

## Action Research Final Report 2018-2019

Title: Development of Critical Thinking through Process Writing Approach in EFL Writing  
: Studies on Academic Writing Enhancement for Japanese College Students

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### 1. Context:

Level: second year university, lower intermediate

Class size: 10 students

Textbooks: Huizenga, J. et al. (1997). *Introduction to essay writing: A step-by-step course from paragraph to essay*, Tokyo: Shohakusha.

Kluge, D. E., & Taylor, M. A. (2018). *Basic steps to writing research papers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Tokyo: National Geographic Learning/ Cengage Learning K.K.

Folse, K. S. and Pugh, T. (2015). *Great Writing: from great essays to research 5* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) . Tokyo: National Geographic Learning/ Cengage Learning K.K.

Problems: Rubric is not consistent to use throughout the year

Quality of writing is measured by proof, refuting and outlines.

Not enough revision was done by students after feedback.

2. Overall Goal: I am working on developing students' writing through **process writing** in action research using **sociocultural theory**, **critical thinking** enhancement related to issues in Japan, and **rubrics** for self and peer review.

AR teaching goal: The goal of my research is to have the EFL students become capable of developing their thoughts logically and clearly expressing their statements in academic essays of 1000 words.

Research Questions:

RQ1. In what ways might critical thinking activities develop the quality of EFL academic writing in Japanese college?

RQ2: In what ways might process writing support the quality and development of ideas in ELF academic writing for low intermediate students?

### 3. Literature Review

This overview of literature organizes the focus of study in nine sections, providing both background information and current research in relevant fields. The first section examines the effect of process writing in English as Foreign Language academic writing course. Because of its collaborative nature between students and instructors, the topic makes connection with all the following sections. The second section explores scaffolding which works as an essential support in writing process to provide thinking habit to diverse EFL student body. Based on this theory, the third section studies the ways to improve critical thinking, which is often a hard task for EFL students, yet a key part of quality writing. The fourth section about communicative language teaching also relates to the above sections to emphasize on enhancing communicative competence to nurture the development of ideas to write. The fifth section focuses on sociocultural theory to enforce the classroom dynamics again with collaboration of students and instructors. As content is the priority of process writing, it may receive a strong effect from the culture. Therefore, social constructivism is discussed in relation. The sixth section argues on writers' identity based on the above social factors on their writing. The seventh section is about assessment rubric which functions for the class to have the same goal and to assist peer revision in the writing process. The eighth section is on freewriting to enhance thinking skills to expect the students to promote their fluency. Lastly, action research method is introduced to understand the approach of this study.

## **Process Writing**

The concept of process writing was introduced by Elbow (1973, p.14) for the writers to discover their own voice. Writing is a way of getting and developing ideas (Barnet & Bedau, 2014). Writing process is dynamic and complex: planning, organizing the ideas, transcribing (Dvorak, 1986) and reviewing (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, p.248). Brown (2007) also mentions the focus on the process allows more attention on the content. Hence, he developed the process approach to writing instruction which help the students understand the process and give them time to write and revise, let them discover what they want to say, feedback including conferences (p.392). Donnelly reported the writing process with the activities of a virtual peer learning to share the insights during the process, of individual search for references, conference, of considering how the findings apply to practice with critical thinking and academic writing (2011). Written products are often the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialized skills. (Brown, 2007, p.391). By writing a draft, we can help ourselves to think our way toward good ideas (Barnet and Bedau, 2014).

## **Scaffolding**

Scaffolding is "defined as tactics in the talk provided by a more proficient interlocutor when assisting a less proficient learner in accomplishing a task which one could not accomplish alone" (Ewert, 2009, p.252). Khodabandeh (2014) reports that model texts alone did not help students writing improvement but combined with instruction, they supported to raise the quality. Thus, introduction of suitable support during process writing is needed.

## **Critical Thinking**

Writing can be an important part of critical thinking (Barnet and Bedau, 2014).

Argument is used not only for defending but also to find the truth (Barnet & Bedau, 2014, p.229). In addition, intercultural competence is the key to critical thinking as it is based on paradigm shift and awareness of different opinions (Deardorff, 2018) To gain the competence, development of empathy between differences are encouraged. This is how students acknowledge the counter opinions and enhance their critical thinking by developing the refutation.

### **Scaffolding in Critical Thinking**

According to Donnelly & Fitzmaurice (2011), critical thinking is highly valued intrinsic part of the writing, but the teaching of it is difficult and not much research has been made within the context writing process. This research was applied to the lower intermediate EFL students. Thus, foreign language may make it harder to develop their thoughts. Therefore, scaffolding activities in ELF process writing is essential to enhance critical thinking skills for them. According to a survey by Times Higher Education (2018), their language proficiency level in standard deviation was 50.1 among college students in Japan.

### **Communicative Language Teaching**

Communicative Language Teaching is reported to show efficiency of successful learning in communicative settings by Savignon (2002:8). According to her, CLT fosters learners with the four competences below in simultaneous and integrated use: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence” (2002:225). As a result, “the engagement of learners in communication allow them to develop their communicative competence” (Savignon, 2002:22). Brown mentions that CLT helps to engage in real- world context which enable the learners to exchange information

between the peers (Brown& Lee, 2015:32). Slavin (1996) praises cooperative learning to be “one of the greatest success stories of in the history of educational research (p.43).”

### **Sociocultural Theory**

Patterns of written discourse by Kaplan (1966) shows that Japanese discourse spiral around the point, while English writers get straight to the point (Kaplan, 1966, p.14). Though in 2005, he admitted the patterns overgeneralized, no one can deny the effect of one’s native culture...native language patterns of thinking. The useful suggestion on instruction for the point by Brown (2007) is that instructors would consider students’ cultural schemata as one possible source of difficulty (p.394). The original sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) is that human develops in society and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others.

### **Social Constructivism**

McKinley argues that academic writing is socially constructed pieces of writing in which writer’s identity and critical argument reflect (2015). “Developing critical argument is a social activity, meant to generate a discussion designed to resolve some difference of opinion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984).” Similarly, Brown, H.D. (1989) mentions

Language and culture are bound up with each other and interrelated...So, if you’re planning to carry on some sort of communication with people who speak or write a given language, you need to understand the culture out of which the language emerges.

### **Writers’ identity**

McKinley indicates that writer identity is established through engaging in critical thinking which analyze with students and teacher’s social and cultural backgrounds (2015).

### **Rubric**

Scoring rubrics display students their areas of strength and weakness according to Brown (2007, p.413). In process writing, more points are weighed on content over syntax and vocabulary. By feedback and peer assessment using the same rubric enable to share the same goal between teachers and students. Kaufman & Schunn (2010) mention on peer assessment that much research has demonstrated the positive benefits of it for both the assessor and students who are receiving the assessment. Another way to evaluate the comprehension of students on the development of argument is by back transfer from L2 to L1 (Khodabandeh, 2014).

### **Freewriting**

Freewriting is a technique to generate ideas (Brown, 2007, p. 406). Brown et al. (1991) describe freewriting to write about a topic in ten minutes without stopping. While writing, write everything that comes to the mind, no judging, no worries about spelling and grammar, and they can write whatever comes to the mind. The process of writing features the practice of freewriting (Brown, 2007. P.392). The benefit is to improve the thoughts (Bernet & Bedau, 2014, p.229).

### **Action Research**

Action research is a recursive investigation through the cycle of selecting a focus, planning based on theories, setting research questions, practice, reflection, reporting results, and taking informed action. Insights and improvement accumulate by repetition of the cycle to further improve the teaching and to meet the diverse student body. Reflection and exchange with the colleagues also serve to build professional cultures to foster continuous growth (Sato, 2018, Sagor, 2000).

4. What I did since September:

The biggest challenge in second semester was to work on refutation, as it represents critical thinking. The strategy was to find reasons for your position first. Next step was to acknowledge opposite positions with proof. Finally, students refute on the counterargument to prove the stated position, Through the process of developing the logics, students examine at least two sides and evaluate which is more persuasive and convince the readers. It was assisted by outline building. Evaluation on critical thinking ability was checked by the points of refutation in the rubric. Students evaluated news sharing useful as it triggered discussion on different perspectives and it connected to the content of writing as citation. Freewriting topics were free but with some suggestions. Process writing scheduled to start with body paragraphs. They could change their position as they searched for proofs. Conclusion and Introduction were introduced after students were trained to refute to rethink. To review and confirm the argument, a class discussion on another cultural topic was argued and the outline was presented as the final evaluation.

## 5. Results

The course resulted in finishing ten papers which reached one thousand words with argumentative content and five paragraph structure to meet the rubric criteria. The improvement of the length of the essays during the course is shown in Figure 1.

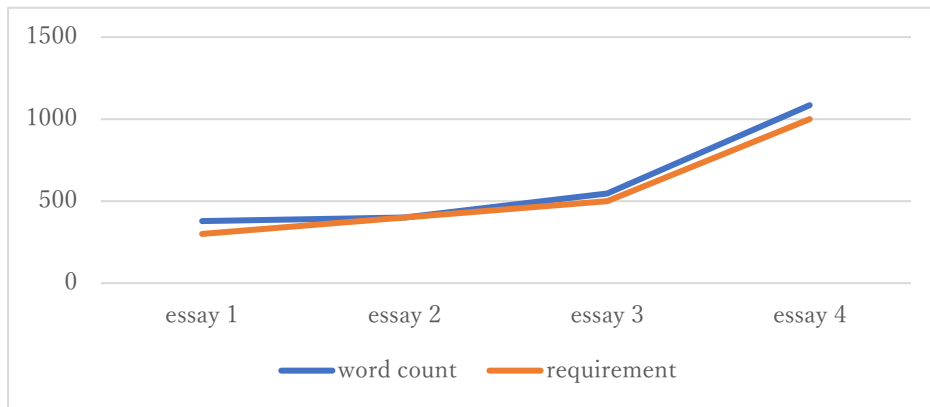


Figure 1. in ARR February: Increase of word counts in the essays

Table 1

Essay grade average

n=10	Essay1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Total/ 80
Grade points/ 20	12.1	12.6	13.1	15.1	62.9

Essay grades were evaluated using the rubric to assess the content, organization and self-reflection. Students total points varied between 31 to 68. Among four focus students, the lowest student Rk kept writing to finalize it in one thousand words, though failing to refute. Yk showed the biggest improvement while Me was constantly well. Se was doing well in 1<sup>st</sup> semester, but after being absent for a few times, she could not understand the goal of the essay and she failed to refute (Table 2, 3). Yk gave an advice in the final survey to the next year students never to be absent from the classes. He showed the effectiveness of the class as he positively joined the activities.

Table 2

Change in essay grades through the course for focus students

	Rk	Yk	Mo	Se
E1: descriptives	9	11	17	15
E2: examples	8	15	16	15



E3: cause & effect	6	20	19	13
E4: argumentatives	8	20	16	11

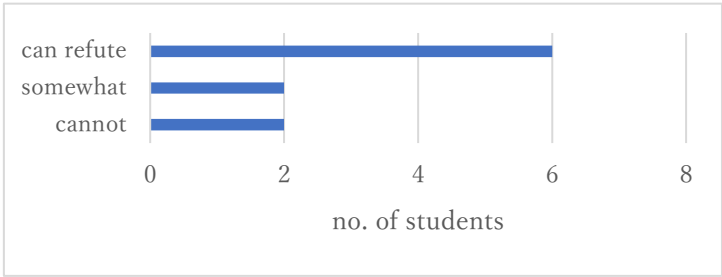
\*grade total /20

Table 3

Focus students' refutation points

	0	2	2	1
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\*refutation point total /2



Regarding refutation, six students were successful but two failed which were evaluated by the rubric.

Figure 3. Number of students who could refute in the final essay

Freewriting word counts was reported in ARR January report Figure 4.

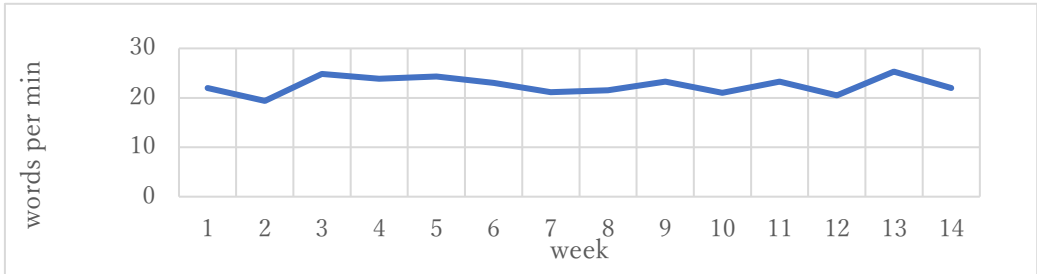


Figure 4. Change in word counts average over 14 weeks

Not big improvement in the fluency was observed from word counts per minute through fourteen weeks.

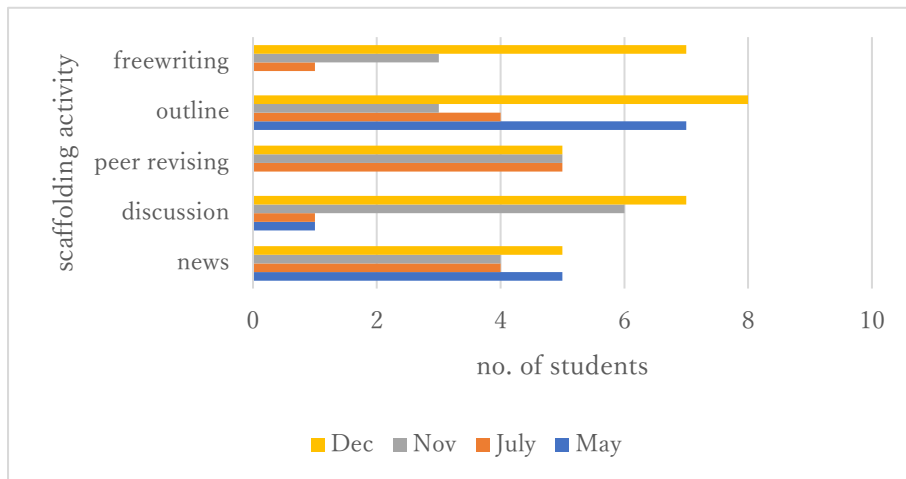


Figure 5. Student number who evaluated the activities in process writing very useful

From the surveys, students highly evaluated outline, discussion and freewriting activities to support their writing. Freewriting gained popularity at last with positive comments reported in the survey in December.

I can think in English.

Words come up quickly.

Next two figures show students confidence in the categories in writing.

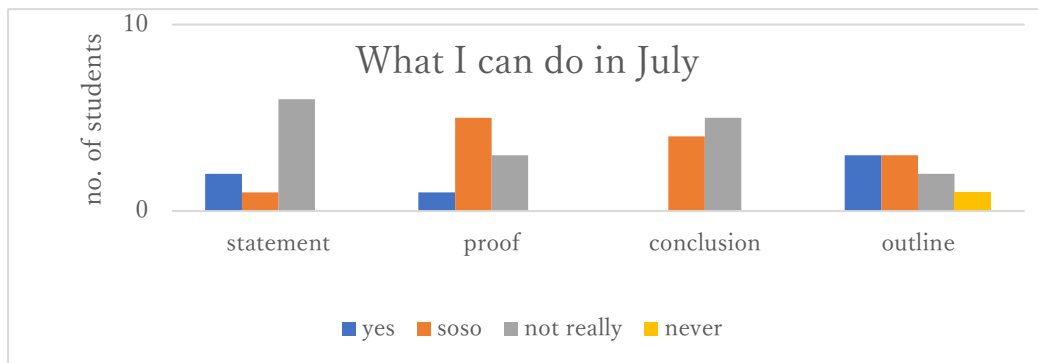
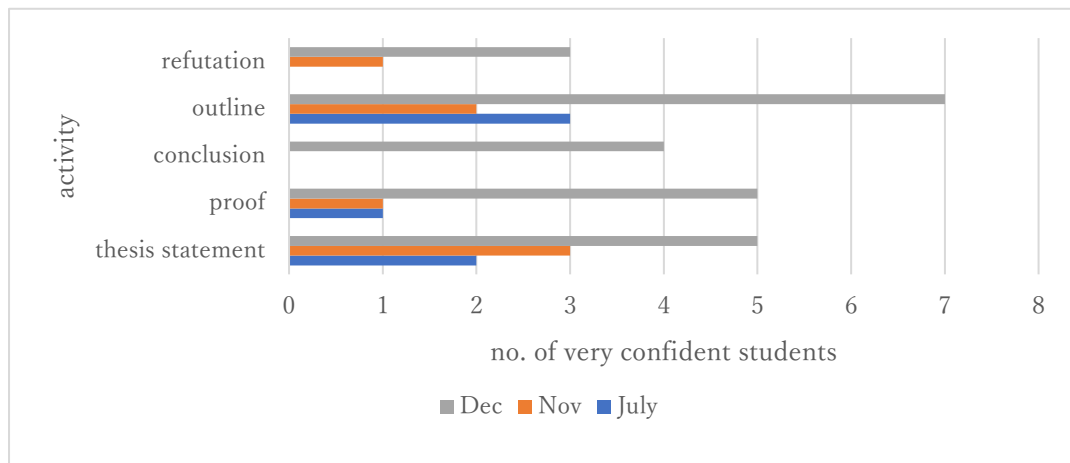


Figure 6. Change in students' confidence on each category in writing



*Figure 7. Improvement in number of confident students in critical writing process*

Regarding refutation, three students answered that they can refute, and seven answered that they understood how to refute and nine told they would like to use the style in the future. Compared with the fact of using refutation, this showed eagerness of the students despite they had difficulty writing the refutation. A student mentioned the hard part as below.

It was hard to find opposite opinions that relate to my statement.

Other final survey results shown in AR February report were analyzed to reveal how they thought they developed critical thinking skills and writing skills.

Writing skills development:

By focusing on the main points, clarifying my perspective, searching for proofs, being logical using outline, using academic ways, using synonyms, having the goal to write 1000 words, freewriting (6)

Critical thinking skills development:

By news sharing, weekly news checking, class discussion, knowing opposite points of view, asking why, listening to the others, accepting the other opinions

## 6. What I learned

Next year, as two academic writing classes are both in lower intermediate level, I expect much scaffolding is needed. Hence, it is best to research on the effectiveness of scaffolding activities to improve critical thinking in process writing. Specifically, the effect of additional step in process writing to have the students exchange their assessment on peer second draft on Moodle is scheduled. Targeting intermediate level students is meaningful as they have big potential of improvement (THE, 2018). One essential aspect I think is teaching based on sociocultural aspects, such as having the topics deeply related to Japanese settings (McKinley, 2014). Several topics were carefully chosen from the list of common political issues in appendix 2. This may make the students Zone of Proximal Development wider (Vygotsky, 1978).

## 7. Future Issues

Associated with teacher conferences, discussion and group sharing have contributed to raise students' confidence, so detailed observation on these activities is planned. Introducing proper argument topics within each class ZPD would be the key to a successful critical thinking writing course. Building up a relevant rubric for each semester is the first work to properly evaluate the critical thinking skills. What parts of thinking skills are measurable in a rubric is the question. Topics for argument that motivate students is what I would choose while checking the class ZPD. I would also measure the effectiveness of scaffolding in the activities in the writing process.

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Appendix 1. Course plan

Syllabus 1<sup>st</sup> semester

Week	Critical thinking	Practice	Structure	text	Handouts
1	research paper process writing for critical thinking	introduction News check on <b>Voting</b>	Research Paper Topics Paragraph	Unit 1 Unit 2	Weekly News Report: WNR, News sharing sheet Freewriting record
2	Critical Topics to Thesis Statement Don't Write- Think!	Brainstorming Narrow down topic Mind map HW: TS, OL	Thesis Statement: TS Outline: OL	Unit 2 Unit 4 Unit 5	OL sheet
3	3 Reasons Rubric	Peer revise TS, OL Class conference while Citation 1 for reasons HW: OL, 1 <sup>st</sup> <b>Draft</b>	Bibliography  OL of Sample essay "E-Vote"	Unit 3 Unit 4 Unit 7	Citation sheet rubric
4	Supportive Reasons Detail on Rubric	Peer revise draft HW: OL, 2 <sup>nd</sup> <b>Draft</b> References	3 reasons 3 Body 1 support/ reason	Unit 5 Unit 7	1 <sup>st</sup> survey Consent
5	Search for more supportive reasons at the library	Citation 2 for more reasons Revise OL & Draft HW: Moodle upload	References	Unit 3 Unit 6	
6	Peer revision & self-reflection by rubric	Presentation-1 HW: reflection	Body paragraphs and filled in rubric Reflection		Presentation rubric
7	Peer and self evaluation	Presentation-2	Feedback Narrow down to TS, OL	Unit 6 GW p.164	



	next topic & opinions	Brainstorming on free education or zoos HW: OL with 3 reasons			
8	Reasons for your opinion Plagiarism	Peer revise OL and TS Proof sharing HW: 1 <sup>st</sup> <b>Draft</b>	Body 1,2, 3	Unit 11 Unit 13	
9	More Supportive Reasons	Peer revise OL and draft 1 HW: 2 <sup>nd</sup> <b>Draft</b>	Body 3 with 3 supports Sample essay	Unit 10	
10	Restate and Summarize Rubric	2 <sup>nd</sup> Peer revise HW: add intro and conc <b>Draft</b> on Moodle	Conclusion & Introduction 400 words	Unit 12 Unit9	
11	Peer evaluation	Presentation-1	Feedback	Unit 9	T chart of pros and cons
12	Self-reflection Intro to counterargument	Presentation-2 HW: body 3 outline	refute	GW Essay 16	Body 3 outline Rubric for refutation
13	Refutation paragraph	Peer revise HW: <b>body 3</b>		GW Unit 7	interview
14	Intro and conc	Peer discussion HW: Refuting <b>Draft</b> on Moodle			Interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> survey
15	Review and prepare	Summer HW: list up pros and cons on next "topic", read a sample essay	References in APA plagiarism		Body 3 outline During summer

\*WNR: weekly news report, GW: Great Writing

## Appendix 2. Topics

Controversial topics for 2nd essay: moral conflict, learners cannot easily say good or bad, so they critically reflect on the topics, they develop critical and intellectual thinking. (Ishikawa, S. (2017). JACET Chubu Journal V.15, p.11-28). Policy motions is better in which students research and plan for an action.

### Policy Motions

1. Electronic Voting in Japan?
2. Gay marriage, minorities in Japan?
3. Get rid of Higashiyama zoo?
4. Free **college** education?
5. Uniform for **NUFS**?
6. Is study abroad beneficial?

### Value Motions for warming up

1. Should we stop” giri-choco”?
2. Which is better, e-dictionary or smart phone?
3. Which is better, praise or scold to raise children?

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### Topics from last year

1. Should be value proper holding style of Chopsticks?
2. Tattoos in Japan