Chapter 9
Teaching Critical Thinking and Academic Writing Skills to Japanese University EFL Learners: A Pedagogical Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This chapter looks at a critical thinking and academic writing skills course designed for Japanese learners of English. The study presents two sets of data from the 87 participants who have taken part in the course since its inception in 2008. The first data set is concerned with actual writing samples from multiple drafts of a medium-sized research project carried out by the student participants. The second data set results from a self-assessment survey given to the learners both at the beginning and end of the 15-week course described in this chapter. Further, results from a satisfaction survey given to learners at the end of the course are presented. The chapter concludes with some pedagogical implications for both Japanese and other Asian EFL learners and how the methods used in the course described within can be replicated elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION
With globalization rapidly baring its teeth across the world, and with the massive changes this brings, university students are forced to deal with these changes by adapting their learning strategies and the goals they have for their future. In a similar vein, teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) must also adapt their teaching to suit the students in their classrooms, since, to successfully prepare them for our rapidly changing world, we must do our utmost to prepare them for what they may face beyond the classroom (Oi, 2005; Tanaka, 2009).

This chapter will outline how a critical thinking skills and academic writing course at a
medium-sized Japanese national university was structured, organized and carried out. The study focuses on how the course affected the students’ critical thinking and writing skills and their own assessment of what they had learned.

BACKGROUND

It is well known that reading and grammar are given more importance than speaking, listening and writing in Japanese junior and senior high schools (Aiga, 1990). This poses a problem for students when they enter university, as they lack the requisite skills to cope with the writing courses they will have to take. In fact, due to the great emphasis placed on writing at U.S. and Canadian universities (Fujioka, 2001), the conduct of writing classes in Japan needs to be re-evaluated. Warschauer (2000) argues that traditional methods of learning English will be inadequate when preparing students for the changes in global Englishes and a society that relies more and more on critical thinking skills. This is an approach that most Japanese learners are wholly unprepared for, as they learn how to write in junior and senior high school from Japanese teachers of English by using grammar and translation-based methods (Hirayanagi, 1998): methods that later pose problems for students when they enter either a Japanese university or a Western university where English is the language of instruction. This leaves those entering university seriously unprepared to write academic papers. True preparedness for a study-abroad experience in English – the goal of increasing numbers of Japanese high school and university students in recent years (Drake, 1997; Heffernan, 2003) – means that our curricula should include courses on how to teach critical thinking and academic writing skills to our university-level students.

Students who are hoping to gain entrance into universities in America or Canada now have to write an academic-style essay for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Many of these students are well aware of the preferred rhetoric styles required in TOEFL - introduction, body and conclusion and main ideas and topic sentences - through preparation materials (Knoch, 2011). Yang and Sun (2012) suggest that argumentative writing requires writers to possess high cognitive skills in order to demonstrate appropriate linguistic and cultural discourse in the target language. For many Asian learners this proves to be a challenging task, as they are not accustomed to being taught critical thinking skills (Hussain et al., 2007).

One approach that works with EFL learners involves process writing (Lee, 2008). Since the emergence of the process writing movement, intervention by a teacher during students’ actual writing process has been recognized as assisting them to advance to more complete stages of the writing process (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). However, even though process writing facilitates creativity and idea generation (Lam, 2013), novice writers – like the majority of Japanese undergraduates – might feel more comfortable with instruction on how to form a pattern for constructing compositions. Given the notion of contrastive rhetoric, patterned rhetoric hinders the learners’ writing process. But giving learners practice with critical thinking skills and forming argumentative essays still requires development of the logical capacity essential in academic communities (Cumming et al., 2002). This is a prospect that may seem daunting to many Japanese EFL learners, but one that can be instilled in them with direct instruction.

To adequately prepare our students for the rigors of overseas study, or merely for the opportunity to learn how to write in an academic style, writing courses at Japanese universities, and indeed across Asia, should focus on teaching the types of critical thinking and academic writing skills needed in today’s world. And currently the stereotype view of Asian students studying at Western universities is that they do not possess these skills (Ballard, 1995; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). Teaching these kinds of “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-