

Student Perspectives on the Difficulties of Writing English Graduation Theses

Martin Hawkes

The University of Shiga Prefecture

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The challenges faced by a group of Japanese university students as they wrote their graduation theses in English were examined in a nine-month longitudinal case study. Writing a thesis is a common graduation requirement in Japan, yet it has been reported that many students struggle with the demands of long-form academic writing and external pressures on their time and emotional resources. To better understand these difficulties and support students effectively, a qualitative case study was conducted. Five students from one seminar cohort participated, documenting their experiences through monthly diary entries and two semi-structured interviews. A content analysis highlighted challenges such as processing academic texts, sustaining motivation, and managing external distractions like job-hunting and club activity commitments. The findings shed some light on students' academic and emotional journeys and indicate potential strategies for providing better support for students embarking on their graduation thesis projects.

本研究は、9か月にわたる縦断的ケーススタディを通じて、日本の大学生が英語で卒業論文を執筆する際に直面する課題を検討したものである。日本の大学において卒業論文の執筆は一般的な要件であるが、多くの学生が長文の学術論文執筆の負担や、時間的および感情的リソースに対する外部からの圧力に苦しんでいることが報告されている。これらの課題をより深く理解し、学生を効果的に支援するために、質的なケーススタディを実施した。一つのゼミに所属する5名の学生が参加し、毎月の日記記録および2回の半構造化インタビューを通じて、一学年に亘る体験を記録した。内容分析の結果、学術文献の読解、動機の維持、就職活動や課外活動のような外部からの気を散らす要因の管理といった課題が明らかになった。本研究の成果は、学生の学術的および感情的プロセスを明らかにし、卒業論文執筆に取り組む学生へのより効果的な支援策を提示するものである。

In order to graduate from a Japanese university, many students are required to successfully complete a graduation thesis, especially if they belong to an arts or humanities faculty (Yamada, 2013a). This is a long-form piece of writing, sometimes involving primary research, which is generally carried out over the final year of university. The thesis is done within a seminar or *zemi*, under the supervision of a specialist in a certain field, although the extent to which students write about their supervisor's area of research may vary.

With an increase in the number of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses being offered by Japanese universities (Huang, 2018), along with a similar rise in the number of foreign faculty (Bradford, 2018; Noguchi & Anderson, 2018), more students across Japan now have the option to write their thesis in English, which brings with it its own distinct challenges (Hawkes & Adamson, 2023). There is limited literature in this rather niche area, especially research that has sought to hear students' voices in order to understand the successes and struggles they experience during their graduation projects. This paper aims to contribute to this literature by reporting on what was primarily a diary study that examined one *zemi* cohort of five students as they worked through their thesis project over the course of an academic year. It then considers possible wider implications for providing effective support for 4th-year students tackling their graduation thesis.

The Zemi in Japanese Tertiary Education

The *zemi*, influenced by the long-established mentoring system in Germany, was introduced into Japanese universities at the turn of the 20th century (Hitotsubashi University, 2010) and became widespread in the post-war era. Although a great deal of variety exists in how *zemi* is organised at different universities, essentially students choose to study under the supervision of a specific teacher, from one to three years (Ikeda, 2015). Some universities keep their *zemi* cohorts small (around five students,

which is the case at the author's institution) while others have around 10 (Ikeda, Yoshinaga, & Kiyomiya, 2023) or even 20 students in a single group (Fushikida, 2019). There often seems to be a great deal of freedom given to teachers to choose what to focus on in their zemis, but, at many institutions, it is probably assumed that they will be looking at topics related to one or more of their research areas. The zemi usually culminates in a piece of long-form writing—the graduation thesis—in the final year.

The Graduation Thesis

The graduation thesis project is conducted over a period of a few months up to a full year (Hawkes & Adamson, 2023; Yamada, 2013b). At the author's institution, students may choose to focus on a topic related to their supervisor's expertise, but this is certainly not always the case, and some teachers grant students significant flexibility in choosing their topic. Some thesis projects might essentially be long reports without any primary research, while others involve research method training, data collection, and even some original insights. Regular informal oral reports outlining progress can be held throughout the year, and important milestones include events where students present their findings to their peers and department teachers. The thesis is submitted towards the end of the final autumn semester and is assessed by the zemi supervisor and a second faculty member.

Despite long-established protocols, institutional memory, and the experience of faculty members, the graduation thesis presents challenges for both teachers and students. From the outset, students might have difficulties choosing a suitable thesis topic (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017) and formulating appropriate research questions (Shimada, 2017). The next stage might often be to conduct a literature review and learn more deeply about the topic and previous research. However, finding appropriate reading materials, especially accessible texts in what is the students' second language, also presents a challenge (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017). When it comes to the actual writing, students can find it difficult to avoid plagiarism and correctly cite and reference previous work (Lambacher, 2011). Outside of school, job hunting and extracurricular activities may also hinder progress (Hawkes & Adamson, 2023). Perhaps because of these and other distractions, many students do not dedicate sufficient time to their thesis work (MEXT, 2022). Shimada (2017) reported that students still expressed some dissatisfaction with their final work even after completing their thesis. Finally, simply having students produce enough content for an English language thesis may be a challenge in itself (Hanks, 2017; Tomei & Aden, 2014). Fourth-year students may still have only limited

experience of English academic writing, and the leap from essay to thesis may be significant. In a case study of a single student in Japan, Ueno (2023) reported how they struggled with aspects of the thesis content, the language demands, and issues in their personal life.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, some educators have questioned whether a thesis is the most appropriate model for the final assessment of university in Japan (Furmanovsky, 2002); after all, very few undergraduates continue on to graduate studies, and perhaps there are alternative skills, ones more relevant to the workplace, that ought to be developed. However, despite such reservations, the thesis remains compulsory for graduation in many universities in Japan, and, as such, striving to find ways to provide better support is a worthwhile endeavour.

Research Questions

In a qualitative interview study, Hawkes and Adamson (2023) described some of the challenges faced by foreign teachers when taking on a zemi class and supervising graduation theses. The current study sought to investigate and understand these challenges from the students' perspective, longitudinally, over the course of their final year at university. To guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1. What challenges did students feel they faced over the ten-month graduation thesis project?
- RQ2. What additional support could be given to students in future zemi cohorts?

Methods

Case Study Research

As described by Duff (2008), case study research is usually characterised by having a focus on a bounded unit, although the size of this unit may range from a single person to an entire institution. Richards (2011) described how case studies are contextualised and that cases should be studied in their natural context. Finally, Richards (2011) also pointed out that case study research usually involves the use of multiple data collection methods. The current study focused on a bounded unit of a single zemi cohort, and, in turn, the students that made up this group, which was indeed studied in its natural setting over the course of a year using two main sources of data—learner diaries and qualitative interviews—and supplementary researcher memos.

Research Setting and Participants

The site of this investigation was a multi-disciplinary faculty in a public university in Japan. The department has teachers who hold zemis in fields including anthropology, cultural studies, creative writing, literature, and linguistics. Students choose their zemi at the beginning of the second year and begin their thesis at the start of their fourth year. Therefore, they belong to their zemi for three full academic years. This study took place in the author's zemi, which was an EMI zemi with an applied linguistics focus that culminated in students writing a 6000-word thesis in English. After an explanation that the purpose of the study was to better understand students' feelings about the thesis and the challenges they face, one zemi cohort, consisting of five students (four female and one male), consented to take part, and the project was conducted following the guidelines of the institution's ethics committee. A summary of the student participants is given in Table 1, which shows the topic of their theses and graduation-related activities that may have competed with the thesis for their time and attention.

Table 1
Student Participants in the Study

Name	Sex	Thesis Topic	Job hunting?	Teaching practice?
Eri	F	World Englishes	Y	Y
Haruka	F	History of English teaching in Japan	Y	N
Fuka	F	World Englishes	Y	N
Natsuki	F	L2 motivation in junior high	Y	Y
Ken	M	Masks & listening comprehension	Y	N

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Procedures

The primary form of data collection was learner diaries. A diary study essentially involves the “keeping of an introspective journal...and analyzing the patterns and anomalies that occur...over time” (Curtis & Bailey, 2012, p. 68). Diaries are an example of an introspective research method; the key advantage of such approaches was summed up by Nunan and Bailey (2009) when they claimed that introspective methods “take us to a place that no other data collection method can reach—into the mind of the learner...

Thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states can really only be gotten at in any direct sense through introspection” (p. 307).

Participants were asked to make a diary entry each month of the study but excluding the summer holiday. As a result, the entries were actually a mix of introspection and retrospection, looking back at what had happened in their lives over the previous month. Participants were requested to spend at least 20 minutes on each entry, and they were provided with optional prompts (see Appendix), as suggested by Gkonou (reported by Morgan, 2016) to stimulate their writing. Participants could choose whether to write in Japanese or English. Four of the five participants chose to write in Japanese, while one, Eri, said that she saw the diary as an extra opportunity for English writing practice. Table 2 shows how much the participants recorded in their monthly entries (Eri wrote in English, so the table shows the number of words. The other four participants wrote in Japanese, so the table shows the number of characters, while DNS indicates that the participant did not submit in that month).

Table 2
The Number of English Words or Japanese Characters Written in the Diaries

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Mean
Eri*	185	147	188	232	120	141	223	226	183
Haruka	428	200	DNS	362	358	347	DNS	644	390
Fuka	253	741	453	398	318	343	332	366	401
Ken	339	516	273	335	330	325	421	436	372
Natsuki	180	568	729	549	393	306	DNS	474	457

Bailey (2015) recommended adding an element of triangulation to a diary study. In order to achieve this in the current study, the data collected from diary entries were supported by two qualitative semi-structured interviews. The first was conducted at the halfway point of the thesis project in September, and the second was conducted after thesis submission but before the oral defence. Based on the topics touched upon in the diaries, a semi-structured interview guide was devised with open-ended questions that allowed room for further “probing and clarification” (Mann, 2016, p. 102). The same interview guide was used for all five student participants (see Appendix for the September interview guide). Each interview lasted about 10 minutes and was conducted in both

Japanese and English following student preferences. The meetings were audio recorded and roughly transcribed using the software *Otter*.

A summary of the data collection over the nine-month period is summarised in Table 3. In total, 37 diary entries were collected from April to February, and 10 interviews were conducted for this study.

Table 3
Summary of Data Collected Throughout the Nine-Month Study

Month	Key Stages	Data Collection
April	thesis plan submission	Diary 1
May		Diary 2
June		Diary 3
July		Diary 4
September	end-of-term oral progress reports	Interview 1
October		Diary 5
November		Diary 6
December		Diary 7
January	submission	Diary 8
February	oral defence, final submission	Interview 2

Data Analysis

The diary and interview data were transferred to NVivo for qualitative content analysis. Content analysis has been described by Lune and Berg (2017) as “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, assumptions, and meanings” (p. 182). As the diary prompts would sometimes guide the content of participants’ entries to some extent, the themes that emerged were partly to be predicted. The analysis involved a multi-phase process drawing on both initial deductive and later inductive coding of relevant points of interest in the data (Bingham, 2023). Data were analysed throughout the year, and, at each stage, memoing was used to keep an audit trail of the analytical process (Cresswell &

Poth, 2023). Memoing is the strategy of making reflective notes throughout the research process to identify and develop emerging categories.

Findings and Discussion

Much of the diary content was specific to each student’s thesis topic such as mentions of a useful reading they had found or simply a review of the progress they had made in the previous month. However, it was possible to identify three broad themes that became apparent from the diaries and were subsequently focused on in the interviews. The first theme covered academic challenges that participants were facing. The next was extra-curricular distractions; that is, how activities outside of university were affecting their progress. Finally, the third theme involved issues related to supervision. In this section, these three themes are discussed, and representative extracts from both the diaries and interviews are provided to limit the risk of anecdotalism (Silverman, 2017). Excerpts that were written (diary entries) or spoken (interviews) originally in Japanese are presented along with an English translation (translated by the author). For excerpts where there is no Japanese, the original diary or interview data was provided in English.

Academic Challenges

Literature Review

One notable feature of students’ diary entries in the spring semester was their positive assessment of their progress to date with the literature review. This was despite being told by their supervisor that he was concerned with the quality of their literature reviews.

非常に満足しています。(I’m really satisfied [with my progress]).

—Fuka (June diary)

Ken was very confident that he had completed his literature review despite having only written around 1000 words of the recommended 3000. (He would later need to return to it and extend it after his thesis was significantly shorter than the required 6000 words.)

Introductionとbackgroundを書き終えた。悲観するほど悪くはない進み具合だと思う。(I finished the introduction and background. I don’t think my progress is so bad that I should feel pessimistic about it.)

—Ken (June diary)

In contrast to this early optimism, reflections at the end of the project told a different story. In the final interview in February, participants were asked about any regrets they

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had, and all reported that they wished they had made more progress in the earlier stages as it left them much to do later.

“Introduction part was...I had to do it earlier.”

—Ken (February interview)

“もっと早く最初の歴史のパートを終わらせるべきだったかなあ。”

(Perhaps I should have finished the history part earlier.)

—Haruka (February interview)

The early comments were somewhat surprising to me as I had assumed that students would not hold such a positive appraisal of their progress either due to modesty or pessimism. It was also inconsistent with how I, as their supervisor, was feeling about their general progress at that point, in terms of both the quantity and quality of writing produced, signalling a discrepancy between the students’ and my own expectations. It suggested to me that I might need to draw more attention to shortcomings in students’ literature review work and be more explicit in pointing out the need to make more headway.

Reading Materials

Somewhat connected to the literature review was the issue of tackling reading. With limited experience of independently reading academic literature, both in Japanese and English, this proved extremely challenging for the whole cohort.

専門用語が多くて参考文献が難しい (There are many technical terms so the background reading is difficult.)

—Fuka (November diary)

“Simply I don’t like reading a lot academic paper.”

—Natsuki (February interview)

Of course, reading academic texts in a second language adds an extra layer of difficulty. As mentioned above, finding appropriate reading materials is a major challenge (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017) and is a persistent issue in EMI contexts more generally (Iyobe & Li, 2016; Macaro, 2018; Pessoa et al., 2014). From the beginning, Eri expressed a desire to use English language texts as much as possible. However, in her final interview, she mentioned the following:

“[reading] was very challenging because all of information were written in English.”

—Eri (February interview)

Thesis Length

One anxiety that persisted until submission was that of the word count. According to the department’s rules, English theses must exceed 6000 words. Many students in the department had never written more than a 1000-word essay. Very early on, Eri expressed concern about meeting this target.

I have never written the English report which includes over 2000 words.

—Eri (April diary)

Even at the halfway stage in September, students were still concerned about word count, as expressed here by Natsuki.

“Especially 6000 is- I’m- I haven’t experienced before. So the words count is I think the hardest part for me.”

—Natsuki (September interview)

Outside Distractions

It is often said that students are very busy and focus on securing a job at the beginning of their fourth year, and this can impact how much time they can devote to their thesis. Indeed, one member of the cohort mentioned this point.

“At April, and May. I did job hunting. So it was so very [busy] days. So motivation is very low—was very low. And then after job hunting a little bit higher.”

—Natsuki (February interview)

I had anticipated that talk of job hunting would also appear a lot in the diary entries; however, there was no mention of it by any of the participants. Perhaps job hunting was not such a competing distraction after all, at least for this small cohort. Indeed, Eri explicitly stated that she did not find it difficult to balance the two activities.

“I didn’t feel difficult to write graduation thesis and do job hunting. So it’s not problem.”

—Eri (September interview)

In fact, it was other pursuits such as club activities and part-time work—undertakings that many teachers may feel to be of lesser importance—that seemed to compete more fiercely for students’ time and attention.

どうしても卒論と部活とバイトの並行がうまくいかず、卒論をスムーズに進めることができない。(I wasn’t able to do my thesis, club activity, and PT job well at the same time. I couldn’t make smooth progress.)

—Ken (December diary)

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冬休みはバイトばかりしていました。(I did nothing but my PT job during the winter holidays.)

—Fuka (December diary)

I was in full agreement with Ken and Fuka when they reported how their extracurricular activities were adversely impacting their progress. In classes, they frequently did not complete thesis-related tasks but talked about the time they had spent with their jobs or clubs. I had concerns that they were both being distracted by such non-academic activities.

Finally, one of the students, who was working towards obtaining a junior high school teaching licence, was doing their teaching practice during the closing stages of the project, and was feeling a little anxious about its impact:

3週間卒論に全く触れていなかったため、周りよりだいぶ遅れてしまったように感じる。(Because I didn't touch my thesis for three weeks, I feel that I'm behind compared to others.)

—Natsuki (November diary)

Supervision

Throughout the project, there were diary prompts related to support from the supervisor. Indeed, the initial purpose of the study was for the author to ultimately become a better thesis supervisor. Those students who addressed the prompt simply said they were happy with the level of support they were receiving. However, I could often see students struggling and missing soft deadlines, especially during periods of library research. For example, only one of the five students successfully completed their literature review by the end of spring term deadline. During the final interviews, I raised this topic with students and proposed compiling tailored reading lists for each student. I was surprised to hear that they unanimously did not necessarily want this, and they felt it would be too much. Eri succinctly summed this up:

“research some sources is also [a part of the] graduation project so students have to do this.”

—Eri (February interview)

Implications and Limitations

The findings of the study highlighted the challenges faced by students over the course of their graduation thesis project and suggested ways in which teachers can provide support with this endeavour.

To address difficulties with finding appropriate readings, the teacher can help to compile a reading list of appropriate articles and/or book chapters. Although the participants in the current study indicated that they did not necessarily want this, it is possible that some students would welcome such support. Also, library training is often available at universities, and students can be instructed to use search engines to seek out more accessible—and often relevant—articles found in university bulletins (*kiyou*). Finally, although it may seem obvious, students should be encouraged to use all their language resources, including their L1. In my experience, some students tend to primarily use English-language texts for their research.

For those students struggling with the thesis length, breaking the thesis into more manageable sections may be helpful. For example, trying to have students imagine the literature review as consisting of five 600-word essays may help students to make more realistic smaller targets while working towards the greater 3000-word goal. Further, having some kind of concrete acknowledgement when students submit their literature review—such as having it count towards their spring semester credit or assigning a grade to it—might foster motivation and support their drive to persevere with the project.

Finally, for outside distractions, such as recruitment and other extracurricular activities, it may be difficult to convince students to dedicate more time to their thesis work. However, taking part in this diary study seems to have allowed students to reflect on how they were balancing their commitments. In both their diary entries and interview responses, the participants mentioned how much extracurricular activities had occupied their time. Having students keep a diary as part of the thesis project may be enough to help many students reflect on this, decide on their priorities, and make more informed decisions.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study was the inherent weakness of diary studies. For example, some participants may not put in the optimal effort, be too tired, or simply forget relevant points (Dörnyei, 2007). Other participants may simply write what they think the researcher wants to hear (Nunan & Bailey, 2009), a potential problem in studies like the current one, where participants are also the students of the teacher-researcher. Bailey (2015) pointed out that “it is axiomatic that we can only report on those teaching and learning factors of which we are aware” (p. 248). Therefore, diaries may under-represent the actual experiences of learners. Finally, a factor specific to this investigation—but actually characteristic of many diary studies (McKay, 2017)—is the low number of

participants and the resulting question of external validity. As a result, while the findings may not be immediately directly applicable to other contexts, the current study should be seen as an addition to the conversation related to providing support for final-year university students in Japanese universities.

Conclusion

This paper has described a longitudinal case study, using diaries and interview data, looking at the struggles and successes of a cohort of final-year students as they navigated their graduation thesis project. It sought to understand the challenges that such students face and provide some recommendations for supervisors to support their students. The data showed that students tended to mainly struggle with organising themselves for such a long-term project, processing academic texts in their L2, and writing the kind of lengths necessary for an undergraduate thesis. The data also corroborated widely held views that extracurricular activities distract students from focusing on their thesis work. The findings provide insights and recommendations for supervisors supporting students as they embark on their thesis projects.

Bio Data

Martin Hawkes has been teaching English in Japan since 2003. He became an associate professor at The University of Shiga Prefecture in 2015. He holds an MSc in TESOL and a PhD in Applied Linguistics, both from Aston University in the UK. His interests include English as a medium of instruction (EMI), task-based language teaching (TBLT), and preparing students for Model United Nations conferences. <hawkes.m@shc.usp.ac.jp>

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Appendix

Sample of Diary Prompts

Diary Entry 1

Please spend at least 20 minutes writing your entry.

Write your entry in MS Word or another similar application.

Write in Japanese or English.

Keep a copy for yourself and share a copy with me.

I am interested in hearing about your feelings regarding your graduation thesis project. Below is a list of possible points you might want to write about. You don’t need to write about all of these points. They are just ideas to stimulate your writing.

- What have you done for your thesis so far?
- Do you feel ready to do your graduation thesis?
- What are your goals for your graduation thesis?
- How are you feeling about your graduation thesis?
- Are you feeling confident about your thesis?
- What worries do you have about your thesis?
- How would you like your supervisor to help you?
- What are your goals for April?
- Is there anything outside of university that might affect your progress?
- How are you hoping or planning to overcome any problems?
- Please feel free to write about anything else you like!

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Tell me about...

- how your thesis is going.
- what aspects you have found most challenging.
- what aspects have gone smoothly.
- your writing process.
- your plans for the next few weeks/months.



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- how you're feeling about the upcoming presentation event.
- your feelings about the thesis system at our university.
- choosing to write your thesis in English.
- your motivation over the past six months.
- how confident you are about finishing successfully
- any impacts from your activities outside of school.