

"I hope you don't mind that I put down in words" Essay Writing in the Global Course

Paul Tanner
Shiga University / Lecturer

The Global Jinzai Program (G-Course) was started at Shiga University in 2014 with a goal of creating / developing international leadership skills. In addition to doing an internship in a foreign country, taking Special Project classes, and three courses in English Presentation, students also take Essay Writing I & II as well as Academic Writing. I have been teaching the writing course for the past 10 years. In this essay, I will explain how I organize and implement the essay writing courses and address their future in the G-Course curriculum.

Timed writing

Students need to write in English as much as possible. At the beginning of every class, students complete a 10-minute writing about a specific topic or theme. This serves as an icebreaker as students think in English and concentrate on putting ideas on paper. The emphasis is on spontaneity and moving away from their "mistake averse" habits. Examples of topics include: "10 years from now," "Japan's most important problem," and "How to be a better student." Timed writing is a flexible tool; the topic can be discussed before and after the writing. It is commonly used to reinforce or preview targeted linguistic patterns and grammar.

Process Writing

Process writing is a concept that students may be aware of but generally don't practice. To write an essay, students should brainstorm, work through an outline, revise and edit, and give and receive feedback before making a final, polished essay. Students sometimes think they

should write in a product approach, in which the main idea is to produce a model text. Students are often averse to making changes, as if their draft was "born perfect." Following process writing removes the temptation to write in one take and helps students develop skills that become ingrained habits.

Types of essays

There are a variety of fundamental essay formats that students should learn. These include the "standard" 5-paragraph essay format including the persuasive essay (with and without refutations and concessions), compare and contrast, process description, cause and effect, reasons and examples, etc. Students also practice writing summaries of various lengths and write a number of personal narratives, such as their English Language Learning Histories (ELLH), in which students reflect on their own English learning experience.

Reflection

For students to develop their writing and be able to write independently, they need to develop reflective habits. Students don't improve without noticing mistakes and developing strategies for improvement. This awareness includes thinking about what they are doing, how they can improve and monitor the mistakes they have made. I use a few activities to promote reflection.

One strategy for reflection is peer review in which students read their classmates' writing and make comments on the content and organization. Students are encouraged to suggest

meaningful changes and additional content on their peers' essays, rather than suggesting mechanical or surface changes. Students can notice weaknesses and strengths in classmates' writing, making them more skilled at finding their own weak points. This activity naturally leads to re-writes. I don't require students to re-write every essay (although the option is available) however all peer reviewed papers should be re-written.

Another reflective activity is for students to complete a portfolio of their writing at the end of each semester. Students rank their papers by quality, based on their own judgement. A portfolio cover sheet requires reflection on various class activities and a self-analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. By reflecting on their writing, students learn to transfer knowledge and skills from one assignment to the next, gain fluency and learn from their mistakes.

Beyond the five-paragraph essay in second-year writing

Discussing current events and controversial themes is one focal point of the second-year writing classes. Students read newspaper articles in English, discuss them in groups and offer opinions. Each person has a different article and is responsible for explaining the article and leading a discussion. Students write summaries of articles and write comments about the content. One assignment is for students to disagree with a published article and write a rebuttal.

Another goal is for second year students to go beyond the five-paragraph essay format. For example, one assignment asked students to write a letter to the Japanese Prime Minister giv-



ing an opinion about a policy or offering policy suggestions or proposals. Students also practice reading for speed in short segments. After learning the format in class, students read the short paragraphs outside of class, record their speed and comprehension and write a reflection at the end of the semester.

I don't specifically teach TOEFL or IELTS essays, but I do provide some strategy advice, and offer to check student practice essays. The formats are similar to that used in Essay Writing I. One ambitious student asked me to review 100 practice TOEFL long essays that he wrote over one summer. That is a record that I hope is never broken.

Special writing projects

Twice G-Course students have put together a special project resulting in a collection of their writings. The first was an English language restaurant guide to Hikone with foreign students studying at the JCMU as the target audience. The second project was a collection of essays concerning students' ELLH. Both collections required peer review and much cooperation. Comments from their portfolios were overwhelmingly positive. These three comments were typical:

1. *It stimulated my motivation to learn English.*
2. *I like to read about other people's experiences.*
3. *The book will become one of my valuable memories of my student life at Shiga University.*

Many students mentioned that to write for a real audience was motivational. To be fair, not every comment was positive. One hard-working

student noted that *not everyone put in the same amount of effort*, which is a fair critique.

The future of the G-Course

Over the years of the course there have been many changes and adjustments to the G-Course and essay writing. Determining the best candidates for selection, and what criteria to base selection on is a constant debate. The essay writing classes have undergone changes as situations (such as the Covid 19 pandemic) change, improvements are made, and technology advances. Class size varies as do ambition levels. Future classes will continue to be adjusted to better match student needs. For example, over the years I have taught the essay classes, I have added more class time for discussing and sharing ideas. Including additional collaborative writing projects will also enhance learning and further motivate students.

The G-Course has been a great challenge and a rewarding experience for our students, as well as myself. Our graduates have been successful on so many fronts: being selected for good jobs, having successful work and study experiences abroad, entering quality graduate school programs, and earning scholarships. All these accomplishments indicate the success of the G-Course and enhance the reputation of Shiga University.

1125

