

<研究ノート>

## **A 6-step News Summarizing Activity to Tackle Deficiencies in Japanese First-year University Students' English Language Skills**

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### **Abstract:**

The primary intent of this short work is to unveil a news reporting activity that evolved from a necessity to improve rudimentary English writing skills among first year Japanese university students in mandatory English classes. After a sketch of the origins of the activity, some of the most pronounced language skill deficiencies exhibited by students entering Japanese university will be identified and listed, along with a dabble into some probable causes for their enduring prevalence. After which, the news-reporting activity will be introduced and outlined in its entirety, followed by a specific breakdown of the objectives and justifications offered for each of the 6 main steps in the activity. In the conclusion, the activity's most discernible advantages will be highlighted.

### **Introduction:**

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2019 (THE, 2018) featured two Japanese universities among the top two hundred universities in the world. Four years earlier, Japan boasted five universities among the world's top two hundred. These figures may be indicative of Japanese universities not keeping abreast of educational trends abroad, and could also be suggestive of the lackluster progress in Japan's English education system. Despite the humbling figures, scholars in and outside Japan have been decrying the systemic failings of Japanese English language education for decades. The voices are so numerous that it has become mundane to repeat that academic English writing skills among first-year entrants to Japanese universities are substandard. The long term persistence of these substandard English levels has not only been a thorn in the side of a succession of Japanese education ministers, it remains an impetus for all English language educators in Japan to adopt and develop new and effective strategies to redress the shortcomings. The ongoing challenge to improve this situation is responsible

for the formulation of the news-reporting activity that follows.

The primary intention of the activity was to tackle several specific student weaknesses by focusing on a 6-step set of tasks that required participants to employ most of the verbs in Bloom's Taxonomy. More specifically, it was designed to improve students' capacity to read international news articles in English, quickly hone in on the central issue, and assess and organize a comprehensive structured summary, with a well-reasoned opinion tagged on. Moreover, the 6-step process was intended to eventually be internalized by the students so that they could read any news, and quickly narrate a condensed version without recourse to pen or paper. Before detailing the method of administering the news activity, a list of specific student weaknesses needs to be drawn up. The problems will be isolated, enumerated, and appended with potential generative causes. After which, an overview of the activity's primary aims will be presented, and explanations and justifications for the 6 steps of the activity will be outlined in relation to how they may counter the listed weaknesses. In conclusion, some of the salient benefits garnered from the activity will be appraised.

### The Problems:

In the last century, Roger J. Davies (2000), a scholar and author of several best-selling books on Japanese culture, proclaimed there were serious inadequacies in Japanese students' English writing skills at the post secondary level. He contended that among the four English language skills taught in Japanese institutions, writing was the most neglected, and simultaneously the most problematic skill for Japanese students of English to master. Davies diligently codified every identifiable writing problem in his exhaustively researched 264-paged 2000 publication, and since then, the seemingly insurmountable problem of commanding an operational English writing fluency still eludes many Japanese students. From 2000 to 2018, or for eighteen consecutive years, the author of the ensuing pages has taught introductory English writing at Japanese high schools, colleges, and universities in and around Tokyo. Hopefully, the reader will concede this lends sufficient qualification to the assertion that in 2018, the proportion of Japanese high school graduates entering university with inadequately spoken and written English language skills is still as alarmingly high as it was in 2000.

- 1) Apart from those who have lived abroad, studied at international schools in Japan or abroad, or at Japanese schools with exceptional English programs, most Japanese students enter university barely able to write or deliver a complete and coherent sentence in English. Their written and spoken sentences abound with incomplete or missing subjects and predicates, subject-verb agreement misfires, jumbled tenses, and exhibit an absence of singular and plural awareness along with a plethora of other

inconsistencies. Who is to blame for this? Should junior and senior high schools be held to account for not sufficiently preparing Japanese students for university English classes? Given that pre-tertiary schools prioritize the mastery of the mother tongue over second languages, and Japanese students need to know over 2000 kanji to fathom the depths of a newspaper article, they are so encumbered with the need to memorize sequenced ink strokes that time for studying English is nominal. The sheer weight of this burden is aptly demonstrated by statistics collated and published by Ikuko Tsuboya-Newell (2017). Her data comes from a study conducted by the American Foreign Service Institute (FSI). The study determined the number of study hours necessary for native English speakers to sufficiently learn foreign languages that would qualify them to work in demanding Foreign Services. For European languages, like German or French, which English is partially derived from, it takes roughly 480 hours of study; to learn Greek or Indonesian usually requires around 720 hours; To learn Russian or Turkish requires 1,320 hours, but to learn Japanese takes 2,400 to 2,760 hours of study. She also points out that of the 62 languages covered in the study, Japanese was deemed the most difficult language to learn. This conversely demonstrates the magnitude of effort required for Japanese to speak proficient English. Furthermore, according to her other sources, for Japanese to obtain an English proficiency level equivalent to, or above a 900 TOEIC score, usually entails between 4,000 to 5,000 study hours. This figure is juxtaposed with the 787 hours that attentive, non-truant, Japanese students have usually logged in by the time they graduate from high school. In addition to the traditional list of explanations given for Japanese being poor English speakers, it seems this immense gulf of difference between the two languages could be a major culprit. As Davies (2000) wrote, "It is difficult to judge who is the most to blame for the sorry state of Japan's higher education, but it is easy to see who is the least responsible: the student..."

- 2) The second problem is that many Japanese high school graduates enter university without knowing what a paragraph is, or how to structure one in English. They are often unfamiliar with what constitutes a topic sentence, or how to write a complete opinion, and have had little to no practice in logically supporting either one with relevant or substantiating evidence. These deficiencies in the structural norms of English writing can obviously be attributed to the reason given above, but in addition to that, a cursory glance at the OECD (2018) figures for average high school class sizes in 2016 shows 27.3 students occupied the average Japanese classroom. It takes scant imagination to foresee that high school English teachers who are notoriously overworked to begin with, would find it logistically infeasible to even consider having students submit written English paragraphs for assessment and correction. To add to this problem, and segue into the next problem, here is what McVeigh (2002) wrote: "pre-tertiary-level schools and teachers are too busy preparing students for entrance

examinations to prepare them for critical thoughts...”

- 3) The third problem relates to logical consistency, critical thinking, and other sometimes metaphysically obfuscating terms. The ability to read English texts, identify principle ideas, and assess and extract an overall gist, or link central concepts to something familiar, seems a slumbering faculty in many Japanese university students’ arsenal of skills. In the past, scholars like Ballard & Clanchy (1991); Atkinson (1997), tended to attribute Asian students’ observable weaknesses in critical thinking to socio-cultural causes. One implied cause was that critical thinking is impeded in Asians from hierarchically organized societies with collectivist traditions. The tacit implication being that critical thinking comes naturally to Westerners steeped in aggressively individualistic societies. Current studies tend to refute this. For instance, Rear (2017) posits that critical thinking skills could be hampered more by language limitations than cultural stereotypes. His study suggests that Asian students are adept at critical thinking when the tasks are conducted in their own language. More studies along these lines may reduce the older views to limping suppositions, but the problem still remains. Even Davies (2000), who has been cited as a proponent of the former rationale, emphatically stressed that his accusation of systemic failure in Japanese education did not mean he thought Japanese students were less intelligent than their counterparts abroad. Perhaps the biggest problem is lack of familiarization and training.
- 4) Fourthly, a large proportion of university freshmen appear to be oblivious to plagiarism, and perhaps out of expediency and lack of awareness, rather than ill-intent, copy and paste swaths of text from others without citation. Again, many Western scholars have been critical of Asian students’ ambivalence towards plagiarism, claiming it largely stems from inherited cultural traditions. Rinnert and Kobayashi (2005) inferred that Japanese students rarely took plagiarism serious for a variety of such reasons. In contrast, Wheeler (2009) and Teeter (2014) are more supportive of Japanese students. Teeter’s limited study found that only 28% of the Japanese students surveyed were sympathetic with Obokata, in the infamous STAP cell plagiarism case of 2014. The inference being that the ubiquity of plagiarism among Japanese university students could be more due to inadequate training than an inherited cultural predisposition.
- 5) Finally, as writers of Japanese high school texts and university entrance exams can readily attest, when Japanese publishers issue specifications to contract writers, a stipulated list of taboo subjects is usually attached. Harsh social and political realities are deemed inappropriate for Japanese high school students. This is ostensibly to protect students from disturbing material, but in conjunction with the current administration’s hope of inculcating students with a sense of patriotism (Mie, 2014),

through an expunged depiction of Japan's past, it may have the adverse effect of creating Japanese high school graduates who enter universities with a political naivety that might seem surprising to some of their European counterparts.

- 6) One addendum to this list is the lack of confidence or fear-evoked paralysis that many first year Japanese university students experience when called upon to give an opinion in front of an English class. A predicament that has likely been abetted by extended exposure to an antediluvian language education model that treats students like empty tea cups needing filling with the purported omniscience in the teacher's proverbial teapot, and tends to create students fearful of making the smallest of mistakes or venturing any hypothesis counter to the teacher's view. A model that still prevails in English language classrooms across the nation, a model that engenders obedient passivity, stifled creativity, and listless boredom.

### **The News Reporting Activity:**

The news reporting activity was designed to habituate students to summarizing news on a weekly basis and consume between 20 to 30 minutes per 90-minute lesson. Harvesting news is alternated each week. For instance, in week one, the teacher selects and provides written or orated articles for the students to summarize and write out in class, and for homework the students select, summarize, and write up news summaries to present in week two. This perpetual rotation is kept going for the duration of the course in the hopes that the 6-step procedure will be fully internalized by the students and eventually become so second nature that they will be able to quickly produce a succinct summary on any given news. To avoid monotony, the news theme changes every week. When students harvest news, it is culled from different continents, countries or topics, so that by the end of the year, the class has been exposed to news from around the planet. One week may be African news, the next education news, then Australian news, political news, European news, technological news, and genocide news ... The news furnished by the teacher is also eclectically varied to provoke thought, foster globalism, and incite discussion.

The activity is usually introduced in the second week of classes, and promoted as not only fun and informative, but guaranteed to improve summarizing and paraphrasing skills, broaden global perspectives, build confidence in speaking, and bolster an academic approach to reading and writing through adherence to the 6-step formula. Students are given a detailed handout with each of the six steps defined and illustrated with sample sentences. It is then stressed that almost all news, no matter how complicated, can be summarized and effectively re-delivered, providing the writer or speaker adheres to the six steps: *Type, Source, Context, Summary, Details, Opinion*. By breaking news into these component parts, and answering the questions that each step dictates, the speaker or

writer will cover the most critical aspects of the news, and if they can smoothly narrate the completed sentences, they should pass as fairly fluent English speakers. Any follow-up questions the audience may have, will generally pertain to omitted details directly involving the news itself; something the audience can pursue at their own leisure. To dispel any incredulity, perhaps an example will suffice. Let's take the STAP cell case mentioned above. It was an international story replete with baffling scientific jargon that many will be familiar with. By employing the 6-step paradigm, the story can be reduced and redelivered in seven sentences.

*Type: I have some shocking news.*

*Source: I read this news in the Japan Times, and saw it on NHK TV.*

*Context: It happened in the summer of 2014.*

*Summary: A Japanese biologist made an amazing discovery worthy of the Nobel Prize.*

*Details: Unfortunately, her data was fraudulent and she was discredited and disgraced.*

*Opinion: I was surprised because I believed scientists to be seekers of truth who rarely lied. It is also interesting to consider what may have happened if her deception had worked.*

Of course this is a terse rendition of a convoluted story, but it is also a comprehensively packaged unit ready to dispatch to those unfamiliar with it. The parameters are established; the topic has been opened for discussion and debate. Einstein would undoubtedly approve of such simplification, as he once penned, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

Another crucial aspect of the news activity is seating. Students are grouped in fours and encircle tightly converged desks to create an equitable round-table setting. Each week, group members are randomly reshuffled so that everyone gets to know each other, and grow accustomed to speaking in front of new people. When they deliver the news assigned to them for homework, the teacher first collects the two or three precisely formatted A4 sheets that they have printed out in compliance with the meticulously set out guidelines furnished at the outset of the term. They are collected to prevent students from mumbling to their peers from behind quivering papers. Each member is encouraged to make eye contact with all members of their team while audibly articulating and

expounding upon the news they have chosen, summarized, and opined upon. When all have delivered their news, one member volunteers, is elected by the group, or randomly chosen by the teacher, to share the most shocking, noteworthy, or entertaining article with the class.

The days when it is the teacher's turn to provide news, students work in pairs with the person beside them to create a 6 -step summary from printed or orated news. This is periodically substituted with students using their phones in class to find news on a designated theme. In all these cases, when their summaries are complete, the pairs share them at the round table, and select a member to report to the class, or let the teacher select someone. Another periodic alternation is when the teacher hands out four different articles and the four team members are given an allotted amount of time to read them without dictionaries or note-taking. When the time is up, the articles are retrieved, and the students are challenged to employ the 6 -step formula to vocally recapitulate the main points without using Japanese. The aim is to avoid getting mired in the arcane details of the article, to seize the big picture, transcend the details, and accurately render it comprehensible to their team members. A task that demands focused cognitive dexterity, critical thinking, and lots of practice.

### **The Six Steps:**

**Type:** There are two reasons for prefacing every news article with a "type." First, it establishes the aesthetic, moral or political character of the speaker by defining their stance on any given issue. More importantly, it determines what information will ensue by establishing a tone, and creating expectation. Essentially, by defining the direction of the information that follows, it functions like the topic sentence of a paragraph. Thus, training students to begin paragraphs with clear topic sentences and help address problem 2 outlined above.

**Source:** The source is essential for establishing credibility. If the news is sourced from the BBC or NHK, it is likely to have more authenticity than something gleaned from a teenager's blog site. This is important as students are primarily harvesting online news, and some news is suspect, if not entirely fabricated. The source also addresses the fourth problem: plagiarism. By always including a source in their weekly news reports, students exercise the academic function of transparency, wherein credit goes to those who deserve it. In addition to providing a source in all weekly reports, when students submit their printed news reports every other week, they have to attach a version of the original article so that the teacher can quickly reference it for plagiarism. A set of strict submission guidelines is also issued for this at the outset. By eliminating the temptation to

copy and paste text without citation, students veer towards consistently giving credit and develop academic propriety. One more thing the source addresses is the naivety factor mentioned above. Given the limitlessness of online English news for students to choose from, some select shocking social and political issues to share with their classmates. Such news gives a compensatory jolt of revelation to the adolescent innocence nurtured by the pre-tertiary policy of deeming some issues unsuitable for high school students.

**Context:** Context is an essential component to any news, as it establishes the relevance of the news by answering the when and where. If no context is furnished, the audience is left in the dark. For instance, if a speaker suddenly launches into news about a man who has been murdered, the listeners should know if the murder took place 5 years before in some remote and dangerous country, or that day in the same classroom. This distinction is critical for assessing the immediacy of the news in relation to one's proximity, and something the speaker should be aware of if they have the critical capacity to view themselves from the shoes of their audience. This is not only dictated by common courtesy; it is also a basic exercise in sequential logic, or critical thinking, and something university entrants often need.

**Summary:** The summary is the most demanding task in the 6-step process. As demonstrated in class, the first step is to determine the subject of the news. Is it a person, place or thing? This requires critical thinking coupled with basic grammar and extensive vocabulary comprehension. When reading complex English news articles in a second language, the simple subject of the article is not always glaringly apparent. Nonetheless, once the simple subject has been established, a predicate in active or passive voice needs to be affixed to it. Again, easier said than done when multiple verbs issue from, or assail, the simple subject. It takes time and practice for students to quickly settle on the simple subjects and predicates in an article. As an example, when asked to summarize the Harry Potter series in one sentence, many flounder. With practice, they might say, it's about a boy who studies magic or fights evil. This weekly exercise of recognizing, isolating, extracting and simplifying is perfect training for prospective scholars and addresses problems two and three above: grammatical structure, and critical thinking skills.

**Details:** Details also demand cognitive gymnastics. Without details, some stories remain incomplete or pointless. If someone tells news about people being rushed to the hospital after drinking dish soap, it is incomplete because the why is missing. Adding the detail about the soap being a free sample placed in mailboxes is a key detail, but it doesn't complete the point. When adding that the labels had pictures of lemons, and "with real lemon juice," written on them, the audience can infer that inattentive people misread the labels and drank the dish soap. The point is that without an ability to extract oneself from the confines of one's own perspective, and observe the narrative from an outsider's view,



narration falls short of transmitting comprehensible ideas. This ability for abstraction and perspective swapping is another facet of critical awareness, and an essential component if students want to entertain or enlighten anyone outside the confines of themselves. Students who don't develop this critical faculty consistently fail to engage their audience. On top of this, the process of deciding which details merit keeping, and which can be discarded, takes serious critical acuity in a timed activity. Longer articles are especially onerous, and students often figuratively throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the first few months of the reporting, a palpable perplexed silence can be detected when one member has left teammates in the dark, or completely baffled them. Improvement takes time, but eventually comes.

**Opinion:** The opinion part of the news activity requires the most vigilance on the part of the teacher. In the first semester, some students will unwittingly offer opinions along the lines of: "I think its bad because I don't like it." It takes scaffolding and coaching to prevent this type of nonsense from passing as acceptable. Moreover, opinion-giving activities among first-year university students are often severely inhibited by their terror of exposing themselves on certain issues, and from a fear of being wrong or making mistakes. They also tend to lack the vocabulary, the grammar, and critical thinking skills to construct a complete opinion in English; let alone defend one. Getting shy students to openly express opinions in English invariably requires grammar-focused activities, vocabulary building, and modeling, along with exercises that promote critical thinking, all in an environment where they feel safe. When these are all addressed, and students are required to develop and articulate their opinions and listen to others on a weekly basis for a semester, they quickly acclimatize to the process and can eventually muster sufficient confidence to offer their own opinions on a host of issues. Thus, tackling addendum six in the problem's list.

### **Conclusion:**

In summary, unless English language education in Japan begins earlier, or antiquated teaching methods are supplanted with novel forms, it is quite likely that Japanese students will continue to enter universities with deficient English speaking and writing skills. Although the necessity for change poses a challenge for students and educators alike, there still remains hope for Japanese university students to acquire an adequate mastery of the English language to study, work, and live abroad. Activities like 6-step news reporting, engage students' receptive and productive skills, acquaint them with a multiplicity of issues that foster awareness of international culture and politics, and build students' confidence in delivering succinctly structured news reports, followed by supported opinions on a wide range of global issues. To accomplish this, they also need to

exercise critical thinking, and the faculties of discerning, assessing, and reasoning. Moreover, the activity inadvertently expands their vocabulary base, improves their grammar, and hopefully causes them to adopt the habit of keeping abreast of international issues. Given that these assertions have not been qualified with any quantitative data, we shall stop here in the hopes that someday they will be. As of now, the only evidence for the efficacy of the 6-step activity is in the convictions built upon the teacher's observation, and on course reflection sheets, wherein many students claimed the news activity was not only highly informative and entertaining, and sparked their interest in global affairs, but the weekly task of summarizing news effectively equipped them with valuable skills that could be applied elsewhere.

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