

THE CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC WRITING FOR JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Teaching English Academic Writing at Universities

This paper will examine the results of a one-year academic writing class at Nagoya City University. The general goal of the course was to prepare the students for advanced academic English writing and enable them to write an organized and focused graduation thesis in English. My specific goal was to have the students produce an original, well researched and correctly documented 3 to 4 page term paper. The material used and discussed in this paper was designed to help the students write a research paper that could receive a passing grade in a freshman composition course at an American university. This material was also used to provide students with the skills to write a logical and comprehensible graduation thesis paper. Most of this material was developed by the author and used in a writing class for 3rd year International Cultures students at Nagoya City University. Although they were not English majors (International Culture), English literature and conversation courses formed a large portion of their studies. Many of the students had studied or planned to study abroad.

The majority of the students in this class had writing skills that could adequately express their feelings and opinions on political and social issues but had little experience with professional or academic writing. Many would be required to write a graduation thesis the next year. Some of the instructors at this university had concerns about the quality of the students' academic English writing skills, which were considered to be inadequate.

The overall goal of this class was to improve academic writing skills. I wanted the students to be able to clearly express their opinions and feelings while learning and practicing the proper form and conventions of professional and academic writing. A secondary goal that evolved through the year was to

hone the students' research skills, which were found to be seriously deficient. There were no tests in this class; grades were based on participation in class and writing assignments. No textbook was used and I provided all materials used in the class. I focused more on expression and fluency than accuracy and grammar. This reflects my basic philosophy that writing improves as a whole as our overall language improves. When I did teach grammar and error correction I tried to identify grammar points and incorrect patterns that students made consistently and tried to use these errors in the students' work to plan ahead: What do the students need to work on? What are they consistently having trouble with? (Raimes, p.23). I then worked on these points together as a class instead of individually.

GETTING STARTED

I always write a letter introducing myself to the students and ask them to read it during the first class. Not only do I tell them about myself and my hobbies, interests and concerns; I also write about why I like to write and what I like to write about. I then ask them to write an answer letter for homework, modeled after mine. During the first class I ask them to identify two or three issues that they have a strong opinion about or are concerned about, such as juvenile crime, the graying of the Japanese population, Middle East conflict or any topic they would like to research and write about in the class.

Timed Writings. We often started class with a timed-writing session. Usually I chose a topic and asked the students to write freely on this topic for 15-20 minutes without concern for grammar, spelling or structure. Students were not graded on these exercises, the object was to loosen up writing 'muscles' and get into the habit of putting ideas on paper before exploring and writing about the topic of the lesson. I found this to be more conducive for getting ideas, feelings and opinions onto the paper than just starting off with the formal writing assignment. It also allowed the students to begin to formulate ideas and positions that would be applied to the day's writing assignment.

Typically we would take the first 5 minutes of class and talk about the topic, brainstorm some ideas, vocabulary and phrases and then spend 10 minutes writing freely on the topic. No dictionaries were allowed, no erasing or talking, only writing. If a student encountered a word or idea that he couldn't express in English I suggested writing a similar phrase or word that he knew or simply write it in Japanese. If he couldn't spell a word to try it without his dictionary and if he made a mistake to cross it out and not waste time erasing. Usually these Timed Writing topics led into the major theme of the class. If time permitted I would return the papers at the end of class and spend the final 10 minutes comparing their original thoughts with the more polished edition.

Talking Journals. I asked students at the beginning of the course to write one full double spaced page per day. I called these 'Talking' or 'Dialogue' journals because they were used to establish a dialogue or rapport with the teacher. They could write about anything that they liked, their daily life, friends, classes etc. I also asked that students dedicate at least one paragraph to a news item or social issue that they read or heard about that day. I encouraged students to express their opinions on issues that they feel strongly about. I used this as a medium to exchange ideas and opinions about current events and some other issues that students were interested in. This provided a forum for debate between the students and myself. Many of my students held opinions that were different from mine and I encouraged them to express and debate these issues with me through their diaries. We had written dialogues about the Middle East, whaling, the UN and many other issues. For most of my students this was the first time they had engaged in this sort of debate in English (or even in Japanese). These journals allowed the students to use written English as a medium for exploring, clarifying and expressing their views.

These talking journals also allowed me to get to know my students on a much deeper and personal level. They often felt more comfortable talking to me through the diary than they could verbally; it allowed me to not only help my students improve their writing but also to get to know them as people, what their dreams and plans were and their day-to-day concerns.

I generally avoided grammar corrections in these journals and limited my comments to suggestions that would help improve fluency. Students bought two journals and alternately handed them in each week.

FLUENCY AND EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Pictures and photographs Pictures and photographs can be used to elicit vocabulary and emotion, not only from what can be seen, but from what can be inferred or imagined as well. Anne Raimes' 'Focus on Composition' has a wealth of productive activities based on photos and paintings. Edward Hopper's 'Nighthawks' is an excellent piece as it captures one single moment frozen in time that a whole story can be woven around. I would begin this exercise by eliciting words to describe the mood of this night scene, then I focused on the people. Who are these people? Why are they sitting in this diner at this time of night? What are their names? How are they related to each other? I would then ask the students to construct a narrative around this scene.

Summarizing

Most of my students had a great deal of difficulty summarizing and paraphrasing. I probably spent at

least half of our classroom time on developing summarizing skills since a large portion of academic writing consists of researching and using other people's ideas and then restating them in your own words.

Summarizing can be difficult. It requires the ability to read, understand and then rewrite the message of the text or article in your own words. This is often difficult for students who have had little experience with it in their own language to try to do it in a second language.

Paraphrasing and summarizing were concepts that the students had difficulty fully appreciating. Francis Britto of Sophia University has suggested using the word 'retelling' instead. I explain that paraphrasing means reading an article, searching for the meaning and then writing it again in your own words and expressions. I then tell the students to find a short, interesting article, to read it, think about it for a minute or two and then write it down again, in your own words without referring back to the article. I ask them to imagine it as an interesting story they've just heard and that they want to retell it to their friends; you don't retell it exactly word for word, you relate it using your own words and expressions. I periodically reminded them that summarizing does not mean copying, and that copying is unacceptable, I also explained about plagiarizing, and the necessity of citing a source.

Storytelling and movies can be effectively used as summarizing activities. Students have to rely on memories, their understanding of the materials presented, and have no written text to refer back to or copy from. Also if we present a story verbally the same material will appear less daunting when presented in written form.

Storytelling activities.

During the first semester I narrated Guy De Mapusant's 'The Necklace'. This was used to improve summarizing skills and as a speculating exercise. I first read (more or less verbatim) the beginning half of an abridged version of de Maupasant's 'The Necklace'. I then asked them to summarize or retell in writing the story. In the next class I then asked them to imagine or create the second part, beginning from Matilda becoming destitute but paying back her debt. In the next class I read the second part of the story and had them summarize that as well. I then asked them to compare the two versions. As a homework assignment I gave out the original text and asked students to read it at home. In the following class I had them re-summarize the written version and to compare it with their version of the story that I had narrated to them.

Authentic writings.

I looked for articles from newspapers and magazines that would provide subject matter for the topics of interest that the students identified in the first lesson. Two that we used were 'The State of Japanese Education' about the 'classroom collapse' phenomena and 'Nationalism and Soccer' both from the International Herald Tribune (this was during the 2002 World Cup held in Japan/Korea). I also used an article that first appeared in "TALK" about the death penalty. These authentic and current readings do much more than provide subject matter for discussion and composition topics. When students read authentic popular writings they are engaging and interacting with the target language and culture, this is important in a setting where students have little exposure to spoken English communication. (Anne Raimes p. 50) When choosing material the teacher should consider topics that are relevant to the students, that they may hold diverging opinions on and written in relatively accessible language.

The article taken from 'Talk', 'Should John Paul Penry Die?' debates the morality of executing a retarded murderer. This was the type of real English article that addressed a controversial social issue appropriate for both the US and Japan. We would do a variety of reading and writing exercises with this story, scanning, reading for content, vocabulary exercises and speculating and summarizing activities. We worked on this particular story for about one hour a week for four weeks.

Students were asked to write a report on the article and to include their own opinions and views on this particular case as well as the death penalty in general.

First lesson:

Should John Paul Perny Die?

(Before reading)

Judging from the title, what do you think this article is about?

Do you believe in the death penalty? Why? Why not?

Who should be executed? Who shouldn't? How do we decide who gets the death penalty and who doesn't?

Chose a position: FOR or AGAINST capital punishment,

Write one paragraph explaining your position. Here is an example (my own opinion).

The Death Penalty

The death penalty is a complicated issue with valid arguments both for and against it. Personally, I am against the death penalty for a number of reasons. First, we can never be sure if it's the right person and it's really not a deterrent. The death penalty can be more expensive than life in prison and at least in the US the death penalty is as much a political issue as an issue of justice because District and State Attorneys are elected, therefore they often have to appear to be tough on crime and will seek the death penalty for political rather than judicial reasons. It's also an issue about economics; a poor person who can not afford good lawyers receives the death penalty more often than a rich person who commits the same type of crime does. I also feel that even though many criminals deserve to be executed, once we begin to execute people it becomes easier and easier to execute people for lesser crimes.

I do understand that victims and society have rights including the right for retribution and closure. Although I feel that many of the most horrible of criminals do not deserve to live, still I'm reluctant to support the death penalty.

Movies.

We watched and discussed one film (Mississippi Masala). We usually watched 15 minutes at the end of each class. Students summarized it for homework.

I asked the students to research the background of the movie, 'Mississippi Masala'.

This was their first assignment: Please research and write a 2 paragraph essay on the Asians (mostly Indians and Pakistanis) who lived in Uganda from the British colonial period to the 1970's when Idi Amin came to power.

What to do: Find and cite 2 or 3 sources. Your sources can be either English or Japanese. Write the

report in your own words, use your sources, ideas and information but make your own sentences. Try to think about and internalize the material you've researched before you write your paper.

If possible please type it. It's much easier to read, looks nicer and is good practice for you.

What not to do: Don't just copy something out of an encyclopedia and don't just translate something from Japanese to English. (I asked that the students follow these guidelines throughout the course for homework and research assignments.)

I used the movie to not only provide material for summaries but to incorporate other language skills, specifically listening. We would usually spend 15-20 minutes per session watching the movie. I would make a worksheet with two or three tasks that required specific listening and one or two questions involving content or general listening. I also asked the students to write down in their diaries any questions that they had concerning the part of the movie we had just watched. I would answer by the following class.

The following is a 90-minute lesson on the movie 'Mississippi Masala' and a follow-up homework exercise.

1) Mississippi Masala (15 minutes of the film)

1. How would you describe Mina's mood at the supermarket? Why do you think she feels that way? What language does her aunt sometimes use?
2. What does her aunt (or relative?) want to buy? Why?
3. After the accident Mina has an argument with her cousin about the car
Listen for:
 - a) her father's joke
 - b) her cousin's retort
 - c) Mina calls him a not very nice name. What did she call him? Why is that a little unusual for this situation?
4. What's a masala? Who is a Mississippi masala? Can you explain?
5. Why is Demetrius (Denzel Washington) arguing with his brother?

Answers to some of your questions

The first scene

Who's in the car with her father?

It's not really clear who's in the car at the checkpoint. I think it's the father and his African friend. The point of this scene is to indicate that it's a dangerous time and place.

What language is the African speaking to Mina?

The African friend is speaking Swahili to Mina.

Why and what are the children singing?

The children are taunting the Asians by song "Farewell, farewell from my beautiful land.." The newspaper says 'LAST DAYS', again taunting. This must have all been arranged by Amin and his supporters. I don't think a majority of the Ugandans supported Amin. He took power by force and killed anyone who opposed him, so it wasn't very healthy not to support him or at least pretend to.

Listen for these exchanges:

1) Who says:

a) "He is insulting my family's honor."

b) "You leave our women alone!"

c) "Leave them f----- foreigners alone. They ain't nothing but trouble."

d) "You let down your family.....you let down your entire race!"

2) What are these people really saying?

The homework was to read the following newspaper article and answer the questions. The next class was based on student summaries and their opinions.

Color-blind love • By Nicholas D. Kristof

Mixing the races in America

In a world brimming with bad news, here's one of the happiest trends: Instead of preying on people of different races, young Americans are falling in love with them. Whites and blacks can be found strolling together as couples even at the University of Mississippi, once the symbol of racial confrontation.

"I will say that they are always given a second glance," acknowledges C. J. Rhodes, a black student at Ole Miss.

He adds that there are still misgivings about interracial dating, particularly among black women and a formidable number of "white Southerners who view this race-mixing as abnormal, frozen by fear to see Sara Beth bring home a brotha."

Mixed-race marriages in the United States now number 1.5 million and are roughly doubling each decade. About 40 percent of Asian-Americans and 6 percent of blacks have married whites in recent years.

Still more striking, one survey found that 40 percent of Americans had dated someone of another race.

In a country where racial divisions remain deep, all this love is an enormously hopeful sign of progress in bridging barriers.

Scientists who study the human genome say that race is mostly a bogus distinction reflecting very little genetic difference, perhaps one-hundredth of 1 percent of our DNA.

Skin color differences are recent, arising over only the last 100,000 years or so, a twinkling of an evolutionary

eye. That is too short a period for substantial genetic differences to emerge, and so there is perhaps 10 times more genetic difference within a race than there is between races. Thus we should welcome any trend that makes a superficial issue like color less central to how we categorize each other.

The rise in interracial marriage reflects a revolution in attitudes. As recently as 1958, a white mother in Monroe, North Carolina, called the police after her little girl kissed a black playmate on the cheek. The boy, Hanover Thompson, 9, was then sentenced to 14 years in prison for attempted rape. (His appeals failed, but he was released later after an outcry.)

In 1963, 59 percent of Americans believed that marriage between blacks and whites should be illegal. At one time or another, 42 states banned intermarriage. The Supreme Court finally invalidated these laws in 1967.

Typically, the miscegenation laws voided any interracial marriages, making the children illegitimate, and some states included penalties like enslavement, life imprisonment and whippings. My wife is Chinese-American, and our relationship would once have been felonious.

At every juncture from the 19th century on, the segregationists warned that granting rights to blacks would mean the start of a slippery slope, ending up with black men marrying white women. The racists were prophetic. "They were absolutely right," notes Randall Kennedy, a Harvard Law School professor and author of a

dazzling new book, "Interracial Intimacies," to be published next month.

"I do think [interracial marriage] is a good thing," Kennedy says. "It's a welcome sign of thoroughgoing desegregation. We talk about desegregation in the public sphere; here's desegregation in the most intimate sphere."

These days, interracial romance can be seen on the cinema screen, on television shows and in the lives of some prominent Americans. Former Defense Secretary William Cohen has a black wife, as does Peter Norton, the software guru. The Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas has a white wife.

I find the surge in intermarriage to be one of the most positive fronts in American race relations today, building bridges and empathy. But it's still in its infancy. I was excited to track down interracial couples at Ole Miss, thinking they would be perfect to make my point about this hopeful trend. But none were willing to talk about the issue on the record.

"Even if people wanted to marry [interracially], I think they'd keep it kind of quiet," explained a minister on campus.

For centuries, racists warned that racial equality would lead to the "mongrelization" of America. Perhaps they were right in a sense, for we are increasingly going to see a blurring of racial distinctions. But these distinctions acquired enormous social resonance without ever having much basis in biology.

The New York Times

GRAMMAR, ACCURACY AND FORM

Structure and Grammar Exercises

While the main focus of this class was expressing opinions and increasing fluency, grammar and form were also taught. I found Betty Azar's 'Fundamentals of English Grammar' and Anne's Raimés' 'Focus on Composition' to be helpful, Azar's book consists mainly of grammar exercises and drills while the Raimés' book is based on the writing process, and uses a wide variety of real writings to teach style, form and mechanics as well as providing material and topics to write about. Another book written by Anne Raimés, 'Exploring through Writing, continues on this theme and is appropriate for a slightly higher level than these students.

Corrections from homework and students writings. I tried to use a portion of each lesson to correct mistakes from student's writings in class together. I found it best to focus on grammar errors that were common to the group and work on them together as a class instead of individually. I tried to find 8-10

sentences from the previous week's homework assignment that reflected some grammar or word choice problem's that were consistently problematic. Working in pairs the students would first try to identify the error and not only correct it but explain why it is incorrect.

Here is a homework correction exercise and sentences from an assignment about the story 'The Necklace'. I had verbally related an abridged edition (not quite a dictation) to the class and asked them to reconstruct it for homework.

Mistakes from writing assignments

Some of these sentences have grammar mistakes; one of them is fine.

Please find and correct the mistakes.

- 1) Matilda was very charming and she was an average family.
- 2) She answered that she has not had any jewelry.
- 3) Her husband bought her the dress and even if she got a nice dress she cried again.
- 4) She got married an average man, who was a clerk.
- 5) She didn't notice it was other necklace.
- 6) He expected her to be happy but in fact she began to angry.
- 7) At first Matilda was happy to get a nice dress, but later she was unhappy.
- 8) The party invited many rich people.
- 9) She has been dreamed that she would be rich.
- 10) So they decided to buy a necklace, which replace for the borrowed one.

All of these sentences are grammatically correct but word choice is incorrect for the situation. Try to find a better way to express these ideas.

- 1) He finally found not the exactly same but look alike necklace she lost.

2) Her husband went to the police, the newspapers, everywhere he hit upon to look for the necklace.

3) When formal party became sooner, Matilda became sad.

4) She couldn't do anything because of the happening.

5) I think Matilda was very pity for her dream but she learned an important thing.

Here are two fun exercises from Anne Raimes' 'Focus on Composition'. 'Focus on Composition' contains with many effective and practical writing exercises, based on interesting and authentic writings.

The first one uses Richard Brautigan's "One Afternoon in 1939" describing the past and what happened. I like this cloze exercise because it not only teaches form but helps develop students' narrative skills too.

After we completed the exercise I related an incident from my childhood that remains vivid in my recollections (my sister and I almost burned the house down making popcorn), and then ask the students to write a short narrative describing their most vivid childhood memories.

I found this reported speech exercise using an episode from Ray Bradbury's 'The Martian Chronicles' helpful for reporting what was said without relying to heavily on direct quotations.

ONE AFTERNOON IN 1939

This is a constant story that I keep telling my daughter who _____ four years old. She _____ something from it and _____ to hear it again and again.

When it's time for her to _____ to bed, she _____, "Daddy, tell me about when you _____ a kid and climbed inside that rock."

"O.K."

She _____ the covers about her as if they _____ controllable clouds and _____ her thumb in her mouth and _____ at me with listening blue eyes.

"Once when I was a little kid, just your age, my mother and father _____ me on a picnic to Mount Rainier. We _____ up there in an old car and _____ a deer standing in the middle of the road.

We _____ to a meadow where there _____ snow in the shadows of the trees and snow in the places where the sun did not _____.

There _____ wild flowers growing in the meadow and they _____ beautiful. In the middle of the meadow there _____ a huge round rock and Daddy _____ over to the rock and _____ a hole in the center of it and _____ inside. The rock was hollow like a small room.

Daddy _____ inside the rock and sat there _____ out at the blue sky and the wild flowers. Daddy really _____ that rock and _____ that it was a house and he _____ inside the rock all afternoon.

He got some smaller rocks and _____ them inside the big rock. He _____ that the smaller rocks were a stove and furniture and things and he _____ a meal, _____ wild flowers for food."

That's the end of the story.

Then she looks up at me with her deep blue eyes and _____ me as a child playing inside a rock, _____ that wild flowers are hamburgers and _____ them on a small stove-like rock.

She can never _____ enough of this story. She _____ it thirty or forty times and always _____ to hear it again.

It's very important to her.

I think she uses this story as a kind of Christopher Columbus door to the discovery of her father when he was a child and her contemporary.

RICHARD BRAUTIGAN, *Revenge of the Lawn*

NOVEMBER 2005:
THE LUGGAGE STORE

It was a very remote* thing, when the luggage-store proprietor* heard the news on the night radio, received all the way from Earth on a light-sound beam. The proprietor felt how remote it was.

There was going to be a war on Earth.

He went out to peer into the sky.

Yes, there it was. Earth, in the evening heavens, following the sun into the hills. The words on the radio and that green star were one and the same.

"I don't believe it," said the proprietor.

"It's because you're not there," said Father Peregrine, who had stopped by to pass the time of evening.

"What do you mean, Father?"

"It's like when I was a boy," said Father Peregrine. "We heard about wars in China. But we never believed them. It was too far away. And there were too many people dying. It was impossible. Even when we saw the motion pictures we didn't believe it. Well, that's how it is now. Earth is China. It's so far away it's unbelievable. It's not here. You can't touch it. You can't even see it. All you see is a green light. Two billion people living on that light? Unbelievable! War? We don't hear the explosions."

"We will," said the proprietor. "I keep thinking about all those people that were going to come to Mars this week. What was it? A hundred thousand or so coming up in the next month or so. What about **them** if the war starts?"

"I imagine they'll turn back. They'll be needed on Earth."

"Well," said the proprietor, "I'd better get my luggage dusted off. I got* a feeling there'll be a rush sale here any time."

"Do you think everyone now on Mars will go back to Earth if this is the Big War we've all been expecting for years?"

"It's a funny thing, Father, but yes, I think we'll all go back. I know, we came up here to get away from things—politics, the atom bomb, war, pressure groups, prejudice, laws—I know. But it's still home there. You wait and see. When the first bomb drops on America the people up here'll start thinking. They haven't been here long enough. A couple years is all. If they'd been here forty years, it'd be different, but they got relatives down there, and their home towns. Me, I can't believe in Earth any more; I can't imagine it much. But I'm old, I don't count. I might stay on here."

"I doubt it."

"Yes, I guess you're right."

They stood on the porch watching the stars. Finally Father Peregrine pulled some money from his pocket and handed it to the proprietor. "Come to think of it, you'd better give me a new valise.* My old one's in pretty bad condition. . . ."

RAY BRADBURY, *The Martian Chronicles*

RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

Many of my students had little experience doing real research in Japanese and therefore lacked the skills to do so in English. In their first research assignment instead of exploring a question or issue and reading extensively in search of possible answers they seemed to arrive at a conclusion based on what they had heard and used what few sources they had to justify an opinion already held. Serious college level research includes reading widely, extensively and selectively and then drawing conclusions based on a rational assessment of the material read. (Hacker p. 249) An example of this was the topic 'Whaling'. Three students did a paper on whaling. All three made basically the same argument (independently) and used sources that were exclusively pro-whaling, without seriously taking into account any opposing view. The idea of balancing your research to include the opposing point of view was not considered. I tried to explain this and often looked for material that countered their views and asked them to include and then refute the opposing view in their paper, some of the students grasps this idea but many did not.

I then asked them to find 5 articles about the 2000 Supreme Court Decision on the presidential elections. I also had them try and determine what stance the writers took, pro, neutral or against the decision. I choose this issue because I felt that the students were not very biased one way or the other about this issue.

Plagiarism

Many of my students had serious problems in recognizing and understanding what constitutes plagiarism.

DOONESBURY



As Zipper points out, when writing we often 'go dry' and it's not always easy to come up with original ideas. It's okay to use another writer or researcher's thoughts and ideas but it has to be documented or paraphrased into our own words. However, many of my students felt that Zipper's approach was the correct one. A simple explanation of what defines plagiarism and why it is unacceptable in academic writing failed to convince many of the students to avoid it. I then devoted the better part of three lessons on activities that focused on properly documenting their papers and paraphrasing and summarizing. Often

students would over-document their papers, loading up on quotes and footnotes without really doing any original writing. The paper could have been properly documented but not very original and consequently poorly written. They had a hard time understanding why this would also be considered bad or even unacceptable writing.

CONCLUSION

I found that the majority of these students were socially and politically aware and had opinions about these issues. They were happy to have a venue to express them, the key was to provide an impetus for finding and expressing them. By exploring and finding what is important to our students and what their concerns are we have a wealth of material and topics for them to write about. Interesting and relevant material and topics encourage and enable students to express their feelings and opinion. Once provided with the opportunity to express themselves and enough relevant topics such as whaling, the aging population of Japan and the death penalty these students learned to adequately express their opinions in English. I felt that by the end of the year most of these students could express their opinions clearly enough and had the grammar and vocabulary to write an acceptable paper or thesis. However I did find that most of these students had little experience or training more difficulty doing college level research and properly documenting their research. That was the area I felt that these students and their advisors should concentrate most on when writing their English theses.

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