

## *Designing a Course for Building Effective Pre-writing Skills of Academic Thesis*

Satomi Yoshimuta, Kwassui Women's University, Japan

The Southeast Asian Conference on Education 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Today, the number of Japanese universities has decreased to less than 70%, requiring students to write a senior thesis as part of the graduation requirements (Kawaijuku, 2017). It may result from the weak motivation toward writing that Japanese students have. That might be because not a small number of students perceive writing a senior thesis challenging when completing a senior thesis is deemed to be the culmination of four years of academic learning. The course was created, based on the student's need for supportive instruction and assistance through the process of writing, with a focus on a pre-writing phase. It aims at students' discovery of their research topic and overview of the senior thesis, which will lead to the fourth-year senior thesis. This paper outlines the key findings from developing a course designed for the pre-writing stage of a senior thesis writing process of students at an English department of a university in Japan. The course is designed to assist third-year students in starting to prepare to write a thesis by thinking critically and logically. Pedagogical approaches were explored, and an active learning course, chiefly in the style of task-based learning, was developed. In three modules, it first focuses on idea generation, then research and outlining, and finally presentation of the overview of the thesis. In addition to the student needs, the background of the course, the educational setting, the characteristic tasks representing each of three modules, complexities, and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Syllabus Design, Pre-writing, Process Writing, Senior Thesis

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

This research reviews the course design for the pre-writing tasks for juniors who prepare to write senior theses. The senior theses in English need to be a culmination of a student's four-year academic pursuit. Among frameworks of course development (e.g. Richards, 2001; Brown 2007; and others), Graves' (1996) sequential framework of course development provides substantial opportunities for reflective practice at every stage. Furthermore, Bloom's Taxonomy is insightful in providing information on what skills students need to acquire and orchestrate to complete a senior thesis. Based on the goals and objectives, the course is designed in a semester divided into three modules of five weeks each. It highlights some of the most significant tasks and activities of each module which address the student's needs and help students attain their goals. Since acquiring logical thinking and writing skills are necessary goals for completing a senior thesis, the focus is placed on them at different stages throughout the course. The finding argues that Graves' framework can provide a standardized point of view in understanding the sequence of the syllabus design, thereby helping teachers identify the skills that students need to orchestrate for writing a substantial lengthy English essay.

## Literature Review

Grave's framework of course development processes (2013) was selected from the past literature reviews of the curriculum design frameworks since it is based on the sequential questions as below that help to clearly understand the situation needed at every stage. By answering these questions in order, important points are highlighted, which guides the teacher to the next stage of the process. This can provide a standardized approach to viewing the sequence of the syllabus design, and also reminds teachers of the questions to ask themselves and the issues to pay attention to at every stage.

1. Needs assessment  
What are my students' needs? How can I assess them so that I can address them?
2. Determining goals and objectives  
What are the purposes and intended outcomes of the course?
3. Conceptualizing content  
What will be the backbone of what I teach? What will I include in my syllabus?
4. Selecting and developing materials and activities  
How and what will I teach the course with? What is my role? What are my students' roles?
5. Organization of content and activities  
How will I organize the content and activities? What systems will I develop?
6. Evaluation  
How will I assess what students have learned? How will I assess the effectiveness of the course?
7. Consideration of resources and constraints  
What are the givens of my situation?

Table 1: Framework of component (Graves, 1996, p. 13)

## Senior Thesis Positioned as a Culmination of University Study

Since working on and completing a senior thesis in English is considered to be the outcome of four-year academic pursuit, Bloom's Taxonomy theorizes the sequential skills that students need to acquire till they complete a senior thesis.

# Bloom's Taxonomy

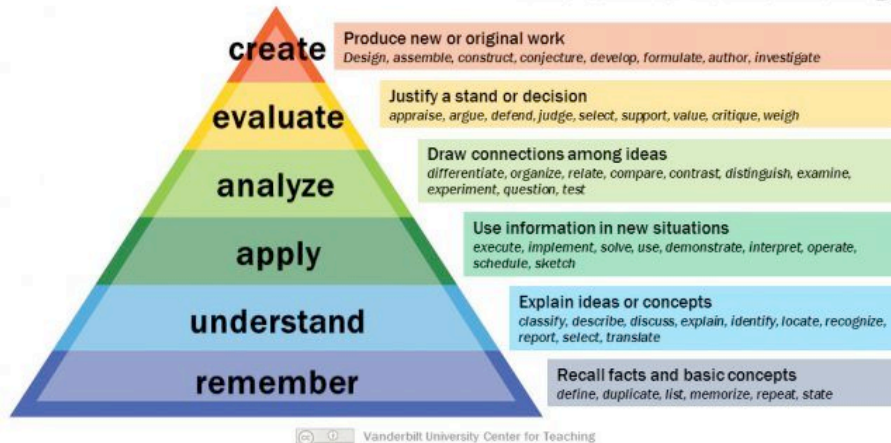


Figure 1: Bloom's Taxonomy

Source: The website of Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

Japanese students, who have been historically learning passively for most of their student life, have to face the issue of their autonomy, required to take charge of their own learning and writing strategies in the higher order. Since a senior thesis is acknowledged as a culmination of the four years of study, students must actively orchestrate all the skills required for writing a substantial English essay at their discretion abiding by their own decisions. The process necessitates good comprehension of information in English, research skills, and analytical ability with highly logical thinking even before a student reaches the planning stage of process writing. Therefore, it may call for all the knowledge and skills that students have learned at all educational levels in the past. This framework helped the journey of the course design through, and it clarified what skills teachers needed to help students. Furthermore, to enhance the persuasive appeal to students, this framework proved to be quite efficacious. Therefore, as seen in the chart above, students need to utilize the skills at all stages and integrate them to make sense when generating ideas, and composing and finalizing a written essay.

## Context of Praxis

The setting of this writing course is within a university where the author teaches, which is a local women's university situated in Japan. It was founded in 1879 and is one of the oldest private schools in Japan, established by a Methodist missionary. Not all students are fluent speakers of English. Therefore, the students are pressured to improve their scores on standardized tests such as TOEIC. The students started paragraph writing in the first year, and in the third year, they have to take this course as compulsory before they start writing a senior thesis in the fourth year. Paradoxically, the students have the liberty to choose to write the senior thesis in English or Japanese. As the result, only 5-20% of the students choose to write a senior thesis in English every year.

## Goals and Objectives in Syllabus

Here are the goals and objectives of this course stipulated in the syllabus.

1. To acquire the logical thinking and writing skills necessary to complete a graduation thesis.
2. To be able to determine the topic of the graduation research and organize the arguments related to it.
3. To be able to give a systematic presentation on the topic.

Mainly the goals and objectives are divided into these three. They cover the preparation process in the process writing. The syllabus does not also require students to research for or make an interim presentation in English.

### Three Modules in 15 Weeks

One semester of fifteen weeks is divided into three modules of five weeks respectively. This paper presents a few most characteristic tasks and activities of each module. Here is the list of course content for Module I.

#### Module I

In Module I, students are expected to research and determine the topic for the senior thesis. They need to brainstorm and pick a topic from whatever they have studied and found interesting, but the topic needs to be based on their field, one of three areas of study: either intercultural communication, international business, or teacher development. For instance, in case a student is interested in international business, she needs to choose a topic from the field of international business, and then she possibly researches a few global enterprises and compares and contrasts the operations and company cultures, for example. The area of interest is deemed to be a very good starting point to consider in the senior thesis.

W	Course content
1	Intro, Cultural thought pattern
2	Keyword sharing
3	Brainstorming
4	Concept map
5	Library orientation

Figure 2: Module I

In the first week, cultural thought patterns were considered because writing in Japanese and English is different. Kaplan's framework of cultural thought patterns (1966) was introduced to students. They are classic but still convincing to students. A matching quiz between ethnicities and visual thought patterns was presented.

## 文化による思考法の違い

Kaplan (1966) (*Representation of Ethnicity-based Cultural Thought Patterns*)

カプランの、言語には思考パターンがあるという説。どれがどの言語ですか？アルファベットと番号をマッチングしてください。またその理由も述べてください。

A Japanese, Chinese, Korean  
C English · German, Dutch

B Italian, French, Spanish  
D Arabic, Hebrew

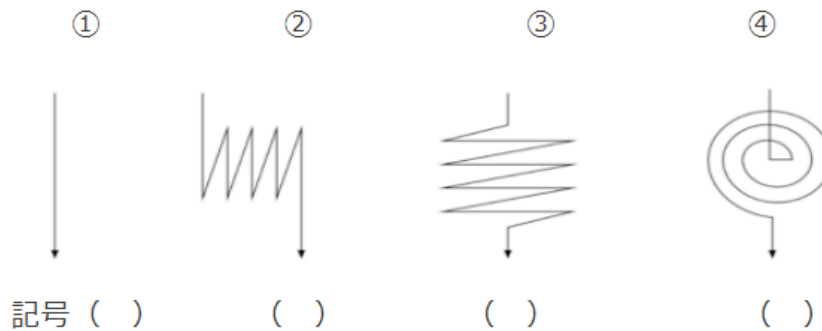


Figure 3: A class slide for Module I

Source: Kaplan's Cultural Thought Patterns (1966)

This finding seemed to be shocking and interesting to the students because they found that the thought pattern that they feel accustomed to was no longer useful but realized that they had to think and write as native speakers of English did. However, the class was successful in emphasizing that straightforward thinking and writing should be focused on from then on.

## Module II

Students need to have determined the topic for the senior thesis as the result of brainstorming and come up with a concept map by this stage. Subsequently, an outline will be created after the concept map is converged. Brainstorming a map and creating a concept map is a successive process of divergent thinking and convergent thinking.

W	Course content
6	Converge Concept map
7	Create an outline
8	Make an outline of an academic paper
9	Structure the thesis
10	Submit the topic and overview

Figure 4: Module II

To go through this convergent process, a concept map needs to have at least thirty concepts or more to select a topic (Kiyosawa et. al., 2018). Therefore, students were instructed to select only a few most significant words in the middle as the keywords in the research. They arranged concepts other than the keywords in a visibly related way using a linking line. On the linking lines, they need to come up with the linking words or phrases. Concepts are nouns, and the linking arrow needs to convey the linking phrase. Coming up with linking phrases

needed time generally speaking because that is the connection between the ideas and must be logical and that is where students need to demonstrate logical thinking.

### **Module III**

The main event in this module is the student presentation that summarizes the research about the topic they choose.

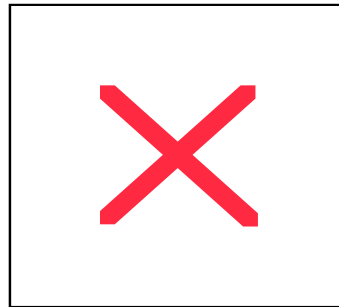


Figure 5: Module III

Students need to know much about each item they talk about. The presentation has to include a. The reason why the student chose the topic, b. background information, c. learning from literature review, d. thesis statement, e. structure of the thesis. Therefore, the final presentation in Module III functions as an interim information session for the senior thesis. If students can articulate the five items, that information will be the basis for the introduction of the senior thesis.

### **Findings and Implications**

There have been numerous findings, reviewing Graves' framework, out of which two are presented here. There are two significant facts worth considering through the two years since the course was first designed and implemented. The first fact is that quite some students, who took the course in the previous year, adopted a new topic for the thesis when they started writing as a senior, meaning that the original topic did not sustain. It is partly because the students' topics were not approved by the senior thesis supervisors, and students decided to give up and change the topic. There may be a few possible reasons. They just change their moods. Or it seems that the students were not able to make themselves understood by the supervisors. Possibly their research was insufficient or inadequate enough to make them talk about the topic. The students need to train students to research more in-depth and to be able to talk about it persuasively.

Second, another discovered fact was that it was difficult for certain students to overcome the issue of delayed submission. Originally, behind the establishment of this course was the intention of starting the senior thesis project ahead of schedule so that a senior can spend more time hunting for jobs or engaging themselves with self-actualization. To address the issue, there was a demerit method adopted in the grading system. However, task delay remains a significant obstacle that continues to require attention.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article presents the procedure and the main outcomes of a course design to help Japanese third-year students at the pre-writing stage of their senior thesis writing. The course demonstrates its value for teachers and students to enhance their critical and logical thinking skills, research skills, and writing extended essays. For teachers, although teacher reflection was conducted at every stage, it is not discussed in detail. Future research could explore reflective practice as part of professional reflective practice. For students, the task-based learning approach adopted in the course is appropriate to generate ideas, conduct research, and presenting the overview of the thesis. Based on the needs analysis of the students, this course is designed, the student feedback has been quite positive and it can be concluded that the course design is suitable for helping the students to start engaging in a senior thesis. Although some complexities emerged as further challenges, the outcomes suggest that this course offers opportunities for students to improve their thinking and writing skills. In the future, further research could examine the longitudinal impact of this course on the quality of the senior theses and how it can be adapted to improve student motivation and attitude toward writing.

## References

- Armstrong, P. (2010). Bloom's Taxonomy. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved as of January 10, 2023, <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). Pearson Longman.
- Graves, K. (1996). A framework of course development processes. In K. Graves (Ed.), *Teachers as Course Developers* (pp. 16-31). Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. *Language Learning*, 16(1-2), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1966.tb00804.x>
- Kawaijuku Kei-Net Magazine. (2017, November 1). Retrieved March 10, 2023, from <https://www.keinet.ne.jp/magazine/guideline/backnumber/17/11/01toku.pdf>
- Kiyosawa, K., Kobayashi, Y., Koizumi, Y., Yoshimuta, S., & Iwata, Y. (2018). Developing critical thinking skills and attitude: An analysis of a reading course in a university English program. *Language Research Bulletin*, 33, 10-21. Retrieved as of January 10, 2023. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sjErX9MbOcgwu\\_LlISrWfldTg1zax6RL/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sjErX9MbOcgwu_LlISrWfldTg1zax6RL/view)
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

**Contact email:** [yoshimuta.satomi@gmail.com](mailto:yoshimuta.satomi@gmail.com)