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Correcting formatting flaws in EFL academic writing: A case study

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While many university students show aptitude with regard to content and structure in academic writing in EFL classes, they often do not have a good grasp of basic formatting conventions for academic English. An introductory course in academic-level process writing for second-year medical students at the University of Miyazaki presented a clear example of this problem. Students displayed an ability to organize their thoughts and form a coherent thesis, but their physical products were so poorly formatted that they often posed a challenge to the reader. Subsequent research conducted by the teachers revealed that most students had never received any sort of instruction regarding the formatting of academic papers in English. It was also revealed that most students had no experience using common word-processing software (e.g., MS Word) for any sort of writing in English. In this short essay, we will discuss the problem in more detail, how the situation was resolved, and offer samples of the teaching materials that were used to address and resolve the problem.

日本の大学の英語教育におけるアカデミック・ライティングでは、多くの学生が内容と構造を理解しているようだが、実際には基本的な形式さえよく分かっていないことが多い。本論では、宮崎大学医学部2年生の初級レベルを例にとって、同様の問題を検証する。多くの学生は自分の考えを論理的にまとめる能力はあるが、全体的な構成があまりにも未熟なために読み手が困惑することが多々ある。その後のアクション・リサーチで、アカデミック・ライティングの形式に関して何の指導も受けていない学生が多いことが明らかになった。さらに、ほとんどの学生がワープロ機能ソフト（MicrosoftのWordなど）を使用して英文ライティングに臨んだ経験が皆無であることも判明した。本論では、上記の問題解決について議論を深め、改善策として授業で実際に使用した指導教材サンプルを提示する。

The authors of this paper both teach medical students at the University of Miyazaki. Among the courses taught are some that introduce academic writing. The authors had been teaching these, or similar courses, for four years before the problem described herein was identified and addressed.

Over the four years prior, the authors had focused primarily upon content and structure in these classes, with students making marked progress in these areas during the course. A more visceral problem that had been left unaddressed however was the cosmetic factor—the fact that despite whatever progress was being made in terms of expressing content, mastering structure, or utilizing cohesion and other rhetorical devices, student essays often did not look appealing simply due to sloppy, haphazard formatting. Although the authors had previously made mention of formatting issues when providing feedback to their students between written drafts, no comprehensive addressing of this problem had previously been carried out and thus the problem had persisted.

Interestingly, little or no EFL-related research appears to have been published in regards to the treatment of formatting problems in academic writing, the closest comprehensive study being Dyson's (2004) inquiry into optimal computer screen reading layouts. Perhaps this is because teachers may see formatting as a peripheral issue, being almost wholly cosmetic in nature. As an example, one of the leading textbooks on academic writing for EFL students, Bailey's *Academic Writing: A Handbook For International Students* (2005) devotes a mere three of nearly 200 pages to punctuation and almost none to aspects of formatting.

There is no shortage of research regarding organizational, rhetorical, and stylistic features in EFL academic-writing literature but formatting seems to be omitted from consideration, which we feel is an oversight since the initial impression generated by any written document can affect the reader's perception of the value of the document as well as the veracity of the writer; at the very least, it is liable to leave the reader frustrated and dissatisfied (Chapparo, Shaikh, & Baker, 2005). From the EFL writer's perspective, Pennington (2003) talks of EFL writers having their "…enthusiasm dampened if they experience technical problems, early on, (or) have difficulty typing or mastering computer commands…" (p. 288), underscoring the sense of achievement that EFL writers are likely to feel upon mastering these skills.

The problem with EFL students not addressing these issues is that the reader is inconvenienced, as poor formatting obscures the intended argument or narrative by making the document visibly difficult to process, ultimately minimizing the rhetorical impact of the paper or essay. Further, first appearances lend to the notion that due care had not been used in creating the documents, since they often appear childlike or amateurish. Therefore, such texts most certainly would not be found acceptable by formal standards of written English in the business or academic worlds. Initially this was surprising, given that Japanese society, and Japanese aesthetics in particular, tends to place a premium upon visual verisimilitude and balance, but it became apparent over time that the problem of correct formatting needed to be addressed explicitly, particularly since medical students would almost certainly be writing English research papers in the future.

Noted formatting problems

Over the four years prior to conducting this research the most common formatting problems noted by the authors included the following seven types, each illustrated with an authentic example

1. Spacing: Often two spaces, or no space at all, left between words, between punctuation marks and the first letter of the following word, or no space entered pre and post-parentheses (Fig. 1).

2. Punctuation (often related to spacing): Periods doubled or omitted. Commas inserted randomly (Fig. 1).

We researched some of organ transplant, such as cardiac transplant ,marrow transplant ,hepatic transplant ,and kidney transplant.

Obesity ,however , is becoming a social problem,and is said to be a life style-related disease.

Figure 1. Spacing and punctuation problems

3. Indentation: Often omitted altogether or inserted in a rather random form (Fig.2).

Another problem is the loss of personal freedom for a patient staying in

a hospital. They can't eat their favorite foods, watch their favorite TV shows,

or use a computer while staying in a hospital. If a patient were able to

do these things he/she might feel a lot less stress.

Figure 2. Indentation problems

4. Improper line breaks or line spacing: Either extremely dense spacing or two lines separating paragraphs, often when a paragraph break is completely uncalled for. Random hyphenation. Separate paragraphs having different justifications. Academic compositions often written in *poetic* form with each new sentence beginning from the left margin (Fig. 3).

Some of the symptoms include.

-
- Problems sleeping
-
- Getting enough sleep, but still feeling exhausted.

Figure 3. Improper line breaks and spacing

5. Margins/headers/footers: Often no inclusion or otherwise evidence of awareness of these features.

6. Font consistency (type and size): A variance in the type of font used within the same text body and a change in font size completely unrelated to titles or headings (Fig. 4).

> In an intramuscular injection, the nurse shouldn't inject infant under 18 months,because their deltoid muscle are not well-developed.

Figure 4. Font problems

7. Remnants of L1 typography: The use of Japanese fonts to write in English precipitated many spacing issues. Occasionally a hiragana or katakana symbol appeared in English text (Fig. 5).

> When a patient is matched with a donor…
>
> 1. 「The statement of international health conference」New York, in 1946.
>
> There are twice as many obese young people as there were thirty years ago。

Figure 5. L1 typography problems

The seven formatting issues noted above are quite basic; they are not technical, and are not concerned with the degree of minutiae that, for example, the APA format requires. The formatting problems the authors had encountered and wanted to address were basic visceral infelicities that would be noted by any regular user or reader of alphabetic languages.

Addressing the problem: Formatting experience survey

In order to establish the cause of these formatting problems a simple survey (see Appendix 1) was drafted and conducted. The content of the survey was extremely simple and to the point asking about students' experience in using word processing software. These surveys were distributed to students as follows:

- Second year medical students (31 students)
- First year medical students (85 students)
- First year engineering students (32 students)
- Total students surveyed: 148

Although the target class was the second year medical class, first year medical students also completed the survey. This was done in order to uncover any possibility that second year medical students were learning formatting procedures in other courses. The survey was also distributed to students in a separate faculty (engineering) in order to note if the problem was in any way con-nected to course content or other faculty-specific factors.

Interpreting the survey results

The results (see Appendix 2) of the background survey indicate clearly that the vast majority of students had some ability/experience using word processing software in their own language, Japanese. Most students, however, appeared to have little or no experience using word processing software to write in English. This seems to be a result of not having any formal instruction regarding the basic rules of a properly formatted English document.

The most salient difference between the three sample groups surveyed can be noted in the responses to Question 2, "How much experience do you have using word processing software to write in English?" The number of second year medical students who said that they used the software "sometimes" to write in English exceeded the number who "never did" by only a slight margin (16 to 15). This stands in contrast to the two first year sample groups, in which "never" outranked "sometimes" by a total of 85 to 25. This indicates that the perceived necessity of using word processing software to write in English had increased by the second year. This would further imply that the first year of university is an opportune time to introduce correct English formatting.

Addressing the problem: The one-lesson two-handout solution

We believe that it's not necessary to start from scratch with teaching these students word processing skills. That is, it is not necessary to develop an entire course devoted to teaching students how to format a document written in English. Instead, what we propose is a *one-lesson two-handout solution*, meaning that the issue can be adequately addressed and corrected in a single lesson using two prepared handouts (see Appendices 3 and 4).

Before introducing and distributing these handouts the teachers conducted a brief classroom refresher session on the names and functions of the most basic and common English punctuation marks before distributing the first handout (Appendix 3). Appendix 3 is a teacher-created sample of a written draft that includes 18 formatting errors, including the specific errors mentioned earlier. Students were placed in groups and

required to find the flaws and, to the best of their ability, fix them. They were also told that none of the errors were lexical or grammatical. Typically, students indicated a receptive, passive awareness of some formatting problems but, not knowing what the accepted standard was, were often unable to fix them. These provided opportunities for the instructors to explicitly state the standard or rule (e.g., "You must leave a space before and after parentheses but not immediately inside them"), aided by whiteboard examples.

The second handout given to students (Appendix 4) is a screenshot of a Microsoft Word document, overwritten by hand to indicate clearly the Microsoft Word functions that students should prioritize when composing in English. Both handouts were to be retained by the students and became a standard part of the self-checking process before each subsequent draft of any composition submitted to the teachers. Students also carried out peer checks on these formatting issues before allowing their peers to submit drafts. Correct formatting was also explicitly mentioned to the students as a significant factor in grading papers, helping to highlight awareness.

Follow-up and Extension

Results following the *one-lesson two-handout solution* lesson were loosely monitored in four separate classes. One of these was the target class, the 2nd year medical students. For this class, the authors reported that post instruction, approximately 90-95% of the previous formatting problems had been removed. Properly formatted papers and revisions allowed both the teachers and students to now focus upon the expression of content.

Two classes in which follow-up was carried out were smaller seminar classes for 4th and 5th year students who had high proficiency in English. These classes had not been included in the initial survey due to timing and scheduling issues, but since both classes included an academic writing component, the same materials and lesson were provided after students' first drafts had been submitted. It is noteworthy that although students in these classes had a higher degree of English proficiency, they were still prone to the same formatting errors described earlier. However, approximately 95% of these errors no longer appeared in subsequent drafts or papers post instruction. This suggests that the problem of incorrect formatting and the need to explicitly

address the issue has little or no correlation with the students' actual English proficiency.

However, our follow-up research indicates that formatting standards might not be internalized if students do not immediately begin the formal writing process soon after the problem has been explicitly addressed. This was noted when the same instructional lesson was given to a group of 2nd year nursing students whose English courses did not include any academic writing component, nor formal compositions immediately after instruction. One year later however, when the same students were asked to submit a more formalized essay, it was apparent that little or none of this instruction had been retained, as almost every error that had previously been addressed reappeared. This would seem to indicate that instruction must be immediately followed by regular and consistent application for the rules to be internalized.

Conclusions

In the target class (2nd year medical students) there was almost instant and universal improvement in the students' written product after explicitly addressing formatting issues using the *one-lesson, two-handout* solution. In particular, spacing and punctuation problems ceased almost immediately, allowing the instructors to focus their feedback upon rhetoric and content in the revisions. The same has since held true for all subsequent classes that include an academic writing component.

While the focus of this action research was on Japanese students having difficulties using word processing software in an English setting, it might also be relevant to other English learning environments in which students have to deal with multiple keyboard layouts. The course of action described above might also be of use in any English learning environment where students are unfamiliar with proper English formatting conventions as they relate to word processing software.

We therefore recommend that teachers faced with academic writing classes in environments, such as Japan, where alphabetic word processing may not be the norm, and the cosmetic standards of formal English word processing have never been explicitly addressed, spend one lesson addressing and fixing the issue in the manner that we have described.

White & Guest: *Correcting formatting flaws in EFL academic writing: A case study*

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Position available

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The Language Teacher is seeking a qualified candidate for the position of Associate Editor, with future advancement to the position of Coeditor. Applicants must be JALT members and must have the knowledge, skills, and leadership qualities to oversee the production of a regularly published academic publication. Previous experience in publications, especially at an editorial level, is an asset. Knowledge of JALT publications is desirable. Applicants must also have regular access to a computer with email and word processing capabilities.

Job details

This post requires several hours of concentrated work every week editing articles, liaising with the Publications Board, and, in conjunction with the Assistant Editor, overseeing production and proofreader training. Applicants should be prepared to make a three-year commitment with an extension possible. The assumption of duties is tentatively scheduled for November, 2014. Applicants should submit a curriculum vitae (including details of publication background and published works), a cover letter, and a statement of purpose indicating why they would like to become Associate Editor (and later advance to Coeditor) of The Language Teacher, to the *TLT* Coeditors <tlt-editors@jalt-publications.org> and Darren Lingley, JALT Publications Board Chair <pubchair@jalt-publications.org> by September 30th, 2014. This position will remain open until filled.

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1. How much experience do you have using word-processing software (for example, Microsoft Word)? [CHOOSE ONE]

    a. I've never used it.

    b. I sometimes use it.

    c. I often use it.

===➔ If you chose "a." please <u>SKIP questions 2 and 3. Go to question 4.</u>

2. How much experience do you have using word-processing software (for example, Microsoft Word) <u>to write in English</u>? [CHOOSE ONE]

    a. I've never used it to write in English.

    b. I sometimes use it.

    c. I often use it.

===➔ If you chose "a." please <u>SKIP question 3. Go to question 4.</u>

3. How did you learn how to use word-processing software to write in English? [<u>More than one answer is OK</u>]

    a. I taught myself.

    b. Family member/friend showed me.

    c. I learned in school.

    d. I took a special course.

    e. Other. (Briefly explain_____)

4. Is there a computer (desktop/notebook) in the room/apartment/house <u>where you are currently living</u>? [CHOOSE ONE]

    a. YES   b. NO

5. Is it convenient to access a computer here at the university? [CHOOSE ONE]

    a. YES   b. NO

Survey results

The results obtained from the questionnaires were as follows:

1. How much experience do you have using word-processing software (for example, Microsoft Word)?

> a. I've never used it.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students (31):   0 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students (85):   2 students
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students (32):   2 students
>
> b. I sometimes use it.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students: 22 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students: 66 students
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students: 27 students
>
> c. I often use it.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students: 9 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students: 17 students
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students: 3 students

2. How much experience do you have using word-processing software *to write in English?*

> a. I've never used it to write in English.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students (31):   15 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students (83):   59 students
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students (30):   26 students
>
> b. I sometimes use it to write in English.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students: 16 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students: 23 students
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students: 2 students
>
> c. I often use it to write in English.
>
> 2nd Year Medical Students: 0 students
>
> 1st Year Medical Students: 1 student
>
> 1st Year Engineering Students: 2 students

3. How did you learn to use word-processing software to write in English? (multiple responses allowed)

(*Totals are aggregated from the three groups due to the small sample size: n=44.)

a. I taught myself.	34 responses
b. Family member/friend showed me.	4 responses
c. I learned in school.	14 responses
d. I took a special course.	0 responses
e. Other.	0 responses

MS Word Disaster

In the passage below there are 18 mistakes. Work with your partners: find and circle the 18 mistakes.

NOTE: There are NO SPELLING or GRAMMAR mistakes.

The goals of this class are a) to improve students ' ability to discuss topical issues clearly and logically, and b)to introduce students to basic academic standards of writing . Students will be introduced to vocabulary , expressions, structures, and ideas that will stimulate discussion and   help them to express themselvesin clear English.They will also be introduced to the basics of process writing and academic writing.

Each week students will be given copies of short articles taken primarily from the internet. These articles will be supplemented by other materials which will serve as pre- and post-reading activities.

Concur rent to the above,periodically the teacher will introduce materials related to academic writing standards (abstracts, proper citation , etc.   ).

CHOOSE A GOOD FONT! ("CENTURY," "TIMES NEW ROMAN," ETC.)

FONT SIZE: "12" IS OK FOR MOST PAPERS

FIND THE "SPELL CHECK" FUNCTION IN THIS TAB. TURN IT ON!

HEADERS / FOOTERS / MARGINS

DON'T HAVE A LOT OF BLANK SPACE!

LINE SPACING SHOULD BE SET AT "2.0"

REMEMBER: ALWAYS A SPACE AFTER PUNCTUATION

: NEVER A SPACE BEFORE PUNCTUATION

LINE BREAKS: DON'T HIT "ENTER" UNLESS YOU REALLY MEAN IT!!

NO!! → ひらがな(H)
全角カタカナ(K)
全角英数(L)
半角カタカナ(A)
YES!! → 半角英数(P)
キャンセル

(DIRECT INPUT)

NO!! → SHOULD LOOK LIKE "A"