

Rationale and challenges of developing a new English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a Japanese University

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Abstract

This article examines the rationale and challenges of starting a new English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program for a new department at a Japanese university. The rationale focuses on the theoretical framework and practical approach by the instructors in academic reading and writing (ARW) classes, specifically in the areas of intensive reading and academic writing based on Japan-related topics, as well as extensive reading using a digital platform called Xreading. Lastly, the challenges faced over the two-year development will be addressed to better shape the future iteration of the EAP program.

Introduction

In April 2022, at the start of the new Japanese academic year, the first cohort of students began their first classes in the newly formed Global Studies program within the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences (SLAS) at Musashi University, a small private university in Tokyo, Japan. A distinguishing feature of this program is that, ostensibly, the bulk of courses are to be taught in English by Japanese, as well as foreign faculty members. While this might not be considered particularly noteworthy in many developed countries around the world, in the Japanese higher education sector, English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) is still typically limited to those courses that students need to take to fulfill their foreign language course requirements. Therefore, due to the central role that English plays in the program, it was made very clear to prospective SLAS students that they would receive a “world class education” at Musashi University with the university’s advertising campaign going on to say that while “there are many faculties that describe themselves as international... the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Musashi University provides a world class learning experience.”

It may be expected then that, given such claims, the predominantly Japanese-speaking students who will be entering the Global Studies program will be supported in their studies with a robust and rigorous English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program that can prepare them for academic study in English. However, while the writers of this article, who joined the program at the same time as the first cohort of students, found they had been assigned courses with familiar titles such as English I (Reading and Writing) and English I (Speaking and Listening), the expected structural support to deliver a world-class learning experience was in need of more clarity and development. In fact, the EAP “Program” existed in name only, and its three instructors found themselves independently implementing a curriculum and teaching content they themselves decided was appropriate, using materials they deemed suitable, and focusing on aims that may or may not match what the other instructors were doing or what was being expected of the students in their non-EAP classes. As a result, after the first year, the three instructors mutually agreed to align their materials, aims, and approaches with the hope that a more unified approach would be of greater benefit to the students. This article will recount how this

unification took place, what challenges needed to be overcome, and how the lessons learned from this experience might be of benefit to other institutions seeking to start their own EAP program in the future.

Background

The EAP support provided to Global Studies students at Musashi University is mostly composed of Reading & Writing courses that meet twice a week for both the spring and autumn semesters in the students' first and second years, and Speaking & Listening courses that meet once a week. Each course typically has between 15 and 20 enrolled students, with the levels of the students ranging from those that might be considered B2 to C1 on the CEFR - at least a few students in each course are probably taking courses conducted in English for the first time in their educational history, while a few others have international experience such as having lived abroad, studied abroad, or attended an international school. The total number of Global Studies students each year is only around 50 - 60 students, with the students split into three groups of between 15 - 20 students who take their EAP courses together. These courses are required classes that students are automatically enrolled in; however, they are not necessarily obliged to pass the courses to progress in their degree. Nevertheless, failing to do so would result in a lack of credits and would also damage their overall GPA. This, coupled with the fact that most students do appear to want to improve their academic English, means that most students do put in the required effort to pass the courses and are not the typical "timid, exam-worn survivor with no academic purpose" that Berwick and Ross (1989) and many others have encountered at Japanese universities.

As a result of this, the program does not suffer from some of the issues that are widely known to affect the delivering of English courses at Japanese universities. The biggest challenge facing the instructors was to deliver an EAP program that could meet the needs of students that, while generally having quite high levels of motivation, do also have varying English proficiency levels and varying expectations of what might be expected of them in an English-language academic environment. As alluded to earlier, having only properly met each other during the first week of classes, and having to have already submitted their syllabi for the semester some months earlier, the three instructors teaching the EAP courses in the Global Studies program at Musashi University did not have the chance to coordinate their classes for the first year of the program. Therefore, what follows is an explanation of how the instructors decided to coordinate their courses to build a comprehensive and unified EAP program for students from the second year of the program, specifically for the Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) classes. This attempt to develop such a program is ongoing at the time of writing.

Theoretical Framework of Academic Reading and Writing (ARW)

The theoretical framework of the academic reading and writing (ARW) curriculum could be best framed from Nation's (1996, 2007) Four Strands in which meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development are critical in any language course and language development. Nation refers to these strands as "long continuous sets of learning conditions" that are mutually interconnected in a language learning course (Nation, 2007, p. 1). This is a critical aspect of an ARW course as the components of intensive reading, extensive reading, and academic writing are inherently complementary "strands" where each "brings a different strength, altogether providing a balanced system of learning" (Truxal, 2018, p. 68). Within the ARW course at the university, meaning-focused input refers to a range of reading exercises from reading to learn, reading for fun, reading to integrate information, reading to critique texts, and reading to write. Meaning-focused output refers to linking reading, writing, and other linguistic skills to show comprehension of reading materials through written output in short- and long-form, group discussion, and answering comprehension questions. Language-focused learning is deliberate intentional learning and focuses on language features or strategies guided by the instructor through formative instruction. Lastly, fluency development is vocabulary exposure through extensive reading which in turn increases reading speed and comprehension (Nation and Macalister, 2020).

Practically, the cycle of intensive reading, extensive reading, and academic writing provides a useful structure and balance of opportunities within the four strands for learning reading and writing skills. From an instructional perspective, the four strands provide guidelines for the planning of the curriculum, the effective organization of approaches, and the teaching, training, and monitoring of materials to encourage linguistic development with the ultimate goal of learner autonomy (Nation and Macalister, 2020). This theoretical basis guides the approaches to the three main aspects of ARW implemented by the instructors.

Approach to Intensive Reading

When it came to deciding upon an approach to helping improve the students' intensive reading skills, the first decision that needed to be made was whether to assign a textbook or not. While there are several obvious benefits to using a textbook as the basis of a reading course, not least the way in which they help to structure a course and act as its de-facto syllabi (Crawford, 2002), in the end, it was decided that the numerous drawbacks outweigh these advantages, and the decision was made to use graded and abridged versions of authentic reading materials, selected by the instructors. The main reason for this decision was that the instructors wanted materials that had content that the students could actively and readily discuss, and then write about, thereby attending as much as possible to the theoretical principles established above. Textbooks are well-known to be deficient in this area as a result of them being catered to as broad an audience as possible. As part of the instructors' decision-making process, several well-known academic reading and writing textbooks were surveyed, and severe doubts were expressed about whether a group of Japanese university students would find the topics interesting or relevant. While these textbooks may have provided the students basic training in key reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, inferring meaning from context, and so on, the instructors believed themselves to be experienced enough to incorporate the teaching of these strategies into their own, more interesting and relevant, materials.

Having decided that textbooks would not be used, the instructors then set about developing their own materials, and in so doing, the following decisions were made. Firstly, it was decided that students would be assigned one main reading per week. Each reading would be about two to three pages in length for the first-year students and anywhere between four and eight for the second-year students. It was also decided that each reading should contribute to the students' greater understanding of a particular content area to simulate the experience of reading for a course of study. Ultimately, each semester of each course was divided into two content areas meaning that students would read five "main readings" over five weeks (there would then be some kind of writing assignment to give the students the chance to apply the knowledge they have gained from the readings); then students would read another five "main readings" over the next five weeks. Thereby, students would read about four topics in their first year and a further four topics in their second year.

Given the cultural background and nature of a typical Japanese university student who may be reticent to share and discuss opinions freely (Miller, 1995; Sower and Johnson, 1996), it was considered important that the topics chosen were as broad as possible and also focused on issues that are relevant to young Japanese people. Therefore, for example, in the first half of the first semester of their first-year courses, students read on the topic of "Isolation and Connection". This topic allows students to consider personal topics such as how easy it is to make friends in a new town/environment (that might be particularly relevant to students who have just enrolled at university) through to more general topics such as the rise of "Isolationism" in the modern world. Each weekly reading was taken from an academic source, or what might be considered a "faux" academic source, such as a broadsheet newspaper or specialist blog. Selecting materials in this way was considered far superior to using textbooks as it meant that the instructors could control for topics that the students would find relevant and interesting, while also ensuring that students developed a deeper understanding of each content area - something that is rather difficult when relying on textbooks given that they tend to have one reading on a topic before going to the next topic.

Approach to Extensive Reading

In the ARW classes, the principal aim of the curriculum is to maximize intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER) for students to become successful readers. Waring and McLean (2015, p. 162-163) argue that IR and ER are “endpoints on a continuum of how attentional resources are expended - whether primarily on fast, fluent comprehension, or on forms”. Therefore, ER completes the four strands by being another avenue of meaning-focused output and fluency development. It can be an important component of EFL reading instruction as there are benefits including “vocabulary recycling, sight word reading gains, reading speed gains, reading practice, and a habit of being a successful reader in the [second language]” (Grabe and Stoller, 2011, p. 122). Crucially, for ER to be successfully implemented, learners must be free to read individually and freely on a wide range of topics as much as possible, while books need to be easily comprehensible and pleasurable to read (Day, 2015).

To this end, it was decided that students would be required to sign up for Xreading, which is essentially a vast library of graded readers that students can choose to read to complete weekly extensive reading goals assigned by the instructors. Graded readers are often the preferred format to execute ER in EFL settings as “they are written with strict vocabulary control and with consideration of other factors affecting comprehensibility, such as grammatical difficulty, sentence complexity, use of illustrations, and simplicity of plot” (Nation and Waring, 2020, p. 17). The control over language level makes it ideal for EFL learners “to ensure a fluent reading experience that builds reading speed and enjoyment without the learner having to be troubled by too much unknown language” (Nation and Waring, 2020, p. 20). Having the students join Xreading was considered to be advantageous as it allows for students to be able to read appropriate materials in large quantities as Xreading was specifically developed “to make graded readers more accessible for students and extensive reading programs easier for teachers to manage and assess” (Xreading, n.d.). In fact, Xreading has over 1800 graded readers, as of December 2024, and while not free, it “takes away the cost, time, availability, and management issues that might prevent teachers from running an extensive reading program” (Nation and Waring (2020, p. 56).

As the classes were focused on intensive academic reading and writing, the implementation of ER using Xreading was mostly conducted outside of class as homework. The students were required to purchase Xreading subscriptions for one year and were given bi-weekly assignments where they were required to read a predetermined word count during the period. In order to receive credit for the word count, students were required to pass a reading comprehension quiz with a 60% passing grade. Based upon instructor preferences, the word count requirement was modified to accommodate the class pace and progress on intensive reading and writing assignments. Some of the challenges, and attempts to overcome them, which were experienced in integrating extensive reading in the courses are outlined later in this paper.

Approach to Writing

A further benefit of the approach to intensive and extensive reading previously outlined is that it provides a fertile environment for the development of students’ academic writing skills. As students are reading and discussing thematically linked materials on a weekly basis, students are necessarily primed with ideas to write about (Nation, 2013). Therefore, in a typical one-week cycle, students would read around one aspect of a particular topic intensively with extensive reading assignments to improve vocabulary and reading speed; they would then discuss their ideas with their classmates in small groups; and then be provided with the chance to write about this topic, typically choosing one of the questions that they had discussed as their topic. The form of this writing would normally be an academic paragraph of around 200 words, allowing the students to focus on the expression of their opinion in a structured academic way. Additionally, having written these weekly paragraphs, it was then a relatively simple process to expand one of these paragraphs into a midterm or final essay assignment for the first year students in their second semester (and in both semesters for the second year

students). While writing essays can be a chore for many students, it was believed that this burden would be lightened if students had already researched and written about their chosen topic earlier in the semester.

While students were relatively free to decide *what* they would write about, provided that they attended to that week's aspect of the topic in some way, it was also deemed important to agree on what good academic writing should look like. This standardization is something that may be lacking in programs which are uncoordinated and can lead to problems where the students in one group are being taught different, and perhaps contradictory, things about what is good academic writing. Therefore, to avoid this problem, the three instructors in charge of the EAP program decided that the following should be taught (in the students' 1st years, and then reinforced and expanded upon in the students' second years).

Firstly, it was agreed that the *topic sentence* of every paragraph should directly answer the question that the students chose and should ideally give some hint about the reasons for this answer. Therefore, in writing a paragraph to answer the following question: "Why has Japan been reluctant to accept more immigrants?", the students would need to write something along the lines of: "Japan has been reluctant to accept more immigrants because of its unique working culture and traditional attitudes to outsiders". While this may not seem like an especially challenging goal, it does in fact run counter to Japanese students' natural tendency to avoid answering questions directly, and consequently, when writing, to begin a composition with a lengthy introduction that may leave little room for any topic development. Secondly, by limiting the students to no more than two reasons (or supporting points), students are behoved to explain themselves in some detail. Typically, if this style of paragraph is not prescribed, students may simply come up with a list of as many reasons as they can, and then not explain any of them. As a result of restricting the students in this way, it becomes somewhat easier to develop students' abilities to explain themselves with relevant reasons, examples, and research evidence. Furthermore, students are more likely to notice when they are repeating themselves or writing off topic, which means that they gradually start to improve their coherence in writing.

The above points attend to what the instructors considered good structure in academic writing. As well as structure, academic style was also something that was considered necessary to agree upon. In this regard, it is not uncommon for instructors to disagree over the extent to which personal language (especially, the use of personal pronouns) may be used. The three instructors acknowledged that while there is a time and a place that it is appropriate to use personal pronouns, the students may be better served if their use were not to be allowed in their ARW courses. The reason being that clearer guidance (in this case, prohibition) would lead to less confusion, particularly as times when personal pronoun use is appropriate, such as when writing up one's own research, would unlikely be covered. A further benefit in this approach to academic style is that it helps to move the students away from writing paragraphs and essays in the same way that they might write the script for a presentation. It has been noted that Japanese university students are fond of using rhetorical questions and phrases such as "I would like to talk about..." and "thank you for reading/listening" in their writing, which may suggest that they do not instinctively appreciate the difference between spoken and written English.

In summary, the three instructors responsible for developing the EAP program hoped that by having the students write academic paragraphs on a weekly basis, about topics that they have become familiar with through their weekly readings and discussions, the students would develop a certain academic writing fluency in which they are reliably able to answer questions and support their answers with relevant details and examples. Furthermore, the expectations placed on the students in terms of academic style were also consistent across the program. Therefore, as students progress from writing single paragraphs, through multi-paragraph compositions, to longer academic essays (including correctly formatted citations and references), it is hoped that the students will feel less daunted when they come to write their final dissertations in English in their final years.

Challenges with Extensive Reading

As outlined above, the approaches taken to intensive reading, extensive reading, and academic writing

were largely built on a sound theoretical framework, and therefore, the implementation of these approaches proved to be relatively straightforward. Nevertheless, a few challenges with the usage of Xreading were experienced, which, along with attempts to overcome them, will now be addressed.

Firstly, a general lack of enjoyment with Xreading was reported to the instructors via a student-led forum. This is likely a result of students being required to read every (or almost every) day for the benefits of an extensive reading program to be accrued. It was noted that, while the students appeared to see the value in ER, there was a notable drop off in engagement with Xreading as the semesters progressed, particularly towards the end of the second semester. This experience tallies with similar research into ER, particularly that of Walker (2020) who found that reading extensively is often not a priority for students because they did not want to be forced to read outside of class and desired to spend their time on other responsibilities like club activities or earning money. It is to be imagined that Global Studies students at Musashi University are likely to be of a similar mind in this regard.

A second theme was the pressure of passing quizzes to receive word count credit. The quizzes at the end of each ER book are fairly manageable and are in place to ensure accountability and integrity of their reading activity. Although most students were able to pass the 60% passing rate threshold, there were cases of students not passing a quiz even though they read a book. This can be discouraging for the students, especially those that read longer books. In many cases, the students ended up reading shorter and easier books to ensure that they would pass the comprehension quizzes. Tagane et al (2018) recount similar responses from students as they felt the questions were too detailed to pass the quiz after reading thus accumulating the feeling of moderate pressure participating in ER. Tagane et al (2018) conclude that although there were some negative perceptions of the quizzes, not all students felt negatively, and the quizzes were helpful for comprehensibility on a deeper level.

With the above in mind, the instructors are committed to continue the ER program with some adjustments. One major adjustment will be the emphasis on creating positive habits to read. Due to student obligations to other classes and their personal lives, many students procrastinated completing each ER assignment. However, to truly reap the benefits of ER, Grabe and Stoller (2011) note that building ER habits requires a curriculum-wide commitment to have a major effect on their reading development and fluency. Therefore, to reconcile these competing demands, in the forthcoming year, it was decided that, rather than only setting a weekly word target, students will also be required to access Xreading five times a week for at least ten minutes with gradual increases in frequency and time throughout the academic year. Crucially, to offset this extra demand, it was also decided that the weekly word targets would be slightly less demanding. Furthermore, the grading of each bi-weekly Xreading assignment will reflect the importance of reading habits with 50% of the grade being how many times they read in a week and 50% reflecting achievement of word count goals. In fact, in a study conducted at a Japanese high school for beginner and intermediate learners, which emphasized habitual 10-minute reading cycles per week, ER led to an increase in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Fujita and Noro, 2009), and it was hoped that in Global Studies students at Musashi University a similar boost in motivation would be seen.

Challenges with Program Coordination

Finally, it is important to note that the development of the program, including the above-mentioned choices of approaches to reading and writing, their implementation, and the monitoring of their success, was left entirely up to the three instructors' initiative. However, while all three instructors are qualified and experienced EAP practitioners, the lack of departmental coordination and leadership does pose a series of challenges for the future of the program.

First among these is that, as colleagues of equal status, it is not possible for one of the instructors to make final executive decisions on matters which are not mutually agreed upon. Therefore, while the instructors

by and large were of a similar mind on most of the approaches detailed above, there were times when a full unification of the program was not possible due to irreconcilable differences of opinion. Were there to have been someone whose responsibility it was to make final decisions, a fully unified and coordinated program would have been more readily achievable. Furthermore, this would safeguard the future of the program against disruptions such as an instructor suddenly leaving the program and being replaced with someone else who may be of a different mind entirely. Sadly, this eventuality did in fact come to pass, and will likely happen again, meaning that a fragmentation of the program is, regrettably, equally as likely as further integration.

Furthermore, the lack of departmental direction and oversight is more typical of the *laissez-faire* approach taken by most Japanese universities and therefore brings into question how serious the university is about providing the “world-class” education that it believes sets it apart from those universities which merely *claim* to provide an international learning experience. In fact, in research surveyed by Young (2021), it was found that foreign faculty members working at Japanese universities were less interested in teaching autonomy than they were in greater structure and more defined course objectives, believing that there would be benefits in “reduced workload, the creation of a community of learning, benefits for students, the possibility of reflective development and overall course quality.” It can be stated with confidence that the three instructors hired by Musashi University to teach courses on the nascent EAP program feel exactly the same way.

Conclusion

Considering the initial obstacles of starting a new EAP program with little coordination and guidance, the progress spearheaded by the three instructors in charge has allowed for some continuity and structure, which has in turn led to high satisfaction rates from the students at end-of-the-year surveys. In fact, 80% of students felt they made progress in their academic reading skills, and 88% of students felt they made progress in academic writing skills since joining the Global Studies program. However, the current challenges highlight the need to further refine what constitutes a world-class EAP curriculum at the current university and, in a broader context, for all Japanese universities as these issues are not singularly insulated to one university. The presentation of the rationale and recognition of the challenges of this particular EAP curriculum will hopefully encourage a deeper introspection of curriculum goals at the current university. Secondly, the hope is to provide insights for other institutions looking to implement or refine their own EAP programs thereby facilitating a collaborative approach to enhance EAP education across the Japanese higher education context.

Authors’ Note: We note with deep sadness the passing of our colleague, Garrett Sayre DeOrion, during the completion of this article. He made invaluable contributions to the Global Studies curriculum, and his insights and dedication were instrumental in shaping this article. We dedicate this article to his memory.

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