

Issues Currently Facing the Language Centre at Toyo University

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Abstract

Now in its fourth year since inception, the Language Centre was established as a writing centre to improve the writing ability of Toyo university's students. This increased proficiency would help to reach the university's goals to send more students abroad to study and, in the best case scenario, have students complete an undergraduate dissertation in English. The instruction at the Language Centre is non-compulsory, carries no credit and is regularly carried out one-to-one between a student and a teacher. Despite positive testimony from students, the Language Centre faces a number of different obstacles to its successful operation. This short report highlights some of those issues, both outside of Toyo University and within the university and under its control that may negatively impact on the Language Centre's operations.

Keywords: writing centre, operational matters, study abroad

Introduction

The Language Centre is in its fourth year of operation and its main purpose is to promote the development of academic writing among students at Toyo University. This is with the main aim to help them function in the academic setting of foreign universities for study abroad, and ultimately to guide students into writing a graduation dissertation in English. In order to reach its aims the Language Centre employs three full-time writing teachers who spend 30 minutes with each enrolled student six times during a semester to help them produce paragraphs or essays based in rhetorical modes that fit their level of writing development. This very personalized instruction is different from the normal classroom instruction that students are used to, but students attest to receiving benefit from attending these personalized sessions at the Language Centre. Since its start the Language Centre has grown its student intake year on year and this year has a combined intake of over 200 students throughout Toyo University (some will be continuing students), resulting in Language Centre teachers being sent to the other satellite campuses of Toyo University. This short report is to highlight some of the issues that the

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Language Centre faces in its quest to fulfill its aims. The issues covered are those pertaining to inside and outside of Toyo University.

External Issues

There are a number of different factors that happen outside the control of Toyo University that have an impact on the Language Centre.

Decline in Study Abroad

Considering that one of the primary aims of the Language Centre is to develop students' writing to a stage where they can function in the study abroad setting, a large number of students who will study abroad is needed to sustain the program. The goals as stipulated under the Super Global budget projects the following numbers for students studying abroad are 1,207 in 2016, rising to 1,830 students in 2019, and ultimately 2,870 students in 2023 when the Global budget is to cease. The problem, however, arises in that the recent and current number of students at Toyo University studying abroad for three or more months is not near these projections. In 2014 it was 136, and in 2015 was at only 211 students. There appears to be a problem with securing the prerequisite number of students to study abroad.

This trend seen at Toyo University is mirrored elsewhere. Bradford (2015) reports that although there were increases in Japanese students visiting locations in Asia, there was a drop by 53% for those visiting the U.S. for a period up to 2011. Bradford goes on to explain that factors both inside and outside Japan have led to a decline. Firstly, it was claimed that an increase in diversity in Japan and a more international focus on curricula at Japanese universities has somewhat negated the necessity to study abroad for a long time in favor of shorter study abroad programs.

Another important factor that has both domestic and overseas effects is the cost of overseas programs. According to a site that compares cost of study abroad, tuition fees in the UK stand at around 12,000 pounds (approximately 1.2 million yen) and the cost of living without the fees comes to around 12,000 pounds (Top Universities, 2016). While in America the public universities charge around 9,000 dollars (920,000 yen) in tuition with living costs amounting to 10,000 dollars (1,000,000 yen) for the year. America is slightly cheaper as a study abroad destination, but both are expensive even with help in the form of scholarship. These study abroad fees set in the backdrop of a flagging Japanese economy making personal saving difficult, amount to some students being forced to give up study abroad plans on economic grounds.

Safety Concerns of Going Overseas

Linked with the issue of study abroad is concern for safety abroad. In recent times there have been a number of high profile safety-related incidents. Firstly, some incidents have involved acts of terrorism where Japanese citizens were killed or taken as hostages. The rate of incidents worldwide has certainly increased in recent years. Research has shown that specific terrorist incidents have produced a negative effect on visiting destinations (O' Connor, Stafford & Gallagher, 2008). Secondly, along with terrorism, crime in general can also affect tourism as seen in the U.S.A (Baker & Stockton, 2014). Again, the incidents of gun crime have been especially prominent in the U.S., and such news is broadcast around the world. Although little evidence exists that links terrorism or gun crime with specific dropout rates of study abroad, it can be said that Japanese travelers in general are very risk averse when making decision about their destinations (Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). These factors could negatively affect the demand for writing programs offered by the Language Centre designed to increase the number of students who will study abroad overseas.

Concerns over Job Hunting

A further external factor is the problem of job-hunting. Ideally, students study abroad between the end of their sophomore and start of their junior years, but in order to expand the number going abroad Toyo University has made a system that encourages later study abroad enabling students to register for credit whilst abroad (previously this could only be done inside Japan). However, the continual changing of the start of the job-hunting season has created some anxiety among students with some students disinclined to take off valuable time for study abroad. This has been noted anecdotally by the author, scholars and journalists previously (Japan Times, 2010; Ota, 2011). It appears that unless students can get benefit for their job hunting activities from study abroad, it is seen as having little value. Ota echoes this sentiment commenting on interviews undertaken with recruitment staff who claim that in this uncertain economic climate, companies rate the efforts of students who have studied abroad less than those that had done so in the past.

The factors listed above are all concerns that impact on the number of students studying abroad. Without the number reaching what has been projected, it may be difficult to sustain the number of students at the Language.

Internal Issues

Along with the external issues, there are internal matters which can negatively effect the operation of the Language Centre.

Role of the Language Centre

The role of the Language Centre has also been a source of conflict. The role envisaged for the Language Centre is to help improve the writing of students of all departments to facilitate them studying abroad and writing their dissertation in English. Not all of these students will reach these two personal goals, but the necessity to develop student writing remains. Conflict can be seen in the time-old balance between quality and quantity. Even though one semester has been apportioned for a student to complete one component of the program, not all students work at the same pace. North (1984) states that writers in individual program need time to develop their abilities. It is in the very Language Centre itself that learners get this personalized instruction and care that they cannot receive in the classroom, something that Ronesi (1995) sees as the benefit of writing centres. However, under the present system the emphasis is more on the number of students who enroll in the programs. This is brought about by adherence to targets relating to having as many students as possible study at the Language Centre. By concentrating more on the physical number of enrollees, something of the journey that leads them to be more competent writers is lost. If they are unable to develop at a uniform pace set by the program's curriculum, there is a possibility that more time is required for learners to finish work at a particular level to a satisfactory degree. An over-emphasis on physical numbers may have the effect of reducing the quality of work because teachers are stretched and students are pushed beyond what is reasonable for them to complete set levels of work.

The second and more important issue of the role of the Language Centre concerns a mis-fit in the function that the teachers provide. As mentioned, the writers require time to learn to write through a process of dialogue with the teachers. Proponents of writing centres call against the subsequent use of them as a fix-it shops or place for remediation (North, 1984) or as Harris, (1988) calls them: Band-Aid shops designed to patch up bad writing. This means both teachers and students must be fully aware of why students go to the Language Centre. Students' participation at the centre should always be voluntary, and it is to improve the writing ability of the students themselves, not their work. Quoting North (1988) who said "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing," (p. 438) The Language Centre is not a place to bring work at the last minute to be "improved" before a deadline. The value of the Language Centre must be viewed over a long timeframe, especially when students are producing longer pieces of academic work like a dissertation abstract or the dissertation itself.

Faculty-Driven Writing Classes at Toyo University

If Toyo University is serious about trying to increase the writing ability of students, it stands to reason that writing should be an important part of instruction at Toyo University. Although students have many oral-communication type classes, there are much fewer writing classes. The author of this report conducted a simple check on the number of writing classes currently on offer for both

semesters of the 2016 academic year. Keywords in English like *writing and composition* and similar meaning Japanese words like ライティング or 作文 were used for searching all curricula on the Toyo University system. As seen in Table 1, the type and availability of writing classes varies depending on the faculty. A number of faculties, particularly those located in the main campus, offer basic writing classes. Looking at the syllabi these basic classes were grouped on themes like improving writing at the sentence level, or basic paragraph construction.

Table 1 - Writing Faculty classes available Toyo University in 2016

Faculty	Basic	Above basic	Mixed
Literature	4	3	2
Law	2		2
Sociology	2		
Regional Development	3	2	
Economic			4
Life Sciences			2
Human Life Design			2
Information Sciences			3
Food and Nutritional Sciences		2	
Science and Engineering	2		
LEAP		2	1

Note. LEAP stands for Learning English for Academic Purposes and is not affiliated to any faculty

Fewer faculties offer classes in training writers to write above the basic paragraph level, including essay construction. Both the basic and above basic classes appeared as single classes in the curricula indicating that they are elective rather than compulsory classes. The numbers appearing in the column on the right are those classes, mainly compulsory where part of a class syllabus mentions instruction related to writing. There was a large range among these classes with some classes giving over just one week of a 15-week semester to writing and others stating that the aim of the class was to improve writing and having a weekly schedule indicating up to around one third of scheduled classes covering writing instruction.

Although writing is only one of the sub-skills, it is important that sole responsibility to help students write should not fall on the Language Centre. Faculties need to make firm commitments to basic and more advanced writing programs within their own faculties. In this way, the Language Centre can work in harmony with the faculties of Toyo University.

Addressing Student Critical Thinking

Another issue that affects how students react to the work required of them in the Language Centre has a cultural focus. Part of the writing process means and one that is particularly espoused in North American universities is critical analysis. Balester (2016) describes critical thinking in the U.S. as employing judgment of quality and validity to texts. She further describes it is as being based on a skeptical stance of the author. The notion of critical thinking, however, could be culturally specific, as

some claim. From a western point of view critical thinking is locked into the idea that the individual is distinct (Atkinson, 1997) and the dissenting voice is a source of change and rethinking of old norms. In an eastern paradigm, on the other hand, the Confucian-based education system puts emphasis on shared consensus and constructing solidarity with others. In that way, critical thinking can be awkward or even incompatible with some Japanese writers. This differing of expectations between being critical or not has an impact in the way that the Language Centre teachers are able to successfully prepare students to function in an overseas university environment where to think critically is assumed.

Some writers claim that notions like critical thinking are incompatible in the East, and by degrees Japan. Others writers believe that critical thinking is alive and can be encouraged (Stapleton, 2002) and it does exist in Japan, but not in the same form as that of the West (Oda, 2008). If we take the position that critical thinking is a part of Japanese education, it is very difficult to ascertain the level of exposure to these concepts that students have as they enter the writing programs at the Language Centre. From anecdotal evidence of teachers in the Language Centre, it becomes evident that the actions of the learners shows that they are unfamiliar with such notions. The teachers try to instill critical thinking into their students, but students most often merely copy an idea that the Language Centre teacher has given them, without them, first, exploring their own thinking about the topic. If the university is serious about creating critical writers who can function in study abroad locations, the buck should not stop at the Language Centre that may possibly be the last place where students learn before they study abroad. More attention should be given to critical thinking in education in a wider variety of classes, not only in Toyo University, but also in Japan in general.

Promotion of the Language Centre

In explaining how to attract students to writing centres, Harris (1988) advises addressing a number of questions related to the operation of a writing Centre. However, one thing that is not covered and that does constitute an issue for the Toyo University is the promotional issue. At present, the Language Centre joins a long line of other programs that are promoted during the first year orientation period as students first come to the university. It is important to catch prospective students at this early time because what they hear as part of the explanation may fit in with their existing study goals. However, with all the other programs on offer the message of the Language Centre, and other programs for that matter, becomes diluted. Students are bombarded with such an array of information such as study abroad, internship programs as well as other curriculum programs and how they can survive in the regular curriculum that it can become too difficult for them to choose. This is compounded by the fact that once the orientation finishes students are head-long into their first university classes, and that initial momentum in attracting students may be lost.

Student Assessment by Language Centre Teachers

As with many other parts of second language output, assessment employs rubrics for assessment. There are currently a number of different criteria in the rubric that assess student essays in the program. Those individual criterion are language use, mechanics, vocabulary, organization, content and genre. Each of criterion is judged on a scale of one to five starting from weak through fair, developing, strong and ultimately academic. Rubrics have been used in research involving assessing first language writing (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010) as well as ESL writing (Huang, 2009; Park, 2004).

At the Language Centre it would not be expedient for each writing teacher to rater every essay, so the teachers only rate the essays of the students that they are looking after. This can lead to problems of how to apply the criterion descriptions. One teacher may judge content more harshly than mechanics, while another teacher may concentrate more on the judgement of language use. Indeed, studies have found that teachers (raters) that use rubrics often prioritize different areas and use different strategies to apply rubrics (Barkaoui, 2010; Kuiken & Vedder, 2014). Therefore, it is important that all Language Centre teachers are trained to rate essays in a similar way getting around the problem of over-concentration on one criteria (bias).

Conclusion

This short paper has highlighted a number of issues that could negatively affect the Language Centre at Toyo University. The issues can be divided into external, those which the university has little control over and internal issues, which the university has a certain amount of management of. The external factors are mainly based around the falling number of students who are studying abroad for longer than three months. If this number falls, so does possible demand for writing instruction at the Language Centre. The university must work towards making scholarships more accessible, and calm student concerns about the safety of study abroad locations. The internal issues cover a wider range of topics. Some of the more important of these issues cover the role of Language Centre and how more emphasis needs to be put on the instruction of writing outside of the Language Centre in regular faculties. There is much opportunity for remedy of the problems in order to make full use of the benefit from the Language Centre and many parties need to be aware of such problems and work together to address them.

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東洋大学ランゲージセンターの直面している問題

ロブソン グライアム

要約

学生のライティング能力を向上させるためにランゲージセンターが開設されて4年目になる。ライティング能力の向上は、より多くの学生を留学させ、また卒業論文を英語で書く能力を向上させる一助となる。ランゲージセンターでの指導は必修ではなく、単位も付与されないが教員と学生とのマンツーマンの指導で行われている。学生からの肯定的な評価にもかかわらず、ランゲージセンターは適切な運営にまだいくつかの阻害要因がある。このレポートはランゲージセンターの大学内、大学外における活動に負の影響を与える問題とその運営方法に焦点をあてる。

キーワード：ライティング・センター、運営事情、留学