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# Academic Writing Skills: Japanese as a Second Language Students in HGU

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the problems that Japanese as a second language (JSL) students have with academic writing in Japanese universities as well as the more general area of writing requirements in subject-area courses. The authors of this paper teach Japanese and English to international students in a Japanese university. This study was conducted to provide JSL teachers with information concerning the realities of writing assignments, along with associated problems, that JSL students face outside of JSL classes: information that is important for gauging the degree of success that JSL writing courses have achieved in preparing students for writing across the university curriculum.*

This paper specifically addresses the following questions:

- In what percentage of subject-area courses do teachers require writing assignments?
- What types of writing assignments do teachers assign in subject-area courses?
- What factors do subject-area teachers regard as most important in writing assignments?
- What difficulties do JSL students have with writing in subject-area courses?
- What skills do JSL students need for writing assignments in subject areas?

**Keywords:** *Academic writing, Cognitive skills, Japanese as a second language (JSL), Japanese universities, Subject-area courses*

## INTRODUCTION

### **Literature Review**

In the field of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), much research has been reported concerning teaching academic writing to ESL students in post-secondary education. Among them, Horowitz (1986), Leki & Carson (1994), and Leki (1995) focused on problems that ESL students face with writing in university subject-area courses and examined the gap between writing tasks in ESL classes and those in subject-area courses.

On the other hand, there is little research in JSL settings beyond rather narrow areas such as teaching specialized language (e.g., Komiya, 2001) or teaching academic writing skills to JSL graduate students (e.g., Chinami et. al, 2001). Although teaching academic writing skills is becoming one of the more important issues among JSL teachers, there is little research examining the reality facing JSL students in university subject-area courses.

## BACKGROUND

### **Hokkai Gakuen University and Courses of the Faculty of Economics**

This study examines the situation at Hokkai Gakuen University (HGU), where the authors are presently working. HGU, with the four faculties of Economics, Law, Engineering, and Humanities, is the biggest private university in Hokkaido, the northernmost region of

Japan. Approximately 8,000 students attend HGU, including about 25 JSL students from China and Korea. Among the four faculties (five from 2003) of HGU, the Faculty of Economics, consisting of the Department of Economics and the Department of Business Administration, is the largest with 3,700 students and 68 professors. The Faculty of Economics is the authors' primary focus in the research since it encompasses 85% of the JSL students.

Subject-area courses can be divided into three groups, each characterized by purpose and class size. Because of the labor-intensive nature of evaluating student writing, class size is a very important factor when examining the conditions regarding writing assignments in subject-area courses.

- Regular lecture-type courses: maximum of 500 students. About 50% of lecture courses have 200 to 300 students.
- Introductory Economics/ Business Administration courses: compulsory courses for first-year students. The number of students is limited to 60.
- Seminars: non-compulsory one-year courses for second- and third-year students: 38 areas of study (in day program) in 2002. The number of the students is limited to 20: average number about 15.

### ***JSL Courses in Hokkai Gakuen University***

The JSL program in HGU is an integral part of the university curriculum where JSL students can take JSL courses as substitutes for other courses in general education. In addition to improving Japanese speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills, the JSL program seeks

to provide the foundation necessary for studying in Japanese universities. HGU offers five Japanese courses, three for the first-year JSL students and two in the second year. In 2002, 16 JSL students were taking JSL courses. Although JSL students typically enter the university with high-intermediate or advanced level Japanese proficiency, they have various kinds of difficulty when taking regular subject-area courses. In particular, academic writing is particularly difficult for all JSL students.

### ***State of Writing Instruction in Japanese Secondary Schools***

Compared with North America where students are assigned written reports or essays in various subjects in secondary education, little importance is placed on writing instruction in Japanese secondary schools. Typically, elementary school pupils are required to write narrative compositions or book reports in their Japanese language classes. However, after elementary school, students rarely write compositions except for special occasions such as collections of student compositions to commemorate their graduation. This lack of emphasis on writing in Japanese education results from the entrance examinations of high schools, 2-year colleges and universities in which multiple-choice type questions predominate. Thus, students need not write essays to enter universities and colleges. As a result, almost all Japanese students enter universities with minimal academic writing experience. In addition, the authors learned from JSL students from China and Korea that the state of writing in the secondary schools of their countries is similar to that in Japan.

### ***Academic Writing in Japanese Universities***

In general, there is no formal support system for writing in most

Japanese universities such as the academic writing courses and writing centers often seen in North America universities. Other than in foreign language courses, most students in Japanese universities normally receive little or no training in academic writing unless they happen to enroll in one of the few introductory courses or seminars where instructors teach these skills through a process of essay writing.

Subject-area teachers in Japanese universities have traditionally emphasized conveying the contents of courses to students through lectures with little emphasis on critical thinking or logical analysis skills or academic writing skills. This situation is closely related to the fact that no generally accepted standards exist for academic writing in Japanese universities.

Nitsu (1995) found that there are a number of subject-area teachers who want to provide academic writing instruction because of the poor writing ability of students in their classes. However, the large size of most subject-area courses makes this difficult. (Nitsu, 1995, pp. 66-69)

## METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain the state of writing assignments in subject-area courses, the authors conducted a brief survey of the catalog of courses in order to find those that assign an essay as part of the student evaluation. In addition, the authors interviewed both subject-area teachers and JSL students. The participants and the procedure of the interviews are as followings:

- Seven instructors: Five participated in an in-depth interview and

two discussed particular topics. The courses and seminars of the participants were *Introduction to Economics, Business Administration Seminar, International Affairs, Study of the Hokkaido Economy, Social Welfare, Business Management, and English and Culture.*

- Ten JSL students: Six participated in an in-depth interview and four discussed selected topics. The major, first language, and Japanese proficiency level of the JSL students are presented in Table 1. Two JSL students majoring in Japanese Culture are included in this study for comparison because of their higher Japanese ability and greater experience with academic writing.

Table 1. Student participants

Year	Number	First language	Major	Japanese proficiency level*
1st	4	Chinese	Business Administration	High intermediate to Advanced
2nd	4	Chinese	Business Administration & Economics	High intermediate to Advanced
3rd	2	Korean	Japanese Culture	Advanced

\*Japanese proficiency levels ranged from top-level highest grade to second level of the Japanese Proficiency Test, i.e., advanced to high-intermediate level Japanese ability.

The interviews for both subject-area teachers and students were conducted by the authors in September and October 2002. Teachers were asked about writing assignments in their courses. Some of the teachers showed examples of student essays and gave some comments on them. JSL students were interviewed about their experiences concerning academic writing in subject-area courses and, in particular, what kind of difficulties they have and what skills they felt they needed for writing essays. The length of each interview was from 30 to 40 minutes. Six interviews, all the second- and third-year students, were

tape-recorded and transcribed into Japanese, while only notes were taken of the first-year students' and instructors' interviews. The interview questions are in Appendices A and B.

## RESULTS

### **Essay Assignments in Subject-Area Courses**

According to the Faculty of Economics Course Catalog for 2002, 127 subject-area courses were offered: seminars, foreign languages, and physical education not included. The 127 subject-area courses are composed of the following: 67 Economics and Business Administration major courses, eight introductory major courses, nine Law courses, and 43 general education courses. Among the above, although 35 subject-area courses assign essays, almost all of them also require an examination and attach greater importance to it. Only four of the 35 courses evaluate students solely on essays. Another eight courses require either an essay or examination, depending on the number of students enrolled in the course. According to the JSL student interviews, the average number of essays they wrote in one semester was two (Table 2).

**Table 2. Number of courses assigning essays**

Requirement	Major subject <sup>1</sup>	Introductory major	Law	General Education <sup>2</sup>	Total (%)
Essay only	1	2	1	0	4 ( 3.2%)
Essay & test	22	0	0	9	31 ( 24.4%)
Essay or test	2	3	1	2	8 ( 6.3%)
Test only	42	3	7	32	84 ( 66.1%)
Total	67	8	9	43	127 (100.0%)

<sup>1</sup>The total of two departments: Economics and Business Administration. <sup>2</sup>Most General Education courses are one semester, whereas most other subject-area courses are one year, i.e., two semesters.



**Writing Assignments in Subject-Area Courses**

## Types of assignments

From interviews of both teachers and JSL students, the authors collected 14 examples of writing assignments, including essays: seven examples from interviews of teachers and seven examples from interviews of students. Among the 14 examples, two are essay-type term examinations. These 14 examples can be divided into the five types listed below. The number in parentheses is the number of occurrences.

- A. *Summary* of some chapters of either a textbook or a reference book (1)
- B. *Explanation* of a problem or a topic concerning course content (8)
- C. *Analysis* of a case (case study) (1)
- D. *Written report* of research and oral presentation (3)
- E. Other (1)

**Examples of writing assignments**

Examples of each type of writing assignment are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Examples of writing assignments**

Type	Assignments	Length	Course
A	Summary of each chapter of the textbook: 15 chapters	1-2 pages for each chapter	Seminar: Economics
B	Explain with an example a company's responsibility to society	1 page	Introduction to Economics
C	Analysis: case study of a company's product development (theme of essay-type test)	1-2 pages	The Study of Merchandizing
D	Field research and presentation concerning an NGO in Japan (oral presentation and written report)	3-4 pages	Seminar: Social Welfare
E	Report on an example of an unusual custom from an different culture and an explanation of the reason why the student thought it unusual	1 page	International Affairs

## **Assignment A**

Assignment A does not require the writing of a formal essay, only a listing of the main points of the textbook. The aim of the assignment is to make students read the textbook and acquire basic knowledge about Economics for later discussion in the seminar. Students have to read each chapter of the textbook and to note the important items. The instructor mentioned that one third of the students cannot correctly pick up the main points of the chapters and, in fact, the students who cannot find the main points merely copy some parts of the chapter without a clear understanding of the meaning.

## **Assignment B**

Assignment B requires students to explain an issue using an appropriate example. To complete this assignment, students have to review the lecture and the textbook in order to understand the concepts underlying the issue. The instructor directed students to submit their essay by e-mail and returned the graded essays with one or two lines of comment. The instructor indicated six criteria for evaluating this assignment: clarity of the main points, originality of the argument, validity of the argument, appropriateness of the citations, structure of the text, and appropriateness of the language.

## **Assignment C**

Assignment C requires an original analysis of a case chosen by students. They have to state their own views concerning the case and substantiate them with appropriate reasoning, using sources from

reference books. The instructor attaches importance to both content and structure of the text; the text is required to explicitly consist of three parts: opinion, reasons, and conclusion.

### **Assignment D**

Assignment D is a research-type essay in a seminar course. All students are required to experience short time volunteer work in a day-care center of a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) during their summer vacation. Then students give presentations in the class about the organization and programs of the day-care center as an NGO, based on their experience and research. The instructor emphasizes the following points in the writing: accurate presentation of information such as the name of the organization, appropriate usage of language, and unity of the content.

### **Assignment E**

Assignment E requires references and a brief explanation concerning cultural differences. One aim of this assignment is to make students aware of their unconscious biases towards the customs and manners of different cultures. Another aim is to teach appropriate citation methods: incorporation into text including information about the author and accurate documentation. According to the instructor, a number of Japanese students cannot incorporate citations into the text correctly because of the lack of previous instruction.

## **Student Interviews: Problems with Writing Assignments in Subject-Area Courses**

The students identified the following five problem areas with their writing assignments.

- Lack of academic writing experience
- Lack of clarity: requirements of the assignment
- Insufficient reading skills for research prior to writing essays
- Insufficient cognitive skills for developing arguments
- Inadequate vocabulary and lack of proficiency with written Japanese

### **Lack of academic writing experience**

For most JSL students, particularly the first-year students, writing essays is difficult because they have never experienced academic essay-type writing, even in their first language.

K. E., one of the first-year students, said that she was apprehensive when starting to write an essay in a subject-area course. She thought that she had to write a type of text completely different from what she had written at a JSL school before entering the university: short compositions in Japanese, i.e., 400 to 600 Japanese characters. In addition, they were simply narrative compositions in which she just described her impressions. In fact, she had had no experience with academic writing even in her schools in China. K. E. added, “When I write an essay, I look for some parts in the textbook concerning the essay topic. But even if I can understand the meaning of the text, I cannot write an essay about what is written if I did not experience it.”

S. Y., another Chinese student, talked about her writing experience in China.

“When I was a high school student, I wrote a lot of compositions. I wrote compositions in Chinese class almost everyday. According to the teacher’s instruction, I wrote directly about what I thought and wanted to say. However, I had never written an academic essay before entering this university. [Are those compositions different from essays that you write in the university now?] Yes. They were very different. They were, so to speak, a child’s compositions. Many of them just described my own impressions.”  
(S.Y.)

Although each JSL student has different writing experiences in previous schools, none of them had any experience with academic essay writing before they entered university. As the students suggested, they felt a huge gap exists between their previous experiences with composition and the academic writing that is required in subject-area courses.

***Lack of clarity: requirements of the assignment***

Four first-year students talked about their first experiences of academic writing in Introduction to Business Administration. Although the instructor provided students with instructions that specified the theme, length, and due date of the essay, they remained puzzled about how to write it. S. Y. said, “When I was given a writing assignment in my class, I could not understand what I should have done for the theme that the teacher had given us. I thought that it would not have been sufficient to write an essay with just my own ideas, but I had no ideas as to what I should write about the theme.”

In most of the subject-area courses, students do not receive any detailed instructions about the assignments from the instructors such as how their writing would be evaluated. Even after submitting their essays, the lack of feedback left the students with questions about whether their papers met the requirements. Some JSL students said that they had given up trying to get information from instructors because there were too many students in the classes. For example, J. R., a third-year Korean student, expressed her anxiety about essays.

“I always worry whether I can accurately convey my thoughts to instructors with my writing. When I recall what I wrote in my assignment in the second year, I am still ashamed. I think I made big mistakes in my essay although I do not know if the instructor noticed them. I wanted to ask him about them and wondered for a long time whether I should go to see him or not. In the end, I did not visit his office.” (J. R.)

#### ***Insufficient reading skills for research prior to writing essays***

Students generally need to read textbooks and reference books in order to collect information before writing essays. Reading academic texts in a second language is another difficult task for JSL students. Looking back on her first year at the university, J. R. said, “When I was a first-year student, it took a lot of time to read textbooks. I had trouble reading academic texts containing many specialized terms and a complex structure. Even after I could understand each word in the text, I had difficulty understanding the content.”

Furthermore, lengthy texts are another problem for JSL students. It is difficult for students reading long texts in a second language to

gasp the main points. W. J., a second-year Chinese student, said, “When there is a book or some text and I have to extract the important parts, it is difficult to identify where the important parts are. I cannot find the main point. Also, when I want to cite something important, I cannot paraphrase or cite it properly.”

JSL students’ difficulty with reading academic texts is a result not only of insufficient reading skills in Japanese but also of insufficient cognitive skills necessary for understanding academic text. This lack of development of these reading skills is not limited to JSL students; it is also common among Japanese students in general. (Suenaga, 2002) Although it is uncertain which is the more important problem for individual students, many JSL students seem to have both problems in varying degrees.

***Insufficient cognitive skills for developing arguments***

The student interviews show that some JSL students seem to have a comparatively passive attitude toward their writing assignments. We can see the differences in their approach toward writing in the following comments.

A. K., a third-year Korean student, used a coherent methodology when composing her essay written in the Study of Modern Film Culture course.

“I chose one Chinese movie director, Jon Woo, because he is popular in both Korea and Japan. I selected two movies; one that I loved before and another that was very popular recently in the U. S. I was interested in why a movie made by a Chinese director

achieved such success in the U.S... At first, I wrote about my impressions of his movies. For example, there is a lot of gun fighting. And his philosophy...he describes modern Chinese urban society more than the rural customs of traditional China. Then I wrote about how his movies have changed since he started to direct American movies.” (A. K.)

On the other hand, other JSL students seem to start writing without a clear purpose or a plan regarding a theme. Even after starting to write, they tend to lose the thread of their own writing. C. S., a second-year Chinese student, told about her process of academic writing in her first year in the university:

“I lost my way during the writing, and I become confused about what I wanted to voice. [Did you start to write with only a vague idea of your purpose?] Yes. I had something that I wanted to write in the beginning. However, after I had finished the first part of my essay, I felt the text had somehow lost coherence. I wondered why I had written it as I had. In addition, it was too short. Therefore, I thought that I needed something to fill the rest of the pages. In the first two pages, I had written what I had wanted to express. However, for the rest of pages, I copied many passages from the textbook and combined them with my text. Consequently, my essay became incoherent.” (C. S.)

Many students, like C. S., have difficulty with coherently developing their own arguments over the required essay length. As a result, they tend to seek the parts of existing texts that relate to the topic of their essays and just extract some passages in order to fill the required



pages, as with these other second-year Chinese students:

“I know I should not copy passages from a textbook. I try to write my own ideas and examples. However, there is a problem of length. I cannot write a very long essay. Therefore, I get some books from the library and read as many pages as I can, looking for something concerning the essay question. Sometimes, I copy something from the books. [So, did the books help you?] Yes, they did. [Is your inability to write a long essay the biggest problem?] Yes.” (W. W.)

[Did you refer to books when you wrote the essay?] “No, I did not. I only used the Internet. After I collected information, I divided it into paragraphs. Then I started to write each paragraph. [Did you use your own arguments in the paper?] Yes. I used my ideas in the last part of the essay. However, that was only one page in four. [So, you wrote the rest of the essay using information from the Internet.] Actually, I copied (the text from the Internet). [Could you combine such information successfully into your text?] That is difficult to answer. I cannot say yes with confidence.” (S. I.)

***Inadequate vocabulary and lack of proficiency with written Japanese***

Other problems for JSL students are insufficient vocabulary and knowledge of syntax for academic writing. Although JSL students may already have a relatively high proficiency level in Japanese, they still find it difficult to adequately express their thoughts. A. K., a third-year student, said, “(When I am writing) I have to express myself with a limited vocabulary. I sometimes feel troubled after I write

something in Japanese. I feel that the text does not really express what I had wanted to say. But I do not know the appropriate vocabulary, so I submit my essay without making any change.” In addition, there are some students who have difficulty with written Japanese, a style that is syntactically different from the spoken language. S. Y., a first-year student, said, “Even now (after six months of studying in the university), it is difficult to write using written Japanese. If I write in spoken language, I can write more easily. When I use written language, I become nervous and cannot smoothly write what I want to say.”

## DISCUSSION

### ***Academic Writing: Need for Instruction and Experience***

A general lack of knowledge about and experience with academic writing seem to be the main factors causing the difficulty JSL students have with writing assignments in universities. JSL students need to become familiar with different types of assignments such as those listed in the section summarizing the teacher interview results, including learning how to actually write each type of essay through the process of completing assignments. Some seminar teachers, with their relatively small number of students, try to teach the fundamentals of academic writing. Because of the larger number of students in subject-area courses, however, there is little opportunity for students, especially in their first-year, to learn how to prepare and compose these different types of texts. The situation is different in the Faculty of Humanities, where the required English language courses include instruction in academic writing. (Suenaga, 1993 a, b)

### ***Writing Standard Criteria and Feedback***

In general, a lack of explicit writing standard criteria and feedback from course instructors are problems in Japanese universities. In interviews, two teachers indicated that they pointed out the criteria for course writing assignments. However, in most other courses, students were not informed of any criteria for the writing assignments. In addition, there is little feedback about assignments from the instructors. As a result, many JSL students are uncertain about the requirements for the writing assignment as well as any problems with their completed assignments.

### ***Cognitive Skills for Developing an Argument***

According to the results of the subject-area teacher interviews, the most common type of writing assignment involves an explanation of issues concerned with course content. Students are required to thoroughly understand the content of the lecture and textbooks, grasp main points, and write an explanation in their own words with appropriate examples from outside sources. In other types of essays, they are required to summarize texts or analyze cases. In each type of assignment, students need various cognitive skills in addition to writing skills.

As the authors pointed out in the student interview results, many JSL students are unable to formulate and develop their own point of view. A lack of cognitive skills such as clarifying, summarizing, drawing conclusions, and integrating information from different sources in order to develop arguments is a common reason that students have difficulty with academic writing. This problem is closely connected to the passive learning style common among Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students pointed out by Pennycook (1996, pp. 220-223)

in an analysis of an Asian student learning style in which memorization is emphasized. When teaching academic writing, this aspect cannot be ignored.

### **Referencing Skills: Integrating Outside Knowledge into Arguments**

In order to write academic texts, students need to learn how to integrate information from outside sources. As brought out in the interviews, students tend to copy information from the Internet and other sources directly into their essays without proper citation. This unfortunate situation results from an ignorance of referencing procedures as well as a lack of ethics concerning plagiarism. Students reported in interviews that they were not required to refer to outside information in secondary school writing, let alone follow strict referencing standards. Not surprisingly, JSL students show little skill in summarizing and paraphrasing when incorporating the writing of others into their own papers.

Among the writing assignments shown in this paper, assignment type E was used by the instructor to teach fundamental rules of citation. In addition to citation standards, students need to be taught how to integrate outside knowledge into their own arguments by summarizing and paraphrasing.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, the authors examined various aspects concerning writing assignments in subject-area courses in the Faculty of Economics in HGU as well as problems that JSL students have with them.

The results of interviews with subject-area teachers and JSL students highlight some important problems concerning the academic writing of JSL students; the lack of academic writing experience, cognitive skills, and referencing skills discussed in this paper are important issues for university JSL writing classes. As a result of this study, the authors will reconsider the approach and materials of university JSL classes in order to address student needs better.

At the same time, the above problems are not limited to JSL students. As some content-area teachers pointed out in the interviews, Japanese university students have similar problems with writing. Given this situation, as the authors briefly described in the background section of this paper, the teaching of academic writing in Japanese universities is inadequate in various ways. Therefore, a collaborative study between subject-area teachers and JSL teachers is also necessary to understand the problems better and to improve teaching practices so that the academic writing of both JSL and Japanese students can be improved.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Semi-Structured Questions to Subject-Area Teachers**

1. What kinds of writing assignments have you given to your students in recent years?
2. Did you provide any directions when you gave the writing assignments? If yes, what directions did you give?
3. Did you provide the students with any criteria for the writing assignments when you gave the assignments? If yes, what kind of criteria did you provide?
4. What did you expect in the students' writing? Point out some aspects that you strongly require in student writing.
5. In general, what skills do you think that the first- and the second-year Japanese students are having problems with concerning essay writing in subject-area courses?

## APPENDIX B

### *Semi-Structured Questions to JSL Students*

1. What kinds of writing assignments were you given in subject-area courses?
2. What were the themes or questions of the writing assignments?
3. What instructions did you receive when you were given those assignments?
4. What difficulties did you feel when you wrote the assignments in subject-area courses?
5. Did you ask anyone for help when you had difficulties with completing the assignments?
6. What writing skills do you think that JSL students need to learn in JSL courses when starting university studies?