

# New Approaches to Teaching the Academic Writing and Graduation Thesis Seminar Class

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**PAC3  
at  
JALT  
2001**

**Conference  
Proceedings**



**International  
Conference  
Centre**

**Kitakyushu  
JAPAN**

**November  
22-25, 2001**

More and more native speaker university instructors are being asked to teach graduation thesis and academic writing classes. There is a tendency for these classes to emphasize skills that are more appropriate for students who intend to undertake sustained academic study in undergraduate or graduate classes in overseas universities rather than for mainstream students. Few of the latter will study abroad for more than a few months and they are unlikely to be asked to write lengthy academic papers which require a focus on paragraph level structures, rhetoric, bibliographic citations etc after graduation. Many students who might be forced or encouraged to take an academic writing or two-year graduation thesis class would benefit instead from classes that emphasize critical thinking, primary research, problem solving and presentation skills which they can use in their future work environments. An example of this kind of approach to the graduation thesis class is described.

Over the past two decades native speaker faculty at Japanese universities who were originally hired as merely language teachers have been asked to teach an increasingly wide range of subjects. In some cases, those with a high level of language proficiency have been asked to teach their special fields

in Japanese. While this is still relatively rare, more and more of them are being asked to use English as a medium for teaching a variety of content-based classes. In the past, most English teachers who did not teach the basic four-skills courses tended to teach English literature, and this remains one of the most common content topics taught by native speakers. Others include linguistics, rhetoric and debate, cross-cultural communication, comparative culture, global studies, computer and Internet literacy, area studies, and various popular culture-related themes. This development has led to a wide ranging debate about how content classes in the Japanese university context should be taught, and to what degree the theories of content teaching in an ESL context apply to the EFL environment that most of us teach in [Mackenzie 2000].

One logical new approach to content teaching is to incorporate it into academic writing classes, since these classes have become increasingly accepted by native speakers and university administrators alike. Although not a content classes per se, classes in “Academic Writing Skills,” which include a research paper on a particular content, are becoming a standard part of many university English curricula and seem to have the approval of administrators. There are a number of probable reasons for this, but three stand out. The first is the idea that such courses represent a raising of academic standards and tightened quality control for

English classes in general. This of course appeals to university administrations since they are expected to present an increasingly serious academic image to the Ministry of Education and the outside world. A second more practical reason for adopting such courses is to help students who might later undertake undergraduate or graduate classes in overseas universities to prepare for what is often a very difficult transition—especially in the areas of note taking and essay writing. Thirdly classes in academic writing often appeal to the native speakers who are asked to teach them. This may be because these classes tend to be taken by, and are most effective with, the most proficient and diligent students; in other words, those students that teachers are usually happiest teaching. In addition such classes carry prestige, since they stress the “academic” skills that universities are supposed to foster, rather than the somewhat non-academic skills of EFL communication. All three of these reasons for promoting academic writing within the standard EFL syllabus, however, deserve closer examination

Given the mutual interest in academic writing classes shared by administrators and English faculty, it is hardly surprising that when native speakers are asked to take undergraduate thesis seminars, they tend to consider this an opportunity to make such classes or projects into quite rigorous academic exercises with the main focus being on the writing itself. But is this the ideal

approach to teaching the graduate thesis class for the average student? The decision by many universities to require or encourage students to take academic writing classes or to do a graduation thesis coincides with the enrollment of more and more students who in the past would not have wanted to, or been able to, attend university. A significant number of these students will be asked to take these kinds of classes. Yet the fact is that the vast majority of them will probably never have to write an academic paper of any kind, regardless of what career they choose. Indeed they may never even be required to write a lengthy academic report at all. By contrast, it is quite likely that they will have to make short oral or computer presentations, or write succinct illustrated reports in which they analyze, summarize, or suggest solutions to a specific issue or problem related to their work. In many cases, this will be connected to the organizational structure and day-to-day running of their companies or workplaces or to issues related to the sale or promotion of a product or service. As such, they will require the ability to think critically and to develop methods of finding, presenting, and utilizing data in order to find solutions. It therefore seems reasonable to use the graduation thesis class as an opportunity to develop these universal skills through the medium of English.

## **The Limitations of *Academic Writing in English as a Mainstream Subject***

The efforts of some universities to raise their overall level of professionalism through more rigorous hiring practices, increased course evaluation and a general tightening of academic standards, are naturally welcomed by most native speaker university faculty. Few, however, have considered whether the fear of losing prestige (and students) might lead universities to forget what it is that their “customers” really want or need from their English education. While university English curriculum should not be designed based purely on surveys or popularity contests, it seems legitimate to ask whether compulsory academic writing or graduation thesis classes (whether in English or Japanese) are an appropriate response to the pressure to raise standards.

The argument that mandatory academic writing or (English) graduation thesis classes are an appropriate response to the increase in the numbers of Japanese students who are going overseas for their education seems, on the face of it, to be a legitimate and logical one. Students who plan to do academic degrees in foreign universities or go to graduate school do need rigorous academic training. However it is appropriate to ask whether the recent proliferation of academic writing and similar classes is in proportion to the actual numbers of students who go overseas to do real sustained academic study at the undergraduate level.

The vast majority of those who study overseas do so for a few months to a year. There are many things that a Japanese student who is planning on enrolling in this kind of short course needs before leaving. It is highly debatable whether an academic writing class that focuses on the kinds of skills needed for producing a footnoted research paper or a closely argued essay should be a high priority except for those with possible long term plans or who are already at upper intermediate level. Such students are a small fraction of those that usually study overseas for a year or less. By contrast there are many skills courses that could make a short to medium length stay more productive, such as more advanced listening, note taking, and, as is argued below, critical thinking skills.

### **The Role of Critical Thinking in the Student Graduation Thesis**

Any graduation thesis class must include instruction in and practice of a range of basic academic writing skills. Students who may have never have written a long paper need to refine note taking and summarizing skills, understand how to organize a paragraph and master the basics of documentation and citation. The traditional academic writing class might devote almost all of its time to these kinds of skills, and would have as its main goal the production of a smoothly written, logically organized and well-substantiated report. By

contrast a two-year theme-based graduation thesis class for regular students offers a chance to combine content teaching with critical thinking and problem solving skills that can serve the students well after graduation, regardless of whether they use English in their careers or not. At my middle ranking co-educational university's Faculty of Intercultural Communication, students can choose to enter the classes of around 25 mostly Japanese professors. Surprisingly those who have chosen to take one of the two graduation thesis classes taught by native speakers do not necessarily have higher language skills than average and nor are they in any way a self-selecting elite. Out of 36 students who have enrolled in my British and American Studies "Sotsugyo Ronbun zemi" over the past two years, only four had already spent a year or more overseas—mostly in EFL type programs, and only one or two have indicated a likelihood of attending overseas universities as an undergraduate or graduate student. Given this kind of enrollment, what is the most appropriate and useful approach to teaching this kind of class?

Among the things that became clear to me when first teaching a graduation thesis class was that my students—despite all taking a one year mandatory "Research Methods" class—did not really know what a thesis paper was. To the extent that they could articulate this concept, it was that a thesis was a long report in which their opinions were stated and a list of books cited. A

few suggested that it might involve some kind of survey. The discovery of this conceptual gap, and my evaluation of their overall English level—mostly pre-intermediate or intermediate—led me to the view that most of the first year should be devoted to understanding what a thesis paper was and how to find and begin researching a topic. This process, in turn, led me to emphasize critical thinking skills, since these were so important when defining what kind of evidence might be valid in arguing for a particular position. In order to help students understand that a graduation thesis was an original piece of work in which a hypothesis had to be made and then both primary and secondary evidence used to prove or back up this argument, a set of guidelines, informed by a critical thinking approach, was distributed to students, together with a narrative model. This was done as shown below in the student guidelines for choosing a thesis and a “FAQ” style handout which is distributed in the first week of the two year course.

### ***SELECTING A TOPIC FOR YOUR BRITISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES GRADUATION THESIS: SOME GUIDELINES AND FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS***

In general try to choose a topic which is:

- very interesting for you. It might be connected to your hobby or non-academic interests;

- related to the overall theme of this class (American and British culture and contemporary society) and also to this Faculty (comparative culture);
- manageable in size and quite narrowly focused. Generally the smaller the topic the better;
- researchable using primary sources such as magazines, newspapers, the Internet and others. There should be no books that are exactly on this topic in the library;
- involves some comparison with Japan. If you do not compare with Japan, it is unlikely that you will be able to make an original contribution;
- likely to still be interesting to you 20 months from today.

Here are some *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ) about graduation thesis selection and research:

*Q1: What is a thesis and how do I select one?*

The best way to think about a thesis is as an idea or hypothesis about something that you have. After stating your idea, you then look for evidence or proof to show that the statement was or was not fair or accurate.

*Q2: What are some examples of past graduation themes in this class?*

1. Compared with the British Premier soccer League,

a much higher percentage of J-League fans are middle class and female. This reflects the very different image of the sport in the two countries and the way in which commercial sports-such as baseball-have developed in post war Japan.

2. Students in American universities are much more likely to eat fast food in the cafeteria because fast food culture has spread much deeper into daily life in the U.S than in Japan. In Japan fast food is still excluded from certain areas or institutions such as schools.
3. Most of the differences between a British and Japanese guidebook to Italy are related to the very different historical and contemporary images of the country that British and Japanese people have.
4. Out-of-school commercial educational study materials for British and Japanese elementary school children reflect a very different approach to early school learning in the two countries as well as the role that mothers play in this education.
5. So-called outdoor Family adventure vacations are increasingly popular in America. They are not likely to become as popular in Japan, however, because Japanese family vacations are largely designed for children and are not expected to be challenging or tiring for parents or children.

*Q3: What's the difference between a long report and a graduation thesis?*

Selecting a topic for your graduation thesis is challenging and takes a lot of time. One reason for this is that--unlike a report--a thesis must be at least partly original. A report requires you to read and write about what other people have researched and thought about. So you can do a report about almost any topic. But a graduation thesis must be your work and it must have some element of originality. Of course it is not easy to find a topic that few or no people have ever written seriously about. But if you can find something interesting to research, you will enjoy doing it and be able to graduate with a sense of pride.

The handout also includes a case study in which I describe a student who takes an idea based on his hobby and gradually turns this into a thesis topic. The student likes baseball and wants to compare baseball in the U.S and Japan. He asks himself a number of general questions based on the guidelines above and then uses critical thinking to consider if he can find a sub topic that is small enough to be manageable. He finally decides to write about the way in which fan clubs and souvenir shops of Japanese and American baseball teams cater to their supporters. Preliminary research

suggests that there are some significant differences and his hypothesis is that these differences are a reflection of the way in which people in the two countries learn to cheer on their teams in elementary, Junior high and high school. He will now start thinking about what kind of information could be used as evidence to back up or refute this hypothesis. From this point on, gathering and thinking about this evidence will be his main activity until well into the second year of the two-year course. Only when this process is thoroughly completed will the writing process take center stage.

## References

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## Conclusion

Graduation thesis classes for mainstream students offer a unique two-year opportunity to work on critical thinking, research, organizational and presentation skills, and with lower level students who are unlikely to study overseas, these should be emphasized before the traditional academic writing skills which focus on paragraph level structures, rhetoric, bibliographic citations and other conventions that are required of students in overseas university. The former skills are likely to be of much greater use to the vast majority of our students in any career that they undertake in Japan's changing work environment.