

Thinking in English and the Instructed Writing Center: Evolution of English Instruction at KUT, 1996–2014

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Abstract: As one of the founders of KUT, in 1996 I was given the rare opportunity to develop language learning methods and materials that suited the institution and its clients. It has been an ongoing thrill to work in this open-minded place, and to work to find out how much is possible in KUT's education scenarios. This paper presents my fundamental principles of language learning support, developed over the years at KUT, in two scenarios: Section 1. The Learning of Functional English Skills: Second year undergraduate Thinking in English; and Section 2. The Mastery of English Academic Writing: PhD study of technical academic writing. The intention is to present the educational design thinking in these two scenarios without masking it in the formal academic manner.

1. The Learning of Functional English Skills

European educational policy allows 2 years for the mastery of an additional language: students in secondary and post-secondary institutions typically manage to master an additional language in that time.

In Asia, the situation is different. In Japan, for example, six years of English study in secondary school are aimed at successful performance on university entrance examinations — and once that goal has been achieved, forgetting and loss of skill progress rapidly. The world in which English is used as a tool for achieving goals is a world far away.

1.1 Doing English vs. Doing Something in English

In the Thinking in English program at Kochi University of Technology, we aim to reclaim the learners' achievement, and to redirect it to the acquisition of functional skills. This calls for a primary emphasis on achieving goals in an English environment, not on acquiring vocabulary and grammar knowledge (these can be acquired on-the-fly, in the course of achieving practical goals in an English environment. This approach was the foundation of our early Asahi Shuppan textbook, *Critical Thinking*,

and my more recent Cengage book, *Thinking in English*.

This approach can be represented simply in the steps that make up the methodology of *Critical Thinking*:

1. INPUT: demonstration / listening / reading for vocabulary and usage input and exercises.
2. USAGE PRACTICE: activities and tasks that use the above vocabulary and usage.
3. AUTHENTIC TASK: arranging information, solving real-world problems.
4. EXPRESSION: reporting task results, as presentation, written report, drama, interview, etc.

In the *Thinking in English* methodology, much emphasis is placed on individual and small group interaction (spontaneous interaction) with the instructor. To encourage this kind of exchange, instructions and background materials are intentionally brief and/or incomplete, thus creating a need for the learners to communicate.

1.2 Self-perception: My English is Bad vs. My English is not Good Yet

The learner's perception of his/her learning situation is very important for progress towards learning goals. If the learner has a clear idea of what he/she knows and what

he/she needs to learn next it is easy to have a positive attitude about learning — and a positive attitude is essential to efficient, effective learning.

Many learners can be heard to say, “My writing is bad.” This implies an acceptance of the situation. It is essential to keep the focus on the on-going process of language acquisition, with such phrasings as, “My writing isn’t good yet” and “I don’t like English — yet.” This framing of an expectation of success and positive outcomes creates an atmosphere of optimism.

When the instructor speaks to a large class, she/he speaks to no one: that is why so many students don’t listen. There is nothing personal. Even in a class of 30, the language learning supporter (= language ‘teacher’) must avoid speaking to the whole group unless it is a motivating performance that needs a sizeable audience. The best approach is for the instructor to speak to each individual; however, that is not realistic, so second best is to speak to small groups (max 4), and to repeat the message until all members declare that they have understood it. If this is too time-consuming, then recording the message on one member’s cell phone is an alternative, and in fact this technique leads to some interesting question asking by the learners. When learners want to ask a question in the target language, we have success!

1.3 The Instructor Must be Learning Another Language (and not Nihongo)

It’s often said that the problem with mathematics teachers is that they were always good at mathematics, and thus cannot imagine the mental state of the struggling learner. The situation can be even worse with second language teachers: many have not successfully studied a second language! And if they have studied one, it may be so far in the past that the experience of that learning is only the vaguest of memories — and is remembered as much more successful than it actually was.

1.4 Framing Information and Tasks

If we present information, or a task, to the learner in the target second language, the learner may misunderstand, or may not grasp the importance of the information/task. Frequently language instructors repeat the material in the learner’s first language; obviously this is going in the wrong direction. Repeating the material in the target language (discussed above) is a good approach. However, as variety is the spice of life, it is important to be always looking for alternative representations.

The textbook *Thinking in English* (Hunter, 2007)

uses “Information Structure Maps” for the presentation of complex information in a low-text manner: ISmaps can be read at a glance, and provoke considerable discussion between learners (which is not the case in paragraph type text). More details about my ISmaps are available in the form of powerpoints at

<http://lawriehunter.com/cv/presns.htm>

1.5 Peer Evaluation

The language learner needs to develop confidence in assessing pieces of target language. Is the grammar correct? Does the text have meaning? Is there only one meaning? There is no easy road to that objective other than real world practice. Rote, textbook exercise type practice is not effective for this: the learners smell a rat, they know that the exercise is a simulation, and has nothing to do with the real world.

One effective approach is to have the learners assess some aspect of their peers’ language production. Here are just a few examples:

1. Did the person write in complete sentences?
2. Did the person use katakana pronunciation of any important English words?
3. Did the person introduce their topic so that others could anticipate the content?

It is important the learners not be asked to make value judgements of each other’s language production (e.g. He’s a good speaker). Of course they can do so for the information put forward (e.g. I’m not sure that’s correct).

1.6 Error correction puts the emphasis on failure

It is ingrained in educational practice around the world: student takes test; teacher ‘corrects’ test, indicating errors, often indicating the correct answer in each case. End of story! What message can the learner take away from the experience of error correction? Most likely a negative message: “I didn’t do well” or “I made a lot of mistakes.” An alternative to error correction is the use of coded feedback (indicating the type of weakness [not the type of error] and leaving the learner to analyze and revise. It is essential for the learner to apply the knowledge that she/he has to the revision of her/his work.

1.7 Reiteration to perfection

Furthermore, error correction always leaves the learner with a sense of failure or inadequacy. The alternative is to work with the learner to revise the task until it is perfect (this is called Mastery Learning in learning theory). How many of our learners have had the experience of do-

ing something perfectly? It is an exhilarating and highly motivating experience. (Note that achieving perfection is completely different from receiving a grade of AA: doing something perfectly has intrinsic value, getting a grade of AA has only extrinsic value.)

1.8 Jumping out of the plane: Never ready!

Japanese learners of English communication typically display ‘hesitation’, apparently preparing mentally and striving to avoid error. However, communication in the real world is not the place for either hesitation or painful perfection. Thinking in English exercises and classroom practice put time pressure on the learners: they cannot achieve perfection in the time allowed, so they have to do the best they can, and see if their production results in successful communication. Initially the learners refuse to perform, claiming that they are not ready; they are met with the reminder that in life we are never ready, and that when the time comes, we just have to jump out of the plane. Many learners report that this is a liberating experience.

2. The Mastery of English Academic Writing

English academic writing occupies a precarious position in technical universities in general, and in Asian technical universities in particular. Engineering researchers depend more and more on publication in English language journals for recognition of their work, and for career advancement. English academic writing is a serious, but only incidental, publication obstacle for many Asian technical researchers. This section examines the array of possible interventions that can facilitate technical academic publication, and works from the point of view that writing center type ‘mentoring’ service is the key tool for empowering technical researchers to overcome English related obstacles to the publication of their research achievements.

2.1 History of technical academic writing at KUT

When KUT was in the planning stage, one policy element that was laid down by Information Systems Engineering Dean Terada was that English faculty could not be asked to check the English papers of faculty members. Background to this: for the first seven years of KUT’s existence, English was part of Information Systems; also there were only two native English speakers on faculty, compared to 85 engineering professors.

For the first seven years, academic writing was not an issue at KUT. There were not many graduate students, and very few wrote papers for publication in English

language journals. Then in 2003 the Special Scholarship Program (SSP) was launched, providing full 3-year scholarships for Asian PhD students. As a result, the International Relations Center (IRC) was opened, under Professor Sakai, to provide recruitment and logistics support for SSP. I created two semester-long courses in academic writing: Technical Writing 2 (TW1 was already in place for masters students) and Research Writing.

Since the needs of the new SSP students were unknown, TW2 and RW were created as works in progress. Fortunately, at about the time the courses opened, Swales and Feak (2004) published their landmark textbook, *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. This allowed for the establishment of a curriculum and a teaching methodology that put KUT on a global footing.

Then in 2008, I published the first edition of *How Academic Writing Works*, a KUT press book that presents all the concepts related to successful technical academic writing. This book is like Swales and Feak without the exercises, or like Lebrun’s *Scientific Writing* without the jokes.

As for the 1996 policy about English faculty editing papers, SSP presented a raw challenge: here were graduate students in substantial numbers, many of whom were going to need some kind of English editorial support in order to meet the challenging requirement of the SSP program: publish 2 papers in top rank English language journal, within the 3-year period of the scholarship.

The first cohort of SSP students numbered 29, more than half of them Chinese. No official editing support was offered, though many unofficial requests were made, and many bits of unofficial support were given. In 2005, concluding that the success of the SSP program depended on some kind of writing center support, I devised the 2-page system, which provided carefully controlled mentoring in academic writing, but not editorial services. Students in need of editorial support were referred to paid editors living in the Kochi area.

2.2 The 2-page system (mentoring system)

In order to control the volume of requests, and the workload upon myself, I created a system based on the following elements.

1. Maximum 2 pages at a time. Clients could submit only two pages, double spaced, at a time. This limitation was imposed for two reasons: it restricted the workload imposed on the professor (me) at any given time; and it avoided the pointless checking of

repeated errors. A number of students complained that they didn't have time to go through the necessarily slow process; they were directed to a local editor.

2. Coded feedback. Clients for the 2-page system were given coded feedback on their papers in progress, rather than error correction. Thus a word or phrase would be circled, and the type of error would be indicated. The client would have learned all the error types in TW2 class, and would have practiced techniques for correcting such errors. A list of typical feedback elements is shown at the back of my book, *How Technical Academic Writing Works*. Some examples are 'agr': the subject and verb don't agree; 'par': mistake with parallel structure; 'ref': the referent for this pronoun is not clear.

The 2-page system proved successful, though some students never used the service. A number of clients of the system became semi-autonomous writers of technical academic writing by the time they graduated. At the time of writing, April 2014, the system is working at high volume: in fiscal 2013 I performed 164 2-page consultations, with the average consultation consisting of 15–20 minutes of annotating and 10–20 minutes of discussion with the client.

2.3 The Style Dossier System

Clearly, people working in engineering research with high pressure to publish do not have time for bottom-up learning of academic writing (grammar, register, usage conventions, information organization). It is inevitable that they will resort to mimicry of the language patterns found in same-topic papers published in top journals.

However, unbelievable as it may seem, many papers published in top journals nowadays are written in sub-standard English, and are not at all good models of academic writing. (This is partly explained by the fact that there are many journals nowadays, and the competition for good content is fierce. A well-designed study with good data in its results is unlikely to be rejected on the basis of its English.)

If PhD students are going to use the English that they find in journal papers, they should have a clear idea of the quality of the writing in those papers. For this reason I created the Style Dossier System, in which the client collects papers close in topic and in research design to her/his own, and I give feedback in the form of multi-color highlighting of problems in grammar, Formal Aca-

demically English, and readability. At a glance the client can see how usable the paper will be as a model for her/his own writing.

In fiscal 2013, I checked 54 dossier papers for my current group of first year SSP students.

2.4 Does KUT have a Writing Center?

In the past ten years, writing centers have sprung up in universities around the world. Writing centers typically offer consultations to students who are trying to write assignments, theses, or papers for publication. Most writing centers serve humanities students, who usually have to write in a narrative form that makes the case for their claim and demonstrates the validity of the claim.

Few technical universities have writing centers, in part since technical academic writing is formulaic, i.e. it follows standard formats and phrasings, making it easy to produce using mimicry. Another reason for the scarcity of technical university writing centers is typical heavy dependence on commercial editing and rewriting services.

However, if young sci-tech researchers are to become capable writers of formal academic English, they do need to have support, in two main forms:

1. Instruction in technical academic writing: information organization, creation of readable text, creation of strong cohesion in text, ethical use of language models.
2. Mentoring to support the learning of the skill of using the concepts acquired in 1. above.

I have presented my design for the 'instructed writing center' at a number of international and Japanese conferences. The instructed writing center is based on instruction in technical academic writing (e.g. KUT's TW2 and RW courses), followed by mentoring in real-world scenarios (writing papers for publication) using coded feedback work with the concepts that were taught in the instruction phase (e.g. Hunter's 2-page system).

So yes, KUT does have a writing center. KUT has an 'informal instructed writing center.' Many universities in Europe and Asia have expressed interest in this design, but almost invariably they report two main obstacles: funding and capable staffing. As a well funded, free-wheeling research institution, KUT can afford such a writing center, and I do hope KUT will continue to value that service, and to develop it.

References

Some years ago I concluded that the publication of academic papers in journals does not gather a very large audience for one's ideas. I began publishing my work in the form of readable PowerPoints (as opposed to presentation ppts), sharing them on my page at Slideshare. This has proven very effective, and gratifying: I get frequent emails from people around the world who have found my materials by searching the web. You may view/download all of my ppts at

<http://www.slideshare.net/rolenzo/presentations/>
(find the ppt with over 10,000 views)

and at

<http://lawriehunter.com/presns/index.html>

These references are 'practical' writings, meant to introduce the reader to the scope of a topic, introducing various points of view and approaches to learning support ('learning support' is an imaginable activity, whereas 'teaching' is such a confusing term: consider the frequently heard comment, "I taught the class that material but they didn't learn it.").

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Dedicated to the late KUT Vice President Koshida, who provided educational leadership and inspiration to the entire university in its early years. His passing was our great loss.

「英語で考える」コースおよびライティング・センター指導： KUTにおける英語教育の進化 1996-2014

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要約：1996年、私は高知工科大学設立準備財団の一員として、この大学と学生に適した言語学習方法と教材を開発するというたいへん貴重な機会をいただいた。この開かれた精神の場で仕事をし、KUTの教育シナリオにおける可能性を探ることはわくわくする経験の連続だった。本稿では、私がこれまでにKUTで開発してきた言語学習サポートのための基本的理念を二つの学習法を通して紹介する。セクション1「実用的な英語力の学習：学部2年生のための『Thinking in English』」、セクション2「英語学術論文熟達法：博士課程における技術系論文作成法の習得。この二つの学習法において形式的な学術表現での曖昧さを避けた明解な英語教育法のあり方を提示することを意図している。