

## **Addressing Concerns about Advising Graduate Students: From the Language Instructor's Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

In 2014, Teruyoshi Sasaki, the Dean of the International Christian University (ICU) Graduate School, explained his concerns about advising within the Graduate School in the ICU *FD Newsletter*. Some of these concerns might be addressed by the Academic English (AE) program. The following is a report of the Academic English (AE) for graduate students program offered by instructors in the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program. This report, written by two of the language instructors involved in the AE program, will first include an overview of the existing problem with advising in the Graduate School, the AE program, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Then, a discussion of the observations made by the two language instructors will be offered. The report will conclude with some possible future recommendations for improving advising of the graduate students with the help of the ELA's AE program.

### **Background**

#### ***The Existing Problem with Advising Graduate Students***

In a study comparing graduate programs at Nagoya University and ICU, Sasaki (2014) found that four similar problems with advising graduate students existed between the two schools:

1. Decline of basic academic abilities of students
2. Decline of enthusiasm of graduate students for their studies
3. Feebler mental aspects and temperaments among graduate students
4. Problem points on the side of the university itself and faculty groups (pp. 1-2)

The focus of this report will be with the first and fourth issues raised; that of the academic abilities of the students in the graduate program, and problems with communication between the different university departments. Examples given for this issue at ICU were, "insufficient writing skills, lack of English-language abilities, . . . insufficient knowledge concerning how to compose and write the thesis" (Sasaki, p. 2).

#### ***The English Program for Graduate Students***

The students at ICU, especially in the graduate program, have various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Some of them are non-native speakers of English with limited experience in academic English writing. In order to accommodate such students, two new elective intermediate English courses, Academic English (AE) and Academic English for

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Research (AE for R), are offered primarily for students who are in the master's program through the JDS (Japanese Grant Aid for Human Resources Development Scholarship) and ABE Initiative (African Business Education Initiative for Youth) programs. These students require extra support in writing academic papers in addition to completing the required course, *Writing for Researchers* (Iwata, 2016).

Each elective course is taught in a sequence of three terms, and AE is a prerequisite for AE for R unless sufficient academic English proficiency is demonstrated. For encouraging the academic success of the students, it is highly recommended to take the three credits of AE in the first year and the three credits of AE for R in the second year of the program as each course is worth one credit per term.

The AE course starts from building academic vocabulary and the basic writing skills for research papers, and aims to develop academic writing skills in order to write a research proposal at the end of the first academic year. The AE for R course focuses more on each part of the thesis, and provides necessary skills for the oral defense of the thesis at the end of the second academic year.

### ***Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)***

Whether it has been fully acknowledged or not, the graduate AE program, coinciding with the graduate program, might very well represent one of the purest forms of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at ICU. According to Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010), CLIL is “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content *and* language” (p. 1). This dual-focused form of instruction, which requires focusing on both content and language (p. 25), opens new doors in an educational experience that cannot be fully met in a language-learning classroom (p. 4).

Concerning CLIL at a tertiary level of education, Coyle et al. (2010) stated that “there are examples of CLIL being introduced to both further develop additional language skills and to accommodate the learning needs of migrant students who do not have a high level of proficiency in the medium of instruction adopted” (p. 24). When compared to our current situation and the topic at hand in this paper, this might be considered a good description of the AE for graduate students program offered by the ELA. It is meant as a way to provide additional language support on the content already provided by the graduate school content instructors and advisors.

Therefore, to address the issues brought forth by Sasaki (2014), we suggest further promotion of the AE for graduate students program amongst the attending graduate students as a means for improving the basic academic abilities of the students. Its unique integration of content from their graduate advisors and language instruction from the ELA faculty members might offer a satisfactory solution towards the improvement of the English language abilities and thesis writing skills of the participating students.

## **Discussion**

### ***Classroom Report and Observations***

The specific reports and observations offered in this paper concentrate on the AE courses offered in Spring 2015 and Spring 2016 to first and second year graduate students. In the first year course, we focused on three main aspects: further development of academic English skills, preparation of the research proposal, and research proposal composition. For

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the second year course, the focus was on thesis composition and thesis defense preparation. It should be noted that approximately one third of the courses were devoted to instruction on various academic skills in the classroom. The remaining two-thirds were devoted to the actual writing and feedback, often in the form of one-on-one tutorials.

Although the first year students had taken two AE courses previously offered in the Autumn and Winter terms, their diagnostic essays revealed that most of them lacked practice in delivering their statements clearly and effectively. Most notably, they tended to include multiple topics in one paragraph, which makes it difficult for the reader to follow. Thus, review of paragraph writing was provided with some exercises that focused on topics such as unity, flow, signaling, and cohesion using reference, substitution, ellipsis, and anaphoric nouns. Their diagnostic essay also displayed their limited vocabulary (e.g., repeated identical words and phrases) as well as their tendencies in making grammatical errors (e.g., missing subjects or verbs, wrong use of prepositions or parts of speech, using correct tenses, unnecessary use of progressive or passive clauses, and carelessness of verb transitivity). Due to the limited time of instruction, the students were encouraged to expand their academic vocabulary by using the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 1998). The instructors then supported this by teaching vocabulary learning strategies, holding frequent vocabulary quizzes, and pointing out repeated and common errors in their writing. Thus, by analyzing the diagnostic essays, the instructors could custom-build the course according to the individual language needs of the students.

Before starting to write the research proposal, the students were asked to submit a formal outline and an annotated bibliography. Having confirmed the topics and organization of the outline with the instructor, they were encouraged to consult with their advisors and get feedback on their content, since, without being familiar with the content, it was often difficult to determine if the topics were well covered and logically organized. When assigned an annotated bibliography, the students knew what to do, but often missed its purpose. Since they were under the pressure of deadlines and wanted to jump into writing the literature review section, some of them were not keen on this process. On the other hand, it gave the students a better idea of which sources to include by evaluating them using a checklist, and it also helped some students who were still collecting more sources and formulating research questions.

Since the students come from various disciplines, there are usually two or more writing style guides reviewed in class. In addition to introducing useful online resources (Purdue OWL, 2016), some basic writing skills were discussed as needed (e.g., punctuations, quotation marks, the use of italics and acronyms, what to capitalize, Arabic numeral and number words). However, the students had to be responsible for following the writing style guide of their disciplines, and a few of the students commented that there were just too many rules. Thus, individual issues were discussed during tutorials, and the students were encouraged to try their best on their own using the tools and information they learned about in class.

The writing process of the research proposal was divided into main sections: the abstract, introduction, literature review, and design/methodology. Some students found the abstract difficult to write, and made it almost similar to the introduction section or included too much detail with citations. It was also challenging for them not to repeat the same information in the introduction and literature review sections. Therefore, sample abstracts were provided to help them better understand how an abstract should be written and what should be included.

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In the literature review, the students had a tendency to use direct quotations whether they were short or long. Hence, some important academic English skills such as paraphrasing and summarizing information from sources were also covered with a list of reporting phrases, and the use of direct quotations were discouraged in order to keep the flow in a paragraph. In particular, the notion of plagiarism was clearly stressed by showing examples from different types of plagiarism. It was also seen that the students merely reported what the articles and studies were about, and often ended a paragraph without stating clear reasons why they had cited those resources. Most of the students struggled with synthesizing the literature, which is a process of combining their previous work from the annotated bibliography that contained ideas from some of the existing literature to create a narrative to justify their research. Instead of looking for connections between the citations and their justifications, many of them included more than necessary details about the citations in the proposal. In addition, it appeared to be hard for them to incorporate a conceptual or theoretical framework into this section, and make a clear research question. Therefore, advice was provided to help the students with these issues in both the classroom and individually in tutorials.

In the design/methodology, the following contents were suggested to be completed as many of the students planned to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research: research design, context, participants, data sources, data collection (or sampling) techniques and instruments, procedure, data analysis and interpretation, and ethical considerations. Since they were still in the process of planning the research, filling in the details seemed to be difficult for them as well as coming up with the limitations of their research. Some students found it tricky to organize the order of their content and mixed some of them together, which made this section less comprehensible. Therefore, further advice and suggestions were given during tutorials to deal with these issues.

For the second year students, the focus of the class shifted from proposal writing to thesis writing and thesis defense preparation. For thesis writing, classes were held to give instruction on the parts of the thesis and how to write the different parts, this time with the addition of the results, discussion, future implications, and conclusion sections. Further instruction was provided on synthesizing sources, and frequent and common grammar and vocabulary issues. Individual tutorials were frequently held to discuss individual issues in their theses. Many of the students were continuing to struggle with avoiding plagiarism and using the correct formatting, so additional instruction was provided.

For the second year thesis defense preparation, classes were held on summarizing their theses and presenting said information through slide preparation. The students were given time in class to present their slides and feedback was provided from the other students and the instructor. Then rigorous practice was given for answering questions about their theses.

One last observation was made on the improvement from the first year to the second year. Instructions and advice that were given during the first year class had often been brought forward into their second year AE course and successfully incorporated into their theses. This included research paper layout, ethical considerations, formatting, and attempts at synthesizing sources.

### *Student Comments*

The AE course basically consists of three lectures/classroom activities and one tutorial per week. Once the students started writing the research proposal, more tutorial hours were needed to discuss their writing individually. The students later made a remark that they found the tutorials helpful to develop their research proposals as well as to improve their writing

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skills. On the other hand, they also expressed their anxiety of whether they would be able to apply the skills they had learnt to write academic papers in the future.

One thing the students might find confusing is the unclear line between the academic English writing in general and discipline specific requirements. In fact, one of the students commented, though the student was too polite to mention it during the term, that the requirements from the English instructor and those from the advisor were not exactly the same, and it caused some complications, while the other students thought the English instructor accommodated their needs well.

At times, some of the students would complain about the amount of attention to detail that was needed when writing their thesis. For example, when multiple grammar errors were noticed, helpful tools such as Grammarly were introduced. However, some students would complain that using those kinds of tools were not technically difficult, but time consuming and troublesome. Therefore, gentle reminders were given about responsibility; that it was their responsibility, not that of the content and language instructors, to make their thesis perfect.

Finally, on more than one occasion, the students reported that their graduate advisors had expressed appreciation for the help from the language instructors. This appreciation was specifically given for focusing on and finding aspects of thesis writing and language they would not normally focus on.

### ***The Extent and Limitations of Assistance from the Language Instructors***

As mentioned in Sasaki's (2014) article, there is a need for the improvement of the basic academic abilities of the graduate students. The following is an explanation of the areas in which assistance can be provided by the language instructors teaching the AE graduate courses, and the limitations to our involvement.

With regards to the use of English in the students' proposals and theses, the language instructors can provide information and feedback on frequent grammatical errors, help with non-content specific academic vocabulary, proper use of punctuation, and so forth. However, the language instructors cannot spend hours carefully proofreading the entire proposal or thesis, nor provide feedback on very technical vocabulary or content related to the student's specific field of study.

Language instructors can also give advice about formatting styles, such as APA or Chicago Style, as long as we are informed about the specific formatting style the advisor prefers. We can provide instruction on the formatting basics and teach the students how to locate resources on formatting for themselves. Feedback on major errors in formatting can be provided. However, detailed correction of their formatting cannot be provided unless the students ask about it in their tutorials.

Additionally, basic information and feedback can be provided on how to write a research proposal and master's thesis. Instruction and feedback is frequently given on parts of the thesis, the information that is required in each part, and how to arrange said information. For example, many classes are devoted to developing the literature review. Instruction and feedback is provided on how to find sources, how to use paraphrasing, summarizing and limited quotations to avoid plagiarism, and the basics on how to synthesize information from different sources. Basic instruction can also be provided on how to research theories related to their topic of interest and create a conceptual framework for their own research. Ethical considerations are also explained along with information about maintaining participant confidentiality, proper storage of sensitive information, and creating and distributing informed

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consent forms. Yet once again, instruction and feedback on any content specific information with regard to the research proposal and thesis cannot be provided, such as detecting plagiarism in content heavy passages or recommending specific content-related resources for their literature review.

Finally, limited computer skills can be taught. This includes the basics of Microsoft Word and Google Docs, such as how to set the correct margin size, choose the correct font and size, or use the commenting system. However, instruction on many things beyond the basics is not possible.

### **Future Recommendations**

After carefully examining our observations, we would like to propose a few suggestions that might help solve some of the advising issues brought to light by Sasaki (2014). We are well aware that some of these suggestions might not be feasible due to different circumstances.

Firstly, we would like to encourage collaboration between the content and language instructors in the form of a face-to-face meeting or two at the beginning and possibly middle or end of the term. These meetings would be an excellent opportunity for information exchange. Such information might include clarification of the advisors' preferred formatting style, access to exemplar proposals and theses written by former students, details about feedback schedules and due dates for the students' work, a list of content-related technical terms and definitions to help with deciphering issues such as grammar, information on any ICU Graduate School-specific formatting rules for thesis writing, and anything else the advisors feel might be useful for the language instructors to give appropriate advice to their students. This information will most likely strengthen the advice provided by the language instructors, alleviate student confusion and prevent misunderstandings.

Additionally, even though we recognize constraints on time as an issue, we feel that closer collaboration might benefit the students and give the language instructors more information about specific requirements the advisors might have. If time cannot be found for face-to-face meetings, perhaps the helpful information mentioned above could be relayed by a different means. This information could be conveyed by email or campus post. Information exchange between the content and language instructors might very well be one of the keys to solving this issue in advising.

Finally, the most important suggestion we can offer is to ask the faculty and staff at ICU to encourage the graduate students to take advantage of the opportunity to help improve their academic English skills by participating in the AE for graduate students program offered by the ELA. After all, if they do not attend the classes and tutorials, we cannot advise them on their English and academic writing. This encouragement could be done directly by the content instructors and advisors, or perhaps through an informative orientation event during the first week of their arrival at ICU, similar to the orientation held for the College Composition course for the September undergraduates. Representatives from the ELA could prepare a short presentation about the program to explain its benefits if this is deemed as useful for promoting the AE for graduate students program.

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