

# Mandated Writing Center Utilization among 1st Year English Students in Japan

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## 英語を学ぶ日本人大学一年生のライティングセンター使用を 必須としたケースについての考察

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### Abstract

This paper examines the effects of three different types of support for Japanese students studying English writing. Students were required to make weekly visits to either the Writing Center or a student tutor or were given cards with simple reminder checklists that they were to review before and after completing each stage of writing an essay (pre-writing, first draft, and final draft). Due to the small sample size, we cannot address how these support structures affected improvement of students' writing; however, we did see an impact on students' awareness of support services. Students generally believed that the help they received was worth the effort. Instructor-mandated visits, to a limited degree, are likely to nudge the students to make the important first visit to the writing center or tutors. It is still not clear why utilization of the Writing Center decreases in the second semester.

**Key words** : writing, tutors, writing center, writing support

(Received October 2, 2009)

### 抄 録

本稿は日本人学生が英語論文を書く際のサポート体制について考察する。論文は下書きから最終稿まで段階的に完成させるが、その過程で学生は毎週、ライティングセンター／チューター指導の下、論文の修正を行うか、授業担当講師から渡されたチェックリストに沿って自身で修正する。本稿の調査では研究対象学生数が少ないため、この体制が学生の英語論文作成能力の向上に効果的か判断できないが、体制自体が学生に与える効果の考察はできた。学生はサポート体制を概ね効果的と認識しており、サポート体制使用を必須とすることも大切なことが分かった。しかし、前期に比べ、後期はライティングセンターの活用が減る理由はまだ解明していない。

**キーワード** : 論文作成、チューター、ライティングセンター、ライティングサポート体制

(2009年10月2日受理)

Collegiate Writing Centers are enigmatic in the sense that some Writing Centers have more students than they can handle while others are underutilized at best and are constantly trying to attract students. Factors affecting a student's decision to visit a Writing Center include knowledge of the resource (what is it? where is it? when is it available?), opportunity costs (is the location and schedule convenient?), perceived need or benefit (will I get a better grade? will my writing skills improve?), and course requirements (does the teacher recommend or require students to visit a Writing Center?). Clark (1985) considered the question with regard to motivation; should students come because they are intrinsically motivated, because they are extrinsically motivated, or both?

In the English language program at Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) in Japan, students study most courses through English with many written assignments. For many students, this is the first time they have formally studied how to write in academic English. The students learn to write paragraphs, essays and then research papers in the first year.

OJC established a Writing Center (OJCWC) to provide additional support to students through one-on-one discussions with a native English consultant. Because our students are Japanese studying through English, their second language, we must address students' needs as English as a Second Language learners while expecting them to write at a high level of English. The OJCWC thus must help students understand assignments and how to make their arguments as well as how to improve their writing at the sentence level, with correct grammar and word choice. Thus, we need to help them in terms of higher and lower order skills.

One problem that has arisen is that students in the first year writing courses do not visit the Writing Center regularly, if at all. In Spring 2007, we had 212 visits by 86 first year students and in the Fall only 119 visits by 62 students (Johnston, 2008). As Clark (1985) indicates, getting students to the Writing Center once is necessary in order to get them to come back. Gordon (2008) also highlights the complexity of requiring writing center sessions in a university.

Thus, another instructor and I set up a research project to examine the effect of required Writing Center visits. In this project, students would be required to visit the Writing Center at least once a week. They were encouraged to discuss assignments from their writing classes but were also informed that they were not limited to these assignments and could discuss other classes' homework as well. They were given a short form to take with them that provided space for the Writing center consultant to write any comments they wanted the student's teacher to read.

Two additional forms of support were included for comparison purposes. Two instructors, myself and the other faculty member, each taught one class of first year writing and within each class, three groups were created. For both classes, the Writing Center group had five students, a second group of five students was required to visit the student tutoring

center under the same conditions as the Writing Center group, and the final group (the remaining students in each class) was given sets of cards with checklists of reminders for use when writing essays (See Appendix 1). These cards were to be filled in at the pre-writing, first draft and final draft stages of the writing process. The additional forms of support through the student tutoring center and Reminder Cards were provided to avoid the situation where only a portion of the students were receiving support. However, the student visits to the Writing Center remained the focus of the project.

### ***OJC Student Support Services in the SASSC***

Osaka Jogakuin College has both 2-year (junior college) and 4-year (college) curricula which focus on learning content through English. The centerpiece of Osaka Jogakuin College's student academic support system is the Self Access & Study Support Center (SASSC). At its core a study lounge with tables, reference books, and computer stations, the SASSC also hosts a conversation corner, Writing Center, and tutoring center. These services are offered at no charge for students who want to practice speaking English with a native speaker, refine their writing skills and get help with revisions, or consult with Japanese tutors, who are former students, about classes and assignments.

The Writing Center is staffed by a native English speaker and is available on a walk-in or reserved basis Monday-Friday 5pm-8pm and Saturday 1:30-4pm. Sessions are mostly conducted in English at the Writing Center, though some consultants can speak Japanese and may use it at their discretion. Tutors are former students and were available on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 4pm-8pm. Tutors help students with a range skills including improving study skills, brainstorming writing topics, and helping with grammar. The hours of operation reflect students' availability; Japanese students' schedules are typically quite full until the late afternoon. However, as part of one author's research as the Writing Center Coordinator, some day-time hours were added (Monday 11:30-12:20 and 2:00-2:50 and Friday 10:00-10:50 and 2:00-2:50) only for the Fall 2008 semester.

### ***The Writing Center at OJC***

In 2007-2008, 299 students made 686 visits to the Writing Center (Johnston, 2008). In 2008-2009, 264 students (27% of total) made 549 total visits (just over 2 visits per student on average) to the Writing Center (Johnston, 2009). Among these students in the year 2008-2009, 229 (87%) were first year students. However, in the Fall semester (i.e. the second half of the academic year) the number of students visiting the Writing Center fell to 70, a 73% reduction.

School-wide student surveys of the Writing Center usage indicate that many students did know about the Writing Center but did not visit. In 2007, the Spring semester questionnaire revealed that 91% (580 of 639 responses) of students and 96% of first year college students

(158 of 165 responses) had heard of the Writing Center. However, only 32% (205 of 639) had actually been to the Writing Center; 40% (66 of 165) of 1<sup>st</sup> year students in the four-year college reported visiting the Writing Center.

According to Writing Center data on the students who visited the center, in the spring of 2007-2008, 86 first-year students visited 212 times and 62 visited 119 times in the fall. In 2008-2009, 78 first-year students visited 169 times in the spring and 40 students visited 70 times in the fall. It seems the number of students visiting is dropping.

The disparity between the number of students who have heard of the Writing Center and the number who have visited is more disconcerting than the second semester drop off. The average number of visits among students who went to the Writing Center at least once is over 2 in the spring and 1.7 in the fall, indicating that, in general, students are making repeated use of the service after their initial consultation. It is not that a few students are going all the time. In 2008-2009 Spring, only one student visited 15, one 12, and one nine times (Johnston, 2009).

The problem lies in getting students to make their first visit (Clark, 1985; Gordon, 2008). Surveys indicate that some students felt the availability of the Writing Center was inconvenient. Many do leave school immediately after classes to work part-time and thus earlier hours were requested. Other students explained that they did not go to the Writing Center because they did not feel they needed grammar help. This latter comment indicates either a failure to convey the purpose of the Writing Center to students, as grammar instruction is just one element of the Writing Center, or a misunderstanding by students.

The high rate of awareness of the Writing Center among students suggests that the advertising is at least partly successful. Advertising of the Writing Center has expanded since the center opened weekly in April 2004. SASSC is adjacent to the cafeteria and a wall of windows facing high traffic areas is highly visible. The Writing Center is visible from outside SASSC and has signs posted on the windows outside as well as within. There are an additional five large signs advertising the Writing Center in well traveled areas of the school as well as on the announcement board. These signs succinctly explain how the Writing Center can help and encourage students to stop by or make an appointment. The hours of the Writing Center are posted in some classrooms as well.

First year students attend an orientation to English study at OJC within the first three weeks of school. At this time, the Writing Center coordinator explains the purpose of the Writing Center using both English and Japanese and PowerPoint slides. This was done only in English in the past but was modified to include some Japanese explanation to make sure students understand the purpose. It is emphasized that students can visit for any reason and at any time in the writing process of brainstorming, organizing, writing drafts or revising. We even highlight that students can go for any type of English support, including talking.

Beyond promoting the Writing Center to students in orientations and in-school

advertising, faculty are enlisted to promote and encourage visits to the Writing Center. Every April, at the beginning of each academic year, the Writing Center coordinator emails all teachers who teach courses with writing components and explains the purpose of the Writing Center and suggests that teachers encourage students to take advantage of it. Writing Center visit forms are made available to teachers who can give them to students to have signed by the Writing center consultant. Teachers at OJC are reminded about the Writing Center via email throughout the year.

These efforts have been successful in raising awareness of the Writing Center (over 90% recognition), but this has not translated into greater utilization by students. This research project was designed to see what effect requiring students to take advantage of support services would have. The Writing Center is the best resource for improving writing, but two additional forms of support (tutors and reminder cards) were included for comparison purposes. This research is partly influenced by reports from another Asian program that required students to use a Writing Center.

All first-year students at Seoul National University are required to go to a Writing Center. The visit was factored in as 5% of their final grade. According to Dr. Yunhee Whang (personal communication Oct 20, 2008), although students did not particularly like the requirement, 70% who fulfilled the requirement agreed that a mandatory visitation policy was necessary and felt that one visit was not enough. Whang stated, "We realized that the students treated the Writing Center consultation as medicine: they know that it's good for them, but they don't want to take it if they don't have to." This metaphor was kept in mind when we developed this research project.

One issue raised during the planning of this project was whether students would have enough material to support weekly visits to the Writing Center. OJC students are all second language learners of English and there is a wide variety of levels among the students. Many students are preoccupied with lower order concerns (grammar, mechanics, word choice, etc.) but these are primarily only addressed after writing an initial draft. Perceptions that the Writing Center is mainly helpful for correcting lower order concerns may contribute to the low utilization by students because many students finish their assignments immediately before the deadline and thus do not consider taking advantage of the Writing Center. This project aimed to help students understand that the Writing Center is useful for addressing higher order concerns such as topic selection, organization, and rhetorical development as well as for examining lower order concerns during the writing process.

## **Method**

This research was conducted over the 2008-2009 academic year at OJC. First year

students at OJC are placed in one of four levels (A-D) based on an in-house placement test. All levels follow the same curriculum and schedule, the only difference being the English level of the students as assessed by the placement test. One author taught a top-level A class with 20 students and the other had 17 C level students. The students were randomly assigned to the three groups; any student who was retaking the class after failing in a previous year was assigned to the reminder cards groups and their data was not included in the analysis. The Writing Center and tutoring groups had 5 students from each class (20 total) and there were 17 students in the reminder cards group (4 freshman and 3 “repeaters” in one author’s class and 9 freshman and 1 “repeater” in the other author’s class).

The project was explained to students as an experiment exploring the efficacy of different forms of writing support. There was no secrecy between any of the groups and the whole process was explained to the class as a whole. The Writing Center and tutoring center groups were told to visit their respective support section once a week at a time of their choosing. They were given special forms that included a place for the Writing Center consultant or tutor to comment and sign. Students in the Writing Center group were told to discuss writing class assignments while students in the tutoring group were instructed to talk about any of their classes with the tutors. The students in the reminder cards groups were given a set of three cards for each required assignment, one for the brainstorming/pre-writing stage, one for the first draft, and one for the final draft.

This research project covered four assignments (Process Paragraph; Illustration Essay; Cause & Effect Essay and a Basic Research Essay). While a Comparison & Contrast Essay was also required during this time, there was no complete data on this assignment, so we did not include it in the analysis.

Students in the reminder card group were provided with a set of reminder cards at the beginning of each assignment. Each card had several simple checkbox reminders that students were instructed to read and check off prior to and after the completion of each assignment (Appendix 1). These cards were collected with students’ brainstorming and first and final drafts.

All students were informed that the project was part of a research project and would be analyzed and published. They all signed a written consent form that explained the project in Japanese.

Over the course of the project, students were regularly reminded to meet their weekly obligation though there was no penalty or reward for doing so. Furthermore, it was emphasized that any student could go any time to visit a tutor or the Writing Center; it was not limited only to the students in any particular group.

This project began in the first of four units of the first year writing curriculum and covered three assignments over two semesters.

- a. Process paragraph: mid-May to mid-June (middle of spring semester)
- b. Illustration essay: mid-June to mid-July (end of spring semester)
- c. Cause & Effect essay: mid-October to mid-November (middle of fall semester)
- d. Persuasive Research essay: mid-November to mid-January 13 (end of fall semester)

After completing the Cause & Effect essay in November, it was evident that student participation had dropped precipitously and the required visits to the Writing Center, to the Japanese tutoring, and use of the reminder cards were suspended. Students were still encouraged to visit the Writing Center or Japanese tutors as they saw fit for the final assignment.

Due to the small sample sizes, 20 students in one class and 17 in the other, we combined the results and did not evaluate each class separately. In addition, again due to the small sample size, it would have been difficult to precisely identify the impact that these various support programs (Writing Center, tutors, and reminder cards) had on students' writing.

## Results

Tables 2-6 summarize student participation in their respective groups. Full participation (weekly visits over the course of the study) was not found. In fact 0 of 10 students made weekly visits to the Writing Center during the spring semester. For the first two assignments, however, there was at least minimal participation by all (100%) students (Table 1). For the process paragraph, two students went every week to the Writing Center and eight students went some weeks. In the second semester, however, participation falls dramatically for the final assignment, with 7 students reporting visits and 3 not visiting at all. Table 1 clearly shows the decrease in level of participation.

**Table 1**

***Writing Center Participation***

The level of participation is listed vertically in order to highlight the differences.

Assignment	Schedule	Level of Participation
Process paragraph (3 visits)	middle of first semester	All 3 visits 2 Some visits 8 No visits 0
Illustration essay (4 visits)	late first semester	All 4 visits 0 Some visits 10 No visits 0
Cause & Effect essay (4 visits)	middle of second semester	All 4 visits 0 Some visits 7 No visits 3

Care should be taken not to interpret too much from these results. One reasonable explanation behind the falloff in participation at the Writing Center is that students made progress based on their earlier visits and thus may have felt that there were few gains to be had by making the Writing Center a priority. Students in this program have very little unscheduled time during an average school day and many work part-time jobs as well.

At OJC, classes are 50 minutes long and begin at 9:00 AM. Most first-year students finish at 4:00 PM on weekdays and at 1:20 PM on Saturdays covering 34 class hours per week. Among one class of students that we examined for the spring semester in 2009, we found the average number of class hours and academic activities to be 28.7 per week, which means they have only one hour without courses or school activities each weekday. Thus, their free time is at a premium and while it is clear they were not choosing to exercise that time at the Writing Center, it does not necessarily follow that they did not see value in the service itself.

The use of the tutors followed a somewhat different trend. On a unit-based level of analysis (Table 2), we see relatively high numbers of students visiting the tutors on a weekly basis, with 30%, 40%, and 30% of the students going to the tutor every week for each of the three assignments respectively. Students visiting the tutors mentioned they often went for help with grammar and did not always specifically discuss writing assignments.

**Table 2**

***Tutoring Center Participation***

Assignment	Schedule	Level of participation
Process paragraph (3 visits)	middle of first semester	All 3 visits 3 Some visits 5 No visits 2
Illustration essay (4 visits)	late first semester	All 4 visits 4 Some visits 4 No visits 2
Cause & Effect essay (4 visits)	middle of second semester	All 4 visits 3 Some visits 5 No visits 2

A reduction in the number of students using the reminder cards was seen over the course of this study, with 81% (13 of 16) using all the cards for the first assignment but less than half (44%, 7 of 16) for the final assignment (Table 3).



**Table 3*****Reminder Cards Participation***

Assignment	Schedule	Students Completing All Cards	Percentage
Process paragraph (3 cards)	middle of first semester	13 of 16	81%
Illustration essay (3 cards)	late first semester	10 of 16	62%
Cause & effect essay (3 cards)	middle of second semester	7 of 16	44%

In the second semester, which started on September 22, students did not use the Writing Center or the reminder cards as much. The two students who visited the tutors continued to do so. It is likely that the general applicability of the tutoring service to all classes over the more restricted support service in the Writing Center was the basis of this appeal and utilization.

### **Students' Views**

Follow-up surveys at the conclusion of each assignment and the end of the research project as a whole provided students several opportunities to explain why they did not go to the respective service on a weekly basis (see Appendix 2 for the final survey). The most common reasons concerned a lack of available time and the scheduling of the services. These answers suggest that students are not opposed to services and would like to take advantage of them but are unable to because of their course schedules. A lack of interest or perceived need is not listed as a reason for not going, but the benefits of the Writing Center in terms of learning or writing were not mentioned either.

Students used the reminder cards fairly consistently for the first assignment (81% completing all cards), but this rate fell to 62% at the end of the spring semester and even farther to 44% in the fall (Table 3). Though just less than two-thirds of the students said the cards were useful than not useful, it is not a resounding number (Table 4). This is somewhat surprising since the cards were designed to be simple and easy and used short questions written in classroom English (Appendix 1). Marking the cards is the least time-consuming and labor-intensive action among the three groups. However, the questionnaire only asked why students thought the cards useful, and not why they were not useful; thus, we do not know why students did not find these useful. However, in remarks about their usefulness, one student said, "I can check my paper again" and another said, "because I can realize that what should I be careful when writing the paper." However, one said, "I ended up just circling em." This last view may have been more widespread than the students' comments suggest.

**Table 4*****Were the Cards Useful?***

<b>Card</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Process paragraph	10/15	67%
Illustration essay	8/13	62%
Cause and Effect essay	8/13	62%

Students indicated that they received help on a variety of topics during their visits to the Writing Center, especially the process paragraph and illustration essay. Not all feedback was positive. Two responses from student indicate a disconnect between student expectations and the support they received. One student expressed frustration with her inability to “tell the [writing center consultant] what...to do” and another was disappointed that the Writing Center consultant expected her to ask questions instead of just correcting the paragraph for her. Due to these expectations, it is understandable these students did not rate the Writing Center highly on the survey. These problems can be attributed to problems with students’ abilities to express themselves in English as well as a misunderstanding of what to expect at the Writing Center.

Students received more general help from the tutors, mostly about grammar. Overall student response to the question of what topics were discussed with tutors was quite low but the few responses were overwhelmingly with regard to grammar. Unlike the Writing Center support, there was no miscommunication or indication of clashes of purposes, attributable to the fact that former OJC students serve as tutors. These tutors have taken the courses at OJC that the students are asking questions about. In addition, the discussions are occurring in Japanese, greatly reducing real or perceived communication barriers.

At the end of the project, all the participating students completed a final survey that included the question of whether or not they thought we should require all first year students to go to the Writing Center. Although only five students from each of two classes were in the Writing Center group, all students in the class were by this point quite familiar with the three different support services used in this project. In the final survey 23 students (77%) said all first year students should go to the Writing Center (Table 5). Five students were positive towards the Writing Center but qualified this by suggesting that students should only go if they want to get help. Other common explanations for why students should be required to go to the Writing Center included getting help with writing, a chance for one-to-one interactions with a native English speaker, and understanding how to write. Students were also generally supportive of the idea that first year students should be required to visit with tutors regularly with 18 of 33 (55%) in favor.

**Table 5*****Final Survey Results***

<b>Should all first year students be required to make weekly visits to:</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe</b>	<b>Blank</b>
Writing Center	23	7	0	4
Tutors	18	11	0	4
Reminder cards	16	8	1	9

We also asked students on the final survey about what kinds of questions they believed they could ask at the Writing Center. We hoped to identify if students viewed the Writing Center as a proofreading or grammar fixing service, even though we had indicated this was not the case in class and it is also stated clearly on the guidelines available in the Writing Center and posted on posters around the school.

The students' answers were varied, indicating that the Writing Center was perceived to have multiple purposes. The types of questions listed by students can be divided into higher and lower order issues (Table 6). Research on writing centers argues that higher order concerns must be addressed first. Bruce and Raforth (2004) say:

The assignment, focus, argument, development, and organization are usually more important than expression unless some language clarifications and corrections are needed simply in order to understand whether the student has followed the assignment and to understand her points. (p. 53)

Thus, organization and ideas should be addressed before mechanics, grammar, and spelling, unless the paper cannot be understood. However, only two students viewed the Writing Center as helping with both higher and lower order skills. There was only one response pertaining to the brainstorming and pre-writing stage of the writing process. This suggests that students seem to view the Writing Center as a place to go in the later stages of writing.

**Table 6*****Types of Questions Students Believe They can Ask at the Writing Center***

Lower Order	Higher Order
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· mechanics</li> <li>· grammar</li> <li>· spelling, style</li> <li>· mechanics; "because other person read my essay and bring answer to read"</li> <li>· Is the grammar correct? What do you think of this sentence? Which part should I change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· how to improve my essay</li> <li>· organization</li> <li>· understand meaning of essay</li> <li>· What should I write?</li> <li>· How to collect information</li> <li>· about writing essay</li> </ul>

This view of writing that focuses on lower order concerns and the product might be common in Japan. In Japan, there is a general lack of writing, Japanese or English, in high schools. For most of these students, this is the first time to use a process writing style at all. They are struggling to complete the writing assignments, and they have not generalized its use to the Writing Center. Indeed, they may not have enough of a grasp of the content and nature of the assignments to be able to ask questions. As students often say, they don't know what they don't know.

When students talked about what questions could be asked of the tutors, a different tendency was revealed. At OJC, the tutors can help with higher and lower order questions as well as any questions related to English or even with learning or studying in general. Students' responses on the questionnaire confirmed that they understand this, at least in general. Collectively the responses indicated an understanding that they could ask tutors about mechanics and grammar (lower order) and organization, and use of examples (higher order). In addition, students did think that they could talk about how to study.

**Table 7**

***Types of Questions Students Believe They can Ask at the Writing Center***

Lower Order	Higher Order	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· mechanics</li> <li>· how to reference</li> <li>· grammar</li> <li>· writing citations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· how to improve essays</li> <li>· organization</li> <li>· what examples to write</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· how to study courses</li> <li>· how to study</li> </ul>

The suggestions on improving the Writing Center were quite varied. Students requested more Writing Center consultants and earlier and longer hours as well as additional days of operation. One of the more interesting comments was the feeling among some students that it is not easy to talk to a native English speaker in the Writing Center that they do not know.

Internal research on Writing Center visits revealed that a majority of student visits came from a small number of classes and teachers. In fact, 66% of the sessions were from students from 13 courses. Further investigation revealed that five of these teachers were currently working or had worked in the Writing Center. In addition, two of the other instructors either required or emphatically encouraged students to go to the Writing Center. Thus, students who are in classes with teachers who are also Writing Center consultants or students who have teachers who are very vocal about the importance of the Writing Center tend to go more often. This suggests that more students may come for help if more teachers were to advocate the Writing Center more in their classes.

The OJC students' comments about the Writing Center, especially the request for greater

access to the Writing Center in the form of extended hours is consistent over years of survey data at OJC. However, when four day-time hours we added during the Fall 2009 semester, they were not utilized. This is especially striking considering that this project could conceivably be stressing the available time slots. Over the fall semester there were only 31 visits by 21 different students (including five freshmen and 11 sophomores from the junior college) during the four added day-time hours. None of the students from the classes in this project visited during the extra hours, but it is not clear whether their busy class schedules hindered them or they simply chose not to visit during the day.

There are many occasions during normal operating hours where there are no appointments or drop-ins in the Writing Center. Thus, there seems to be a disconnect between what students say they want and the reality of the Writing Center. As our research was mainly based on survey data, we cannot be sure if students are giving excuses not to visit the Writing Center or if they really find the times inconvenient. As noted earlier, students' daily schedules are booked almost solid with an average of nearly six hours of classes every day between 9:00 AM and 4:00 PM, but they are generally not in classes during the standard hours of operation at the Writing Center. When asked, they express a desire for daytime hours, but their class schedules and life priorities for the few open periods in their schedule work at odds to the Writing Center being utilized.

With the exception of the reticence to speak to native-English speaking consultants in the Writing Center, very similar suggestions are made about the tutoring center at OJC, namely more days and more hours. Based on the responses to the final survey, it is not clear if students fully comprehend what the tutoring center is designed for and how they can take advantage of this service, but based on comments regarding students' ease of communication with Japanese-speaking peers, this should be investigated.

### **Incorporating Feedback into the Writing Center**

Since this research was carried out, some new innovations have been initiated. We continue to work to clarify what services the Writing Center is designed to provide. At the beginning of the academic year in April 2009, at least one of the Writing Center consultants personally visited all the first year writing courses to give a face to the Writing Center and to explain how students can use the center. In addition, they handed out bilingual questions that students can use when asking questions at the Writing Center. The Writing Center coordinator learned about the usefulness of visits to the classrooms while visiting the Tutorial and Placement Test Center at Hawaii Pacific University in 2007.

In March 2009, the Writing Center coordinator gave a presentation to OJC faculty explaining the purposes of the Writing Center and some misunderstandings by faculty about

its use. He highlighted the process of writing as indicated by Clark (1992):

Writing center consultants work with papers at all stages of the writing process—those that are just in the process of being formulated, as well as rough drafts, or relatively polished efforts that need only slight additional editing. (p.3)

Interestingly, while this did provide faculty with the concept that support occurs at all stages of writing at the Writing Center, questions by some faculty suggest that they would prefer more focus on the editing or proofreading of students' papers because the instructors had trouble understanding the ideas of some students' papers. This suggests that there may still be some conceptual differences between faculty members that may contribute to students' confusion or lack of interest in the Writing Center. In addition, this raises an important issue of readability of papers in order for instructors to understand students' ideas.

### **What Next?**

While we have made strides towards improving the Writing Center at OJC, this research highlights some shortcomings. Both students in general and the students in this project do not use the Writing Center as much in the second semester as in the first semester. An explanation of this pattern is needed. Writing Center service is under-utilized, both in terms of first time visits as well as repeat visits. The expectation of the research was that requiring participation would be an effective way of getting students familiar and comfortable with the Writing Center which would translate into more visits because of their individual needs. Further research is required to follow up on the second year habits of the students in this project.

While the effect on students writing is difficult to gauge directly, this study did provide insight into the effect of teacher-mandated visits on students' awareness of the support services. Although a direct weekly requirement was not successful as a motivator, participants did recognize the usefulness of the service (77% supported the proposition of requiring it for all first year students). A more successful strategy may include requiring students to go to the Writing Center but limiting this requirement to specific assignments, such as consulting on brainstorming, checking outlines, or reviewing first drafts. There was no penalty for not meeting with the Writing Center and this may have played a role, but there was a consistent thread among student comments indicating that they tended to skip meetings when they "didn't have anything to talk about". In addition, it is possible that incorporating Writing Center visits into the grading criteria as inducements, such as extra credit, may have a positive effect on adoption of the service. In fact this is done at some writing centers in the U.S. (Steven Strang, personal communication, May 12, 2009).

Additionally, better promotion of the OJC Writing Center service may remind students who have come to return or it may stimulate others to visit. We have introduced new

promotional methods, including in-class visits by the Writing Center consultants to promote the service with a human face and reduce the “stranger” factor. This humanizing of the service can be extended to include posting pictures of the Writing Center consultants at the entrance of the Writing Center room. Students may see their teachers on the poster and be reminded that the barrier to entry is not as high as they may otherwise have felt. Timely promotional handouts and bulletin announcements, as opposed to permanently installed signs, could attract interest and remind students of the service. In-class handouts are especially good for targeting a large percentage of the students. These handouts could also be employed for dual purposes by serving as Writing Center visit forms; students could ask the Writing Center consultant to fill-in the date and time as well as any comments, and the students could give them to their teachers. Classroom teachers might offer extra credit or other such positive feedback for handed-in Writing Center forms.

In addition, teachers are an excellent point for promoting the services. As we found, if instructors strongly promote the Writing Center, students tend to go. In addition, classroom instructors could require students to visit the Writing Center or simply remind students that the service exists for their benefit.

Finally, we need to find ways to overcome the beliefs of both faculty and students that the Writing Center is or should be mainly for proofreading. We need to find ways to help everyone view the Writing Center as a resource that helps students become better writers and critical thinkers through discussing their writing assignments. In-class promotion by individual instructors is an important factor for promoting awareness of the Writing Center and getting students to make that first visit. Having all students and instructors on the same page with regard to the service is essential for maximizing its potential.

## **Conclusion**

The Writing Center and tutor programs overlap in providing students with extracurricular study support. One is mainly in English and focuses on the writing process and the other in Japanese and broadly addresses English learning. However, this research and data collected over the years suggests that these remain underutilized, especially in the second semester when a drop-off is seen in student visits to the Writing Center. Much attention has been paid to the promotion and hours of operation of the Writing Center, but there may be other factors behind students’ failure to take advantage of extra support opportunities.

The results of this study suggest it is not feasible to require students to visit a Writing Center or tutor weekly. However, requiring students to go to the Writing Center or tutoring service is the first step after awareness that allowed the students in this research to experience how they can be helped in the Writing Center. In addition, classroom teachers who encouraged the use of the Writing Center or actually worked in the Writing Center had more

students go for help. Thus, requiring students to go to the writing center is likely to be an integral part of a successful system of student support services, but it is not enough on its own. In particular, the beliefs about writing and writing support of students and instructors in the school need to be discussed openly and for an extended period.

### **Acknowledgements**

1. This research was supported by Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (#19520531).

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### Appendix 1: Reminder Cards (front and back)

#### Instructions

<p>Look at these cards when you do your writing assignments. Some of the cards are for before you write and some are for after you've written (and before you turn in the assignment).</p> <p>Read and think about the questions, then check boxes as needed.</p> <p>Attach the appropriate card to the assignment when you hand it in.</p>	<p><i>(back of instructions is blank)</i></p>
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#### Brainstorming & Pre-writing (front and back)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> What is my assignment?</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> What is my topic?</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> What kind of pre-writing do I want to do?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Do I have enough information to write my assignment?</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Do I have enough examples?</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Do I have enough details?</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> What do I want readers to understand about the topic?</li></ul>
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1st Draft (front and back)

<input type="checkbox"/> Introduction, Body, Conclusion?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do I have enough details and examples?
<input type="checkbox"/> What are the main ideas for the developing paragraphs?	<input type="checkbox"/> Is similar information grouped together?
<input type="checkbox"/> What is my thesis statement?	<input type="checkbox"/> Is there any unnecessary information?
<input type="checkbox"/> What do I want readers to understand about this topic?	<input type="checkbox"/> Introduction, Body, Conclusion?

Final Draft (front and back)

What do I want readers to understand about this topic? <i>Read the first draft before answering these questions</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear Introduction?
Introduction, Body, Conclusion?	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong thesis statement?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do I understand my own writing?	<input type="checkbox"/> Enough details and examples?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are the Intro-Body-Conclusion connected?	<input type="checkbox"/> Good conclusion?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are the developing paragraphs related to the thesis statement?	

## Appendix 2: Final Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_  
Writing Class Research Assessment for 2008-2009

Please answer in English or Japanese.  
Please answer all the questions.

1. Which group did you belong to?  
\_\_\_\_ Writing Center      \_\_\_\_\_ Tutor      \_\_\_\_\_ Reminder cards
  
2. Did you go to the writing center during Unit 4?      YES      NO  
If YES, how many times did you go? \_\_\_\_\_  
If YES, what did you get help with? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Did you go to tutors during Unit 4?      YES      NO  
If YES, how many times did you go? \_\_\_\_\_  
If YES, what did you get help with? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
4. While writing your persuasive essay, did you ask yourself questions about the writing process (like the questions on the Reminder Cards)? YES      NO
  
5. What type of questions can students ask at the writing center? (Write many answers)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
6. What types of questions can students ask the Japanese tutors? (Write many answers)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Do you think all first year students should go to the writing center for help? YES      NO  
Why or why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
8. Do you think all first year students should talk with the tutors for help with learning?  
YES      NO  
Why or why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
9. Do you think all first year students should use Reminder Cards? YES      NO  
Why or why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Do you think you will use the writing center in your second year? YES NO  
If NO, why not?

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11. How can OJC improve the writing center to make it better for students to improve their English?

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12. How can OJC improve the Japanese tutor system to make it better for students to improve their English?

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13. Do you have any comments or questions for us?

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Thank you for helping with this research.