

Report on the ELA Writing Courses for Graduate School Students (2015-2020): The Past, Present, and Directions for the Future

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Abstract

This paper is a status report of academic writing courses offered by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, International Christian University in Tokyo. These writing courses are taught by academic staff from the English for Liberal Arts Program to overseas graduate students whose first language is not English. These graduate students are often faced with two intertwining issues: they need to engage in designing and conducting their research, but they also have to write up their research project in English. The aim of this paper is to present the status of the writing courses by providing a descriptive account of the current program over the past five years in particular, and to follow the trajectory of how the courses have evolved and continue to develop in order to meet the needs of the graduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds. It concludes by presenting an outline of the newly restructured curriculum of this program that will come into effect from April 2021 as well as to outline some of the concerns and suggestions for further considerations.

Background

The Writing Program for Graduate Students at ICU: Student Profile and its Historical Overview (2015 - 2020)

At International Christian University (ICU), for over a decade and a half, various attempts to assist students' academic writing skills at the graduate level have been provided for both native English speakers and non-native speakers of English. In addition to Writing for Researchers (WFR), a one-term academic writing course open to all graduate school students, there are two courses that are offered to non-native English speakers, namely, Academic English (AE) for first-year graduate students and Academic English for Researchers (AE for R) for second-year graduate students. These two courses are designed mainly for students from overseas on scholarships such as JDS (Japanese Grant Aid for Human Resource Development Scholarship), Rotary Peace Fellow, and NOHA (Network on Humanitarian Action institutions) who require extra support in writing academic papers in English. This paper is a report on AE and AE for R. The authors firstly present a brief overview of AE and AE for R from 2015, when they were introduced as English for Liberal Arts (ELA) courses for graduate students, through to 2020. It will then introduce a newly formed curriculum that will go into effect from April 2021, and the rationale for making

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changes to these courses. The paper will conclude with some further thoughts and suggestions for the future.

AE and AE for R from 2015 to 2020: Student Profile and Course Description

AE and AE for R are targeted for graduate students who have received their education in non-English speaking countries and who have TOEFL scores of around 550 or lower, or IELTS scores around 5.5 or lower. As illustrated in the following table, the class size each year is small.

Table 1
Students registered for AE in Academic Years 2015 - 2019

Academic Year	Student Number	Participants
2015	5	3 x Asia; 2 x Africa
2016	8	4 x Asia; 3 x South Pacific; 1 x Africa
2017	4	2 x Asia; 1 x Africa; 1 x Oceania
2018	7	6 x Asia; 1 x Africa
2019	6	6 x Asia

Students taking these support courses have little or no experience in writing academic papers in English. Furthermore, some students have not been required to write an undergraduate senior thesis even in their native language. Writing an MA thesis in English, therefore, can be an intimidating and daunting experience for them. AE and AE for R are not mandatory courses but are highly recommended for students who lack experience in writing academic papers in English. AE in the first year covers general principles of writing academic research papers. Once they have developed the foundational skills in academic writing, the students proceed onto AE for R, which helps them to structure and complete their MA thesis in the IMRaD format. In both AE and AE for R, students have three classes and one tutorial a week. The general overview of the two-year program is described below (See also Table 2).

Academic English (AE) for First Year Graduate Students

Autumn Term - AE (A): General Principles of Academic Writing

AE (A) aims to introduce and develop in students the fundamental writing skills necessary for effective academic writing. It covers key aspects of formal writing such as the writing style, structure, and organization of an academic paper. Depending on the level of students in the given year, the course can flexibly start with paragraph writing and build from there. It is intended to provide the basic principles of academic writing for students who lack experience in writing academic papers. There is also a focus on increasing academic vocabulary knowledge.

Winter Term - AE (W): General Principles of a Research Paper

This course follows AE (A) and seeks to further develop academic writing skills acquired in the previous term. In addition, students begin to focus more on constructing and writing research papers. This is done both by analysing research papers in various disciplines, and starting to work on their own research paper. For example, by identifying quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research techniques in papers they analyse, the students can consider how to apply these techniques to their own research. It is hoped that this course will help students to refine their research questions and form and develop arguments.

Another important aspect of this course is working with sources. Students consider what plagiarism means and practice paraphrasing, summarising, and citing. They learn about primary and secondary sources, and how to find, evaluate, synthesise and incorporate sources into their writing. This is put into practice by writing a short literature review for their own research as one of the term assignments. This assignment also gives an opportunity to utilize critical thinking skills that they learn this term; students learn how to write a critique of an article they have read, how to write a comparative critique of several texts, and how to integrate critiques into their own literature review. When writing critiques, students follow a pattern suggested by Wallace and Wray (2016), which includes: title and introducing the text; reporting the content; evaluating the content; drawing your conclusion (p. 56).

As in the Autumn term, the course continues to help students expand their academic vocabulary. Many teachers ask the students to keep vocabulary logs of unknown words that appear in papers they are reading. Students also check these words on the Academic Word List and write definitions, synonyms, derivatives, and example sentences.

Spring Term - AE (S): Research Proposal

This course follows AE (A) and AE (W), and involves writing a research proposal. The process of constructing a research proposal includes aspects of writing that will be fundamental in their dissertation work. It also maintains focus on the students' own research. As in previous terms, the students continue to expand their academic vocabulary throughout the spring term.

The first assignment of the term aims to help students work with the sources they have found by requiring them to write an annotated bibliography. The students are asked to annotate eight of the sources they expect to use in their research proposal. They are encouraged to summarise each source, evaluate it, and explain its applicability to their own research. This forces the students to critically read their sources in more detail and can help them to clarify their own perspective on their topic as they continue to develop their own research questions and discover where their research fits in their field. The students then produce a formal outline of their research proposal before working on each section: Literature Review, Design and Methodology, Research Limitations, Introduction, and Abstract. By completing the research proposal, students have a concise summary of their proposed research and more of an understanding of its significance. At this point, they should be ready to progress to the Academic English for Research course.

Academic English for Research (AE for R) for Second Year Graduate Students

This course aims to provide a necessary instruction on writing a successful thesis at the MA level. It covers various aspects of an MA thesis that are common to most academic fields. While consolidating the academic writing knowledge and skills students have learned in AE, AE for R helps students to write their own research papers. The course focuses on the standard IMRaD research paper structure, as this is the format the students are likely to be using for their papers. Prerequisites of this course are AE (A), (W), and (S), or demonstrating an equivalent level of academic English proficiency.

Autumn Term - AE for R (A): Thesis Writing Part 1

In the Autumn term, AE for R focuses on how to form and write the first sections of a thesis: Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology. As the students are from various fields, it is necessary to look at the features of each chapter in a general manner and focus on common aspects. Nonetheless, the students are encouraged to collect papers from their own area of study to analyse more specifically the characteristics of published work in their fields.

The classes this term explore the Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology in a similar style. First, general aspects of each chapter such as what to include and how to structure it; then more specific elements including grammatical features, such as what tenses are commonly used in each chapter, and vocabulary and frequently used phrases within each chapter that students can use as a template to introduce their work in conventional language.

The lessons on the Introduction and Literature Review chapters often include exercises highlighting the “moves” common to these sections (Swales, 1990). These include the create-a-research space (CARS) model where the moves include: a) Establishing a research territory; b) Establish a niche; c) Occupying the niche (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 331). Further attention is given to aspects such as situating the work within the existing body of related research, avoiding plagiarism, practicing citation patterns, and showing limitations of previous works by other authors.

Similarly, classes on the Methods section might include analysing Peacock’s (2011) seven moves for this chapter, adapted in Swales and Feak (2012, p. 291) as: a) Overview; b) Research aims, questions, or hypotheses; c) Subjects and/or materials; d) Location; e) Procedure ; f) Limitations; g) Data analysis.

Winter Term - AE for R (W): Thesis Writing Part 2

This course follows AE for R (A), and provides support in writing up the results and discussion sections. Like the Autumn term, students look at features of these sections commonly found across multiple disciplines, while comparing them with features from papers in their respective fields. Again, the general structure and organisation of Results and Discussion sections are analysed in addition to more specific aspects. Examples of the Results section include describing data in tables and charts, highlighting important results, reporting negative results, and deciding whether to briefly interpret results here or wait until the Discussion section. For the Discussion section, students study aspects such as interpreting results, presenting claims, comparing with other research, discussing limitations, implications, applications, recommendations, and further research.

Spring Term - AE for R (S): Thesis Writing Part 3

This course follows AE for R (A) and (W) offered in the previous terms. The first half of the term provides support in completing the whole thesis. Some students may have finished

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each section and just require help such as reviewing certain parts, or checking citations. Others may still be working on the latter chapters of their thesis. For this reason, most teachers tend to consider the spring term to be one specifically for tutorials until the thesis submission date around mid-May. The remainder of the term then often switches back to group classes with emphasis placed on preparing students for the oral defense of their dissertation. To this end, improving skills in preparing slides, presentation techniques, and predicting potential questions they may be asked about their research is a critical part of this final stage. The students have a chance to practice their final presentation in front of the class, and as the audience they seem to enjoy playing the role of professor in questioning their classmates about their research. The teachers can also offer tutorials during this stage of the term to give individual feedback and suggestions to the students.

A summary of the above courses is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Course Descriptions, Summary of the two-year course (AY 2015-2020)

First Year	
AE (Autumn Term)	General Principles of Academic Writing
AE (Winter Term)	General Principles of a Research Paper
AE (Spring Term)	Research Proposal
Second Year	
AE for R (Autumn Term)	Thesis Writing Part 1 (Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology/Methods)
AE for R (Winter Term)	Thesis Writing Part 2 (Analysis, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion)
AE for R (Spring Term)	Thesis Writing Part 3 (editing, presentation skills, preparation of oral defense)

Challenges for Teachers

There are certain challenges that instructors face when teaching AE for R in the second year of the program. These issues include how to conduct the classes, how to deal with the fact that the students in the class are from different disciplines, and also that they are at different stages of writing their own research papers. The class meets three times per week with an additional tutorial period. Some teachers hold classes for all students while covering the content described above. As mentioned, the content has to be taught in a general manner with the students comparing this with specific examples from their own field. Once the content for the term has been completed, the teacher can use the four weekly class periods to focus more on tutorials in order to guide the students individually at whatever stage they are with their own research papers. Another option is to have a mixture of lessons and tutorials throughout the term. This style allows the teacher to notice common errors amongst the students' work during tutorials and discuss those issues in class as a group. A further option is to use all four periods each week throughout the term to conduct tutorials, with almost no group classes. Compared with AE in the first year, there is a great deal of flexibility for teachers in how they design the syllabus and conduct these classes. With such small class sizes, it is also possible to take into account the students' wishes and ideas on how to conduct the course.

A further problem that can arise is to what extent teachers should help with the students' research itself. The aim of the course is to help students to write their papers in academic English, but the students often have questions about their research projects: inquiries about their research framework, questionnaires for qualitative research, getting approval from the research ethics committee, and so on. Teachers can feel conflicted about the extent to which they should assist students with their research. Furthermore, instructors may find they can help some students more than others. For example, ELA teachers are more likely to be able to help students doing qualitative research in education, than those doing quantitative research in economics. It is up to the teachers how to deal with this and in the writers' experience it seems fine to help with research issues where appropriate, but there must be a point where the students are told to refer certain questions to their research advisors. In addition, Erdelyi and Kiyosawa (2016, p. 5) highlighted the need to remind students that AE for R is not a proofreading and editing service.

New Curriculum

The purpose of this paper is to not only raise awareness amongst ELA instructors and the wider ICU community about AE and AE for R, but to introduce recent recommendations for the courses. Based on feedback from graduate students, ELA teachers, and MA thesis advisors, several changes have been proposed for the two-year AE and AE for R curriculum. The changes for Autumn and Winter terms will be effective as of Academic Year 2021. The proposals for Spring term are due to be approved and commence from AY2022.

In recent years, the ELA instructors and the graduate school office have received similar feedback from the students that it is becoming increasingly difficult to take these two-year writing courses because of scheduling conflicts. For example, AE and AE for R classes can clash with other graduate school courses students wish to take. There is also often a clash with Japanese language classes, which many graduate students are interested in taking. This

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problem is exacerbated in the first-year winter term when students are asked to take both AE three times a week and also Writing for Researchers (WFR) twice a week, in addition to tutorial periods for both courses. Unlike AE and AE for R, WFR is a recommended course for all graduate students. Students also require time for attending conferences; graduate students are encouraged to present about their research at academic conferences and receive financial support to attend both in Japan and internationally.

According to informal surveys completed by the graduate students, comments indicate that they find it increasingly difficult to meet the time schedule required by AE and AE for R. Consequently, from AY2021, the number of classes for these courses will be reduced from three classes per week to two classes per week. Furthermore, despite the fact that these courses meet three times a week, students have until now only received one credit for each term. As this is disproportionate to other classes in the graduate school, the courses will therefore change from one-credit courses per term to two-credit courses.

Major changes have also been made to the content of AE in the first year. These changes have been made due to the scheduling issues already mentioned, but also by other factors. Firstly, the course coordinators and the graduate school office feel that the general level of students' academic writing upon entering ICU is increasing. While a number of students still require the AE and AE for R courses, it may no longer be necessary to start from an introductory course that focuses on the general principles of academic writing that the AE Autumn term has been offering. In addition, the students are already learning advanced concepts about research in the autumn term in graduate school courses such as Research Design and Methodology.

Thus, as shown below in Table 3, the ELA proposed that as of AY2021 the autumn term for AE focus on general principles of a research paper, rather than general principles of academic writing. There will be a particular focus on general principles and skills of reading and writing academic papers. AE in the winter term has been closed, and the students will only take WFR. Most of the content from AE (W) has been moved to the autumn term, and some to the spring term. The AE students will be grouped together in WFR in the Winter term so they can receive the necessary support they require compared to other graduate students. AE in the spring will continue to focus on writing a research proposal.

Table 3
Proposed changes to Academic English (AE)

First Year	
AE (Autumn)	General principles of academic writing → General principles of a research paper.
AE (Winter)	General principles of a research paper → Take “Writing for Researchers” (WFR) ONLY.

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AE (Spring)	Research proposal → No changes (students develop their research proposal from WFR)
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Suggestions for the Future

Feedback and comments from both the students and their advisors suggest that AE and AE for R are extremely beneficial for the participating graduate students. Nevertheless, there is still some room for improvement.

Erdelyi and Kiyosawa (2016) have previously called for more collaboration between the content and the language instructors, i.e., the professors advising the students and the ELA instructors. This is an area that we feel can still be improved and while the time constraints still exist, the suggestions Erdelyi and Kiyosawa (p. 6) provided are still relevant.

The organisation of materials for AE and AE for R has improved by creating shared folders in the ELA's Team Drive. Keeping these folders updated each term makes it easier for new instructors teaching these courses, and prevents material created by instructors who have left ICU from being lost. Many ELA instructors are not particularly aware of the Graduate School courses that the ELA offers. When assigned to teach these courses for the first time, it can be difficult to find information and materials. New teachers often have to rely on face-to-face meetings with the few instructors who have taught the courses previously. Therefore, we plan to supplement the Team Drive storage with master Google Classroom pages for each of the six terms in AE and AE for R. This will again help to prevent loss of material, and help new teachers to gain knowledge of the course and access material added by multiple instructors.

With the proposed changes to AE and AE for R taking effect from April 2021, it will be important to monitor how the adjustments are received by the people involved. To this end, we recommend a comprehensive collection of term-by-term feedback from both the students and the instructors. Formal surveys and interviews should be conducted with the consent from those involved to share the results. We hope that the proposed changes to the AE and AE for R curriculum will ease some of the scheduling and workload challenges students face, while maintaining the benefits they receive from the courses.

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