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Writing Centers for Improving English Academic
Writing Skills of Japanese Economics Students:
Advantages and Challenges

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**Writing Centers for Improving English Academic
Writing Skills of Japanese Economics Students:
Advantages and Challenges**

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognized among Japanese scholars and non-Japanese journal editors outside Japan that English language academic writing poses difficult challenges for most Japanese writers. For example, Orr and Yamazaki (2004) describe twenty central and recurring problems found in the English language academic writing of Japanese science and technology researchers. Orr and Yamazaki propose that one key factor underlying English writing difficulties for native Japanese scholars is lack of writing instruction at the university level. Many textbooks have been published in Japan that attempt to guide Japanese writers through academic writing difficulties, but Orr and Yamazaki (2004) point out that many of these textbooks lack effective examples or are otherwise deficient. Another weakness of reliance on textbooks for learning how to write academic papers effectively is that academic writing is a communicative activity that is fundamentally collaborative—the writer addresses a reading audience with new ideas and language while at the same time engaging with existing ideas and text generated by other researchers. The skills required for effective academic writing go beyond technical knowledge of grammar rules or the necessary components of a research essay to understanding of how to think about writing and what questions to ask at all stages of the writing process. Examples of such higher-level problems include audience analysis, focus, and argumentative strategy.

This discussion paper argues that both macro and micro levels of attention to improving academic writing skills of economics students in Japan is essential. Specifically, we point to the possible effectiveness of establishing academic writing centers at universities in Japan designed to advance the English language academic writing skills of economics students and faculty. The report contains three main sections: (1) overview of writing center activities at universities in the United States, including available data on users and effectiveness; (2) description of the activities of one of the very few academic writing centers at universities in Japan; and (3) brief discussion of potential effectiveness and challenges of establishing writing centers for economics programs at universities in Japan. This essay should be considered a discussion paper rather than a fully researched

academic paper because the key arguments made and the evidence that supports those arguments are in the early stages of formulation.

2. Writing Center Activities at U.S. Universities

The academic writing center trend in the United States began in the 1980s along with the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, with global efforts energized by the establishment of the International Writing Center Association in 1982. Writing centers provide students at most colleges and universities in the United States with an interactive, collaborative and highly structured venue for learning how to write for academic purposes. For example, at the University of Washington in the city of Seattle at least 20 writing centers serve students and faculty, with most of these centers discipline-specific. Although most writing centers at the University of Washington share institutional features such as required appointments with tutors, there are differences among the centers with regard to tutor demographics, consulting philosophy and goals. One illustration of these differences is the perception among writing center clients that certain writing centers at the University of Washington will actively edit or even re-write essays, whereas some other writing centers will instead coach writers without actively editing. These differences result from the independent development of writing centers at the University of Washington and the lack of any single coordinating or governing body to oversee writing center activities. Funding for writing centers at the University of Washington also is secured by individual academic departments, and there is not much professional communication between directors of the writing centers on campus.

In February 2009 one of the authors, Daniel Dolan, visited the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington to document the activities of academic writing centers on campus. I focused on two writing centers with key importance to this project:

(a) the Business Writing Center

(b) the English Department Writing Center

In what follows I describe the central features of these two writing centers.

2.1 Business Writing Center

Operations

The Business Writing Center is a small center that assists clients with academic writing related to business and economics. The center is open weekdays from 11:00 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. and conducts an average of 15-20 tutoring sessions per day. Tutoring sessions are 30 or 60 minutes, with an average of two tutors providing consulting services per day.

Tutors

Tutors are exclusively University of Washington undergraduate students rather than graduate students. The Center director explained to me during an interview that the decision to hire undergraduate students as tutors is based on two main factors. First, research suggests that peer tutors are more effective than tutors who are older than their clients. Second, undergraduate tutors are less expensive to hire than graduate students, who are members of a labor union and therefore demand a minimum wage higher than the state mandated minimum wage. Tutors are trained and must do observation of tutoring sessions conducted by working tutors.

Consulting

Tutoring sessions focus on assisting clients with papers written for two required writing courses at the Business School. At least half of all clients are non-native English speakers. Tutors are trained to never, in principle, edit client writing using a pen. Instead, tutors are trained to ask questions and direct clients to focus on problems.

Clients

Half of these students are non-native English speaking foreign students, many from China. A small percentage of clients are represented by non-native English speaking graduate students who are writing their dissertations.

2.2 English Department Writing Center

Operations

The English Department Writing Center is one of the largest and most active writing centers at the University of Washington. The center is open weekdays from 9:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. and conducts an average of 15-20 tutoring sessions per day. Tutoring sessions are 50 minutes. During academic year 2007-2008 there were 2,021 available tutoring hours, with 1,560 hours (78%) used. Clients must sign up in advance for tutoring sessions, either online or in person, but walk-ins are accepted depending on availability of both tutoring session hours and tutors.

Tutors

Similar to the Business School Writing Center, all tutors at the English Department Writing Center are University of Washington undergraduate students. Tutor training is rigorous, and according to the Center's website the English Department Writing Center tutors "are the most highly trained and experienced writing tutors on the Seattle campus." Tutors are selected competitively based on writing samples and interpersonal communication skills, and selected individuals must then pass satisfactorily a required writing center tutor training course offered by the English Department consisting of a minimum of 40 hours.

Consulting

The guiding philosophy of the English Department Writing Center is described in the Center's mission statement, which reads in part: "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing." The mission statement also clarifies what clients can expect from tutors. For example, tutors might work with clients to develop organizational strategies, determine when outside sources should be documented and cited, create outlines and become aware of error patterns. However, tutors will not by themselves suggest content, edit writing line by line, give ideas, or supply vocabulary.

Clients

In 2007, 55% of all visitors to the English Department Writing Center were students enrolled in English courses. In 2006-2007, 40% of all clients were ESL students, but this number increased

in 2007-2008 to 44%. At the same time, native English speaking client numbers dropped from 60% in 2006-2007 to 56% in 2007-2008. Among the 253 non-native English-speaking students who visited the center in 2007, the vast majority was Korean (90), with Japanese native speakers numbering slightly more than 20.

2.3 Effectiveness of U.S. University Writing Centers

Although evidence for the effectiveness of writing centers at universities in the United States is neither extensive nor conclusive, one study of 1,519 students enrolled in an English writing course at one university found that the more frequently a student visited the campus writing center the better the student's grade in the English writing course. Although the authors of the study caution that the results may be relational rather than causal, data on student attendance at writing centers at the University of Washington also suggests that writing centers can be effective for helping students write better. At the English Department Writing Center at the University of Washington, available tutoring hours in 2007-2008 represented a 3.7% increase since 2006-2007, and available hours used in 2007-2008 reflected a 5.5% increase. Return visits by clients also indicate effectiveness. In 2007-2008 there were 636 return visits by clients to the English Department Writing Center.

3. Writing Center Activities at Universities in Japan

In Japan the academic writing center movement is in a very early stage, with only a few writing centers at universities nation-wide. In this section we describe the activities of the ALESS Writing Center at the University of Tokyo.

3.1 ALESS Writing Center

Operations

The writing center at the University of Tokyo's ALESS program began in April 2008. The ALESS (Active Learning of English for Science Students) program is a one-semester course designed to improve English language academic writing and presentation skills. The course is required during the first three semesters of study and is taught by trained native English speakers. The Writing Center is open approximately 15-20 hours per week.

Tutors

Writing Center tutors are native Japanese graduate students of arts or sciences, who must pass a writing pedagogy course to become tutors. Currently there are eight tutors working part-time at the center for a maximum of 10 hours per week per tutor. Tutors at the center typically speak Japanese with center clients while guiding students in the writing of required 2-5 page English language experiment reports.

Consulting

In 2008 the ALESS Writing Center served 199 different ALESS students (10% of the total number of students) during 383 tutorial sessions lasting 30 minutes or sometimes longer. Most ALESS Writing Center sessions focus on the writing of the 2-5 page experiment-based paper mandatory for ALESS students.

Clients

All clients of the ALESS Writing Center are first-year undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences students enrolled in science, engineering, and medical courses.

4. Economics Writing Centers in Japan: Potential Effectiveness and Challenges

4.1 Potential Effectiveness

The potential effectiveness of writing centers to support the English language academic writing of economics students in Japan is suggested by at least two factors: (1) the apparent success of writing centers in the United States, and (2) the current lack of academic writing training among Japanese university students in both Japanese and English languages (see Orr & Yamazaki, 2004).

Writing centers at their best serve not to churn out polished essays, but rather to help student writers become better writers. From this perspective, writing centers established in the economics departments of Japanese universities likely would assist Japanese economics students to learn how to write like economists write. However, establishment of writing centers at universities in Japan would face significant challenges with regard to institutional support and funding. Below I discuss both of these challenges.

4.2 Challenges

Institutional support

The directors of the University of Washington Business Writing Center and the English Department Writing Center both revealed during our interview sessions that one significant challenge they face even after many years of Center operation is motivating professors and teaching assistants to encourage students to engage in writing center consultations. It is reasonable to suspect that this problem would be even more pronounced in Japan given the relatively poor level of academic writing instruction here. Establishment of sustainable writing centers in economics departments at Japanese universities would require recognition among faculty members that effective academic writing is a sufficiently important skill for students to develop that scarce university resources should be used to support such activities. However, it is not clear that such recognition currently is widely shared among Tohoku University economics faculty members. For example, earlier attempts by Dolan to interest faculty members in a plagiarism avoidance education program within the department was greeted with little enthusiasm. Yet at universities in most other industrialized nations clear guidelines on avoiding plagiarism, including penalties for engaging in plagiarism, are standard features of new student orientation activities and usually are explained in detailed writing as part of the published student code of conduct. The failure of Japanese universities to conduct such basic training in academic writing protocols signals the importance of establishing writing centers on campuses.

Investment in writing center initiatives also would include identification and hiring of center directors and qualified tutors, followed by intensive tutor training, program development and ongoing center activity coordination. These institutional support mechanisms require sufficient funding, which is the focus of the next section.

Funding

Securing budgets for writing centers at Japanese university economics departments will be difficult at both national and private universities. Although the cost of establishing and running a modest writing center is not a significant amount compared with many other institutional functions at universities, private universities are struggling to fill seats as the population of college-age applicants decreases year by year. National universities, particularly the prestigious imperial universities, are not experiencing such enrollment problems due both to the high status accorded to national universities and also to the relatively low cost of tuition. However, since efforts to semi-privatization national universities began in 2005, national university budgets are being reduced one percent every year by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Therefore, the financing of writing centers in the face of general budget cutbacks will be difficult to sell.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for serious consideration of establishment of academic writing centers attached to departments of economics at universities in Japan. We explained the central features of writing center operation in the United States and we discussed the admittedly scarce evidence for effectiveness of such centers. We also laid out the institutional and funding challenges facing the establishment and operation of writing centers at universities in Japan. To successfully launch writing centers at economics departments across Japan it will be important to argue for and then demonstrate the long-term value of writing centers in advance of significant allocation of required resources. For this purpose establishment of a test case writing center at just one

department of economics would make sense, perhaps modeled in part after existing writing centers at U.S. universities or the ALESS Writing Center at the University of Tokyo. Detailed discussion of such a proposal is beyond the scope of the present essay, but might be worth developing in a future paper.

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