
Teaching the English Research Paper to Japanese Students

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A traditional part of American college education is the “term paper” or “research paper”—an assignment that requires the student to make a thorough investigation of a topic and present the results in a well-organized composition supported by facts. Ideally, the research paper assignment gives students a taste of the types of critical investigation, scholarly discussion, and careful argumentation that experts in a field engage in¹⁾. To reach this ideal, however, requires effort on the part of the students and careful guidance on the part of the instructor. This is true when the students are native speakers of English and even more so when they are Japanese students doing research in English. The following pages give suggestions for teaching Japanese students to write English research papers. They are based in part on my experiences with some 55 Japanese students in research paper classes from 1990 to 1992. These experiences have convinced me that at least four factors are critical to the success of such classes: the instructor’s understanding of the undergraduate research paper, selection of sufficiently qualified students, control of topic selection, and teacher guidance during the early stages of the writing process.

In order to teach Japanese students to write English research papers, it is important that the instructor have a clear understanding of what such papers are. This is the first critical factor. There are at least three types of academic writing that may be called research papers. One is the report of primary experimental or statistical research, such as is typically found in journals devoted to the physical and social sciences. While such papers are sometimes required of university graduate students, they are not the type usually assigned to college undergraduates²⁾. A second type of research paper is “primarily intended to present information for the reader’s benefit” without emphasizing the author’s point of view³⁾. Students may be asked to write this kind of “informative paper” in some college courses. The “review of the literature” article sometimes found in scholarly journals is an example at the professional level.

Although the writing of a good informative paper is a significant achievement and undoubtedly the best way to treat certain topics, instructors often expect student writers to “make and defend a point” in addition to being informative⁴⁾. Research papers which focus on “an assertion or claim the writer makes about a particular subject” are labeled “critical papers” by Hubbuch, who states that

1) Susan M. Hubbuch, *Writing Research Papers Across the Curriculum*, 3rd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1992) p. 4.

2) Roberta H. Markman, Peter T. Markman, and Marie L. Waddell, *10 Steps in Writing the Research Paper*, 4th ed. (New York: Barron’s, 1989) p. 5.

3) Robert Dees, *Writing the Modern Research Paper* (Boston: Allyn, 1993) p. 57.

4) John Langan, *College Writing Skills*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw, 1992) p. 265.

they are “the most common type of research paper assigned to students in college courses”⁵⁾. To write such papers, students must investigate an issue within an academic field, formulate their opinion about that issue, and present evidence in support of their thinking. It is this type of research paper that I endeavored to teach to Japanese students and which will be considered in the remainder of this article.

A second factor critical to the success of the research paper course is the selection of sufficiently qualified students. When we consider the tasks involved in producing the research paper (such as reading numerous source articles and writing a composition of eight to twelve pages), we soon see that they are for advanced students only. My experience has convinced me that when Japanese students produce poor quality research papers characterized by incomprehensible sentences or plagiarism, it is often the case that the students were not sufficiently skilled to undertake such an assignment to begin with.

What, then, are the minimum competencies required for success in the research paper course? Certainly, the ability to read short, unadapted English source materials is necessary, as is the ability to write complex sentences that are generally free from major errors in grammar and word choice. Students with TOEFL scores of 480 or higher usually possess these skills to some degree. Another prerequisite is the ability to write coherent paragraphs which have clear topic sentences and appropriate supporting details. Since students coming out of Japanese high schools may have had little instruction in the composition of English paragraphs and essays, it is important that they have had at least one course in English expository writing at the college level before entering the research paper course.

A third important factor for the research paper instructor to consider is control of topic selection. Often the range of feasible research topics is limited by the lack of English-language books and reference materials in the college library. Even when English source materials are abundant, however, it is usually advantageous to restrict the range of topics students can select from. Such limitation allows the teacher to become more familiar with the source readings in order to give better guidance to students.

Below are three degrees of control for the research paper class. Which degree is chosen depends mainly on the abilities of the students in the class.

Close guidance: all students read the same source articles and write their papers following a common outline provided by the instructor.

Medium guidance: students read a “core set” of articles on a general theme supplied by the instructor, but must then select a narrower topic within this theme. Students read various additional articles in order to write their individual papers.

Loose guidance: the teacher gives general advice on library research, writing style and organization, but leaves topic selection and outlining entirely to the students.

5) Hubbuch, p. 134.

It is my experience that the close or medium degrees of control are the appropriate options for Japanese college students who are attempting their first research papers in English. By controlling topic selection and the source materials students read, teachers can achieve the benefits mentioned by Frank: “the use of controlled reading enables the teacher to determine how heavily students rely on the wording of reading selections and helps avoid the problem of plagiarism”⁶⁾.

The final important factor to note in ensuring the success of the research paper class is teacher guidance during the early stages of the writing process. This is related to the control of topic selection mentioned in the previous section. Assuming the teacher has opted for close or medium control of topics and readings, it is natural that the first several weeks of the course will revolve around the study of articles central to the selected theme. The teacher should design exercises, such as identifying main ideas, making outlines, and writing paraphrases and summaries, that will help students see the important aspects of the main theme. Such readings and exercises, which may continue for half of the semester, can be viewed as prewriting activities. As teachers assign readings to students, they should point out examples of scholarly documentation (quotations, citations, lists of references) as they occur in these articles. Instructors may also want to show students how they can find additional articles as needed in the college library. It is important that teachers help students learn the essential points of the topic so that they will be able to formulate their own theses for their research papers.

A common failing of undergraduate research papers is lack of a controlling thesis statement that reflects the writer’s personal point of view. Too often students “submit papers strung together with little or no focus. The content is usually from their reading and reflects little of the students’ own thinking”⁷⁾. We must somehow help students understand that, although they must support their opinions with documented evidence, it is their opinions which are crucial to their work. As Dees advises beginning research writers, “remember that your own ideas are not only valuable but actually are, in one sense, what the paper is about . . .”⁸⁾.

In order to help students develop thesis statements which express their opinions on a topic, it is usually necessary to conduct class brainstorming sessions, list logical propositions about the topic on the board in the affirmative/negative format of a debate, or simply show students some examples. For instance, if the general theme selected by the instructor is “Aspects of Education in Japan and America,” the teacher can help students consider theses such as the following. (The words in italics are alternatives that can be chosen to produce different statements.)

In order to prepare for the twenty-first century, *Japanese* (or *American*) educators should adopt the methods that *American* (or *Japanese*) teachers use for *teaching computer skills* (or *teaching foreign languages*, or *teaching environmental awareness*, or *promoting international awareness*, or *promoting lifelong learning*, or *encouraging cooperation*

6) Marcella Frank, “Using Process Techniques to Teach the Research Paper,” *TESOL Matters* 1.2 (1991) p. 13.

7) Frank, p. 11.

8) Dees, p. 13.

between students, or encouraging individualism, or dealing with violence, or dealing with adolescent restlessness, or helping dropouts, or helping students with special needs).

Any of the above might serve as a thesis statement for a research paper, provided there are sufficient source materials available for students to investigate.

For many American college students, the research paper is the most extensive assignment of their undergraduate education, and it must be doubly challenging for Japanese students writing in English. Nevertheless, my experience convinces me that the research paper can be successfully taught to Japanese students provided that (1) the instructor has a thorough understanding of what such papers entail, (2) only students with sufficiently developed reading and writing skills are admitted to the course, (3) the field of research is limited, and (4) the teacher gives support and guidance, especially during the early stages of the writing process. If these four criteria are met, I believe the research paper course can provide Japanese students with a positive, in-depth, integrative learning experience, and that each student “can eventually produce a paper that gives . . . a real sense of personal accomplishment”⁹⁾.

Received: September 29, 1995

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9) Hubbuch, p. 2.