

Using Wikipedia to Make English Academic Writing Meaningful for Undergraduates

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Reference Data

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I describe a project to help make academic writing more meaningful and authentic for 1st-year students through a Wikipedia project. Students wrote Wikipedia articles on topics important to them, uploaded them, and then monitored comments made by Wikipedia editors on their articles. The project focused not only on producing articles, but also on building awareness of genre, developing research skills, and getting peer feedback, so as to provide students with an introduction to the unfamiliar terrain of writing for an international audience. In this paper I outline the prewriting, research, drafting, uploading, and follow-up stages. In order to gauge the success of the project, I had students participate in an informal survey and semistructured interviews. The results indicate that students' perceptions of their writing competence improved, specifically regarding the ability to find articles, write references and citations, paraphrase and summarize, and reduce bias in writing.

本論は、ある日本の研究機関におけるウィキペディアプロジェクトについて論じる。これは、アカデミックライティングを本物で意義深くするためにウィキペディアを使用する試みである。350人の英語アカデミックライティングを受講する一年次の学生が、自分たちにとって重要なトピックに関するウィキペディア用の記事を書き、ウィキペディアサイトにアップロードし、編集者の記事へのコメントをモニタリングした。本プロジェクトは、馴染みの薄い国際的な学界に進む準備をするために、記事を書くだけでなく、ジャンルに対する意識や研究スキルを高め、ピアフィードバックを受けるように計画されている。本論では、執筆前、リサーチ、草稿、アップロード、アップロード後の段階について概説する。また本プロジェクトの成功度を図るため、学生にインフォーマルな質問紙調査と、半構造化インタビューを行った。その結果、多くの学生が、記事探索、引用や文献作成、言い換えや要約などにおけるライティング能力に関する自己評価を高め、またライティングに関する偏見が減少したことが示された。

Against the backdrop of decreasing rates of publication in English by academic scholars based in Japan, and the subsequent impact on global ratings, Japanese universities are increasingly incorporating English academic writing courses into undergraduate curricula. Nonetheless, making academic writing authentic and meaningful for 1st-year university students is a formidable task, especially if their writing assignments are only viewed by their teachers.

In order to address this situation, one of the class projects I implemented in my 1st-year academic writing classes at Kyoto University was team-based Wikipedia article writing. Students were first guided through writing Wikipedia articles on topics meaningful to them. They then uploaded the articles onto Wikipedia, monitored their articles, and interacted with the Wikipedia editors. In this paper, following a brief overview of academic writing classes in Japan and the course I teach, English I, I will describe the prewriting, research, drafting, uploading, and follow-up stages of the project. The results of an informal survey of students' perceptions of their experience with the project and of their own English writing ability will be discussed, as well as some considerations for how to implement the project more effectively in the future.

EAP Classes in Japan

Due to increasing pressure for scholars to publish in English and the difficulties students have in acquiring the genre of academic writing, more Japanese universities are offering English for academic purposes (EAP) classes. The small amount of research that exists on the difficulties students face in EAP classes in Japan has produced mixed results. Dasky and Tajino (2007), in a survey conducted following the implementation of mandatory academic writing courses for 1st-year students, found that mastering the style of academic writing proved most challenging. Other scholars have pointed to sentence-level difficulties (Kubota, 1998a). A study by Lee (2008) at Tokyo University found that students perceived both writing in an "academic style" and "expressing ideas logically and clearly" as

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the most challenging (p. 6). Ultimately, the variety of skills needed to write an academic paper, as well as the time needed for any person to develop academic writing proficiency, make designing academic writing courses a challenge.

A central problem in teaching academic writing is making it meaningful for students. One reason is that English itself is often seen as something that belongs to native speakers. Extensive scholarship has analyzed the power relations in the use of English. Even though the majority of English speakers are not in inner-circle countries, but rather in the outer and expanding circles of countries, and the majority of communication takes place between those in outer and expanding circles (Kachru, 1985; Kubota, 1998b), students often do not feel as if they have ownership over the English language. The prioritization of university entrance exams and qualifications such as TOEIC in order to gain employment (Teeter, 2013a) also play a role in diminishing the meaningfulness of English to students. Many students leave university (i.e., after at least 6 years of English language learning) feeling that they are not suitably proficient in the language. The Japanese education system, which tends to prioritize competition, distances the English language from students' sense of self. Finally, it can be difficult for students to understand the importance of mastering academic writing in their 1st year of university. If students do not conceive of their future careers as being connected to the university, it can be hard to motivate them to dedicate time to developing their writing skills. I attempted to address these issues through a Wikipedia project, with the aim of developing the academic writing and research skills of students in a way that was meaningful to them.

Wikipedia and Academic Writing

Although academic writing and writing for Wikipedia are different, they have similarities. According to Wikipedia guidelines, article content must be as neutral as possible, which is similar to the necessity for academic writing to be objective. The guidelines require that articles be “verifiable,” and contain “no original research” (“List of Policies,” n.d.) The Wikipedia style manual (“Manual of Style,” n.d.) provides further policies and suggestions on how to avoid bias and lack of precision in prose. Furthermore, in order to create a Wikipedia article, a variety of skills relevant to academic writing, as well as other useful skills, are necessary:

- Knowledge of how to locate articles in English, Japanese, and other languages
- Capacity to analyze articles
- Ability to paraphrase and summarize,
- Understanding of the Wikipedia style

- Familiarity with referencing
- Basic knowledge of HTML
- Understanding of how to identify/reduce bias in writing

Given the similarities, writing a Wikipedia article can serve as a stepping-stone to future practice in academic writing by helping students acquire these skills.

English I and Student Characteristics

First-year students at Kyoto University exhibit higher academic proficiency and knowledge of the English language than the average student in Japan. The university has not conducted a comprehensive study of students' English proficiency levels. However, based on unofficial calculations, TOEFL-iBT scores at the university are an average of 78 out of 120, with an average writing score of 22 out of 30 (Aotani, 2013). In addition, the average *hensachi* (an indicator of the difficulty of the entrance exams for a university compared to all universities nationwide) of the students at Kyoto University is 71.5, making it the second most difficult university to be accepted into in Japan (“Saishin Ban,” 2013). Sixty percent of the students go on to graduate studies and must write academic papers in English for their schoolwork and for publication (Kyoto University, 2012). Because students' future career trajectories are often related to academic writing, English I is intended to provide an introduction to the skills needed to research and write academic papers. Despite the general high skill level of the students at Kyoto University, English I is often the first time they actually experience English academic writing. According to the curriculum, English I courses are aimed at expanding students' basic academic writing skills, including knowledge of structuring arguments, developing topics, and gathering data. The 30-week compulsory course took place in a CALL classroom. The students were 1st-year undergraduates and each class was for 90 minutes. There were 35 to 40 students in each class, and the majority were science majors.

In order to achieve the curricular goals and to provide students with a sense that their writing was contributing to an international forum, I implemented several projects over the two semesters including the collaborative writing of a Wikipedia article, a critical review of a book chapter, and the writing of a research essay for an international contest. Students also engaged in other supplementary activities related to academic writing:

- Understanding motivations for and how to avoid plagiarism (throughout the course)
- Identifying plagiarized and authentic work (throughout the course)

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- Writing references for a variety of genres (throughout the course)
- Writing productive peer feedback (throughout the course)
- Analyzing the structure, strengths, and weaknesses of academic essays (throughout the course)
- Detailed outline writing and reverse outlining (throughout the course)
- Editing and redrafting (throughout the course)
- Providing specific topic sentences (Week 3)
- Making sentences concise (Week 4)
- Eliminating the 1st-person voice (Weeks 5 and 6)
- Searching for articles through sources such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Cinii (Week 7)
- Summarizing and paraphrasing (Weeks 8, 9, and 10)
- Composing comprehension and discussion questions (Weeks 10 and 11)
- Drafting effective titles (Week 16)

The focus in this paper is on the collaborative writing of a Wikipedia article, which took from the middle of the first semester to the middle of the second semester.

Wikipedia Project

Goals

The overarching goal of the Wikipedia Project was for students to work in groups to research, draft, and upload an article onto Wikipedia. Through doing the project, the students developed their ability to structure their articles. They did library research using journal search engines, identified bias in writing, incorporated their research into their articles through summaries and paraphrases, wrote citations and references, used HTML, provided and responded to teacher and peer feedback, and responded to feedback from Wikipedia editors. As explained above, the skills developed through this process overlap with the skills needed in academic writing. I aimed to provide students with a supportive introduction to writing a researched article while giving them a real-world experience.

Familiarization with Wikipedia

Prior to the drafting their Wikipedia articles, students were guided through activities that helped familiarize them with Wikipedia conventions. First, they were given a link to

a model article to analyze from the simplified English version of Wikipedia, called Simple English Wikipedia. I chose an article on the 1910 Cuba hurricane that had been judged as well written by Wikipedia editors (“Very Good Articles,” n.d.). Editors develop this list by choosing articles they deem to be “distinguished by professional standards of writing, presentation, and sourcing” that are “well-written,” “comprehensive,” “well-researched,” “neutral,” and “well-structured” and with content that remains “stable” (“Featured Article Criteria,” n.d.).

To help students understand how to write a Wikipedia article, I asked them guiding questions about the structure and use of sources in the model article. Students broke into small groups and first answered questions about the overall structure of the article, including how many sentences were in the introduction, how many heading and subheadings the article had, numbers of links, purposes of the links, topic sentences, and number of references. Then I asked them to analyze the references in the article by clicking on the links and determining what kind of sources each article had (government document, organization website, newspaper, journal article, book chapter, and so forth). I asked them to take notice of the structure of the reference as well and how the reference was cited in the article. The aim of this activity was for students to gain an understanding of how to use a variety of sources to balance their writing and make it more objective and accurate. We also engaged in discussions about the nature of information on the Internet, focusing on what makes a source reliable. Finally, the students discussed why the article had been chosen to be a featured article.

Next, I asked students to evaluate articles on a variety of different subjects, taken from a list made by Wikipedia editors titled “Articles Needing Attention” (n.d.), so that students could become familiar with the types of articles suitable for Wikipedia. They had to analyze why the articles had been flagged for editing. Reasons included unbalanced sources, lack of sources, insufficient length, nonobjective language, lacking significant perspectives on a topic, advertising or spam, and content from unreliable sources.

Selecting Article Topics

After reviewing the Wikipedia guidelines and the structure of several articles, students formed groups of three to four and chose news and journal articles on topics that interested them. They shared these articles with their classmates through reader discussion circles, for which they had to summarize the news article, write comprehension and discussion questions related to their summary, and write a reference for the article (see Teeter, 2013b) using the Harvard style, which is Wikipedia’s preferred format. The discussions served as a catalyst for organizing their own Wikipedia articles.

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At first, the students overwhelmingly looked to the US and Europe for topic ideas. Because one goal of the project was for students to draw upon their own lives, I asked them to consider their own experiences and write about something that they knew about their own country or local community. In the next class, students shared a diverse array of ideas that were more relevant to their lives, such as places near their homes (for example, Yoshida dorm, Aji Island, Japanese haunted towns, and Hirakata Park), recent developments and events in Japanese society (including *Kyotographie*, heckling in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly, and the new Theater Law), and relevant aspects of society (including ultimate Frisbee in Japan, *Tenkaippin*, and *Kyoyasai*). Students formed teams and found sources for their topics, which they then summarized and shared through the reader discussion activity described above.

Drafting and Feedback

Students collaboratively drafted their articles both during and outside of class using Google Drive, which was chosen for its similarity to Microsoft Word and because all edits are automatically saved. Furthermore, the service indicates who is the author of different segments of a text, which helped me ensure that all students were doing their fair share of the work while facilitating the provision of feedback. Using Google Drive also gave me easy access to their articles so that I could provide feedback for their work outside of class.

Feedback activities were utilized with a view towards helping students become productive editors themselves and to encourage collaborative learning. Wiliam (2011) pointed out that simply providing students opportunities to view the work of their peers is insufficient. They must be trained in how to appropriately assess their peers so that they may start to take ownership of their own learning and that of others. Therefore, I guided students through activities that taught them how to critically and productively analyze writing so that they could assess their peers with confidence and also accept the feedback as legitimate. Peer feedback can provide an impetus for further learning and promote the realization that peers can be instructional resources.

These activities focused on techniques for providing both positive and constructive feedback. For positive feedback, students were encouraged to write in detail about what the writers did well. An example of feedback of this variety is “You used evidence effectively to explain your arguments, especially in the second body paragraph about DNA.” For constructive feedback, I encouraged students to make the writing itself the subject of statements, not the actual person. So as to help students avoid simply criticizing, I gave

them guidance on the language of advice, such as, “The argument about DNA was not supported by enough evidence. It would be good if there were more research from other scholars and with different perspectives included.”

At first all of the students practiced giving feedback on an article that I provided. After I provided suggestions to each student on their feedback, they gave feedback on each others’ articles on Google Drive. Students used the highlight function to note specific grammatical and structural aspects of the articles that needed improvement and the comment function to provide constructive feedback. The articles underwent several rounds of feedback and editing. I also provided students with feedback on their articles and checked the peer feedback, noting when I agreed or disagreed with the feedback students wrote.

This training in peer feedback writing spanned several classes. Students gradually became more competent in analyzing the quality of the work of their peers and in using the information learned in their own writing. In this way, they were encouraged to learn from each other, develop their ability to edit their own papers, and help one another.

Uploading Wikipedia Articles

Before we uploaded the articles, I instructed students on basic HTML (see Table 1). After uploading, the students monitored their articles by viewing comments from Wikipedia editors, making changes as necessary, and negotiating with the editors about points of contention.

Table 1. Basic HTML for Uploading to Wikipedia

HTML function	HTML
Making headings	==Heading==
Making subheadings	===Subheading===
Inserting links from Wikipedia pages	[[Internal Link]]
Inserting outside links	[http://externallink.com]
Including a reference list	==References== {{reflist 2}}
Inserting in-text citations	<ref> Reference </ref> <ref name = Reference1/>

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Project Evaluation

Surveys

In order to gauge students' perceptions of this project, I asked for 20 volunteers to participate in an anonymous 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire in Japanese with 16 items (Table 2) on their academic writing skills before and after the project. This was followed by semistructured interviews in Japanese or English, depending on the preference of the student. The small number of participants allowed for a more in-depth exploration of students' attitudes. The questionnaire was done using Survey Monkey and the interviews were conducted in my office. All 20 students completed the survey and also participated in the interviews.

Table 2. Self-Perception of Academic Writing Skills Pre- and Post-Project ($n = 20$)

Academic writing skill	Pre-project (mean)	Post-project (mean)
I can find articles in English very well.	2.75	4.29
I can find articles in Japanese well.	3.75	4.23
I can analyze articles well.	3.38	4
I can paraphrase and summarize well.	2.75	4.14
I know how to cite well.	2.63	4.43
I know how to use basic HTML well.	3.13	3.57
I understand how to reduce bias in my writing well.	3.25	4.14
I can use journal search engines well.	3	4

Note. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale; 1 = *I strongly disagree*; 5 = *I strongly agree*.

Results of the survey were generally positive, with students rating their skills more highly after the project for finding research articles, analyzing those articles for bias, and incorporating information from articles effectively into their own articles. The biggest improvements were in finding articles in English, citing articles, and paraphrasing and summarizing. In addition, students indicated that the Wikipedia project improved their confidence in and their motivation to develop their academic English writing skills. Post-project responses to the item *Thanks to the Wikipedia I have more confidence in my*

writing skills had an average of 4.86, 1 being *I strongly disagree* and 5 being *I strongly agree*. For the items, *I am proud that I could write a Wikipedia article* and *The Wikipedia project made me want to keep practicing academic writing* the averages were 4.43 and 4.29 respectively.

Interviews

Semistructured interviews helped to further elucidate what students liked about the project and what was difficult for them. When asked about points they liked, several students stated that they were able to “develop their ability to write without plagiarism.” Several others explained that they “hadn’t thought [they] would be able to put [their] own article on Wikipedia, so being able to do it was a good experience.” Many enjoyed collaborating with classmates, especially as it was their first academic writing project. Students also stated that they thought it was “good that [they] could analyze many articles.” One student explained, “I normally do not get a chance to write Wikipedia articles, and as a part of the class I was able to gain a new experience which helped improve my English ability.” Overall, students were able to practice skills necessary for academic writing while doing a task that they would normally not imagine being able to do.

Most of the difficulties students faced were related to time management, research, and using appropriate styles for referencing. Some noted that if more class time had been dedicated to writing, they could have written a better article. One student also suggested making the groups larger, with six or seven per group. Another noted that doing library research was difficult. Referencing and using Harvard style was new and challenging to some, as was mastering the HTML for adding in-text citations. Another comment was that a student did not “understand the process of writing at the beginning so [they] chose a topic that was difficult to write about.” Allocating more time in class for students to develop these skills could help address these challenges. Making the groups bigger could also ease the burden on students engaging in their first academic writing assignment.

Overall Evaluation

Overall, the goals of the project were mostly achieved, though students definitely need more practice to become proficient in academic writing. All of the groups succeeded in uploading their articles to Wikipedia. The survey and interview results indicated that students saw improvements in their ability to find articles and use them in their own writing through summarizing and paraphrasing. For many, it was their first time using references and citations. Students were able to understand the basic elements necessary

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for references and citations, though more practice in formatting them correctly was needed. They also understood more clearly how to avoid plagiarism. Although the peer review process was not covered in the surveys and interviews, I noticed improvements in the way students provided feedback, as a result of repeated practice. In the future, more guidance in how to respond to feedback could help. Finally, students also learned a new skill very important for the Internet age: how to use basic HTML.

Though students perceived substantial gains in their writing competence, there is room for improvement. Students needed more time in class to work on developing objectivity in their writing, as Wikipedia editors rejected some of the articles, saying they were written like personal opinion essays. In terms of responding to Wikipedia editors' comments, although some students became quite engaged in making edits and communicating with the editors, some did not. This could be because of the complicated format of editor feedback on the Wikipedia site. Peer feedback sessions focused more on content rather than copy editing, so in the future more time could be dedicated to working on improving students' grammar, style, cohesion, and tone. Furthermore, given the large number of students engaged in the project in my classes it was challenging to monitor the use of sources and provide sufficient teacher feedback. In retrospect, I could have worked to ensure that students used a variety of sources, as some depended heavily on primary sources. On the technical side, I learned after implementing the project that articles can be uploaded to Wikipedia Sandbox prior to a final upload to the site to gain feedback from Wikipedia editors ("Sandbox," n.d.). Although students were able to deliberate with editors about their articles post-upload and make changes to them if they were flagged for deletion, the Sandbox tool could help prevent articles from being flagged in the first place while giving students another way to receive feedback on their drafts.

Conclusions

Although there are areas of this project that need to be improved, students were able to acquire an understanding of the basic skills necessary for academic writing, thanks to the peer-support they received. They were also able to better understand the nature of information in the Internet era. Anyone can post to Wikipedia, and although this allows an opportunity for silenced voices to be heard, students came to realize that Wikipedia, as with all information, needs to be confirmed for accuracy and reliability.

Through this project, students gained motivation to use their English in a real-world situation thanks to the peer- and teacher-supported environment. They used their own knowledge and resources, and realized that English is not only reserved for native speakers. Students enjoyed the collaborative nature of the project and noted that this new

experience helped them become better writers. In addition, their research and analysis skills improved, as well as their summarizing and paraphrasing abilities. Furthermore, the project helped students grasp the importance of structure in academic writing. As a bonus, they learned that the HTML necessary for basic functions on webpages was not as challenging as they had previously thought.

The look of disbelief on many students' faces when I first told them that they would write a Wikipedia article in English cannot be erased from my mind. Many of the students had no confidence in their writing and research abilities. Many believed that academic writing was unnecessary—a task reserved for their graduate year seminar classes. They felt a great sense of accomplishment immediately after uploading their articles. Using their years of English learning, coupled with their localized knowledge, they contributed to one of the largest, most well-known, and growing sources of information on the Internet.

Students bring to the classroom a variety of experiences—they simply need the tools and guidance to understand that they have knowledge and experience to contribute. Hopefully, this experience will serve as a springboard for students to keep developing their English academic writing skills so that they may better contribute their important voices to an increasingly globalized world.

Bio Data

Jennifer Louise Teeter is currently a lecturer at Kyoto University teaching English academic writing. She researches youth and indigenous movements and intercultural education and is working to launch the world's first solar/sail cargo ship <<http://www.greenheartproject.org>>. Her main passion is providing interpretation and logistical support for the Aotearoa-Ainumosir Exchange Program sending indigenous Ainu youth to New Zealand for an exchange with Maori on cultural resilience building and leadership <<http://aaexchange.blogspot.jp>>. <teeter42@gmail.com>

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