



Combining Cross-Cultural Understanding and Academic Writing

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A curriculum is presented that develops students' cross-cultural understanding and academic writing through a process of small paragraph-based projects leading up to a final research paper. Japanese high school students were introduced to cross-cultural understanding through meaningful stages and shared their own findings through writing assignments that grew in complexity. To measure success, students took part in an informal survey and wrote comments on the course. Results indicate that the students believed they became better writers and grew more aware of other cultures. Though tested at a high school, the syllabus could be used in many other contexts.

本論では、短いパラグラフを書く段階からリサーチペーパーへと発展させていく過程を通して、日本の高校生の異文化理解とアカデミック・ライティング力を向上させるカリキュラムについて論じる。生徒達はいくつかの有意義な段階を踏みながら異文化への理解を高め、複雑さを増していく多くの課題の中で自身が発見・研究したことを共有する。本プロジェクトの成功を検証するため、略式的な質問紙調査と、授業に対する生徒達の意見の集約を行った。その結果、生徒達はライティング力が向上し、異文化に対する意識が高まったと感じていることが明らかになった。このシラバスは高校だけでなく他の学習環境でも応用することができる。

In recent years, English is being recognised as an international academic lingua franca as more tertiary level institutions in non-Anglophone countries are establishing English medium departments. France, Sweden, Spain, the Middle East, South America, and Central and South East Asia have all seen major growth in courses offered in English (de Chazal, 2014). This suggests that students with a grounding in EAP writing and high cross-cultural awareness are more likely to succeed in this changing landscape. Educators

in Japan are starting to recognise the need to develop these skills (Cutrone, 2010; Kobayakawa, 2011; Sadoshima, 2008; Zhang & Steele, 2012). In Okinawa, a number of students in Kaiho High School's English course hope to enter prestigious universities and eventually find employment in a situation where they can use their English skills. For some this means going abroad to study, for others it means working for a multinational company. A good grounding in academic writing and the ability to understand people from other cultures will help them in these situations. This paper presents a curriculum that combines the two skill areas to help students become better writers and gain a global perspective. As reported below, preliminary feedback from the students who took the course has yielded positive results.

Cross-Cultural Understanding in Japan

As the world is becoming more globalised, the need for cross-cultural understanding (CCU) is growing. Japan, with its recent increase in tourism (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2016), is exposed to people from more cultures every day. With the upcoming Olympics in 2020, visitors from more cultures will be coming to the Far East. The fact that the world is becoming more connected than it has ever been before makes the demand for CCU even more urgent. As it stands in 2016, more than half the population of the world has access to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2016). With this kind of connectedness, culturally aware people are more likely to thrive in the international arena. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) has recognised this importance and has been taking steps to meet the demand (MEXT, 2000). In the past assistant language teachers (ALTs) have been the main means to provide students with exposure to other cultures (Bozek, 2010). However, this has not been enough, as can be seen in one of the five suggestions for English education reform put forward by MEXT (2014), recommending more importance be placed on CCU. It would seem the ministry is aware of the current limitations and the necessity of teaching this subject.

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Cross-Cultural Understanding at Kaiho

Kaiho Senior High School is one of a small number of high schools in Okinawa offering a CCU course. However, there is no prescribed curriculum in the prefecture and for most of these schools, CCU classes have been created by ALTs. Whether ALTs have much training or experience teaching the subject remains unknown and therefore not much can be said about the standard of CCU classes across the islands. The author presents a curriculum in this paper that is intended to be a first step towards meeting the ministry's aims and students' needs.

At Kaiho, CCU classes are run over a five-semester period starting in the English course during the students' 2nd year. Students are generally at a CEFR (Common European Frame of Reference for Languages) A2 or B1 level when they start and a handful will reach B2 level by the time they finish. Traditionally, the main goals of the course have been a research paper and a presentation, which are to be completed in their 3rd year, on any topic they are interested in. The school is an elite *shingakkou* (university school) where the best students from across the islands are primed to enter the top universities. Four classes of approximately 20 students each meet once a week in a language lab with access to the Internet. A meaningful curriculum for this school should meet the goals of a CCU course while preparing these students to write a research paper.

Levels of Cross-Cultural Understanding

CCU means different things to different people, but for this paper Hanvey's (1982) definition is used. He described it as

awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices to be found in human societies around the world, of how such ideas and practices compare, including some limited recognition of how the ideas and ways of one's own society might be viewed from other vantage points. (p. 164)

Using this definition, Wu and Marek (2014) identified four levels of cultural awareness in an ESL context. The first three of these are attainable without physically immersing oneself in another culture and were used to design the curriculum. The first level is an awareness of superficial or visible cultural traits. Wu and Marek spoke about using the type of information that would be used for tourism and also suggested using national geographic materials. The second level is an awareness of cultural traits that contrast with one's own culture. This level involves looking at cultural conflict situations that students may find irrational and difficult to believe. The third level is also an awareness of subtle cultural traits, but this time an intellectual study is made of these differences. At

this level, cultural differences are understood more logically. The author used these levels as goals for the CCU curriculum at Kaiho.

Academic Writing

In a study of Japanese high school textbooks, Kobayakawa (2011) showed that they concentrate more on translation and controlled writing tasks than on developing free writing. Sadoshima (2008) listed various reasons why most high school students have inadequate knowledge of writing in English, including the curriculum with its strong focus on rote learning, large class sizes, and the teachers' lack of time. Similarly, Hayashi (2005) explained that for her the only writing experience she had had at high school was translating Japanese sentences into English. In 2007, at a meeting hosted by MEXT, experts met to discuss the changes needed in English education to meet the country's education goals for 2020. It was proposed that high school graduates should be able to actively use the four skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Given the above, it would seem there is a clear need for English composition classes.

Although writing is highlighted as a skill that should be improved, the type of writing expected from students is not clear. Given that the students at Kaiho are academically focused, it seems fitting to introduce them to elementary academic writing. Previous students have been expected to take the TOEFL placement test once they were accepted into the college of their choice. Others have been expected to take the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) offered by the Eiken foundation as an English entrance exam. These tests both assume some basic academic writing skills and look at the student's main ideas, coherence, cohesion, lexical and grammatical range, and accuracy. If the TEAP is to meet its aim of "serving as a model of the English skills needed by a Japanese university" (Weir, 2014, p. 4), students need to be prepared to write about their knowledge and transform given information into clearly written texts. A curriculum that takes students through the steps of basic academic writing would help them meet these requirements. Therefore, the tests were the driving force behind the design of the curriculum presented in this paper. However, the lesson ideas could be used in other composition courses with students of a similar English level.

In 3 years at Kaiho High School, I used three different approaches to teaching writing; the final methodology seemed to be the most appropriate. In the 1st year, a product approach was tested. Students were given a model and told to base their research paper on it. The following year, in an attempt to make the students better writers, the process approach was implemented. However, it seemed that they needed more help at the paragraph level. Combining the process and the rhetorical function approach proved the

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most successful. More students were able to produce original, focussed, and coherent papers than in the years before. This is in line with Kimball (1996), who found that for science students in Japan, studying rhetorical functions in isolation was a fitting starting point for the exploration of written discourse. Alexander, Argent, and Spencer (2008) also suggested starting undergraduate academic writing with rhetorical functions. They explained that these functions work at the paragraph level and help students to get their points across. Students learn how to use linking expressions to achieve a rhetorical purpose, which will help with their cohesion. Once students are comfortable with these functions they can move on to more complex persuasive writing. It would seem that the functional approach, with its high potential for reuse and scaffolding, would be the most suitable for Japanese high school students. However, students in a tertiary setting could also benefit from this approach. The product approach, despite giving students a clear picture of what is expected, does not explain how the text is created, so students are at a loss as to how to write about their specific topic. The process approach helps students to research, outline, draft, and edit. However, with its strong focus on the actions professional writers perform, it fails to explain how to move from composition at a sentence level to a multiparagraph paper level. Combining the process approach with the functional approach equips students with some standard ways of linking ideas at a paragraph level. These functions work as building blocks to form the foundation needed to write a meaningful research paper.

Writing to Learn, Learning to Write

Common rhetorical functions include descriptive writing, procedure writing, narrative writing, compare and contrast writing, analysis writing, and summary writing. Each of these functions can be used to write about cultural aspects. Alexander et al. (2008) described how they can be taught, progressing from functions that simply give information, as in descriptive writing, to functions that describe more cognitively complex notions, like cause and effect writing. Knowing how to write in this way would help meet the demands of tests like the TEAP. Moreover, these functions also work well with Wu and Marek's (2014) levels of cross-cultural awareness. For example, descriptive writing is appropriate for touristic themes like festivals. Students can practice procedure writing by relating recipes from other cultures. Compare and contrast writing provides them with useful text frames for describing the similarities and differences between cultures. Learners can apply summary writing when they are providing evidence for the logical reasons for cultural differences. More cognitively complex functions, such as problem and solution writing, will be helpful for suggesting how people can overcome cultural

conflict situations. In this way these two subjects, CCU and academic writing, can be mutually supportive.

In the remainder of this paper, I present a curriculum based on these levels of cultural understanding, rhetorical functions, and a process approach to writing, leading up to the final research paper. The principle for each unit was the composition instruction of one rhetorical function, in the order suggested by Alexander et al. (2008), linked to a cultural topic. Students were given the task of finding the content for their own writing. Their output was a text relating their findings and using a specific rhetorical function. This text was then used to make presentations on those findings. In this way, students taught each other about different cultural topics and learned to write small paragraphs before moving on to writing a multiparagraph paper. Table 1 provides a summary of each unit, including the rhetorical function taught, the level of CCU, the difficulty level, and the time frame. Students had CCU classes with me once a week during their 2nd year and twice a week during their 3rd year.

Table 1. Curriculum Implemented at Kaiho High School in 2016

Topic - Material	Rhetorical function	Level of CCU	Difficulty / Macro function	Time frame
1. Festivals from around the world	Descriptive writing	Awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits	Simple / Describing	nine lessons
2. Music	Compare and contrast	Awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits	More complex / Explaining	seven lessons
Politeness, communication styles	N/A	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits - Cultural conflict situations that are hard to believe and it seems that people are being irrational	N/A	two lessons
3. Stories	Narrative writing	N/A	Simple / Describing	three lessons

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Topic - Material	Rhetorical function	Level of CCU	Difficulty / Macro function	Time frame
4. East meets West—China and Germany	Compare and contrast	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits—cultural conflict situations that are hard to believe and it seems that people are being irrational	More complex / Explaining	two lessons
5. Cultural dimensions	Summary writing	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits—intellectual analysis—believable logical explanations of the behavior of people from other cultures	More complex / Explaining	three lessons
6. Students' choice	Compare and contrast and summary writing (CCU research paper)	Awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits—intellectual analysis—believable logical explanations of the behavior of people from other cultures	Complex / Persuading (with evidence)	six months

Note. CCU = cross-cultural understanding.

Project One: Descriptive Writing

For many students, the first project was their first exposure to a class lead by a foreign teacher and so it was fitting to start with a topic that everyone was familiar with: festivals. First they were shown festivals from around the world. Then they studied descriptive writing. Next they were given the task of researching and writing their own descriptive paragraphs on a festival of their choice. Most students chose to describe a local festival. Later, students were introduced to peer checking, which had been initially difficult for many students in previous years. In order to show the students what was expected, the teacher underlined problem areas and gave comments in the first few lines of their first drafts. Students were randomly assigned a classmate's paper and given a

scoring rubric in Japanese. They checked and evaluated the final drafts of their classmates' papers using the same criteria the teacher had used. After editing and handing in their final text, students read each other's descriptions in small groups.

Project Two: Compare and Contrast Writing

For the second project, students were shown some interesting instruments and musicians from around the world. They were then introduced to linking words and text frames commonly used in compare and contrast writing. Later they wrote a paragraph comparing two instruments or two musicians from different cultures. Some students chose simple instruments to compare such as the guitar and the Okinawan *sanshin*. Others chose to compare artists like Maroon Five and Man with a Mission. This paragraph was used for the basis of a presentation in which they spoke about the similarities and differences they had found.

Lessons on Cultural Traits

Students were given lessons on communication styles and politeness based on units from *Identity* (Shaules, Tsujioka, & Iida, 2003). They first read about situations that highlighted the differences between people from different countries. They then evaluated their own tendencies using Likert-scale style surveys. After this they discussed their findings in partner interviews. Later in a full class discussion, students shared their outcomes and whether they agreed with the survey results.

Project Three: Narrative Writing

Kluge and Taylor (2014) outlined seven moves for a paragraph that tells a narrative: an interesting beginning sentence, then a topic sentence, next a situation, a rising action, a climax, a concluding sentence, and finally an interesting ending sentence. Students analysed a model text for the telling of a story and looked at common linking words used in narratives before they did the group task of writing a paragraph based on a short animated film. In this activity students each wrote one move then passed the paper to the person behind them. One problem that arose in this activity was that students wrote at greatly differing speeds. Setting a longer time limit and having a task for fast finishers may be one way to solve this problem.

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Project Four: Compare and Contrast Writing—Revisit

Students were shown differences between German and Chinese culture as illustrated by Yang (2015) and asked to describe one of these differences. In Yang's often humorous book, an aspect of German culture is shown with a pictogram on the left side of a two-page spread; on the right page the same aspect is shown in Chinese culture. This activity helped to combine the compare and contrast writing style students had learnt in project two with the second awareness level of cultural differences. They were taught phrases such as "Chinese and German people both . . ."; "However, in Germany . . . while in China . . ." Students then hung their texts on the wall for the class to decide which picture each text was describing in a limited time. This activity proved successful because students were eager to see what their classmates had written.

Project Five: Summary Writing From Sources

Writing from sources plays a large part in academic writing and requires a unique set of skills (Pecorari, 2013). Due to time constraints, not all the skills could be covered, but the basics of writing a summary were explored with text models and exercises on linking words, reference verbs, and layouts. For a source, I chose Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. Although his research may be contested (see McSweeney, 2002), Hofstede provided a measurable way of comparing cultures that can provide for a logical explanation of why people from a certain culture behave a certain way. Hofstede measured cultures using six dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. Each nation's unique values are a result of extensive research that was started in 1967 and was last updated in 2010.

Students were divided into six groups and given a question to answer by referring to one of Hofstede's dimensions. This project helped to combine the cognitively more difficult task of summary writing with the awareness level of logical cultural differences. Later, students were also taught to use a similar rhetoric to describe data in graphs and answers from interviews.

Project Six: Multiparagraph "Research Paper"

For their final project, a research paper of 1,000 words, students were asked to compare an aspect of Japanese culture with that of another culture, give reasons for the differences, and discuss the implications. The term research paper is in quotation marks because the final genre did not follow the standard *introduction ^ method ^ results ^ discussion* stages, but rather a more level-appropriate genre consisting of *introduction ^ comparisons*

^ reasons ^ implications. This project covered a span of 6 months. Students chose a wide variety of topics including marketing, comedy, conversation styles, and even attitudes towards movie theatres. Using the compare and contrast writing style from the second project, they were able to describe the cultural similarities and differences. Using the summary writing rhetorical style from the fifth project, they were able to write a few paragraphs about reasons for the differences with supporting evidence.

Students went through various planning stages. They first did some preliminary research on two or three topics to see how much information was available online for Japan and their chosen country. After choosing their topics and countries, they researched more in depth and produced a basic outline for their paper. They then scheduled appointments with their mentors to discuss their ideas, outlines, and challenges. Each class had three mentors: one ALT (the author) and two JTEs (Japanese teachers of English). They then wrote their first drafts. In a classroom activity, students checked each other's first drafts before handing in the body section of their paper. The body section consisted of a paragraph outlining the similarities and differences they found and further paragraphs that explained the reasons for the differences with evidence. After the summer holidays, students edited their first drafts before handing in their second drafts, which now included an introduction and conclusion. The conclusion outlined the implications of their findings. Using their papers, students then made presentations. While students were learning CCU, in a concurrently running speaking course they were learning how to give presentations. The two courses combined schedules to give students the opportunity to share their research. For approximately 1 month, students watched presentations and participated in question and answer sessions about cultural differences between Japan and other countries.

Student Reactions

Students ($N = 64$) completed a survey that used a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). There were nine statements, five on CCU and four on academic writing. As shown in Table 1 in the Appendix, students mainly agreed or strongly agreed with the statements about the course of study, indicating students were generally very positive about the course.

Students were also asked to describe something they liked about the course and something they thought the teachers should change to improve it. Typical comments included "I especially liked about learning foreign culture events such like Tomato festival in Spain"; "I like RPP [Research paper project]. I think English Academic writing will be very important to write report in college"; and

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In normal English classes, we can only learn grammar and what is expected to come to exams. It's important but also boring for me. But in CCU class I could make a presentation using what I learned from boring grammar classes. It was the best thing I did in my school life.

Such comments show that the students thought the course was exciting and educational. The most common negative comments were about the time constraints: Many students said it would have been better if the final research project had started sooner.

Suggestions for Improvement

The curriculum presented in this paper could be improved if there was more time, as more rhetorical functions could be covered. Related to this, the final research paper genre relied mainly on compare and contrast and summary writing, but could be adapted to include the recycling of other rhetorical functions. For example, the genre could be extended to include a narrative that tells part of the history of another culture or a story about why the student chose their topic. Also, the third project on narrative writing could be changed to tell the story of a cultural conflict situation, rather than an animated film, as this would be more fitting in the CCU setting. Finally, it may be argued that comparing cultures on a national level, as Hofstede (2001) did, does not do justice to multicultural nations and can mislead students into generalisations. However, as a starting point, his theory provided a logical way to explain cultural differences.

Conclusion

Through the teaching of rhetorical functions, the staged presentation of CCU, and the phases of the writing process, students were able to produce research papers that were far more coherent and focussed than others had done in previous years. Moreover, the students seemed to have enjoyed the course and reacted positively. The survey indicated that they believed they had become better writers and felt that they had a better understanding of people in other cultures.

Through these projects, students learnt to conduct research using the Internet. They also practised writing different types of rhetoric that they are likely to use in their further studies. In addition, they were also trained to use the steps that professional writers take when writing long texts. Furthermore, through their self-directed learning and peer instruction they were able to become more independent learners and become better prepared for university. It would seem that the combination of CCU and academic writing is something that students perceive as empowering and important to their future. It is

hoped that this curriculum could provide a useful guide, not only for teachers at senior high school, but also for any educators hoping to meet MEXT's goals for 2020 or indeed for teachers of university-level courses. Learners were introduced to two powerful skills that will be useful in the new globalised world, CCU and academic writing—two trees from one seed.

Bio Data

Justin Foster-Sutherland is currently an English instructor at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate School. He was previously a foreign language teacher at Kaiho Senior High School. He has an undergraduate degree in computer science and mathematics from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. He is currently a MEd TESOL candidate at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK where he is specialising in English for academic purposes.

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Appendix

Table 1A. Survey Results (N = 64)

Statement – Because I studied CCU ...	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I learned new information about other countries.	5.594	0.601
I understand other cultures better.	5.609	0.581
I am more excited about making friends with people from other cultures.	5.344	0.84
I realised that we have things to learn from other cultures.	5.672	0.565
I realised that people from other cultures could learn from my culture.	5.328	0.714
I feel more confident about writing a research paper in English.	5.141	0.889
I feel more confident about writing a paragraph in English.	5.047	0.881
I understand what is expected in English Academic writing.	5.141	0.889
I am confident about using evidence in my writing in the future.	5.188	0.871

Note. CCU = cross-cultural understanding; 6-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).