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2019   2022

An Investigation into the Applicability of English Writing Centers in Japanese Secondary Education

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The research is useful for all students. However, modern technology needs to be harnessed to provide greater access to all students. Leveraging videoconferencing technology such as ZOOM to provide access to writing tutorials for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged is vital.

To support the development of English writing proficiency, the present study investigates how writing centers can assist high school teachers and students in Japan. The research methodology includes a comprehensive review of writing center research, document analysis, interviews with tutors, observations of tutoring sessions, case studies, discourse analysis of writing samples, and thematic analysis. The findings suggest that virtual writing centers (VWCs) offer advantages, such as greater access to tutorials and the ability to implement a peer tutor model similar to the International Christian University High School writing center. Former high school students can serve as virtual tutors, establishing mentor-mentee relationships and leveraging their prior experiences with the writing assignments. Adequate training, resources, and support are crucial for the successful implementation of VWCs, with teacher involvement and defined tutor roles playing key roles.

Education

Access Inclusivity Videoconferencing Writing support

Background of the research

The revised national Center Test, now known as the University Entrance Common Test, is intending to introduce new English exams that assess productive skills, specifically speaking and writing. Consequently, Japanese teachers and students need to develop their ability to write extended texts. Additionally, Japanese English teachers are, for the first time, expected to provide instruction on summary writing, which include skills such as distinguishing important information from minor details, note-taking, identifying key supporting points, and employing synonyms, referents, and cohesive words while listening to and reading relevant English texts. These changes in English education and assessment in Japan present significant challenges for Japanese English teachers and secondary school students. This research investigated how writing centers might support high school teachers and students in enhancing their English writing proficiency.

Purpose of the research

This research aimed to explore the following question: What can be learned from English writing centers in Japanese Universities and American High Schools to support the learning of English writing in Japanese high schools?

Method of the research

A comprehensive review of writing center research was conducted by synthesizing various resources, including library resources available at Sophia University, online resources, and data provided by the Writing Centers Association of Japan. These sources were used to provide context and inform the data collection in the subsequent stages of the research.

To establish the best pedagogical practices in writing centers, document analysis was employed. This method was particularly suitable for case study research and was used alongside other qualitative research methods to ensure triangulation. Relevant documents pertaining to writing center pedagogy and practice were collected from the participating writing centers for comparison and analysis.

Tutors from the participating writing centers were interviewed, and when possible, their tutoring sessions were observed. The interviews adopted qualitative approaches and explored the tutors' epistemological beliefs, teaching histories, and recorded their observations and perceptions of students' utilization of writing centers. The interview data was combined with the document analysis to provide evidence and enhance understanding of how writing center tutors support the development of students' English writing skills.

Case study research was conducted. Three first-year students from Sophia University were selected as case studies, and their progress was observed and documented over the course of one semester. The study analysed their writing tutorials at the Sophia Writing Center, incorporating multiple interviews with both the students and their tutors. Furthermore, discourse analysis was performed on their writing samples throughout the semester to determine the extent of improvement in their English writing and the role played by the writing center tutorials in facilitating such improvement.

The dynamic relationship between tutors' beliefs regarding English writing instruction, students' perceptions of their own writing abilities, and the documents and practices that influence these relationships was analysed. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, explore, and document patterns within the collected data. These themes shone light on the pedagogical practices employed in English writing centers in Japan.

An in-depth interview with the director of the International Christian University High School (ICUHS) writing center was conducted. Since 2013, the writing center has been offering approximately 150 tutorials each year to support students with their English academic writing. It was found that The ICUHS writing center operates on a peer tutor model, where undergraduate students who attended ICUHS are employed as tutors. This model offers several benefits in the Japanese context. As graduates of ICUHS, the university students serving as tutors are familiar to the school, providing reassurance in terms of their trustworthiness, reliability, academic competence, and social skills necessary to support current high school students with their writing. Because ICUHS writing center tutors have graduated from ICUHS they have senpai status within the school. In Japanese culture, the senpai-kohai relationship is highly significant. This traditional Japanese dynamic transfers effectively to the context of peer tutoring in the writing center, where students are encouraged to respect the tutor's expertise and receive knowledge and guidance from them in a friendly and supportive manner. The ICUHS writing center peer tutoring model was identified as a model that could transfer to other Japanese high schools if the virtual writing center (VWC) model is adopted.

Due to the COVID pandemic the research focus shifted to assessing the feasibility of Virtual Writing Centers and how they can provide greater access to writing center tutorials. A VWC was created at Sophia university and student and tutor data was gathered through multiple tutor and student interviews and #1,921 student reflections from electronic tutorial feedback forms.

Results of the research

As mentioned earlier, the goals and policy guidelines set by MEXT regarding English writing in high school classrooms present several challenges for Japanese high schools and their English teachers. Virtual Writing Centers (VWCs) offer numerous advantages that

can address some of these challenges. VWCs enable Japanese high schools to implement the ICUHS writing center model, as prospective tutors would not need to be physically present at the school. Former high school students could be employed as virtual tutors and conduct tutorials from anywhere in Japan, regardless of their physical location or university affiliation.

Selecting former high school students who possess the necessary academic and social skills to provide writing support for current high school students is beneficial for several reasons. These tutors would hold official senpai status within the school, having been taught by the same teachers who would now be instructing the students attending the VWC. This dynamic is important, as it establishes a mentor-mentee relationship and enhances the credibility of the tutors. Furthermore, these tutors may have relevant experiences with the writing assignments, allowing them to provide more effective feedback to their mentees. Also, the teachers at the school can leverage their prior teacher-student relationship when selecting and training prospective tutors for the virtual setting.

VWCs offer additional advantages, such as the utilization of technology for tutor training. Virtual tutorials conducted in breakout rooms can be recorded and used as learning materials for teachers overseeing the VWC. These recordings can be used for training purposes, allowing tutors to review their techniques and reflect on how they can improve their tutoring in future interactions. Additionally, these recordings provide an extra layer of surveillance and security for schools, enabling them to address any accusations of inappropriate conduct during virtual tutorials.

Teachers need to believe in the value of VWCs for them to succeed. Adequate training, resources, support from model developers, school-level support, administrator buy-in, and control over the implementation are predictors of teacher buy-in. Therefore, teachers require training and support for the implementation and operation of VWCs. Budgeting and allocation of resources and equipment, such as laptops and secure videoconferencing applications, should be considered. Organizing opportunities for teachers to visit existing model VWCs and learn from their creators should be facilitated by school principals and administrators. Most importantly, teachers should be actively involved in how VWCs support teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Involving high school English teachers in decision-making regarding tutor recruitment, training, and tutorial scheduling is important. Defining the tutor's role in virtual writing centers becomes essential to address tutorial issues. High school English teachers should provide detailed descriptions of the tutor's role and ongoing training for VWC tutors. These descriptions should acknowledge the delicate balance tutors must maintain between meeting the teacher's expectations for the students' writing and understanding the student's expectations of the tutor's role.

The research is complete but further research findings are scheduled to be presented and published this year.

In August 2023, related research will be [presented](#) at Eurocall 2023. A short conference paper will be published by the end of 2023: Harwood, C. (2023). Appropriating zoom to host and conduct writing center tutorials. Short Papers from EuroCall 2023, Reikiavik, 15-18 August, 2023.

A [chapter](#) on the research subject is in press and due to be published by the end of 2023: Harwood, C. (in press). Appropriating ZOOM to provide access to one-to-one writing support. In J. Keengwe (Ed.), Handbook of research on innovative frameworks and inclusive models for online learning. IGI Global.

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2019

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Writing Centers in Japanese High Schools
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