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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Should research paper writing be taught at Japanese universities? YES!

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This paper first looks at the debate on the necessity of teaching research paper writing in English at Japanese universities, then describes the current situation of EFL composition in Japanese universities related to research paper writing, especially looking at 1) present Japanese EFL writing curricula, and 2) current research paper requirements in Japanese university seminars. The paper ends with a proposal for a basic research paper writing course for Japanese university programs.

本稿では、まず、日本の大学で英語の研究論文の書き方を教える必要性について論じる。次に、研究論文の書き方に関連して、日本の大学における英作文教育の現状を述べる。特に現在の日本の大学の1)英作文教育のカリキュラムと2)セミナーで必要とされる研究論文について焦点をあてる。最後に、日本の大学教育での基本的な研究論文の書き方に関する科目を提案する。

Japanese universities now face declining enrollment due to changing demographics. In an attempt to attract students, universities have been shifting away from their traditional academic focus and more toward professional training and development. In English departments, this usually means less emphasis on literature and linguistics and more on career-oriented courses and programs. English language skills courses are likewise shifting away from academic skills and more toward career-based skills or preparation for proficiency tests (e.g., for the TOEIC and STEP tests) that could affect job hunting, hiring levels, or promotion. In this environment, research paper writing in English may be seen as a rather antiquated academic skill that should be phased out of the curriculum in favor of more attractive or utilitarian course offerings. At the same time, many writing teachers may not necessarily lament such a development,

as they often find students ill prepared, even on a very basic level, for the complex task of writing a research paper.

Against these rather imposing objections to teaching research paper writing, the authors take the position that research paper writing in English is in fact an essential skill for English majors, or other majors where advanced English language skills are emphasized, and that it should indeed be taught explicitly in such departments. Research paper writing in English can be a very positive and productive experience for students, involves integrated skills that are highly relevant to other English language skills and career preparation, and is, or certainly should be, at the heart of students' university education. This paper addresses common objections to teaching research paper writing in English, discusses the benefits of teaching it, provisionally surveys the departments of several universities concerning their writing requirements, then sets out a proposal for a basic research paper writing course.

Academic Writing Instruction vs. ESL Writing Instruction

Research has shown that there is a strong writing and reading connection, with each skill augmenting the other (Dubin & Olshtain, 1980; Zamel, 1992) and that writing based on a source text is an important academic skill (Leki & Carson, 1997). Shih (1986) writes that content-based writing is considered an effective way for teaching writing, and states that content-based writing teaches academic writing “more realistically than does traditional instruction that isolates rhetorical patterns and stresses writing from personal experience” (617). This research supports the teaching of

research paper writing in the university English composition curriculum.

The case against the teaching of research paper writing in Japanese universities

Swales (1987) outlines the case against the teaching of research paper writing to non-native speakers of English in graduate programs in U.S. universities by saying it is too difficult a task and that teachers are not trained to teach it. However, he concludes that it is important to teach research paper writing to give voice to researchers doing important studies in non-central locations. Shih (1986, p. 619), regarding writing across the curriculum, describes Kroll's academic writing research at the University of Southern California, and concludes, “composition courses [should] let students practice the types of writing [students] really need.” Two questions introduced by Swales and Shih are:

1. Is it necessary to teach research paper writing in the EFL situation?
2. What are the types of writing students need?

In an attempt to answer these questions for the Japanese context, a short survey was sent in 2007 to local Japanese university English program administrators, of which eight responded, inquiring about the requirements of the departments regarding research papers and the attitudes of the program administrators to the teaching of research paper writing. The following are some of the responses:

- “I think teaching [research paper] writing is extremely difficult.”

- “Many of our students don’t like [research paper writing] much and have reported they would prefer to have another speaking class in place of their writing class.”
- “Although some of our students do write their seminar [research] papers in English, most don’t.”
- “I can’t help but wonder what the value of such an exercise is since such a small percentage of them will ever write another research paper in English (or Japanese for that matter).”
- “Many of [our students] will communicate in written English for non-academic purposes.”
- “I sometimes think we aren’t really having them use their time effectively when we teach them skills [like research paper writing] they are unlikely to use in the future.”

These administrators voiced many of the common arguments against the teaching of research paper writing:

1. The teaching of research paper writing is difficult.
2. Students do not like research paper writing and research paper writing instruction.
3. Students prefer speaking to writing instruction, including research paper writing instruction.
4. Students, when they have the choice, prefer writing research papers in Japanese.
5. Students will probably never write another research paper.

6. There are other writing genres that would be more practical to teach them than research paper writing.
7. There is not enough time in a curriculum to teach all kinds of writing.

The administrators quoted above are respected language professionals, and their concerns have some validity. The concerns reflect a demographic reality at Japanese universities, with the decreasing population of college-age students creating the situation where schools and administrators become part of the service industry, where students become customers who require satisfying, and where schools focus on increasing TOEIC scores in a PR effort to garner enough students.

How does a proponent of the necessity of research paper writing in university curricula respond to the administrators’ comments? The following is an attempt at such a response.

1. The teaching of research paper writing is difficult.

The teaching of writing *is* difficult and is a challenge, and not just in Japan. Swales (1986) points out that academic writing is considered to be a challenge to teach in American universities as well. There is a choice that needs to be made by program administrators and universities: to accept the challenge of teaching writing or to throw both hands up into the air in defeat, and give in to demographic reality. That something is difficult should not be a main reason for a university to give up on something that has been the cornerstone of academic learning. That something is difficult means that something needs to be taught, or taught better.

2. Students do not like research paper writing and research paper writing instruction.

Students do not like research paper writing or research paper writing instruction, and yet they do appreciate it. At the end of each semester of the research paper writing course the authors ask students to reflect on their experience, and many remark that they learned a great deal about the topic they selected and about writing. Students do not like the hard work and the amount of time that is required to learn how to write, and to improve their writing skills. Yet, writing is a concrete record of language improvement, and when students see their improvement through observing their writing samples at various stages, as the authors require students to do, most write that they do appreciate the instruction.

3. Students prefer speaking to research paper writing instruction.

Speaking is the skill that allows students to communicate in real-time with foreigners, and the skill that gives them immediate gratification. There is no denying this. However, there is a pedagogical obligation to teach what is needed and not just what is wanted. The question of the necessity of research paper writing instruction is addressed later.

4. Students, when they have the choice, prefer writing research papers in Japanese.

Native speakers of Japanese, if given the choice, prefer using Japanese to using a foreign language. This is not an earthshaking revelation. However, it is a different matter when the native speaker of Japanese is attending a university *to learn the foreign language*. This is not even considering the considerable money paid for tuition. Educational

institutions have an obligation to challenge the students, and have an obligation to teach the students what they came to learn.

5. Students will probably never write another research paper.

In many cases this is not true, especially in language departments where there are research paper requirements in many courses. In addition, this criticism does not take into consideration the skills that students practice while putting together a research paper that are useful to them in almost all classes: research skills, critical reading skills, critical thinking skills, organization, rhetoric, among others, skills that are valuable throughout life.

6. There are other writing genres that would be more practical to teach them than research papers.

It is true that there are practical writing genres, such as letter writing or business writing, and that research paper writing may not be in the same category, but the response is that practicality is not the only criteria for an activity. There is an issue of future need versus immediate need. Many universities require students to write seminar or graduation theses (see section below) but do not teach them how to do this. It seems that in these cases the teaching of research paper writing is eminently practical.

7. There is not enough time in a curriculum to teach all kinds of writing.

The amount of courses and time a curriculum can devote to writing is finite. Departments must select those writing tasks that they feel are necessary. For an academic department to say there is no room in the curriculum to teach such a central

academic skill as research paper writing is irresponsible if those same universities require research papers without preparing the students to fulfill the requirement.

Benefits of teaching research paper writing in Japanese universities

It is not sufficient to merely counter the arguments against the teaching of research paper writing in English. There is also a need to enumerate the benefits of teaching students how to write research papers. Shih (1987), speaking of content-based research writing, states, “it is argued that such instruction develops thinking, researching, and writing skills needed for academic writing tasks” The authors agree, and think that the teaching of research paper writing has the following benefits:

1. It prepares students for department requirements (see next section).

Many university departments require students to write papers for seminars or graduation. Students can do a better job on these papers if they are instructed on how to go about the task.

2. It trains students in patterns of academic discourse.

Specifically, research paper writing gives students experience in ways to build and support arguments.

3. It prepares students for study abroad.

Since research papers are an important part of the educational experience and evaluation at most foreign universities, students will not be prepared for study abroad unless they are taught how to construct a research paper.

4. It trains students in rhetoric and critical thinking.

In the process of putting together a research paper, students are exposed to and are taught elements of rhetoric and critical thinking, skills not overtly taught elsewhere in any class.

5. It teaches students to gather information, evaluate the information, organize the information, format it, and present it in an academic manner.

Learning the process of gathering, evaluating, and organizing information is a worthwhile general skill that can be applied to speaking as well as writing.

6. It introduces students to higher level and specialized vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Students often only use informal vocabulary and simple sentence patterns in their academic writing. When going through the process of writing the research paper, students learn and use more formal vocabulary and more complex sentence patterns.

7. It gets students to read a variety of sources.

Writing a research paper requires students to read a variety of sources that they would perhaps not normally read, expanding their world in the process.

8. It teaches students the connection between reading and writing.

Writing a research paper is a recurring interactive cyclical process of reading, writing, reading more, and adding to and revising based on further reading. This process teaches students the connection between reading and writing in an organic way.

9. It motivates students to practice typing and word processing skills.

Typing skills are obviously practiced in writing a research paper if a typed paper is required. The various formatting elements of justification, centering, indenting, spacing, font, and font style that are required in a formal research paper help students to practice their word processing skills, and motivate them to learn the skills to match the appearance of the sample research paper.

10. It is part of a well-rounded college education.

Any student going through university anywhere in the world ought to have the experience of writing a research paper.

11. It gives students a sense of accomplishment.

In evaluations at the end of the research paper writing process students often write that they are proud of themselves for producing a good research paper. Some even say that they finally “feel like a real university student.”

These are just a few of the benefits of teaching research paper writing in Japanese universities.

Writing curricula in Japan: A Sample

Arguments against the teaching of research paper writing would be valid if research papers were not required in Japanese universities. Horowitz (1986a, 1986b) looked at the actual writing tasks assigned in content classes and found a huge gap between what was required and what was being taught in ESL writing classes. What is the actual situation regarding the teaching and requiring of research papers at Japanese universities? In an informal survey of

local university EFL writing programs, program coordinators were asked to describe their programs: eight administrators responded. The following table represents a brief and incomplete description of the writing curricula in these eight universities in Japan.

Table 1 shows that research paper writing is taught explicitly in only three of the eight universities, universities 1, 2, and 3, with university 3 teaching it as an elective course. This situation would be fine if the writing of research papers were not required in university. Table 2 shows the research paper writing requirements in seminars or as a graduation thesis in those same universities.

In the column indicating whether research paper writing is taught, three program coordinators (Universities 4, 5, and 8) responded that whether it is taught and to what extent it is taught depend on the individual teacher. Table 2 shows that research papers are required in either seminars or as graduation theses at most of the eight universities surveyed, but students may not be taught how to write research papers. This seems to be a mismatch of requirements and instruction that should be addressed by faculty development committees of universities, especially when it involves seminars, the main classes of a student’s major, and graduation theses.

A proposal for a basic research writing course for Japanese university programs

Silva (1993), after surveying L1 and L2 writing research, recommends that a specially designed academic writing course is necessary to help students write academic compositions. It has been demonstrated above that there

Table 1

Present Japanese University EFL Writing Curricula: A Sample

	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
University 1 Language Dept.	REQUIRED • grammar • paragraphs	REQUIRED • essays • basic academic writing	REQUIRED • research papers	ELECTIVE • advanced writing
University 2 Language Dept.	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing • research papers	REQUIRED • research papers
University 3 Language Dept.	REQUIRED • basic academic writing	REQUIRED • practical writing • creative writing	ELECTIVE • essays	ELECTIVE • research papers
University 4 Foreign Studies Dept.	REQUIRED • paragraphs • essays	RESTRICTED • essays • basic academic writing	RESTRICTED • essays • basic academic writing	NONE
University 5 Foreign Studies Dept.	REQUIRED • Process • Paragraphs • essays	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing
University 6 Policy Studies Dept.	REQUIRED • Process • paragraphs	NONE	NONE	NONE
University 7 Science and Engineering Dept.	REQUIRED Integrated skills • paragraphs	REQUIRED Integrated skills • paragraphs	ELECTIVES	NONE
University 8 Science and Engineering Dept.	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing	REQUIRED • process • paragraphs • essays • basic academic writing	NONE	NONE

Table 2

Current Research Paper Requirements for Several Japanese University Seminars and Graduation Theses

	Research Paper Taught?	Seminars		Graduation Theses	
		Required	Language	Required	Language
Univ. 1	YES	YES	English or Japanese	NO	English or Japanese
Univ. 2	YES	YES	English or Japanese	YES	English or Japanese
Univ. 3	YES	NO	X	NO	X
Univ. 4	DEPENDS	YES	English or Japanese	YES	English or Japanese
Univ. 5	DEPENDS	SOME	English or Japanese	SOME	English or Japanese
Univ. 6	NO	SOME	English or Japanese	YES	English or Japanese
Univ. 7	NO	YES	Japanese	YES	Japanese
Univ. 8	DEPENDS	YES	English or Japanese	YES	English or Japanese

is a need for such a class for the teaching of research paper writing in Japanese universities, as it is required for most students to write some kind of research paper before graduating. Taking into consideration the work of Raimes (1991:407) which identified five issues in composition education (topic selection, the nature of the writing assignments, academic discourse conventions, contrastive rhetoric, and teacher responses to student writing) and the research of Winer (1992) which identified teacher strategies that students found helpful (student choice of task/topic, requiring of multiple drafts, peer reading, and guidance in topic development and writing process), the authors constructed the following research paper writing course for Japanese universities. Basic academic writing would be introduced in the second year. (The first year would be spent teaching the writing process, paragraph structure, paragraph patterns, and grammar and style.) Research paper

writing would be taught in the first semester of the third year. A process approach would be implemented. At least two research papers would be completed under supervision in a research paper course. Ferris (1995) found that teacher response on final drafts had little effect on future writing, but that teacher response on preliminary drafts did have a positive effect, so all writing courses, and content seminars, if possible, would require at least two drafts of any research paper assigned. The main topics taught in the research paper course would be what a research paper is and how it differs from a personal essay, the different stages of writing a research paper and how to do each stage, how to do research and how to record the research, the different parts of each section of a research paper and how to build them, how to build a point, how to cite sources, how to improve a paper through editing and revision, issues of plagiarism and how to avoid it, how to correct common problems of grammar,

vocabulary, and style, and how to avoid common problems of translation. Zamel (1985) found that students often find teachers' comments difficult to interpret, with Ferris (1995) finding that about 50% of students in her study having such difficulty. Conferencing with students throughout the writing process has been found to help students become more effective writers (Dawe & Dornan, 1981; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). Therefore, conferencing with students will be conducted to help students understand the teacher's comments and to give guidance throughout the writing process.

Based on the experience of the authors (Kluge & Taylor, 2007), the above would comprise an excellent research paper writing course.

Conclusion

Academic writing in English is a worthwhile and important part of our students' university experience. Schools, departments, and program administrators have to listen to students about what they want, but also have a professional responsibility as education experts to teach students what they may not want to learn, but what they need to learn. For English departments, this includes the teaching of research paper writing in English. Schools, departments, and program administrators also must address the mismatch in what they require students to do, and what they teach students to do. The teaching of research paper writing is one of the issues schools, departments, and program administrators should address by either teaching students how to do it, or by eliminating the requirement to write a research paper students have not been taught how to write.

David Kluge has been teaching EFL, specifically oral skills and research paper writing, in Japan for almost 23 years and has just published *Basic Steps to Research Paper Writing* with Thomson (Cengage Learning). His interests include materials development, drama, oral interpretation, speech, CALL, and cooperative learning. <kluge@kinjo-u.ac.jp>

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