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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Establishing and Managing an English Writing Center in Japan.

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The English department of Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College established a small writing lab as a pilot project in 2005 with a grant from the Ministry of Education. Since then, the lab has been open from 9:00 to 17:00 every day for ten weeks each semester. Native speakers of English were recruited as writing tutors. Students were assigned to go to the lab after they wrote an essay. They made a reservation in advance and brought their essays to the lab. The tutors helped students in 30-minute sessions, by discussing how to write effectively. The tutorial sessions were done in English so that students also enjoyed conversing with the tutors. This paper reports the difficulties and problems of setting up a small English writing lab and managing it with a limited budget and human resources. A research survey conducted in 2006 showed the students' positive reactions toward the writing lab program, and comments from writing tutors about the special needs of Japanese EFL students were also very insightful and helpful. The main findings were: 1) support from full-time and part-time teachers is essential to encourage students to use the lab, 2) tutors need to be flexible in their roles as an English learning resource, and 3) friendly and supportive tutors are a key to attracting more students. English writing centers can be a great place for Japanese students to learn not only English writing, but also to communicate in English.

北星学園大学短期大学部英文学科では、文部科学省の補助金を得て、2005年度パイロットプロジェクトとしてライティングラボを開設した。現在、ライティングラボは、各学期10週間、月曜から金曜日開かれている。英語ネイティブスピーカーがチューターとして採用され、学生はエッセイなどの課題を行なったあとに、事前に予約してライティングラボを活用することができる。チューターは30分間のセッションの中で、学生と話し合いながらライティングを支援している。この論文では、限られた人材と予算のなかでどのようにライティングラボを開設し運営していくか、また、さまざまな運営上の問題点について述べる。さらに、2006年度プログラム終了後に学生アンケートを実施し、明らかになったのは次の三点である。1)ライティングセンターの活用を奨励するには、常勤・非常勤教員両方の協力が必要である、2)チューターは英語学習を支援する人材として幅広く柔軟な役割を果たすべきである、3)親しみやすく親身なチューターの資質が多くの学生をひきつける鍵である。ライティングセンターは日本人学生にとって、英語ライティングを学ぶだけでなく、英語でコミュニケーションする貴重な機会となるであろう。

Writing centers can be seen in most higher educational institutions in North America, and they have been recognized as a part of academic programs (Williams and Severino 2004). On the other hand, a writing center movement has just started in Japan. Some of the writing centers focus on Japanese students' writing abilities in Japanese. A few universities are offering support for English writing, such as Waseda University (Sadoshima 2006) and Osaka Jogakuin University (Johnston and Swenson 2004). Their innovative programs provided a rich source of ideas for starting an English writing center. Learning from advanced models in the United States, it is necessary for English writing centers in Japan to determine their own needs, and to be managed in order to fit an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. In this paper, the English writing lab in Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College will be introduced, and findings from the survey on the students' reactions toward the writing lab will be reported. Then, the difficulties and problems of setting up an English writing lab and managing it with limited budget and human resources will be discussed.

Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College Writing Lab

Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College (HGUCJ) Department of English had 134 first year students and 139 second year students in 2007. The department has one of the most unique and innovate English programs in Hokkaido, and has been offering content-based classes for second year students since 1993. These content-based classes include Sociology, Anthropology, History, Psychology, World

Music, Life Science, Geography, and Statistics and they are taught by instructors who specialize in these fields. Students are often required to do research on a topic they choose and write a report in English for these classes. Although students take several English composition classes, it is quite difficult for them to write a good paper in English. Therefore establishing a writing lab and providing some kind of writing support for students, outside the classes, were long hoped for. This idea became a reality when the department received a "Good Practice" grant from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2005. The grant enabled the department to conduct many new projects and to establish a writing lab. In November of 2005, the writing lab set off as a five week pilot program. Two tutors who had experienced English teaching in our local community were hired. In 2006, the program was extended to 10 weeks each semester. Now the lab opens from 9:00 to 17:00, from Monday to Friday. There are three tutors from different countries, such as the US, Australia, and New Zealand. They are all professionals who have taught English at colleges or high schools in Japan. The tutors were briefed together before the program though a standardized manual for them has not been created yet. Since the human resources budget for the lab is limited, this writing support is only available for English department students, mainly for about 140 second year students.

The place was named "English Writing Lab" not "English Writing Center" because it is very small and is located in the resource room, which the department manages. At first, the lab was furnished by gathering old desks and chairs from other offices. In the second year of the program these

were replaced by new chairs, meeting tables and computers. Partitions were also installed in order to create a private space for a tutor and student during a session. However, it is not always necessary to have them, because some tutors and students prefer to have a session at the meeting table where they can enjoy a lot of space. It is not necessary to supply all of this equipment at once to establish a writing center.

Managing the Writing Lab

Students have to sign up in advance to meet a tutor. Sign-up sheets are placed outside the writing lab and students write their names on the sheet to reserve a session. This simple procedure was chosen because hiring a receptionist was not affordable. In the future, the use of on-line reservation systems should be considered.

Each session is 30 minutes long. Students can bring any kind of written text to the lab and tutors give advice to improve their writing. Before coming to the lab, students are supposed to proofread their essays and reports using a writing check-list which was produced by the lab in order to find simple mistakes by themselves. The importance of discussion between a student and a tutor is emphasized in sessions. Mainly, tutors discuss the structure of students' writing, and are asked to point out two or three key points to be improved, not just to edit or proofread. Error symbols are used when tutors find specific grammatical items to be discussed.

Walk-in students are also welcomed if tutors are available. It was hoped that students would become actively involved with this project, so they were encouraged to visit the lab

when they had any questions about English, or when they wanted to practice speaking English. About 10 percent of the lab users came for speaking practice. Basically an effort to meet any students' request was made at this stage. It is a favorable situation for students to have such individual instruction. Although it was called the "English writing lab," it was a place where students could get assistance anytime for any kind of English learning. Of course, full-time teachers play the same role, and students are encouraged to come and see teachers whenever they need help. However, the reality is that teachers are not always available, because they are kept extremely busy with many classes.

Student record sheets were created and filed in a cabinet in order to keep a log of the sessions and to have students' portfolios on hand. After each session, tutors were asked to write the topic of student's paper and the main points which the tutor and student discussed. Making photocopies of each student's essays and storing them in the cabinet along with their record sheets was considered, but the idea was rejected as not really being necessary and also an environmentally unsound waste of paper. Keeping students' records in digital form will be the next step in saving time and in improving the management of the lab. Both the record of students' writing and the record of lab hours were useful in evaluating the improvement in students' writing and the efficiency of the lab. This information is also important in justifying expenditures for the program or for requesting an increase in the budget to expand the lab.

The result of the students' survey

A survey about the writing lab was conducted at the end of the academic year, in January 2007. The second year students answered the questionnaire the department created. There were five questions about the writing lab, and students were also asked to freely write any comments they might have about the lab. 111 students responded to the questionnaire.

Do you think the Writing tutor program was successful?

Table 1. Do you think the writing tutor program was successful?

	No.	%
strongly agree	25	23%
Agree	62	56%
no opinion	19	17%
Disagree	4	4%
strongly disagree	0	0%

N=111

The number of students who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to this question was 87 students, which was 79% of the total number of respondents.

Do you think the Writing tutor program should continue?

Table 2. Do you think the writing tutor program should continue?

	No.	%
strongly agree	35	32%
Agree	57	51%
no opinion	16	14%
Disagree	2	2%
strongly disagree	1	1%

N=111

The number of students who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to this question was 92 students, which was 83% of the total number of respondents.

Did the Writing tutors help your writing skills?

Table 3. Did the writing tutors help improve your writing skills?

	No.	%
strongly agree	11	10%
Agree	67	60%
no opinion	32	29%
Disagree	1	1%
strongly disagree	0	0%

N=111

The number of students who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to this question was 78 students, which was 70% of the total number of respondents.

How many times did you meet with a writing tutor?

Table 4. How many times did you meet with writing tutors?

	No.	%
Once	0	0%
Twice	1	1%
three times	32	29%
four times	67	60%
over five times	11	10%

N=111

Many of the students visited the lab 3-4 times in the year or once or twice a semester. Perhaps they came to the lab for help with their final reports or essays, not for their daily assignments. However, an interesting point is that there are some students who made exceptionally good use of the lab. Some students regularly came to the lab for writing or speaking. Although they only made up 10% of the total, the faculty felt that the program was an important support for these motivated students.

How long should one session be?

Table 5. How long should one session be?

	No.	%
10 minutes	2	2%
20 minutes	40	36%
30 minutes	57	51%
40 minutes	11	10%
50 minutes	1	1%

N=111

For students, 20-30 minutes was the preferable length for each session. One of the reasons for this is probably that most of the students who replied had actually experienced 20 or 30 minute sessions and had found them useful. In the beginning of the program sessions were scheduled for 30 minutes. Later a shorter, 20 minute schedule was experimented with but the tutors commented that the shorter sessions did not provide enough time to discuss problems with students thoroughly.

Written comments

Some positive comments from students were,

- Tutors were very kind. (5)
- It was nice that tutors taught us how to write essays and correct mistakes. (4)
- Tutors really explained our mistakes in detail. (3)

Some negative comments were,

- The sessions were too short. (10)
- The times were not convenient for their schedules. (3)
- Depending on the tutor, different mistakes were corrected. (2)
- The tutors should stick to the schedule more. (2)

Students seemed to enjoy the personal support and appreciate the tutors' advice. Many of them mentioned the tutors' kindness and friendly personalities. Students also reported that tutors well explained how to organize their essays and reports and how to improve specific grammatical points. There were also negative comments on the lab schedule and its management. As the survey by Johnston and Swenson (2004) showed students concern about logistical problems, students in this study also pointed out that sessions were short or that they were not able to reserve a session at the end of semester. Some tutors were so eager to help students that they extended session periods, which didn't fit students' schedule. The length of sessions and hours of operation should be reconsidered when planning the lab schedule.

Advantages of a writing center

A writing center gives “face-to-face” individual support, which can meet the needs of students with different English proficiency levels. It can also give students more chances to

speak in English because sessions are conducted in English. Tutors can help to improve not only students' writing, but also their speech. Students can also practice for specific styles of English interviews, such as those used in the Eiken (Step Test), entrance examinations, and job hunting with tutors.

Sessions at the writing lab can provide a broad and varied learning experience for students. The tutors were so enthusiastic and adaptable to student needs that they were able to give practical advice on many issues related to English learning; for example, the tutors showed students useful sites to find suitable words or phrases for essays, sites to check grammatical items and internet dictionaries. Tutors even offered to teach individual students new word and synonym lessons.

Tutors can act as resource persons for students and teachers in many other ways as well. Since tutors in the lab come from different countries, students can ask them about their countries and their culture. Students who are planning to travel to such countries can enjoy talking with them and asking information about that. In addition, teachers can consult with tutors about English usage and grammar.

How to start a writing center

The lab was started with limited information, such as teacher's own writing center experiences as a student in the U.S., or on-line information about writing centers in North American universities. However, when starting a writing center, the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) site (www.writingcenters.org/) is extremely

useful. This site describes the basic concepts of writing centers and explains how to start a center. Every year, they hold conferences and summer institutes where participants can learn about writing centers and can meet many writing center professionals.

Attending the IWCA summer Institute in August 2007 and visiting several writing centers in the US gave the teachers involved in this study great insight in dealing with the challenges that come with managing a writing lab. Seeing the layout of several writing centers and talking to directors and tutors led to the realization that creating a comfortable writing center is very important. The handouts and record sheets provided were very helpful as examples. Books on writing centers and tutor training, and Writing Lab Journals can also be purchased through the IWCA.

On-line support services for writing centers are now affordable, with reasonable costs. For about 60 US dollars a month, WOnline (www.therichco.com/wconline/gives) supports scheduling, record keeping and reporting for writing centers. In addition, many institutes offer online writing tutorial sessions. Such online sessions will be feasible in the future but face-to-face sessions are more preferable for Japanese students since they can learn both writing and English communication.

One can learn both theory and practice of managing writing centers from American writing centers, which have a long history and are well recognized as a vital academic organization in any higher education system. However, educators should realize writing centers in an EFL setting is quite different, even from ESL settings, and that Japanese students have different needs than students in North

America. Therefore, a visit to Waseda University Writing Center was meaningful in evaluating the writing center in this study. It was interesting and useful to know how they recruited student tutors and trained them, and how they advertised a new concept of “Writing Center” to students and teachers. Sharing information among writing centers in Japan is of significant benefit.

Difficulties to be considered

First of all, “writing center” is a new concept to Japanese students, that is, the reason for having an English writing center in Japan is difficult for many Japanese students and university faculty to understand. They can’t imagine what a writing center is. Just creating a brochure for the center is not enough. The services the center provides, roles of tutors, and responsibilities of students should be explained in detail. To attract students, teachers and center staff need to advertise the program actively. Writing center organizers should also inform full-time and part-time teachers about the center and ask for their understanding and support. The orientation period at the beginning of each school year is a good chance to introduce the center to all the students. One idea for creating a positive image is to provide something for students to take home, for example, bookmarks, pens or candies, on which the name and contact address of the writing center are printed.

Another difficulty is “Students’ passive attitude.” Teachers should encourage students to ask questions, at the same time, writing center staff and tutors should create a friendly atmosphere so that shy students can talk freely at the lab. Related to students’ attitude, students’ manners can

occasionally be a problem. Students are sometimes late for sessions, or they simply do not show up, without having canceled the session in advance. These “No shows” hinder healthy management of the lab. Students’ responsibilities need to be clearly explained. There has not been a strict rule for this problem at the HGUJC writing lab yet, but some writing centers have rules such that students cannot make an appointment for a certain period of time if they do not come to the center. It is a difficult problem to solve, and so far, teachers are telling students their responsibilities as guidance. An e-mail address for the writing lab was obtained so that students can write an e-mail to the lab if they have to cancel a session in case of illness or emergency.

There are “busy weeks” and “slow weeks.” Although the lab won’t open until two - three weeks after each semester starts, there are still busy weeks and slow weeks. At the end of the semester, the lab reservation is so full that some students cannot make an appointment. There are no easy solutions for this, but teachers are cooperating to reschedule report and essay deadlines on different dates. Support from full-time and part-time teachers who can encourage students to go to the lab is necessary. Moreover, increasing the working hours of tutors at the end of the semester may also help solve this problem.

Although tutors were briefed before the program, they often asked questions like, “How should a tutor start a session?” “What are the basic procedures in each session?” “How many corrections should a tutor point out?” “What should a tutor do if a student plagiarizes?” Whenever such questions arose, they were discussed with each tutor and solved individually. However, writing centers really need

to have guidelines for tutors, and detailed procedures for each session should be clearly written in a manual. Tutor training sessions should be carefully planned, and occasional discussions or meetings between tutors and teachers at the end of the program are necessary to improve the program.

Key concepts for writing centers in North America do not always fit Japan

“*Peer tutoring*” is a very important aspect in American writing centers. It is considered that being a student tutor is educational experience for tutors themselves (Yasuda, 2006). In an ideal situation peer tutors can help students at writing centers, but it is very difficult to recruit undergraduate and graduate students who are qualified to be tutors and who feel comfortable working as tutors in Japanese universities. In EFL settings, writing centers have to depend on professional tutors who teach English in the local community. It is beneficial to hire professional people.

“*Tutors as a facilitator*” is a commonly described role of tutors in North American organizations, and tutors and students are supposed to work together for the student to become a better writer. Tutors are encouraged to help students find ways to improve their writing, not directly tell them points to be improved. However, in EFL settings, tutors may need to take the initiative and be more directive during sessions. They can give useful information to students and can guide students to learn English effectively. Tutors can be a resource person for learning and often need to be very flexible to help students to learn.

“Students voluntarily go to a writing center, but they are not forced.” This policy is ideal, but students don’t know much about the writing center and how useful it is to have such an opportunity, so it is important to require students to experience a writing center program at least once.

“No proof reading / no correction.” Many writing center staff will not use phrases like “correcting a paper,” or “proofreading.” Some tutors do not even hold a pen during a session because they believe that it is the students’ job to take notes about the session. One of the common policies of writing centers is that centers should not give editing or proofreading services to students (Enochs 2001). In EFL situations, students may want such services in order to learn more about English writing. Of course, the focus should be on the structures of written texts and on two or three main points to be improved when consulting students. However some high level students whose essays have good structure may need to learn appropriate words and phrases to improve their writing skills. In Japan, this policy needs to be actively discussed among teachers and tutors.

Conclusion

Writing centers in Japan have just started their programs and there are many issues to be discussed among educators. A small writing center can be started with a limited budget and resources if a simple management style is used, people-oriented tutors are hired, and even a small space for a table and chairs can be found. Definitely more writing centers are needed in Japan and such centers can share information and can cooperate with each other to make themselves more efficient. For many years HGUJC English department has

attempted to create a comfortable and effective learning environment for students. The understanding and support of both full and part-time teachers is necessary in order for the goals of a writing lab project to be realized. With that support English writing centers can become a great place for Japanese students to learn not only English writing, but also to communicate in English.

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