

## Student Beliefs about Academic Writing

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### Abstract

Based on anecdotal evidence it was thought that the academic writing curriculum at a Japanese university was failing to meet student needs and expectations. In order to explore the students' beliefs about L2 writing in general and the academic writing curriculum in particular, a questionnaire was distributed to 228 second year English major writing students and was qualitatively analysed to search for significant trends. Results supported the initial hypothesis that despite a clear need for English writing skills among the student body, there was widespread negativity towards the curriculum which was seen as not engaging the students' intellectual interests, or second language acquisition needs. This suggested that a wider and more diverse curriculum was required.

事例証拠から、日本の大学のアカデミックライティングカリキュラムは、学生のニーズと期待に応えることができないと考えられていました。L2ライティング全般、特にアカデミックライティングカリキュラムに関する学生の信念を調査するために、アンケートが配布されました。2年目の英語のメジャーライティングの学生228人に向けて、重要な傾向を探すために質的に分析されました。結果は、学生の体で英語のライティングスキルが明らかに必要であるにもかかわらず、カリキュラムに対する広範な否定があり、学生の知的関心、第二言語習得の必要性が関与していないと見なされたという初期の仮説をサポートしました。これは、より幅広く、より多様なカリキュラムが必要であることを示唆しています。

In discussions with students at a Japanese university I became concerned that the academic writing courses taught from first to third year were failing to adequately meet the needs, interests and expectations of the students. They reported low motivation as a result of the emphasis on rigid academic forms with instruction focused on APA, the five-paragraph structure and the thesis statement/topic sentence paradigm, and narrow prescribed essay topics such as violence in the media, whaling, and renewable energy, and consequently they were becoming disengaged from L2 writing as a subject and pessimism about their progress in L2 acquisition seemed high. As the students in this university are English majors and many are intent on careers post-graduation that

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require some level of English fluency, their motivation is generally high. In order to ascertain whether there was a larger problem or whether this was more isolated, it was decided to investigate further. To try and identify and define the problem, I undertook to survey the wider student body.

Underlying the above assumptions were a number of theories current in L2 writing research. Dornyei's (2005) concept of the "L2 motivational self-system" discussed the idea of "possible selves", "ideal selves" and "ought selves" (Dornyei, 2009, pp. 11–13) —selves we could become, selves we wish to become and selves we feel we ought to become. In brief, during L2 acquisition the learner constructs a self-identity in the interplay between these potential selves. Writing is key to this formation. Ivanic and Camps (2001) show how writing "always conveys a representation of the self of the writer" (p. 5). Schultz (2001), Hyland (2003), Maley (2012) and Maloney (2019) all argue convincingly that traditional academic writing alone does not have the scope or scale to perform this function.

Students regularly cite an inability to express themselves in L2 as a weakness and a demotivating factor (Liao, 2012; Pelcova, 2015; R. Schrader, 2000). Maley (2009), Hanauer (2010), Iida (2010) and Bussinger (2013) all argue that confidence, motivation and engagement are benefited by the introduction of non-academic writing. Lo and Hyland (2007) show that when students feel they have a greater chance to express their own ideas and opinions, they become more engaged and motivated in writing. This is an echo of Noels (2001) who includes autonomy and relatedness in his triumvirate of motivational preconditions, the third being a sense of competency. Hyland (2002), and Homstad and Thorson (2000) define creative writing as a wide umbrella term that includes fiction, scripts, creative non-fiction, correspondence, blogging. In fact, the definition could be more easily stated as anything that isn't academic writing, any genre that allows freedom of expression rather than rigidity of form (Maley, 2012).

## **Method**

This data was collected by the means of a questionnaire in English and Japanese distributed to 228 second year English major students in the Department of British and American Studies at a Japanese university. Students in the Department of British and American Studies are English majors with a high degree of motivation since most have some expectation of using English in their future careers. Entrance requirements at the university are the equivalent of B2 on the CEFR scale. The questionnaire was distributed by class teachers in the final lesson of the second year academic writing course and completed voluntarily in class. The students had studied academic writing for two years, taking a 90-minute class once a week for four semesters of 15 weeks each. In each semester they wrote three essays beginning at 350 words and rising to 750 words by the final iteration. The essays were research projects in which the students were given a prompt which they would investigate. Each essay focused on a different aspect of academic writing from "formulating an argument" through "comparison and contrast" to the "refutation of counter-arguments." Students were expected to provide evidence using APA citation and referencing conventions, to follow the five-paragraph format and to write in a formal academic style. In second year, the essay topics were

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“The Ageing Society”, “Renewable Energy”, “Health”, “Recycling”, “Animal Testing” and, for the final essay, a topic chosen by the class teacher from a list that included topics such as “Gender”, “Discrimination” and “Minority Languages”. In their first year of study at the university the programme focused on sentence and paragraph structure (topic sentence, supporting details, concluding sentence) and the basics of the formal academic style, preparing the students for full essay writing in the second year.

The questionnaire was given to 228 students divided into 12 classes with 6 teachers (two classes per teacher). Responding to the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and the students were informed that it would be anonymous. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions covering different aspects of the academic writing course and L2 writing more generally, aimed at uncovering student beliefs about L2 writing and academic writing in particular. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and randomised after collection to mask the identity of the class teachers involved. Incomplete questionnaires were included in the data analysis. Completely blank forms were discarded.

Answers were coded using thematic analysis. Six of the 12 questions were closed yes/no forms with a follow up that asked for expansion (usually “why/why not?”). The remaining six questions were open questions. Thematic analysis was used to group answers together on the basis of emergent themes. For instance, responses to question 2, (What didn’t you enjoy about this course?) produced answers concerning the amount of homework/classwork, the nature of the topics, aspects of the in-class experience and the nature of L2 writing in general.

Some questions produced similar answers. For example, question 2 (What didn’t you enjoy about this course?), question 5 (What did you think of the essay topics?) and question 6 (How would you change this course?) all provoked a negative response about the essay topics if the students felt strongly about that issue. Where this occurred, similar answers by the same student are grouped together and counted as one response. A negative comment about essay topics in question 2 by one student and a negative response to question 5 by another student were treated as similar and tabulated together under the heading “Negative response to topics”. This was done in order to avoid one student’s opinion being counted multiple times and affecting the results.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Results*

Response Group	Respondents	Total	Percentage %
Expect to use English in career	79	132	59.85
Desire more freedom over essay topic choice	53	132	40.15
Negative response to topics	50	132	37.87
Positives about course were unrelated to writing	59	132	44.7
Negatives about course were unrelated to writing	22	132	16.7

Feel they cannot express themselves in English	73	132	55.3
Expressed interest in creative writing	57	132	43.18
Have no interest in any kind of writing	19	132	14.39

Out of 228 questionnaires distributed, 132 questionnaires were returned. When asked whether they intended to use written English in their future careers, 59.85% (79/132) responded with a positive answer such as “Yes, I want to be an English teacher” or “Yes, I want to work at an airport”. 14.39% (19/132) expressed total disinterest in writing of any kind with answers such as:

What did you enjoy about this course?

Nothing.

Would you like to write about anything different?

No.

Would you be interested in other forms of writing such as fiction, poetry, travel writing, journalism, correspondence?

No.

With regard to the essay topics, 40.15% (53/132) expressed a desire to have more freedom over the choice of topics and prompts used in the course, a result echoed in the 37.87% (50/132) of respondents who found the essay topics “too boring”, “too difficult” or “unrelated to my interests”. Seven students explicitly stated that they enjoyed the free writing activities far more than the actual essay writing because of the freedom it offered them, for instance,

What did you enjoy about this course?

Free writing because talking my opinion is very fun.

Question 1, (What did you enjoy about this course?) 44.7% (59/132) of respondents to cite something totally unrelated to writing, such as “my teacher was nice” and “I enjoyed discussing with my classmates.” Similarly, 16.7% (22/132) cited something unconnected with writing in response to question 2 (What didn’t you enjoy about this course?), such as “the classroom was too cold” or “I don’t like using computers”. This was to be expected given the open nature of the questions and the large sample size.

## Discussion

The results supported the hypothesis that while meeting some of the students’ needs and expectations, the academic curriculum was viewed negatively by a large section of the student body. While 59.85% of respondents believe they will need to write in English in their future careers, and are therefore motivated to acquire this skills, it is clear from the results that L2 writing is not viewed with positivity across the board.

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14.39% of respondents had no interest in writing, leaving 85.61% who were at least ambivalent if not well-disposed towards the subject. From a potential 85.61% who could have become engaged with writing, all but 55.3% were. That's 30.31% of students who were not being served by the academic writing course. 40.15% specifically stated that the reason for their lack of engagement were the academic topics. Responses such as "difficult" and "boring" were commonplace. Question 7 (Would you like to write about anything different?) prompted many specific suggestions such as "travel" and "movies" but the most common response was some variation of "I'd like to write about my feelings and opinions." This finding echoed a chief concern amongst respondents. 55.3% felt they could not adequately express themselves in English. These results suggest that moving from academic topics to issues more directly related to the students' interests and ambitions might help bridge the gap and increase the level of positivity towards L2 writing. This reading of the data was backed up by 43.18% expressing a direct interest in creative writing, with some even specifying "travel writing", "fantasy" and "short stories" as genres which would engage their interest and effort.

The data show that more can be done to engage students in L2 writing and therefore developing both their English language skills and their L2 identity. Furthermore, the data in combination with the studies cited earlier in this paper such as those by Schultz (2001), Hyland (2003), Maley (2012), Liao (2012), Pelcova (2015) and Maloney (2019), suggest that widening the writing course to include elements of creative writing such as travel writing and other creative non-fiction, as well as fiction, would go some way to alleviate this disconnect.

There are obvious weaknesses with the questionnaire such as the open nature of the questions and the fact that some led to students repeating answers. A more in-depth, wider study, perhaps with quantitative elements needs to be undertaken in order to truly ascertain whether academic writing classes that do not incorporate differing genres and topics connected more directly with student interests are actively posing an obstacle to L2 acquisition and development of the L2 self, but this data show that the issue is live.

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