

# Professors' Expectations of Foreign Students in Freshman-Level Courses

David Kehe

Peggy Kehe

*Minnesota State University-Akita*

As more Japanese students take an interest in pursuing degrees in the U.S., ESL professionals in Japan are designing courses and programs in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), in order to prepare them for American college classes. But the content of these EAP courses is often determined by what *assumptions* the professionals hold regarding the types of skills foreign students will need in order to succeed in college courses. Some of the most commonly-held assumptions in the area of EAP are held up to scrutiny in this report on how 30 American university professors responded in interviews when asked to describe what skills they expected foreign students to have upon entry into their freshman-level courses. Also included are some pieces of advice which these professors said that they wished they could give to foreign students on how to succeed in their classes.

アメリカにおいて学位を取得しようとする日本人学生の増加にともなって、日本の英語教育専門家は、学生をアメリカの大学で授業が受けられるようにするために、アカデミックな目的のための英語 (EAP) のコースやプログラムをデザインするようになってきた。しかしEAPコースの内容は、アメリカの大学の授業で無事に単位をとるために留学生が必要とするスキルに関する推測によって決められることの多いのが現状である。この報告は、もっとも広く信じられている事柄のいくつかを、アメリカの大学教師30人にインタビューすることによって、検証した結果である。インタビューでは、一年生に入学するときに、留学生にはどんなスキルを持ってほしいかを述べてもらった。また、ここには、無事に単位をとるために、留学生にできたらしたいと、これらの教師たちが言ったアドバイスも述べた。

**A**s Japanese students, in ever greater numbers, pursue degrees in the U.S., ESL instructors in Japan are responding to the need for more courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). When designing EAP course-work, however, the assumptions teachers make about what university professors will expect of students may be based largely upon what the ESL instructors *themselves* recall being asked to do in col-

lege. But when thinking back on their own experiences, they may remember what was expected of them as *upperclassmen* rather than as freshmen; and an EAP program that makes curricular decisions based on memories risks misappropriating teachers' and students' resources.

In the 1970s through the 1980s the authors spent a decade teaching at colleges and universities in Japan. On numerous occasions during those years, we shared and compared our thoughts on teaching EAP with colleagues who, like us, were preparing Japanese students for academic life in American universities. Our discussions on how best to do this, however, revealed that we held a disparity of views. If we could have agreed on what would be expected of our students once they entered their freshman classes, we might have been able to move toward some consensus on what the content our EAP courses should be. But what were American professors expecting of freshmen who enrolled in their courses? Literature offered little help. Although studies had focused on the *writing needs* of college students (e.g. Horowitz, 1986; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Kroll, 1979) and on general *academic skills* (Johns, 1981; Ostler, 1980), none had specifically addressed the question of what skills university professors expect foreign students to have *upon entry into* their freshman-level courses. Without knowledge of this sort, however, EAP instructors risked designing curricula in a vacuum. Could we be placing emphasis on skills that would not be expected of college freshmen at the expense of others that would be?

By 1990, we were teaching in the EAP program at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UW-SP), and, during our four years there, we had the opportunity to learn firsthand just what university professors expected of foreign students as they entered freshman-level courses. To test the credibility of some of the more commonly-held assumptions in the area of EAP, we interviewed thirty UW-SP professors who had had foreign students in their courses, focusing on what skills they felt students should have developed prior to enrollment in their freshman-level courses. We ended the interviews by asking what advice the professors wished they could give to foreign students on how to be successful in their courses.

Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. The breakdown in the number of professors interviewed and their various disciplines was as follows: *Humanities*: English: 5, History: 3, Philosophy: 2; *Sciences*: Biology: 4, Chemistry: 2, Math: 2, Computer Science: 1, Geography: 1, Water Resources: 1; *Social Sciences*: Communications: 2, Political Science: 2, Psychology: 2, Sociology: 2, and Business: 1.

Part I, immediately below, introduces five assumptions commonly espoused by instructors of EAP; and, juxtaposing these, are the profes-

sors' reactions vis-à-vis how realistic each assumption is. In Part II, the professors offer advice on how to be successful in their college classes. (See appendix for teacher responses).

### Part I: Assumptions About Foreign Students' Needs

#### *Assumption 1: Students will be required to discuss in class*

How much do professors emphasize whole-class participation at the freshman level?

None of the thirty professors interviewed (aside from those in Communications 101) require students to participate in class discussions. Although many professors said that they were impressed by students who would offer opinions and ask questions, none (with the exception of one Communications professor) said they would penalize a student who did not talk in class. There was general agreement among the professors that, nowadays, it is hard to get even American students to join in whole-class discussions.

According to the professors, however, speaking skills *are* important when meeting with instructors in one-on-one situations to ask questions and discuss study strategies or problems related to the course.

Students were not being required to give oral presentations in any of the courses, except for Communications 101. The two professors for this course (including the Chair of Communications 101) said EAP teachers could best prepare foreign students by giving them some exposure to talking before a group and by improving students' pronunciation. However, neither Communications professor felt that EAP teachers should concern themselves with teaching the modes (e.g. persuasive speeches), since they saw it as is the job and expertise of the Communications instructors themselves.

#### *Assumption 2: Students will be required to write long papers*

How much writing are college freshmen expected to do?

Naturally, the bulk of students' writing was being done for English 101 (essay-writing) and English 102 (research-paper writing). According to the five English 101 professors, students were writing eight papers of 1-5 pages per (16-week) semester, i.e. an average of between 1/2 and 2 1/2 pages per week. One of the five professors of English 101 assigned one essay per week of 1 1/2 pages.

Concerning writing requirements in other courses, Philosophy asked essay questions that required answers of 1 1/2 - 2 pages in length; on tests, History expected essay answers of 2 paragraphs in length and also

assigned one 2-4 -page essay each semester; Chemistry asked for 1-2 page synopses; Political Science required one 2-page essay; Psychology had a 2-page paper as a part of their final; and Communications assigned one paper of 2-3 pages in length per semester.

*Assumption 3: Students need to learn the modes of writing (e.g. cause and effect)*

How much previous experience with the modes of writing are freshmen expected to have?

Four of the five professors of English 101 recommended that the teaching of the modes be left entirely to the English Department (although one professor mentioned that the English Department itself was putting less stress on the modes than it did in the past). One professor among the four was concerned that, if EAP instructors tried to teach the modes, "they would just goof it up." The fifth professor (who, in addition to having spent many years teaching freshman-level Writing courses, was also the highly-respected head of the university Writing Center) thought that, as far as the modes were concerned, foreign students might benefit from being introduced to definition (at the paragraph level) and "some" comparison/contrast. One English professor felt that he would expect foreign students to be familiar with only expository writing. Perhaps surprisingly, these professors claimed that recently not even the American students were entering university with previous experience in employing the modes. Another comment from an English professor was that, considering the lack of writing done in American high schools nowadays, as many as half of her American students could probably benefit from taking an ESL Writing class. All five of the English 101 professors expressed the hope that the EAP teachers would teach their foreign students to write *simply and directly*. "S-V-O is all right for awhile (sic)," was one comment. Another professor stressed that EAP students should *not* be asked to do sentence-combining practice until they have developed basic sentence-level skills, a good base in grammar, and an adequate knowledge of vocabulary (although he noted that American students do not have very large vocabularies either). The five in English 101 were in agreement that EAP teachers should focus on helping foreign students build a solid *foundation* for good writing. As one English professor put it, "In the ESL business, it's the basics that count."

For more advanced writers, the professors suggested that there be some focus on sentence-level subordination. In fact, according to the Chair of Freshman English, at the start of a new term, when the depart-

ment analyzes students' writing samples in order to place them (in either a "remedial-level" Writing course, English 101 or English 102), it is the sophistication of students' sentence-level subordination that determines which course they are placed in.

*Assumption 4: Students need to know how to use the library*

Do professors assume that freshmen will have had prior experience in finding materials at the library?

For twenty-one of the thirty professors' courses, freshmen did not even need to use the library at all. If outside material is needed, the professors themselves furnished it. Of the nine remaining professors who *did* require use of the library, three merely had students search out current periodicals (e.g. *Time*) and one put material on reserve. Before assigning research papers, the five professors of English 102 would either arrange for a tour of the library for their whole class or put necessary source materials on reserve. No professor in English 102 felt that it was necessary for students to know how to use the library before taking their classes.

*Assumption 5: Students need to know how to write research papers*

How much previous experience with research-paper writing do professors assume students will have already had when they enroll in English 102?

Just as those teaching 101 felt it was *their* job to teach the modes, professors of English 102 believed that they themselves, and not the EAP teachers, should teach research-paper writing. At the start of a new term, they said that they assume neither the American nor the foreign students have had any experience in this area. And no professor in any of the other disciplines was assigning any type of research paper at all at the freshman-level. However, as preparation for *future* research-paper there was a general consensus in all disciplines that it would be very helpful if students could learn to paraphrase and synthesize information.

## Part II: Advice From The Professors

As each interview neared its end, the professor was asked what advice he/she would like to offer foreign students on how to be successful in college classes and how EAP teachers might best prepare students *for* those classes. Following are the three most commonly-offered pieces of advice.

*Advice 1: Talk to the professors*

Almost half of the thirty professors advised that students who feel confused should come and talk with them as soon as possible.

A frustration many of them expressed was that foreign students often *say* they understand when, in fact, they do not. Also, too often, foreign students wait to talk to professors until it is too late for them to catch up. Five professors said they felt disappointed when foreign students dropped their classes without at least first talking with them about their chances of success. And two of the professors recommended that foreign students visit their offices within the first few weeks of a new term in order to get "hints" on study strategies.

Professors in the sciences in particular emphasized that foreign students should ask questions whenever they feel confused and that they should do so especially during exams, e.g. if they do not understand the phrasing of a question. Moreover, if a student is unable to finish a test within the allotted time, four professors said that, if they were aware that there was a problem, they would allow extra time.

*Advice 2: Practice writing in class and under a time limit*

Ten professors noted that writing under the pressure of time was a skill foreign students should develop.

According to the Chair of Freshman English, due to the increasing problems with plagiarism among (not only foreign) students, the trend in all disciplines is toward more in-class writing than before. For him, 25-30% of the grade for his English 101 course depends on in-class writing. It is thus crucial that freshmen develop speed and accuracy when writing under a time limit.

Three professors were concerned about foreign students' inability to complete essay-type exams within the allotted time, often, in their opinion, due to the students' overuse of dictionaries.

*Advice 3: Practice taking multiple-choice tests*

In American universities, freshman courses are often of the large lecture-type variety, and professors of those courses recommended that foreign students hone their skills at taking multiple-choice tests, since that is one of the most frequent types given.

The Business professor had found that multiple-choice tests were particularly difficult for foreign students, due, in his opinion, to their inability to apply test-taking strategies or to understand some of the finer nuances of language which can make the difference between a right and wrong answer.

### Conclusion

In sum, although EAP curricula should not be based solely, or even primarily, on professors' perceptions, EAP instructors who are at least aware of what professors expect may make more informed judgments on what the content of their own courses should be. EAP programs that place too much emphasis on e.g. the modes of writing or research at the library risk detracting from other types of skill development that might better prepare foreign students for college classes. Learning what university professors expect of freshmen enrolled in their courses should aid EAP course and curriculum designers in providing students with the type of foundation on which university professors can most efficiently build.

*David Kebe* and *Peggy Kebe* are instructors at Minnesota State University-Akita, Japan. In addition to their years in Japan and at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, they have taught in Greece and in Niger, Africa for the Peace Corps, and are co-authors of a conversation text.

### References

- Bridgeman, B. & Carlson, S.B. (1984). Survey of academic writing tasks. *Written Communication*, 1, 247-280.
- Horowitz, D.M. (1986). What professors actually require: Academic tasks for the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 445-462.
- Johns, A.M. (1981). Necessary English: A faculty survey. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15, 51-57.
- Kroll, B. (1979). A survey of the writing needs of foreign and American college freshmen. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 33, 219-227.
- Ostler, S.E. (1980). A survey of academic needs for advanced ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14, 489-520.

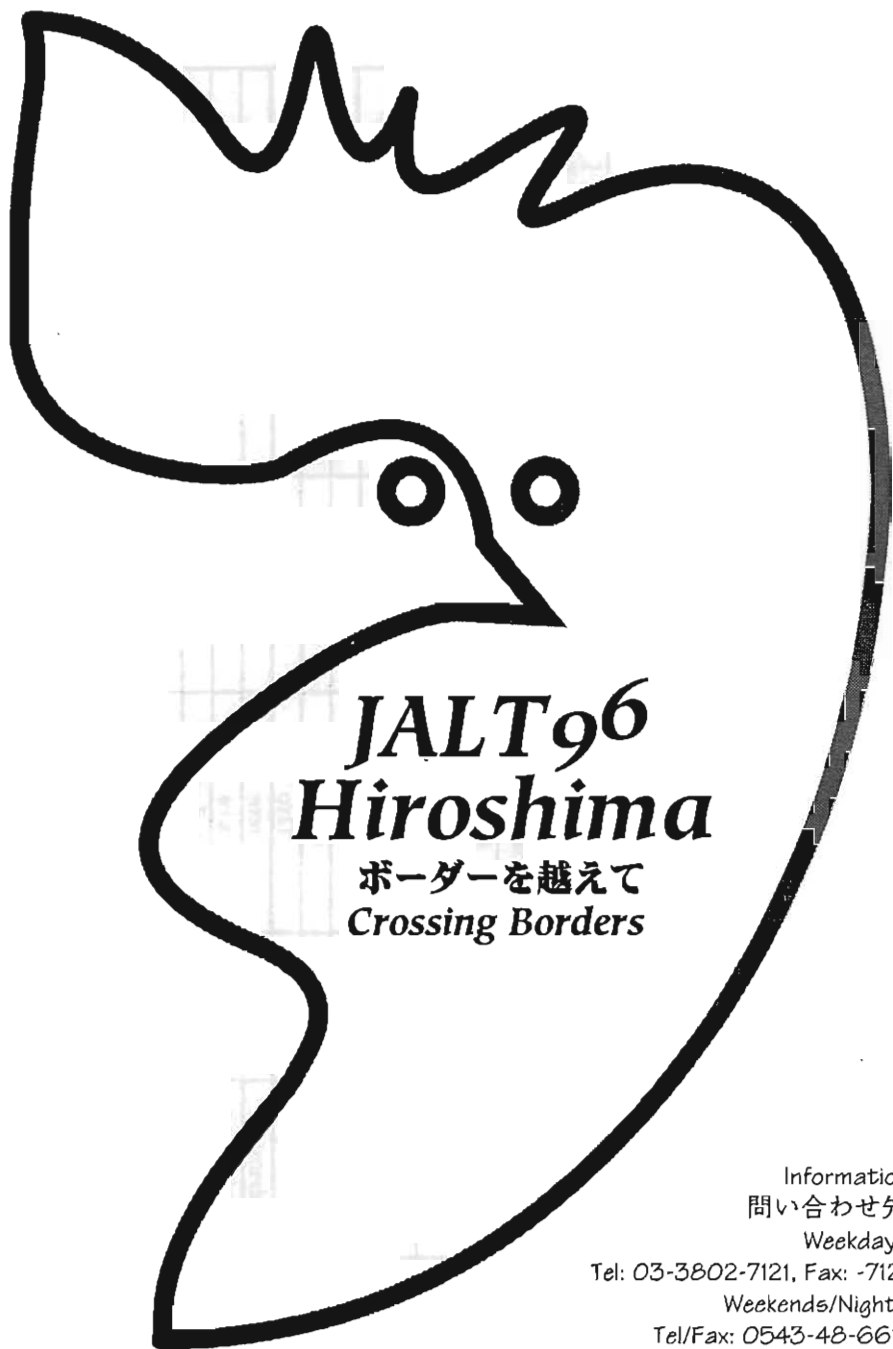
(Received July 27, 1995)

## Appendix

## Responses to Assumptions by Courses

Number of Teachers	Course	Assumption				
		1 Requires Discussion	2 Length of Writing Assignments	3 Requires Understanding of Modes	4 Requires Understanding of Library	5 Requires Knowledge of Research Paper Writing
5	English	no	3 (12 pp) 1 (11/2 pp) 1 (15 pp)	3 (no) 1 (expository only) 1 (some)	no	no
3	History	no	2 (2 parag., short answer) 1 (25 pp)	no	no	no
2	Philosophy	no	12 pp	no	no	no
4	Biology	no	none	no	1 (periodical); 3 (no)	no
2	Chemistry	no	12 pp	no	no	no
2	Mathematics	no	none	no	no	no
1	Computer Science	no	none	no	no	no
1	Geography	no	paragraph, short answer	no	no	no
1	Water Resources	no	none	no	reserve section only	no
2	Communication	1 (yes); 1 (no)	23 pp	no	periodicals only	no
2	Political Science	no	2 pp	no	no	no
2	Psychology	no	2 pg final	no	no	no
2	Sociology	no	paragraph, short answer	no	no	no
1	Business	no	none	no	no	no





**JALT96**  
**Hiroshima**

ボーダーを越えて  
*Crossing Borders*

Information:  
問い合わせ先:

Weekdays:

Tel: 03-3802-7121, Fax: -7122

Weekends/Nights:

Tel/Fax: 0543-48-6613

E-Mail: [dq4t-newf@asahi-net.or.jp](mailto:dq4t-newf@asahi-net.or.jp)

JALT96 Internet Home Page: <http://www.aichi-gakuln.ac.jp/~scott/jalt96.html>