

Teaching academic writing: Form and process

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Teaching academic writing to Japanese learners can be a tricky task: Often, neither the teacher nor the students are fully committed to it. Depending on the requirements of their courses, instructors may have to teach writing at some point in their university teaching careers. This paper deals with some of the common challenges faced by teachers in Japan today. Chiefly, it will address how to structure an academic writing course for learners who may not have the language skills and motivation to deal with such a course. The main problems faced by the author while teaching the course described here included how to get students to narrow their thesis statements down to a manageable theme, and teaching learners how to successfully conduct primary and secondary research. These problems were addressed while attempting to keep students interested in the stated goal of the course: to learn how to write an academic style paper in English.

The underlying reasons for teaching academic writing to Japanese students may be as varied as the techniques employed by teachers in such a course. The ones described in this paper were employed to benefit students going on an eight-month study-abroad program to the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada, as part of their four-year degree program at a top-tier private university in the Kansai region. The steps outlined in this paper can be utilized by teachers at Japanese universities to ensure they approach teaching academic writing courses with their learners' specific needs and goals in mind.

Background

It is well known that reading and grammar are given more importance than speaking, listening and writing in Japanese junior and senior high schools (Aiga, 1990). This poses a problem for students when they enter university, as they do not have the requisite skills to cope with the writing courses they will have to take. In fact, due to the great emphasis placed on writing at U.S. and Canadian universities (Fujioka, 2001), the conduct of writing classes in Japan needs to be reevaluated. Most Japanese learners learn how to write in junior and senior high school from Japanese teachers of English by using grammar and translation-based methods (Hirayanagi, 1998); methods that later pose problems for students when they enter either a Japanese university or a Western university where English is the language of instruction. This leaves those entering university greatly unprepared to write academic papers in English. True preparedness for a study-abroad experience at a university where English is the language of instruction – the goal of an increasing number of Japanese high school and university students in recent years (Drake, 1997; Heffernan, 2003, 2005) – means that our curricula should include courses on how to prepare an academic style paper in English.

In order to adequately prepare our students for the rigors of a study-abroad program, or merely for the opportunity to learn how to write in an academic style, writing courses at Japanese universities should reflect this type of instruction. Indeed, if students are to become fully proficient in the target language, they need to successfully acquire all four language skills (Brown, 2000).

Writing instruction in Japanese high schools

In Japan, secondary school students are not taught the English writing skills that are considered the norm for those involved in teaching academic writing. That is, Japanese students are not taught valuable skills such as how to write for their audience, write numerous drafts of their work, conduct peer reviews and carry out primary and secondary research. According to The 24th Research Group of the Institute for Research in Language Teaching (2001), some of the problem lies in the fact that most textbooks produced for junior high school and high school students are grammar-based and encourage this type of teaching. Thus, by the time students enter university in Japan, they lack the experience in writing they need to successfully complete their coursework.

The academic writing course outlined in this paper attempted to teach students the correct method of approaching and executing academic writing tasks in English. The course was run for three hours a week and in an environment that facilitated communication between the teachers and students – the kind of setting advocated by Xu (1985) and Zamel (1985).

A specific example

The course described in this paper dealt with the common problems described above by eliminating the following factors: lack of motivation to study writing; lack of interest in learning how to write effectively in English; and how to successfully navigate the pitfalls students face when conducting research. Namely, students were required to take an academic writing course in preparation for an eight-

month study abroad program at UBC. If they wanted to be successful in their preparations for UBC, they had to be successful in the pre-departure writing course. The students were chosen for the UBC program based on a number of factors including an application process that included writing an English essay on why each student wanted to participate in the program, an interview with both a Japanese and a native English-speaking teacher, and a TOEFL score of at least 500 on the Paper Based Test. In all, more than three hundred applications are received annually for the program. However, only 100 applicants are successful in making the final cut, thus progressing on to the actual academic writing preparation course. The stated goal of the writing course outlined here was to prepare students to write well-researched academic papers that could stand up to the scrutiny of the standards used by the instructors at UBC.

The writing course was run twice a week for two 90-minute classes over a fifteen-week semester. One of the requirements for passing the course (and thus participating in the trip to Vancouver) was that students had to attend 90% of the classes, successfully complete three expository papers and make one oral presentation on the topic of the final paper. The purpose of completing these tasks was to prepare students for two of the courses they would actually be taking at UBC that would utilize similar methods.

From the beginning, students were encouraged to think outside of the traditional Japanese (*ki sho ten ketsu*) style of organization while writing. A quick look at the *ki sho ten ketsu* style of writing demonstrates the immense differences between writing in English and writing in Japanese. It is an inductive style of writing that reflects

the way Japanese students think and write in Japanese (Kaplan, 1996): Illustrations and examples are presented in a paragraph before the main idea (Hirayanagi, 1998). Further, the Japanese style of writing is quite ambiguous in nature (Takagi, 2001), and so it is quite hard to understand for native speakers of English. Changing these ingrained habits can be a difficult task for an EFL teacher in Japan, but it is a task that must be undertaken if students are to write in a manner that is recognizable by native English speakers. Specifically, when writing an academic English paper, one must follow the expository writing model which includes a thesis statement in the introduction, followed by paragraphs that start with topic sentences, and examples that support the thesis, which are then followed by a logical conclusion. Lastly, students were taught how to support their arguments by using correct referencing conventions. Stylistic rules followed the conventions of the American Psychological Association (APA), since this was the guide they would be using at UBC.

Organization of an academic writing class

Some of the most important elements of academic writing revolve around choosing a thesis and using a format that includes having unity, support and coherence. These are usually new terms to Japanese learners of English. So, in class, teachers stressed these three points from the beginning. In order to demonstrate unity, students had to ensure that all parts of the essay worked together to develop the main idea of the essay. The goal of any English essay is to support a single point or thesis with supporting points, followed by specific examples and evidence. Secondly,

support means that the essay has specific evidence or examples used to illustrate the main ideas. For the purpose of this class, students were taught that they needed at least three supporting points to prove their thesis. Finally, a convincing essay must demonstrate logic and organization in its arguments in order to be successful. This logic includes making an essay easy to read, follow and understand, and uses the correct transitional expressions to connect ideas on the sentence and paragraph levels.

In order to ease the transition into the writing process, the syllabus of the course used the following steps to help students get organized and thinking about how best to approach the task. First, students were told to select a topic that was of interest to them. Naturally, it is easier for writers to write about that in which they are interested, so students were encouraged to choose a topic in this manner.

Second, students were taught to limit their topic so that addressed a suitable theme or problem that needed to be dealt with. For example, *sports* is clearly a topic of interest to many learners, but it is too broad a subject for an academic style essay. So, students were encouraged to narrow their topic sufficiently so that it would be an interesting and useful addition to the body of knowledge that already exists on that topic.

Teachers on the course faced challenges in guiding students toward selecting thesis statements. The criteria for doing so should be outlined by instructors so that students fully understand how to choose one that matches their topic. The main point is that academic papers should be narrow and deep instead of broad and shallow. Specifically, students focused on thesis statements that were of interest

to them and their target audience (their classmates). Some examples of thesis statements students in this course wrote included the following: (a) “Part-time jobs are necessary for university students,” (b) “Smoking should be banned in public places in Japan,” (c) “Japan should limit its Official Development Assistance,” and (d) “English should be taught from elementary school in Japan.”

Third, teachers advised students to prepare a list of sources of information about their topics. In accordance with what would be required of them at UBC, students were encouraged to consult academic journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and of course, the Internet for sources of material for their work. This was the beginning of the reference section of the paper. In some cases, teachers accompanied students to the library to assist them in their search for scholarly works to use for their research. Next, students were advised to do in-depth reading on their topic in order to make their point of view clear and concise. Then, students were instructed to take notes and create an outline on the material they had read. Finally, students began writing their papers.

Writing numerous drafts of any type of research paper can be a time-consuming process. Consequently, students were encouraged to put in the requisite amount of time on their work. The teachers on the course read and re-read all drafts of students’ papers, constantly giving feedback on how to improve not only the style of writing, but also the style and methods of research. Instructors should keep in mind that when students are given these types of assignments, it is likely their first time to perform such a task. So, teachers are advised to check their work slowly and carefully, since any

bad habits picked up by students at this early stage are likely to stick with them for some time. At least three drafts of each paper were expected from the students.

It is always advisable to be well organized in advance for a class of this nature. Problems can crop up at any time and teachers are advised to prepare for them in advance. For example, the learners in this course had difficulty deciding on a topic and thesis statement that was limited, unified and exact; narrowing the thesis statement; choosing materials that fit their topics and thesis statements; choosing support statements and examples; and using the correct methods of paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting and referencing. This last point is critical, as many Japanese learners are unaware of how to correctly paraphrase, summarize, quote and reference. Students in this course took a great amount of time in learning the finer points of how to accurately carry out these tasks. Teachers on the course noted that they spent quite a bit of class time actually practicing how to do each, giving the students specific examples and checking all work to ensure they fully understood these concepts. All of the above activities were placed within a specific outline of how to write an introductory paragraph followed by a main body and a conclusion.

Therefore, in order to ably assist our learners in confronting these problems, teachers should be aware that they are likely to come up, and what the best strategies are of eradicating them. Troubleshooting in a course of this nature constitutes a large part of the teacher's duties and should be dealt with accordingly.

Primary and secondary research

One key facet of teaching and learning academic writing is learning how to conduct both primary and secondary research. The former involves action research done by the students themselves. This entails designing, testing and administering a questionnaire and/or an interview to a number of people with the intention of testing an original hypothesis or thesis. The latter involves conducting research in a library or on the Internet of work that has been previously published. The point of both is to get students writing and researching in support of the thesis of their essay. When conducting either type of research, students were advised to be careful about the reliability of information found on the Internet. In the case of the course outlined here, secondary research was taught prior to primary research. The reason for this was that if students can successfully carry out secondary research with the aim of finding the background material related to their thesis, they will be ready to add to a field of knowledge by conducting their own research.

When teaching how to conduct primary research the main elements included planning a questionnaire survey, selecting the survey sample, developing the survey design, constructing the questionnaire, and collecting and analyzing data. The author found that students were mostly unaware of how to conduct secondary research. That is, the learners needed to be given a step-by-step outline of how to perform the different types of research and the best method of analyzing the data collected from such research.

Evaluation

Finally, students were required to give a 15-20 minute oral presentation on the topic of their third paper. The purpose of the presentation was to give students a chance to practice talking about the results of their study to an audience. Students were encouraged to give an organized and clear presentation on their findings, while using the usual array of visual aids if necessary.

The marking scheme for the course was based on attendance, the three essays, and one presentation. Naturally, the students did numerous versions of each paper that were all edited by the teacher, so the teacher was well aware of the amount of work each student put into the class.

At the end of the course, students demonstrated a clear improvement on their abilities to produce an academic style of writing. That is, the learners on this particular course (and subsequent courses) showed their readiness for inclusion in the study-abroad program and academic life at UBC. Teachers on these courses repeatedly report that the learners are indeed capable of producing academic writing that conforms to pre-course expectations.

Conclusion

Teachers in Japan who wish to instruct academic writing to their university students must approach the task with the specific needs and goals of their learners in mind. Seeing as this course was a preparatory one for students going to study at UBC, it focused on how to write in an academic style and on primary and secondary research methods. This course overcame the specific problems encountered by the students involved by teaching them how to write in an academic style

by taking a step-by-step approach to learning, thus ensuring they had the skills they would need to be successful at UBC.

Indeed, the students showed marked improvement in their writing styles and were successful during their 8-month stay in Canada. Therefore, with the right amount of preparation, the end results can be rewarding, as students who have the motivation and willingness to learn about the form and process of academic writing will certainly benefit from competent, informative writing instruction.

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