

# Research into Academic Writing Skills of Students at Kobe Gakuin University

## 本学学生の学術英語能力に関する研究

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### (Abstract)

This research uses a present-situation needs analysis centered on the learner in order to establish the English-language writing needs of students in the Economics and Business Administration Departments of Kobe Gakuin University. Results show that most of the students have difficulty with academic writing tasks, and also need to improve their general writing skills. It is suggested that more opportunities for guided writing practice should be offered, but that these should focus on general and business writing skills at the sentence and paragraph level.

### (論文要旨)

本研究は、現状からみる学習者を中心としたニーズ分析を用いながら、神戸学院大学経済学部生と経営学部生の英文ライティング・ニーズを考察した。結果として大多数の学生にとって学術英語の使用は困難な上、学生の一般的な英文ライティング技術の向上も必要であると明らかになった。学生のため、文章とパラグラフのレベルで一般の場面またはビジネスの場面で使用する英文のライティング指導を本大学で増加すべきだと提案した。

**Key Words:** Needs analysis, academic writing, university students

キーワード：ニーズ分析、アカデミック・ライティング、大学生

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## Introduction

Writing is an often overlooked skill in English programs at Japanese universities and high schools. Consequently, Japanese students who venture abroad to study in English speaking countries frequently find that they are woefully unprepared to handle the writing of academic papers in English (McKinley, 2010; Takagi, 2001). In a survey of Japanese students who had studied in the United States, it was found that the majority of the students felt that their writing instruction in Japan had not prepared them adequately for the requirements of academic work in America; in most cases their English writing experiences in Japan had been limited to the translation of Japanese sentences into English or the writing of English sentences to practice grammar points (Takagi, 2001). This is supported by a study carried out by Hirose in 1998 which showed that many Japanese students were unable to produce cohesive paragraphs in English; she suggests that this is because most high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes focus on sentence-level translations (Hirose, 1998).

However, with many Japanese students going abroad to study in English-medium universities, and an increase in academic subjects taught through English in universities in Japan, it is perhaps time to reassess the importance of writing, and in particular academic writing, in the university curriculum. It is also worth noting that although the majority of English language programs at Japanese universities emphasize oral skills, a survey of Japanese workplaces showed that most respondents considered writing in English a very important if not the most important English skill necessary in their job (Someya, 2005).

This research is aimed at establishing the academic writing needs of undergraduate Economics and Business Administration students in the context of English as a Foreign Language at Kobe Gakuin University. It is also intended to provide an indication of the students' general writing ability. A present-situation needs analysis centered on the learner was conducted to provide information on students' strengths and deficiencies, with a further view towards the potential goals and likely constraints towards reaching these goals. This research is motivated by the desire to structure the English-language curriculum to most benefit the majority of students.

## Approaches to Teaching L2 Writing

When considering the Second Language (L2) writing needs of a group of students and deciding on the methods and materials to use, a familiarity with what is known about teaching writing can help us approach the task in a more informed way. Over the last fifty years, various theories and methodologies have been developed and used to support different approaches to the teaching of writing in the EFL classroom.

***Product approach***

In the 1960s and 1970s most EFL writing instruction followed a product approach to writing in which the importance of producing a final perfect piece of writing was emphasized. The approach was guided by the principles of the audio-lingual style of language teaching that was popular at the time and importance was attached to the avoidance of errors by following carefully controlled patterns provided by the instructor. In the early 1960s, L2 writing was rarely taught as a separate skill but was usually used as a tool for further grammar practice where language patterns were reinforced through the manipulation and imitation of model sentences (Hyland, 2008). The focus was on the sentence level production of well-formed language and little thought was given to the purpose of the writing or the target audience.

However, students who learn to write in this way are obviously not being adequately prepared to cope with longer pieces of writing in an appropriate manner and by the 1970s, there was an increased realization that more guidance should be given on how to proceed beyond sentence level production. Accordingly, more focus was put on paragraph writing. Students were taught how to construct paragraphs through the effective use of component parts such as topic sentences, supporting sentences and transitions (Hyland, 2008). At the same time, it was recognized that writing usually serves some communicative purpose. This led to students also being taught how to write different types of paragraph such as narratives, comparisons, descriptions and reports. This pattern of teaching is still commonly used in classes where students are being taught English writing for academic purposes in order to prepare them for entry into English-medium colleges.

It can be argued that the product approach to writing teaching, with its emphasis on the final piece of writing, provides a useful framework for L2 learners. Many instructors see it as playing an important part in the development of good writing habits that are necessary to help the L2 learner cope with the challenges of writing in a foreign language. Even now, it is frequently used in L2 writing classrooms.

***Process approach***

However, with the increasing popularity of the communicative approach to language teaching and its emphasis on learner-centered classrooms, the product approach to writing teaching, with its carefully controlled teacher guided activities, came under heavy criticism. In the 1980s, there was a move towards giving students more control over how they were writing. The resulting process approach to writing encourages students to be creative and it highlights the skills of planning, drafting, revising and editing.

Before adopting this approach, however, instructors need to consider whether there is enough time in class or in exams for learners to constantly review and revise their work. They also need to consider the level of the students. Although the process

approach might have a place in classes with advanced level students, in classrooms where students have limited vocabulary and are still having trouble with basic grammar, it is hardly practical to ask them to analyze and edit texts (McKinley, 2010).

### ***Genre analysis***

Another way to approach the teaching of L2 writing is to focus on genre. The important idea here is that “we don’t just write, we write something to achieve some purpose: it is a way of getting something done” (Hyland, 2008). The different ways of using language to achieve various purposes are called genres. Teachers can help students identify the particular genre of a text and analyze its structure so that they can produce the language necessary to write well-formed texts in an appropriate manner. Genre analysis has been particularly influential in the teaching of writing in classes for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

### ***A practical approach***

Although it is tempting to imagine that each new theory evolves from and replaces an earlier one, it is probably more useful to see the different theories as complementary perspectives with each one “organizing L2 writing teaching around a different focus” (Hyland, 2008). Rather than strictly follow one particular approach, the teacher should aim to produce confident and effective writers who have a wide choice of strategies and are able to make use of the different techniques available when they need them.

## **Methodology**

This research uses a short test to recognize the strengths and deficiencies regarding English academic language usage of Economics and Business Administration undergraduate students at Kobe Gakuin University. First-year, third-year, and fourth-year students were administered this test, and the specific features of their use of academic language were analyzed. English-language majors at a local foreign languages university were also administered the test, and their results have been tallied for comparison.

The overall result is a present-situation needs analysis for Kobe Gakuin University students. This is in contrast to a future-situation needs analysis, which examines the students’ future needs, although this report does briefly discuss in the conclusion the students’ potential future needs regarding academic writing skills. It should also be mentioned that this needs analysis focuses on the students’ needs rather than institutional (i.e., university) or societal needs.

The test itself (see Appendix 1) has been devised as a short, 25-minute exercise that can detect three critical skills of academic writing: 1) vocabulary knowledge, 2) recognition of lexical characteristics, and 3) actual academic writing.

First, the test provides ten common academic words culled from a popular academic word list developed by Averil Coxhead (2010). The ten words have been chosen based on their overall frequency in academic writing, and can be considered core academic words that should be learned before attempting serious academic writing.

The second section provides students the opportunity to show their recognition of specific lexical characteristics that are common to academic writing. As Jordan (1997) suggests, quality academic writing should avoid, among other things, contractions, phrasal verbs, colloquialisms/slang, and personal pronouns. This section of the test stresses such considerations, as well as the usage of numerals at the beginning of sentences.

However, there is a difference between recognition of lexical characteristics and actual proper use of such characteristics in one's own academic writing. Dashtgoshadeh, Birjandi, and Jalilzadeh (2011), among others, make a sound claim that error recognition and editing tests, similar to the section two of this test, do not always prove to be reliable indicators of test takers' actual academic writing ability.

For this reason, the third section provides a short test of students' actual writing ability. For section three, a graph is displayed, and students are instructed to write 50 words describing the information in the graph. This style of test is similar to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, one of the most recognized tests of academic writing. However, section three is much shorter than the actual IELTS test, due to time constraints.

Through the methods employed, this test provides a brief glimpse at Kobe Gakuin University students' ability, discovering what these learners know and do not know. Needs analysis, of the kind in this study, should perhaps be conducted as "the starting point for devising syllabuses, courses, materials, and the kind of teaching and learning that take place." (Jordan, 1997)

## Results

The data in this study has been compiled from two sources:

1. Fifty three third- and fourth-year students in the Economics Department of Kobe Gakuin University, combined with a class of 27 first-year students in the Business Administration Department. Differences in the results of these two Kobe Gakuin classes are negligible, so the scores have been presented here as one population of 80 students.
2. Eighteen third- and fourth-year students in the English Department at a nearby university specializing in the teaching of foreign languages.

***Results from Sections One and Two***

As may be expected, the 18 students at the foreign languages university have higher scores and provide an interesting contrast. The section-one and section-two results for the 80 Kobe Gakuin University students are as follows:

Kobe Gakuin Combined Score for Section One (vocabulary) and Section Two (academic language)

Total Possible Points: 20

Highest Score: 16    Lowest Score: 0    Average Score: 10.40

Separate Score for Section One (vocabulary)

Total Possible Points: 10

Highest Score: 10    Lowest Score: 0    Average Score: 5.82

Separate Score for Section Two (academic language)

Total Possible Points: 10

Highest Score: 8    Lowest Score: 0    Average Score: 4.58

In comparison, the results for sections one and two at the foreign language university are considerably higher. The results of the English majors at the foreign language university are as follows:

English Majors Combined Score for Section One (vocabulary) and Section Two (academic language)

Total Possible Points: 20

Highest Score: 20    Lowest Score: 12    Average Score: 18.72

Separate Score for Section One (vocabulary)

Total Possible Points: 10

Highest Score: 10    Lowest Score: 7    Average Score: 9.67

Separate Score for Section Two (academic language)

Total Possible Points: 10

Highest Score: 10    Lowest Score: 4    Average Score: 9.05

Through separating these 18 third- and fourth-year students by year in the foreign language university, it can be noticed that there is almost no discrepancy on the vocabulary scores for third-year students (9.5 out of 10 possible points) and fourth-year students (9.75 out of 10). There is a significant difference on section two, testing

academic language awareness. Third-year students scored 7.83 out of 10 possible points, while fourth-year students scored 9.67 out of 10 points. This can be easily explained due to the fact that all the fourth-year students had, as a graduation requirement, attended a year-long academic writing class. However, the data from this university clearly suggests that even third-year students have learned the basic academic vocabulary and at least some of the basic academic language necessary for proficiency in academic writing.

Looking back at the Kobe Gakuin University data, it is clear that in contrast, the Kobe Gakuin students lack the basic skills necessary for academic writing. While a handful of students seem capable of tackling academic writing (e.g., a combined score of 15 or higher out of 20 points, obtained by several students), the average combined score is approximately 10 out of 20 points. One student actually managed to get all of the answers wrong on the multiple-choice questions in sections one and two.

Looking solely at the results from section one, the average score of 5.82 out of 10 points on the vocabulary section strongly suggests that most students do not know this most common and basic of academic vocabulary.

Likewise, the results from section two indicate that their knowledge of the characteristics of academic language is also lacking, with an average score of 4.58 out of 10 possible points.

### ***Results from Section Three***

A comparison of the section three results also indicates that Kobe Gakuin University students lack even low-level academic writing skills, and almost certainly have problems with basic grammar and vocabulary.

First, of the 80 respondents from Kobe Gakuin, a total of 24 students (30 percent) left the third section entirely blank. It is possible that some of these students did not feel motivated to complete the text, but it is more likely that the majority of non-respondents lacked the ability-vocabulary or otherwise-to complete the short description. The time limit of 25 minutes also likely affected the high number of non-respondents.

In contrast, only one of the 18 students at the local foreign languages university failed to complete section three. This suggests that, unlike these students majoring in English, the Kobe Gakuin University students have problems writing a short 50-word description without the use of a dictionary or notes, regardless of the amount of academic language expected.

Further analysis of section three provides more data for consideration. The students' specific responses can be processed using four basic criterion areas, similar to the process with the IELTS test. These are as follows: 1) task achievement (how well the graph is described), 2) coherence and cohesion (how well the writing is linked), 3)

lexical resource (how good the vocabulary is), and 4) grammatical range and accuracy (how good the grammar is) (IELTS, 2012).

As for task achievement, the Kobe Gakuin students, for the most part, were unable to produce a complete and accurate portrayal of the graph. Only a minority of students (approximately 20 percent) wrote more than fifty words, and even fewer provided what might be considered a detailed and well-structured description. The average number of words written was 18.6, much less than the target of 50 words. Most students who wrote more than one sentence were only able to respond at a basic sentence level, and there was a general lack of any awareness of paragraph layout conventions or any of the features of a typical formal paragraph such as the use of topic sentences and concluding sentences. In fact, 25 percent of the students who wrote anything actually started a new line for each sentence. Interestingly, the students who scored well on sections one and two tended to describe the graph in section three more adequately, which suggests that at least generally sections one and two are fairly reliable indicators of actual writing ability.

In contrast, the English majors at the local foreign languages university produced higher-quality descriptions. The average number of words written by these English majors was 40.39, fairly close to the target of 50 words. Thirteen of the 18 respondents wrote more than 50 words of description, and most of these could be classified as detailed and well-structured. For example, many respondents began their descriptions with some variation of the following:

According to this graph,...

This graph indicates the number of students studying abroad.

This graph shows the transition of students studying abroad from 2000 to 2011.

In other words, the students properly introduced the graph. This was often followed by a presentation of results, contrasting the figures, and perhaps finally ended with an appropriate concluding sentence. A logical procession could be found in the majority of student responses. None of the students made the egregious error of starting a new line for each sentence.

Examining the second criterion from the IELTS test, it can be seen that Kobe Gakuin University students often omitted words that provide coherence and cohesion, words that connect the description as whole. A minority of students did use rather basic linking words and phrases, with examples as follows: *but* / *however* / *comparing* / *on the other hand*.

Nonetheless, the overall impression is that the descriptions lacked any sense of linkage. Moreover, several students who used *but* as a linking word mistakenly placed it at the beginning of the sentence, which would be inappropriate in academic writing. There is



very little evidence that Kobe Gakuin students have the ability to write in a coherent and cohesive manner.

The English majors at the foreign language university used significantly more words of cohesion and coherence, such as follow: *first / as a result / compared with / on the other hand / but / however / while / in comparison / whereas*. The overall effect is a more coherent and cohesive description.

Furthermore, while some Kobe Gakuin University students did well in the third IELTS criterion (lexical response), the majority of students showed their deficiencies in vocabulary by selecting simple words. For example, few students used the words *increase* and *decrease*, choosing instead to use *get up* and *get down*, *up* and *down*, *up go* and *down go*, *go up* and *go down*, or some similar combination. Almost all the students used either the wrong word or the simplest word in selecting vocabulary. This prevalence suggests that the basic words to describe graphs are beyond the grasp of the majority of students. Likewise, a significant number of students could not correctly identify the phrase *international students*, instead using *abroad study students* or *foreigner students*. The general impression is that these students do not have the vocabulary necessary to provide an adequate description.

Not surprisingly, the students at the foreign language university utilize a much wider and more appropriate academic vocabulary. For example, here are some of their words and phrases that did not appear in any of the Kobe Gakuin University students' writings: *by and large / exceeded / reached / gradually / approximately / rapidly / former/ latter / slightly*. These can be considered basic words useful for general writing and necessary for academic writing.

For Kobe Gakuin University students, there is also a significant lack of grammatical range and accuracy, the fourth criterion in the IELTS test. For example, the students tend to use only the basic past and present tenses. Structurally, their grammar usage is simple, and sentence-level errors are frequent. Some of the most common problems with grammatical accuracy include the following:

- incorrect sentence structure
- incorrect or awkward word order
- unclear message
- incorrect or missing connectors
- incorrect subject-verb agreement
- lack of plural/singular distinctions
- lack of articles (a, the, an)

Likewise, in the rare cases when students have attempted to use slightly more difficult grammar, it often lacks accuracy. One example is as follows:

One people who goes to foreign countries from Japan has been decreased since 2004.

In contrast, the students at the foreign languages university use more complex grammatical structures (i.e., have better grammatical range) and make fewer mistakes (i.e., have greater grammatical accuracy). This does not indicate that the students have perfect grammar, but their mistakes are less pervasive and more easily correctable. Here are a few examples:

The number of Japanese who study abroad is slightly decreasing from 2004. There are 140 thousands students who study in Japan from foreign countries. It shows that number of students who want to study in overseas are decreasing.

These are relatively complex sentences with limited mistakes that do not impede the reader's understanding.

## Conclusion

The results of the test on written academic language clearly show that Kobe Gakuin University students in the Economics and Business Administration Departments do not have the skills necessary for producing quality academic writing. Their proficiency in the use of academic language-through knowledge of the specialist vocabulary, awareness of the lexical peculiarities, and in actual production-is limited.

Does this data therefore indicate that students should learn these skills? Some English teachers at universities in Japan argue that English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and the academic writing skills found in EAP, should be part of any university English language program's core curriculum (Morizumi, Jimbo, Okada, & Terauchi, 2010). In addition, several Japanese universities, including for example disparate entities such as Dokkyo University, International Christian University, Tsukuba University, and Ibaraki University, have elected to focus their English education on EAP, including instruction in academic writing skills. According to Hedge (2000), many teachers consider it their particular responsibility to teach academic writing, helping to provide access to further higher education.

However, there are many good reasons not to emphasize students' learning of academic writing at Kobe Gakuin University. First, while the data clearly indicates that Kobe Gakuin University students are relatively deficient in the skills of academic writing, it also becomes apparent that many of the students lack basic grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), among others, state that

academic writing skills should be targeted towards intermediate- or advanced-level students.

Moreover, while teachers at some universities can argue that it is imperative for their students to learn and use academic language, it is less important at Kobe Gakuin University. In other words, it is not so likely that Kobe Gakuin University students will use academic writing skills in the future, regardless of their present-day abilities. Less than five percent of the students in the Economics and Business Administration Departments head to either graduate school or study abroad, the most common situations where knowledge of academic English becomes beneficial.

In addition, the guiding educational principles at Kobe Gakuin University suggest that the university will realize education that provides students with the ability to work in society. Therefore, it may be said that the most appropriate emphasis should be on English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), perhaps with a parallel focus on general and conversational English ability. This suggests the continued teaching of business English skills.

If any writing program is to be implemented (and it does indeed appear that writing courses should be offered), the stress should be on general and business writing skills. This likely matches the present and future needs of Kobe Gakuin University students. However, various factors-including student needs, student levels, available time, and institutional aims-must be taken into account before going ahead and attempting to design a suitable writing program. For example, it is clear that a more guided approach to the teaching of writing would be more suitable for students at this level rather than the less controlled process approach. Most of the Kobe Gakuin University students involved in the survey need to be taught basic sentence-level writing skills as well as the organization and features of a typical paragraph. It would not be realistic to expect them to 'analyze and edit' texts. It is also unlikely that sufficient time would be available for the implementation of an approach that required repeated revising and editing inside the classroom. As has been mentioned earlier, the institutional aims of the departments involved and the student needs would tend to suggest a focus on writing for occupational purposes. If time is limited, this emphasis might be narrowed even further so that the writing program concentrates on teaching students very specific work-related writing skills such as writing a letter or a report.

Nonetheless, it is not necessary to completely ignore the teaching of academic English. It is possible to at least lay the foundations for academic language while teaching more useful communication skills. The data in this study suggests that Kobe Gakuin University students suffer from a lack of comprehensible input. Krashen and Brown (2007) propose as a potential solution that learners be exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input, principally through reading practice. Their findings suggest that students "who read more do better on all aspects of academic language; they have

larger vocabularies, spell better, read better, have a more acceptable writing style, and are more adept at handling complex grammatical constructions.” According to this logic, structured efforts to provide students with increased comprehensible input are critical.

Courses in academic English would of course be beneficial to students intending to proceed to graduate school or overseas study, but the majority of students at Kobe Gakuin University would probably be better served by writing classes with a different emphasis.

## Appendix 1

### Written Academic Language

(学術論文等に使用する学術英語)

Vocabulary: Match the English academic word with its Japanese meaning.

語彙：学術英語で使用する言葉に合った日本語を選びなさい。

- |                   |         |
|-------------------|---------|
| 1. analyze ___    | 1.構成する  |
| 2. assist ___     | 2.益する   |
| 3. benefit ___    | 3.推定する  |
| 4. constitute ___ | 4.評価する  |
| 5. define ___     | 5.規制する  |
| 6. distribute ___ | 6.指摘する  |
| 7. estimate ___   | 7.定義する  |
| 8. evaluate ___   | 8.援助する  |
| 9. indicate ___   | 9.分配する  |
| 10. regulate ___  | 10.分析する |

Completing the Sentences: Choose the more academic word or set of words.

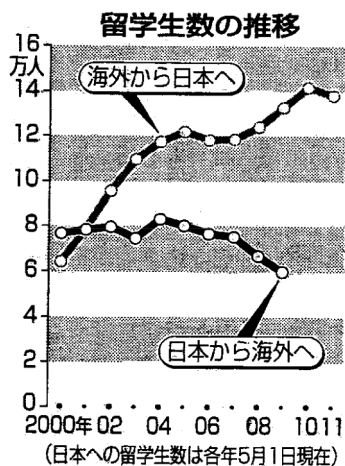
文章：学術英語に最も適切なものを選びなさい。

11. \_\_\_\_\_ evidence in support of this claim.  
1 There's no    2 There is no    3 There isn't any
12. Kobe has Japan's fourth busiest container port. \_\_\_\_\_, the city boasts a strong manufacturing sector.  
1 And    2 What's more    3 Moreover
13. The government's labor-friendly economic policies are credited with allowing workers to \_\_\_\_\_ their jobs.  
1 keep hold of    2 retain    3 hold on to
14. Prices remained \_\_\_\_\_ stable throughout the 1990s.

- 1 kind of 2 pretty 3 relatively
15. \_\_\_\_\_ were needed for the village's reconstruction project.  
1 1,000,000 dollars 2 One million dollars 3 \$1,000,000
16. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is a useful text \_\_\_\_\_.  
1 if you're learning economics 2 if you ask me 3 for economics students
17. The plan proposed by the opposition party was \_\_\_\_\_.  
1 given a no 2 turned down 3 rejected
18. The prime minister \_\_\_\_\_ praise for his handling of the crisis.  
1 received 2 got 3 kept
19. The meeting of ministers was \_\_\_\_\_ until the end of February.  
1 postponed 2 put off 3 set back
20. \_\_\_\_\_ students participated in the survey.  
1 Thirty five 18-year-old 2 35 eighteen-year-old 3 35 18-year-old

Writing: Describe the following graph in academic language (approximately 50 words).

ライティング：下のグラフを学術英語で説明しなさい（50ワード前後）。




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