

# CALL and Writing Academic Essays at The University of Kitakyushu

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## **Abstract**

This paper outlines the benefits of using Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) systems for the purposes of an Academic Writing (英語論文作成法) course delivered to third year International Relations major students. Until October 2005 all Academic Writing classes were taught in a traditional classroom environment, before a gradual shift to CALL was implemented. The empirical data presented here demonstrates that this move has been successful, and that its future use in these classes is recommended. As an extension to the empirical data, this paper concludes by touching upon issues of course development, lessons which might be applied not only to Academic Writing classes but also to other reading, writing and CALL courses.

この論文では、国際関係学科の3年生が論文を作成する際に、CALL教室を使用することがいかに有効であるかを論じる。2005年10月まで、すべての英語論文作成法の授業は一般の教室で行なってきたが、現在はCALLシステムを利用した授業へ移行している。さまざまな調査の結果、CALLシステムを利用した授業は成果を挙げており、今後も推奨していきたいと考える。さらにこの調査結果から、CALLシステムを利用した授業において

の改善点についても考察する。またこの改善策については、英語論文作成法以外の授業、例えばリーディング、ライティング、CALLコース授業の向上においても有効であるかもしれない。

### **Introduction**

The most common form of academic writing is the essay and this is the chosen assessment for the Academic Writing (英語論文作成法) course. The academic essay is a very demanding genre not least because writing one requires considerable time and effort, in tandem with strong abilities in reasoning, scholarship and literacy. A compulsory specialist subject within the Department of International Relations, Academic Writing requires all IR third year students to submit a 2,500-3,000 word essay on a self-selected theme within the field of international relations. Most, if not all, students on the course had absolutely no experience writing an extended essay in English, and for intermediate language learners this genre represents a considerable challenge.

Earlier classroom research undertaken with the previous year's intake of students recommended a number of revisions and modifications to the Academic Writing course, the most significant of which was the integration of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) systems into the syllabus. Moreover, it was suggested that future classroom research should be conducted to assess the impact of CALL upon students' research and writing methods.<sup>1</sup> This working paper reports on some these changes and how they were viewed by the students. As such, it represents the third in a series of studies assessing the teaching of English for Academic Purposes

(EAP) within the University of Kitakyushu.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on how CALL systems have influenced students' essay research and writing techniques by comparing the results from before CALL was incorporated into the curriculum. This article opens with a brief outline of CALL and the related field of autonomous learning, before highlighting the empirical data. Recommendations for course development are made whilst dissecting this data. Once again, the underlying goal of this study is to hone and improve academic essay writing classes in the Department of International Relations, with a view to improving English reading, writing and CALL classes at the University of Kitakyushu.

### **Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)**

CALL is a method of instruction and learning in which teachers and students take advantage of advances in information technology (IT) to present, augment and appraise class materials and subject matter. Despite the potential of CALL, it could be argued that in some educational institutions this potential remains underutilised. Tackling such a question is far beyond the scope of this paper but undisputedly the attitudes of teachers play a major role here. It has been stated that there are in essence three separate scenarios being played out regarding language teachers and CALL.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, for some CALL plays a central role and lessons revolve around computer use. For others, CALL acts as an extra resource for use in conventional classes. Lastly, there remain instructors who believe that information technology makes no significant contribution to language

teaching and learning. The author's approach falls somewhere between the first two scenarios with the proviso that CALL is not a panacea that can cure all language learning ills. In short, CALL has its place in the classroom but its exact role and usage depends on the aims and pedagogy of the class concerned.

For the aims and objectives of the Academic Writing course in the Department of International Relations, the benefit of hindsight affirms that the implementation of CALL was long overdue. For, in addition to helping students research their essays, CALL can also assist them in the process of writing it. For instance, when questioned none of the students knew of the existence of a thesaurus. By demonstrating the use of an online version in class, students can quickly realise how such a tool can help build their vocabulary and enrich their writing. This and other simple suggestions regarding online research hint at the potential of CALL in areas such as autonomous learning and critical thinking, essential parts of any academic writing course.

### **CALL and learning autonomy**

According to David Little, "Autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts."<sup>3</sup> The pedagogy of using CALL in this Academic Writing course involved significant learn-

ing autonomy for the students.

Nonetheless, such an approach is not without its challenges as some researchers have claimed that Asian students do not possess the requisite critical thinking skills to properly undertake rigorous autonomous learning. Others, however, have attributed such apparently passive classroom behaviour, not to any inherent deficiencies of the learners themselves, but to the constraints of the educational environment such students inhabit. For instance, when Holden and Usuki (1999) questioned Japanese students about learner autonomy, they found that it was discouraged within the educational system.<sup>4</sup> Usuki's later studies introduced more evidence that Japanese students are familiar with the need for autonomous learning but find it difficult to put into practice, largely due to negative effects from the educational system.<sup>5</sup> Whilst investigating learner autonomy in China, Ho and Crookall (2000) closely examined the cultural tendencies that both promoted and impeded such autonomy, concluding that it is only through learners seizing responsibility for their own development that genuine autonomy becomes ingrained.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, citing comparisons between Chinese and European students, Gieve and Clark (2005) found that Chinese students appreciated the opportunities and benefits of autonomous study as much as their European counterparts.<sup>7</sup> In a similar study, Littlewood (2000) examined the results of a questionnaire conducted in eight East Asian countries and in three European countries, concluding that Asian students "do not, in fact, wish to be spoon-fed with facts from an all-knowing 'fount of knowledge'. They want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers".<sup>8</sup> The empirical data presented below seems

to confirm these earlier works.

Whilst defining the autonomous learner as someone capable of managing, monitoring and evaluating their own learning process, Little contends that most students are incapable of fulfilling such roles, and therefore still require supervision, advice and support.<sup>9</sup> The author's experiences teaching Academic Writing courses for the last five years at the University of Kitakyushu generally confirm this assertion. Nevertheless, for both teacher and pupil, it remains a goal to be strived for, especially in such an information rich subject as Academic Writing.

Of further relevance to CALL and learning autonomy is research undertaken by Thomas Vogel.<sup>10</sup> Surveying 55 university students to ascertain if they consciously use the Web for language learning, he found that none specifically went online for this purpose but rather were searching for information of some kind. However, his sample was aware that their online activities might be improving their foreign language abilities, as a working knowledge of a foreign language was a prerequisite for processing the information. Vogel likens the Web to a naturalistic language environment in which the learner is walking down a busy street in a country whose language they are trying to learn. Whilst the learner has to carefully select what information is meaningful and what can be discarded, motivation and learner autonomy can both be enhanced by integrating the Web into the language classroom. Such an approach demands a redrawing of the traditional roles of both teacher and student, and requires the acceptance and cooperation of both parties in order to be successful. In the early stages

at least, the selection of what material is relevant and what is not constitutes one of the major barriers to progress and still necessitates somewhat of a traditional role for the teacher. This is particularly the case when advising students on how to approach their chosen essay themes and, in the case of IR majors, requires that the instructor possess a relatively wide background knowledge of the subject.

### **Empirical data**

A common method of collecting data for use in assessing learner needs is the structured questionnaire and survey, not forgetting the proviso that the results must be treated with some degree of circumspection. This study was conducted in January 2006 with 49 third-year International Relations major students studying Academic Writing (英語論文作成法), just after they had completed a 2,500-3,000 word essay on any topic in international relations. The results displayed below have been rounded up to the nearest decimal point, which accounts for any discrepancies in the total.

*1) About what % of your research was done in English? Please circle one.*

Research %	1 - 25	26 - 50	51- 75	76 - 99	100
Students	18	12	17	3	0
%	36.7	24.5	34.7	6.1	0

During the course it is stressed that students are free to research in any language but that because English represents around 80% of all Internet web pages, and perhaps a greater percentage of scholarly websites, researching in English is encouraged. To assess the results of using CALL to

stimulate the use English as a research tool, it is instructive to compare the responses to the same question for the Academic Writing class of 2004-05 to the class of 2005-06. The class of 2004-05, a sample of 71 students, did not use CALL during class time and their results are shown below.<sup>11</sup>

Research %	1 - 25	26 - 50	51 - 75	76 - 99	100
Students	40	18	7	3	3
%	56.3	25.6	9.9	4.2	4.2

Hence, the results above testify to the effectiveness of CALL in encouraging students to research in English. The percentage of students who used English as their main research language increased markedly from just 18.3% the previous year to 40.8%. Such results reinforce the University's decision to invest heavily in CALL systems and should further encourage the take up of CALL where appropriate.

*2 ) Did CALL help you research your essay?*

Yes	%	No	%
42	85.7	7	14.3

The overwhelming response was in the affirmative. Perhaps part of the reason is that during the bulk of the second term students were able to use class time to research and begin writing their essays, thus reducing the burden of home study. Undoubtedly, using computers is a more efficient way of gathering and compiling information during class time. Of those 7 students for whom CALL was no help in researching their essays, 5 did 1-25% of their research in English and 2 did 26-50%, suggesting perhaps

that these pupils rested at the lower end of the ability spectrum. A more open mind to both asking the teacher for help and towards IT in general will be fostered to counter such negative results.

*3 )Do you think CALL helped you to research in English?*

Yes	%	No	%
48	98.0	1	2.0

A large stress was placed on enhancing students' ability to find trustworthy information on the Internet in English. For instance, students are pressed to use .pdf files whenever possible as these are more academically trustworthy. As such, web surfing techniques that allowed for the systematic indexing of only certain types of document, such as .pdf and .doc files, were taught. The 1 student who answered in the negative did only 1-25% of their essay research in English and commented that, "I couldn't get so much information from the Internet. If I could have, it would have been useful to use computers during class." It seems the problem here concerns choosing an appropriate essay title and theme combined with an effective approach to online research. Even though efficient web search techniques were imparted to the class it is possible that this student was absent or missed the point. Online research strategies will be further reinforced in future classes.

## 4) Did CALL help you write your essay?

Yes	%	No	%
47	95.9	2	4.1

It was demonstrated to students how straightforward it can be to find information on the Internet and it appears that most took advantage of this. Of the two students who did not, both undertook only 1-25% of their research in English but both still stated that CALL helped them to research in English. Indeed, 1 of these students even preferred to have all Academic Writing classes in the CALL room.

## 5) Do you think CALL should be used in all 英語論文作成法 classes?

Yes	%	No	%
37	75.5	10	24.5

It is interesting to note the objections of these 10 students to incorporating CALL into all Academic Writing classes. A closer look at their other responses reveals that only 3 of these 10 preferred to have these classes in a standard classroom (see question 8). These 3 students all did only 1-25% of their research in English, with 2 finding that CALL did not help them research their essay. However, 2 of these 3 also circled 'yes' to the question, 'Do you think CALL helped you to research in English?' Of the other 7 who objected to the CALL room being the only location for Academic Writing classes, only 1 did 1-25% of their research in English, suggesting that those students who conducted more of their research in English prefer the CALL room to a standard classroom, even if they have reservations

about using the computer room for every lesson.

6) Did you learn more about computers during 英語論文作成法 classes using CALL?

Yes	%	No	%
37	75.5	10	24.5

Whilst these classes were not specifically designed to improve students' general computer literacy, it might be suggested that greater time at a terminal in an educational environment is likely to generate such results. This is particularly the case when instructing students how to use programs such as Microsoft Word and Internet Explorer more effectively.

7) Do you think you could you get more or less help from the teacher using CALL?

More	%	Same	%	Less	%
31	63.3	15	30.6	3	6.1

The relatively large class size of around 35 does weigh against the instructor being able to devote a lot of individual attention to each student. However, the majority perceived the CALL room as being a more conducive environment for personalised tuition. Again, this is a major positive and bodes well for the future of CALL at the University. However, some of the responses suggest that even more personal attention is necessary for some of the less computer literate students.

8) Do you prefer to have 英語論文作成法 classes in a standard classroom or in the CALL room?

Standard	%	CALL	%
3	6.1	46	93.9

There is a clear and marked preference for continuing to conduct Academic Writing classes in a CALL classroom. Of those students who preferred a traditional classroom environment, all 3 did only 1-25% of their research in English, possibly indicating that either they lacked confidence using computers or they possess lower than average English ability in comparison to their classmates. Paradoxically, 2 of these students also commented that CALL did help them to write their essay. Furthermore, 2 of these 3 did answer in the affirmative to the question 'Do you think CALL helped you to research in English?' - highlighting once again the problems of conducting classroom surveys.

9) What is your biggest strength in English? Please circle one.

	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
Students	21	10	8	10
%	42.86	20.41	16.33	20.41

Questions nine and ten were included to examine if what students perceived as their strengths and weaknesses impacted on the way they approached their essay research and writing. If so, perhaps those students who classed reading as a strength did more of their research in English relative to other students. However, of the 21 students who clas-

sed reading as a strength, 11 did 1-25% of their research in their second language. Conversely, this corresponds to 52.4% of this smaller sample, compared to 36.7% for the sample as a whole. Of the remaining 10 students who thought their reading was the strongest of the four skills, 3 did 26-50% (14.3%) and 7 did 51-75% (33.3%) of their research in English. This compares to 24.5% and 34.7% for whole sample of 49 students, suggesting that their perceived strengths and weaknesses had little bearing on how these students approached their essay research.

*10 )What is your biggest weakness in English? Please circle one.*

	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
Students	5	14	22	8
%	10.20	28.57	44.90	16.33

Of these 5 students who considered reading to be their Achilles' heel, 3 of them were the only people in the whole sample who did 76-99% of their research in English. This suggests that their answer to this question was a response to the obvious difficulties they encountered doing almost all of their research in English, and is thus very interesting from a psychological perspective. Of the other 2, 1 did 51-75 of his/her research in English and the other did 26-50%, once again indicating that answers to this question had absolutely no impact on the way these students conducted their essay research.

*11 ) What problems did you have writing your essay? Please write freely.*

This last question prodded students to candidly elucidate their feelings about the research and writing process, in order for the instructor to gather feedback and make the classes more productive. In addition, it affords the instructor an opportunity to see what advice was applied and what was ignored by the students, with a view to reinforcing those lessons which seemingly went unheeded. For example, 1 student wrote that, "It was difficult for me to find good information", and this student was 1 of the 7 (or 14.3%) for whom CALL did not help their essay research. This suggests, despite a considerable portion of time being devoted to this issue, that the instructor should spend even more time recommending useful websites and effective web search strategies. The implication here is perhaps that the instructor needs to tweak the balance of the syllabus and to take more time to individually help students in this situation. Of course, of fundamental significance here is choosing an essay topic for which adequate information is readily available, and maybe the teacher should even more explicitly stress the vital importance of this.

Of perhaps more concern, however, were the comments of 1 student who echoed the sentiments of a few others, "I didn't know about the basic styles of writing essays". Even though techniques such as writing paragraphs, introductions and conclusions were an integral part of the course, it is possible that the instructor overestimated some students' abilities, especially with regard to the correct structure of paragraph writing. More specifically, a different student wrote that, "I wanted to study more about the main body", referring to the bulk of the essay in between the introduction and conclusion. Again, greater time can be devoted to this during class.

Discussing essay content, another student wrote that, "It is difficult to write an opinion or view because I cannot use 'I' or 'my'". Despite being a problem for this particular student, this is a satisfying response for the instructor because it demonstrates that some the lessons of the class were applied. Nevertheless, it indicates that more options could be given to students who are wondering how to express an opinion in their essays. This should probably take the form of a handout or electronic document which can be sent to each computer terminal using the CALL software.

On the subject of constructing the essay, one wrote that, "It was difficult to translate Japanese into English, especially peculiar expressions and slang". Whilst students are free to translate their essays from Japanese into English, it was stressed that this is a particularly time consuming method of essay writing and, as such, is not recommended. In addition, it was stressed that slang has no place in an academic essay, except perhaps in the rare case of a direct quotation.

Further regarding vocabulary, it was mentioned that some students experienced difficulties with the technical nature of some International Relations terminology. Indeed, it seems that some of these same students even struggle with such terms in Japanese. A possible solution here is to employ Averil Coxhead's academic word list or a modified version thereof.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, an inherent difficulty of this course is choosing an appropriate textbook and student feedback confirms this. Quite simply, there are very

few textbooks on the market that teach foreign learners of English how to write politically-themed essays. Whilst a new textbook is needed, another option is to use no textbook and to make the course completely web-based. Such a change would completely revolutionise the pedagogy of this class and is something under serious consideration.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This working paper has reported on many of the changes to the Academic Writing classes that were recommended in the author's *The Internet and Academic Essay Research Techniques*. The aim of this article has been to assess the impact of these changes. As demonstrated by the empirical data, moving Academic Writing classes from a traditional classroom environment to CALL was almost unanimously approved of by the students. It helped them to research in English, enhanced their general computer skills, and many thought that they could receive more help from the teacher using CALL. Indeed, data from the previous year, when CALL was not used for Academic Writing lessons, clearly demonstrates that CALL is effective in encouraging students to research in English. The percentage of students who used English as their main research language increased from just 18.3% the previous year to 40.8%. Such a response is a positive result of this ongoing research.

The results also seem to suggest that those students who conducted more of their research in English prefer the CALL room to a standard classroom, even including those who have reservations about using the computer room for every lesson, and confirm the wisdom of the University's substantial

financial investment in CALL systems.

In a demanding job market for recent graduates, greater computer literacy will always be desirable. However, whilst previous research hinted at the possibility of incorporating Powerpoint presentations into the syllabus, this change remains unimplemented as the author wanted to assess the implementation of CALL into the syllabus before altering the method of assessment. Nonetheless, making the students do an academic presentation in English using a computer is still under consideration and might still be introduced for the 2007-2008 academic year. This presentation would count towards their final grade, reducing the pressure of writing the final essay albeit whilst increasing the students' workload somewhat, and would be invaluable experience to show to a prospective employer. Further applying technology, these presentations could be recorded onto video and students encouraged to view the results to improve their general presentation skills.

On the subject of identifying areas for follow-up research, a logical next step would be to look more closely at University of Kitakyushu students' perceptions and experiences of autonomous learning, particularly as such an approach is a key to improving foreign language ability. In addition, it would be valuable to conduct more research to assess the impact of any further changes in instruction methods, for example if presentations became a part of the course assessment.

<sup>1</sup> Stott, David Adam (2006), 'The Internet and Academic Essay Research Techniques.' *Bulletin: Journal of the Faculty of Foreign Studies, The University of Kitakyushu* vol.115 pp.67-86

<sup>2</sup> Collis, B. & Muir, W. (1986). A survey of computer education courses in Canadian faculties of education. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, XVI(1), pp. 61-71

<sup>3</sup> Little, David (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues, and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

<sup>4</sup> Holden B. & Usuki, M. (1999). *Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: A Preliminary Investigation*, available at

[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/000000b/80/24/fa/37.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/000000b/80/24/fa/37.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See Usuki, M. (2001). *Learner autonomy: Learning from the student's voice*, available at

[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/000000b/80/25/a3/32.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/000000b/80/25/a3/32.pdf) and Usuki, M. (2002). 'Learner autonomy: Learning from the student's voice.' *CLCS Occasional Paper*, available at

[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/000000b/80/22/60/9e.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/000000b/80/22/60/9e.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ho, J. & Crookall, D. (1995). 'Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching.' *System*, 23(2), pp. 235-243.

<sup>7</sup> Gieve, S. & Clark, R. (2005). 'The Chinese approach to learning: Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme.' *System*, 33(2), pp. 261-276.

<sup>8</sup> Littlewood, W. (2000). 'Do Asian students really want to listen and obey?' *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 31-36.

<sup>9</sup> Little, David (2001). 'Learner autonomy and the challenges of tandem language learning via the Internet' in Chambers, Angela and Graham Davies (eds.) *ICT and Language Learning, A European Perspective*, Language Learning and Language Technology Series. Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger

<sup>10</sup> Vogel, Thomas (2001) 'Learning out of control: Some thoughts on the World Wide Web in learning and teaching foreign languages,' in Chambers, Angela and Graham Davies (eds.) *ICT and Language Learning, A European Perspective*.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see Stott (2006).

<sup>12</sup> See Coxhead, Averil. 'A New Academic Word List.' *TESOL Quarterly* 34:2, 2000, pp. 213-238. This list contains 570 "words" which have both high frequency and high coverage in academic texts, irrespective of subject area and discipline. These 570 consist of head-words plus their inflected and derived forms, thus totalling around 3,100 word-forms altogether. The list does not include any of the 2,000 most frequent words in English.