Students' Perceptions of Difficulties with Academic Writing:

A Report from Kyoto University Academic Writing Courses

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Summary

Academic writing is one of the keys to success in students' academic lives, yet one of the most difficult skills to learn. In 2006, Kyoto University adopted a new English curriculum in Liberal Arts and General Education requiring all first-year and second-year students to enroll in academic English courses. This paper aims to identify and report the difficulties students face in the process of academic writing in their transition from high school to their first and second year at the university. The study discussed in this paper was conducted in two first-year academic writing courses and one second-year academic writing course at Kyoto University in spring 2007. At the end of the term, the students completed a survey about their perceptions of difficulties with the content of the course. The first-year students reported most difficulty with adapting to the transition from high school practical English (English for General Purposes) to university academic English (English for Academic Purposes), especially with writing in a formal style and thinking about the rules of academic writing. The second-year students reported most difficulty with producing a coherent academic paragraph with no redundant sentences. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: academic writing, difficulty, EAP, curriculum development, EGAP

1. Introduction

"We cannot make all scientific studies alone. In other words, we have developed science during a long time communication from person to person. We scientists can develop science when we join this communication chain. For this reason, it is important to study the way of academic communication." (Second-year physics major)

As this comment from a second-year Kyoto University physics major suggests, some undergraduates have dreams of following in the footsteps of Nobel Prize-winning alumni. However, only the most mature and able students are likely to recognize and develop the skills they need with the help of peers or by themselves—it is also important for the faculty to help the students identify and develop the skills necessary for success in academia. As the student quoted above recognizes, communication skills are essential, and currently, English is the common language of the international academic world.

The Japanese Ministry of Education emphasizes practical communicative processes in the English curriculum for secondary education (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2003). However, this type of curriculum is not necessarily appropriate for research institutions whose educational goals include fostering independent thinking and developing outstanding researchers. At the university level, students should be prepared to become members of an academic discourse community, which involves common public goals and mechanisms of intercommunication including several genres with some specific lexis (Swales, 1990).

In light of this, by adopting a framework from the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) literature (see, for

example, Blue, 1988; Jordan, 1997), the English Department of the Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies and the Center for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education at Kyoto University established a new English curriculum in 2006 (i.e., English for General Academic Purposes; EGAP) based on EAP. The EGAP courses, which are administered by the Faculty of Integrated Human Studies, are expected to link to the English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) courses administered by other faculties (Tajino, 2004; Tajino & Suiko, 2005) (see Figure 1).
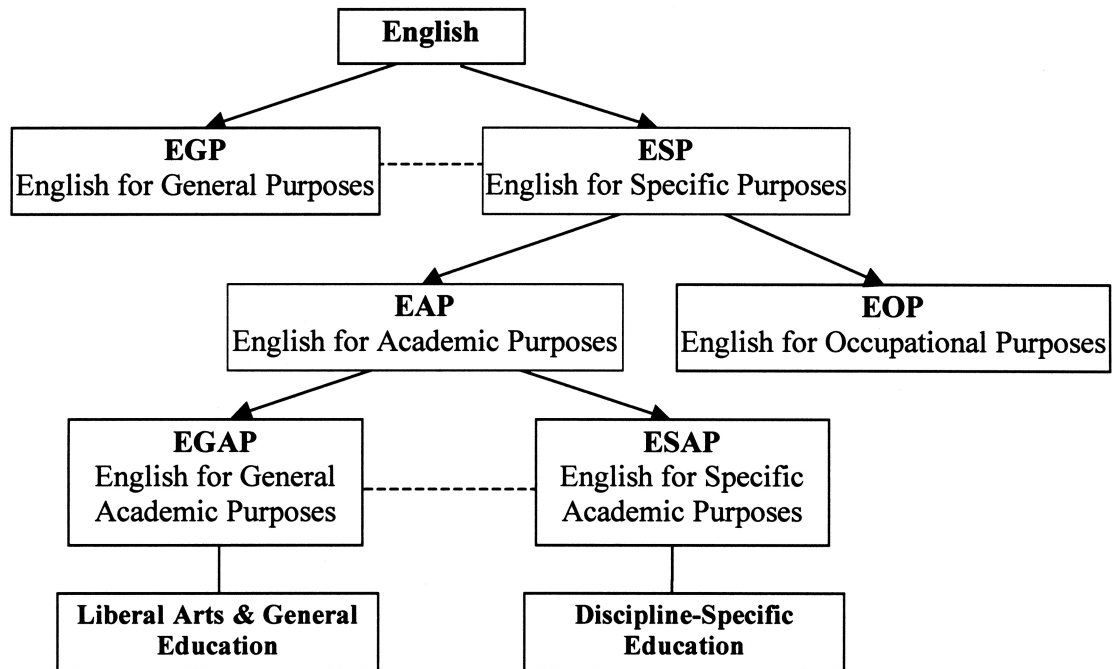
* The dotted lines indicate linkage.

Figure 1   Objectives of English language education at the university level (Tajino 2004; Tajino & Suiko, 2005)

The EGAP curriculum at Kyoto University includes courses in academic reading and academic writing for both first- and second-year students and, in addition, academic listening, academic oral presentations, and test-taking for second-year students administered by the Faculty of Integrated Human Studies. According to the new curriculum guidelines (see The Department of English, Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies and the Institute for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education, 2006), EGAP is distinguished from the old curriculum, English for General Purposes (EGP) in several important ways. One of these is that EGP did not identify the type of English necessary for success in an academic research institution—in other words, it could be interpreted as "English for No Purposes" (Tajino, 2004). In the new EGAP curriculum, goals are clearly linked to the educational philosophy of the university; namely, to develop skills for high-level specialists and outstanding researchers.

This exploratory study is a first step towards gaining insight into first-year and second-year undergraduates' perceptions of their experience in an Academic Writing course, one of the key courses in the EGAP curriculum. Because first-year undergraduates are at the turning point between high school and university, it is important to discover their conceptions of academic writing by considering their thoughts and feelings about the new curriculum at this critical stage. The first-year students came to the university with little or no prior academic writing experience, whereas the second-year students had one year of experience with the new curriculum. Therefore, we aim to discover differences in conceptions about academic writing and perceptions of difficulty for these two groups of students.

We focus on perceptions of difficulty for a couple of reasons: (1) Difficulty can be taken as an important affective factor in the motivation of students (Tajino, 1998), which is crucial for success in foreign language learning (Gardner,

1985); and (2) in order to understand learner difficulty it is important to gain insight into students' actual perceptions because difficulty is "a matter of subjective judgment" (Corder, 1973: 226). Through this process-oriented (rather than product-oriented) approach to academic writing research we expect to uncover student needs (not student wants) and work towards improving methods of learner-focused academic writing instruction in the new EGAP curriculum at Kyoto University.

2. The Study

2.1 Participants

A group of 65 first-year literature and agriculture majors in two Academic Writing I courses that met for 90 minutes per week (15 times) participated in the study. In addition, 17 second-year students in an Academic Writing IIA course that met twice per week (180 minutes) for 15 weeks participated in the study. About 95% of the second-year students were medicine, physics, and engineering majors. The first author was the instructor of all of the classes, which were conducted in English.

2.2 Teaching materials

The textbook entitled *First Moves: An Introduction to Academic Writing in English* (Rossiter, 2004) was used as the primary teaching resource for the classes. The contents of this textbook were taken as appropriate for the EGAP curriculum because the focus is broad. For example, the chapters contain a sample essay from a range of disciplines such as linguistics, history, and medicine. Each essay serves as a model for a typical format written in academic contexts such as definition/classification, contrast/comparison, and cause and effect. The writing activities in the textbook follow a product-approach to academic writing (Hyland, 2003), providing guidelines for students to structure their essays based on the model essay in each chapter.

2.3 Class description

At the start of each class period, the instructor lectured on the content of the text before students worked on the writing activities and assignments in the textbook. The first-year students worked through the first five chapters with the guidance of their instructor and peers. They completed several writing assignments including one paragraph, two academic essays (500 words each), and several exercises. The second-year students worked through all eight chapters of the textbook. They completed writing assignments including one paragraph and three academic essays (500 words each). The students were encouraged to speak in English to the instructor and to the student sitting next to them during the preparation activities. They were also encouraged to speak English with a partner for peer feedback on the writing assignments. After the first writing assignment was completed (a paragraph), each student had a brief individual conference with the instructor during a class period. The instructor provided only written feedback for the rest of the assignments.

2.4 Procedures

To explore our main research question (i.e., identifying students' perceptions of difficulties with academic writing), we conducted a survey study with open-ended questions (see Appendix A). These questions were related to the content covered in the textbook during the first semester of the first-year course. The questionnaire consisted of nine content-related questions regarding *format, titles, paragraph structure, revising and rewriting, transition signals, linking ideas, objective focus,* and *responsibility for communication* followed by students' perception of difficulty for each.[1] Another question was also added: *How is academic writing different from the English writing you learned in high school?*

The students ranked the relative difficulty of each element of academic writing from *most difficult* to *least difficult* and completed the survey during the final class period of the semester. The students were allowed to use their

textbooks to answer the content questions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The most difficult aspects of academic writing

We calculated the frequencies for the elements of academic writing ranked as *most difficult* and summarized them in Table 1. The largest percentage of first-year students reported that the most difficult aspect of academic writing was the difference from the English writing they had learned in high school, followed by difficulties with structuring paragraphs, and writing with the responsibility for successful communication. For the second-year students, however, the aspect reported as most difficult by the largest percentage was structuring paragraphs, followed by writer-responsible communication, and linking ideas. Only one second-year student reported the difference from high school as most difficult.

Table 1   Students' rankings of the top 3 most difficult aspects of academic writing

First-Year Students	%	Second-Year Students	%
1. Difference from high school	27.1	1. Structuring paragraphs	28.6
2. Structuring paragraphs	25.4	2. Writer-responsibility	21.4
3. Writer-responsibility	19.0	3. Linking ideas	14.3
4. Others	28.5	4. Others	35.7
Total	100	Total	100

These results suggest that the second-year students were exposed to academic writing in their first year at Kyoto University—in line with the new curriculum guidelines established in that year. Interestingly, the second-year students reported having the same difficulties as the first-years in terms of structuring paragraphs and having responsibility for successful communication as a writer. This information may be useful for the instruction and development of future Academic Writing II courses.

3.2 The difference between general writing and academic writing

How is academic writing different from the general writing the students had learned in high school? As shown in Table 2, the largest percentage of first-year students reported that academic writing is rule-based and that the style is different from high school general writing. The other most common responses involved three features: (1) Academic writing has a different purpose; (2) it requires writing longer sentences and more words overall than high school general writing; and (3) it has a logical structure. In comparison, the second-year students' responses were quite similar as the largest percentage reported the following three features of academic writing: (1) It has a different style with rules to follow; (2) it has a different purpose, and (3) it involves much longer sentences and words than high school general writing. A smaller percentage of the second-years also reported that academic writing involves a logical structure.

Table 2   Students' perceptions of university academic writing compared with high school general writing

First-Year Students	%	Second-Year Students	%
1. Style, rules	18.5	1. Style, rules	17.6
2. Purpose of writing	12.3	1. Purpose of writing	17.6
3. Longer writing	10.8	1. Longer writing	17.6
4. Logical structure	7.7	4. Logical structure	11.8
5. Others	50.7	5. Others	35.4
Total	100	Total	100

3.3 Difficulties with the transition from general writing to academic writing

These results confirm that the students perceive their high school general writing classes as different from their academic writing classes at the university. Given this, our interest was in finding out what difficulties the students had with the transition. Many of the students' responses indicated that they had difficulty with the formal style of academic writing, which involves specific rules to follow:

"I have to know many words...and enough grammar in formal style." (Second-year engineering major)

"It is hard for me to keep all the rules in my mind and to use them when I write academic paragraphs." (First-year literature major)

The students also reported difficulty with the purpose of academic writing (i.e., to inform readers and deepen their understanding of a topic). For example, according to one first-year agriculture major, "It is difficult to write logical sentences not only to say my claim, but also to satisfy the reader." The difficulty with logical structure and the difference from high school was reflected in other students' comments. For example:

"I didn't write many essays in high school. Therefore, it's very difficult to write many long and logical essays." (First-year literature major)

"It is difficult to be conscious on relations between paragraphs." (Second-year physics major)

3.4 Difficulties with structuring paragraphs

As for structuring paragraphs, almost all of the students (95%) recognized the importance of one or more of the following features: (1) Developing one main idea to which all the sentences are connected (or relevant); (2) stating the main idea in a topic sentence; (3) writing an introduction, development, and conclusion for each paragraph; and (4) avoiding redundancy. As shown in Table 3, when writing paragraphs, most of the first-year students had difficulties with developing main ideas, followed by difficulties focusing on the main idea, and avoiding redundancy. The largest group of second-year students also reported that developing a main idea is most difficult, followed by avoiding redundancy, and having difficulty with connecting sentences.

Table 3　Students' perceptions of difficulties with structuring paragraphs

First-Year Students	%	Second-Year Students	%
1. Developing main ideas	27.7	1. Developing main ideas	23.5
2. Focusing on main ideas	7.7	2. Avoiding redundancy	17.6
3. Avoiding redundancy	6.2	3. Connecting sentences	11.8
4. Others	58.4	4. Others	47.1
Total	100	Total	100

3.5 Difficulties with writer-responsibility

Nearly all (95%) of the first-year and the second-year students responded correctly that the writer is responsible for successful communication in academic writing. As for difficulties with this issue, many of the students reported that it is difficult to write their ideas clearly. For example, one first-year agriculture major reported, "It is difficult for me to clarify things to read for readers." Another first-year agriculture major commented, "I have difficulties with making clear what I intend to mean."

A few of the students also reported having difficulty with the difference in responsibility for successful written

communication in Japanese and English. Communication in Japanese usually requires the reader to be primarily responsible for successful communication, and this was suggested by one literature major who commented, "The most serious problem is that I like ambiguous expressions." It was also reflected in a variety of other responses such as these:

"In Japan, we often use ambiguous expressions on purpose. Then, it is difficult to change the way of thinking from Japanese to English." (First-year literature major)

"When I speak I always skip subjects and confuse even Japanese friends. Writer-responsible writing is…really difficult for me." (Second-year physics major)

4. Limitations

As this is an exploratory research report from academic writing courses in the new Kyoto University EGAP curriculum, it is not surprising that there are some limitations. For example, because this is a case study, the findings cannot be generalized to all Japanese undergraduates and other adults learning second language writing. It is important to keep in mind that the students who participated in this study were a self-selecting group who took unique entrance exams for particular fields of study at Kyoto University. In addition, the aspects of academic writing that we investigated were limited to the contents of the first half of a textbook and it is likely that students have difficulty with other academic writing skills (e.g., using citations and avoiding plagiarism). Finally, because this was an exploratory study, open-ended questions were used, and some of the data obtained from these questions could not be neatly categorized. These limitations should be addressed in future research.

5. Conclusion

The results of our case study show that most of the participants, who were first-year and second-year Kyoto University undergraduates, recognize the difference between high school general writing and university academic writing. In this sense, it is possible to claim that the new EGAP curriculum is accomplishing its goals. Among the features of academic writing considered in this study, the first-year students reported that the difference between high school and university is most difficult, whereas the second-year students reported that structuring paragraphs is most difficult.

Among other important elements for academic writing, we teachers may be sensitive to the following particular areas of student difficulty when designing future university courses (especially for first-year students): style and rules, purpose of writing, length of writing, and logical structure. As both first-year and second-year students reported difficulty with structuring paragraphs and being responsible for written communication, these fundamental issues could also receive more attention in academic writing courses.

Because of the recent change in curriculum at Kyoto University, it is important to make both the students and faculty aware that the curriculum has been changed for pedagogical reasons so that it can be more successful. We hope that this study can serve as an important step towards more successful academic writing courses in the EGAP curriculum. Similar research should be conducted so that the results could be shared by teachers within the university and between universities. Through this collaboration, we can open the doors for our students to become successful communicators in an international academic discourse community of scholars.

Note

1)   We recognize that academic writing has many features that distinguish it from non-academic writing. For the present study, however, our focus is on only some of the content of an academic writing textbook.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

1. What is the typical format of an academic paper? (Please think about indenting, spacing, paper size, font style, and font size.)
2. What are the features of a good title in academic writing?
3. What are features of a good paragraph in academic writing?
4. How many times should you revise and rewrite an academic manuscript?
5. What are some kinds of transition signals used in academic writing?
6. What are some relationships between ideas that can be made clear in academic writing?
7. What is the basic style of academic writing?
8. Who is responsible for successful communication in academic writing (the writer or reader)?
9. How is academic writing different from the English writing you learned in high school?
10. Please rank #1 through #9 from most difficult to least difficult.