using multiple sources. Within the EAP context described in this paper, students have written ARPs on i) the work of one writer, ii) works by two writers, and iii) works by three or more writers.

ARPs, however, permit the teacher to appeal directly to the interests, requirements, and ability level of students in *any* context. Source materials can be selected with student interests specifically in mind. For example, one of the authors used ARPs specifically for science students studying the environment. The demands made can be easily adjusted (length, number of sources, and level of difficulty) to meet individual levels of ability. Materials used by the authors have included audio-visuals, excerpts from fiction, short issue-specific quotations, news articles, single paragraphs, sub-sections within an article or chapter of a book, and full-length articles. To illustrate our point about the flexibility of ARPs, at the authors' 2004 JALT conference workshop, a menu from MacDonald's, a Beatles' song ("She's Leaving Home"), a predominantly visual flyer for an art exhibition, and a *mikan* orange were used. Appendix 2 provides an overview of potential sources for ARPs. It is this versatility of ARPs that makes them an invaluable teaching aid. The teacher is able to appeal to the specific interests of students, focus upon particular skills and learning outcomes, and adjust the level of demand placed upon students as they develop and progress.

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Conclusion

ARPs recognize the need for and provide *discrete practice* in features of writing, academic and non-academic, that are perhaps too easily overlooked when faced with the demands of longer pieces of writing, such as the essay. They serve as training exercises introducing, raising awareness of, and exercising micro level skills associated with the writing process. Importantly, by asking for a cognitive reaction, students are forced to provide one, to exercise their critical thinking, reading, and writing abilities. More specifically, *academic* reaction papers develop competencies that can be incorporated and coordinated together into full essays and other academic writing genres. In a *non-academic* context the ARP can serve as a vehicle for more basic training in a wide variety of writing skills and can be geared to suit both student interest and curricula requirements.

References

Fearn, F., & Bayne, K. (2003) An Introduction to 'Academic Reaction Papers'. *Language Research Bulletin*. International Christian University. No. 18. pp. 19-45.

Gallagher, C., & McCabe, A. (2002). College Composition. *Macmillan English Dictionary*. pp. 8-9. Oxford: Macmillan. LA.

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (1994). *Academic Writing For Graduate Students*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Appendix 1

Sample Student ARP Illustrating Use of Basic Academic Conventions

Examples of the following conventions are identified by the corresponding number in the ARP below:

1. Cover or Title Page

2. Header with name and page numbers

3. Subtitles

5. Standardized typed page formatting, font size, etc.

4. Paraphrasing

5. Use of quotations

6. Citations

7. Vocabulary use associated with using sources or authors (e.g. states, argues, etc.)

8. Hedging

9. Vocabulary use – upgrade and activate (e.g. big, significant)

10. Cohesive and coherence devices (e.g. transitions, conjunctions, etc.)

11. Works Cited page

* As this is in its original form it contains grammatical mistakes

[1]

A Reaction to Andersen's "Cues Of Culture: The Basis Of Intercultural Differences In Nonverbal Communication"

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Times 12, 1.5 Spacing[4]
Contained in Summary[5]

[2]Yamada 1

Summary[3]

In his article, Andersen gives "Uncertainty" as one dimension of cultural differences, which largely[10] influences the behavior of people. He defined[8] "high levels of uncertainty avoidance"[6] and "low levels of uncertainty avoidance" (Andersen 126)[7] by people's tolerance of ambiguity. He stated that people who have high levels of uncertainty avoidance try to find clear answers and people who have low levels of uncertainty avoidance apt to accept more vague[10] answers. Furthermore[11], by referring Hofstede[7] (1982), he gives examples of countries higher in uncertainty avoidance and that lower in uncertainty avoidance.

Discussion[3]

Though his analysis of uncertainty as a dimension culture thought to be proper[10] and helpful for researching intercultural problems, his perceptions about Japan seems inaccurate[10]. He mentions[8] to Japan as one of "Countries with the highest levels of uncertainty avoidance"[6] (127). However, it is often said that Japanese uses ambiguous expressions and does not state clear opinion, does not show their emotion. These characteristics do not fit his description of culture with high levels of uncertainty avoidance; "seek clear, black and white answers" (126)[7]. It also goes against Hofstede's description that those culture apt to display emotions (127). It seems[9] that there are some features he describe which apply to Japanese. For instance[11], he mentions to intolerance of nonconformity and codifier of nonverbal behavior (127). However, the former cannot be the mutual feature of Japanese culture and culture with high levels of uncertainty avoidance. Since it is based on Hofstede's research of countries which including Japan as "higher in uncertainty avoidance". It is right that the feature fit Japanese culture. In addition[11], as Andersen himself says, the latter is mere a hypothesis. It seems that his recognition about Japan mostly rely on statements of Hofstede. Therefore[11], it could be said[8] that his research is not accurate enough.

Works Cited [12]

Andersen, Peter "Cues Of Culture: The Basis Of Intercultural Differences In Nonverbal Communication". From <u>Intercultural Communication: A Reader</u> (Ninth Edition) Wadsworth Publishing Company. (in <u>ELP Reader</u>, 2003)

Appendix 2

Range of Possible Academic & Non-Academic ARPs

	1-3 academic articles	
Section of an academic article/book		Advertisement or Flyer
Letter to an Editor	↑	Photograph or Work of Art
3~4 definitions of a term (e.g. 'race')	↖	Song or Poem
Novel (or Movie)	Summary - & / or + + & / or - Discussion	1-2 Newspaper articles
News item + Documentary	↙	Set of 3~4 quotations on one issue
Combination of sources: Article + TV Documentary (in Japanese) + Novel excerpt	↓	Presentation or Lecture
	Non-fiction Book	