Introducing Virtual Writing Centers in Japanese High Schools to Support Teachers Implementing Changes to the English Curriculum

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Abstract
The recent and coming changes to the Japanese Ministry of Education English Course of Study and English requirements of the Japanese University Entrance Exam system have shifted the focus of the teaching and learning of English in Japanese high schools away from reading and listening towards writing extended texts in English. These changes have increased the workload of busy Japanese high school English teachers who were already struggling to create the time to provide individual feedback to their students. This paper considers the feasibility of introducing virtual writing centers into Japanese high schools to provide a resource for Japanese students of English to receive feedback on their English writing and support for high school teachers tasked with teaching L2 writing. The impact of Japanese Ministry of Education policy documents regarding the teaching of writing in high schools is briefly explained. Then, the role virtual writing centers could play in Japanese high schools and the English curriculum is discussed. The analysis considers how a virtual writing center model could be implemented to support the teaching of English writing in Japanese high schools.

Keywords: Curriculum, Japan, High School, English Writing, Writing Center, Online, Virtual, Peer-Learning, MEXT, Language Policy, Zoom

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the implications of policy changes introduced by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) on the teaching and learning of English writing in Japanese high schools. It posits that for MEXT's objective to improve Japanese high school students English writing to be realised, students will require writing support beyond the classroom. First, policy documents accessed through the MEXT website regarding the Course of Study (CoS) for high school education, curricula guidelines tertiary education, and the Japanese university entrance exam are analyzed. Second, links between the policy directives and their potential impact on English teaching and learning are considered. Third, background information about the development of writing centers in universities and high schools in the United States (U.S.) and Japan is outlined. The document analysis and background information contextualize data collected from a semi-structured interview with the founder of Japan's first high school writing center. The operation and running of which informs the rationale for a proposal to introduce virtual writing centers in Japanese high schools.

English Writing Teaching and Learning in Japanese High Schools

English writing has never been the focal point of high school English language teaching in Japan. Indeed, Hirose and Harwood (2019) summarize the research on Japanese high school students' English writing and explain that it can be characterized as:

> (a) translation from Japanese to English; (b) accuracy-focused writing to learn vocabulary and structures; and (c) limited opportunities for students to produce their own ideas and thoughts in English. When writing is used in English classrooms it is employed as a service activity, i.e., practice/reinforcement of structures and vocabulary learned. Translation from Japanese to English at the sentence level is still a familiar activity in Japanese high school classrooms (Hirose & Harwood, 2019, p.73).

These characteristics do not reflect the educational policy objectives for English writing in Japan. MEXT overseas the implementation educational policy in Japan, and approximately every 10 years it revises the CoS guidelines which are sent to all the schools. The CoS includes explanations of the overall objectives for English teaching and learning in secondary school education, and specific goals for English learning with an overview of the curriculum contents and how they should be treated. Below are the 2009 CoS guidelines (MEXT, 2009a) for English writing instruction and its contents for high school level writing:

- Reading and writing with due attention to phrases and sentences indicating the main points, connecting phrases, etc.
- Writing coherent and cohesive passages on information, ideas, etc., based on what one has heard, read, learned, and experienced.
- Reading and writing with due attention to passage structure, relation to charts and tables, etc., while clarifying the points of the argument, evidence, etc.
- Speaking and writing to effectively convey the meaning to the audience, using carefully thought-out explanations and descriptions.
- Writing brief passages in a style suitable for the audience and purpose.
- Writing with due attention to phrases and sentences indicating the main points, connecting phrases, etc., and reviewing one's own writing.

These guidelines for English writing in Japanese high school are accompanied by further pedagogical objectives. However, in 2017 MEXT released guidelines that advocate for the use of teaching English with an emphasis on active learning. MEXT defines active learning as proactive and cooperative learning and instruction methods focusing on the discovery and resolution of issues (MEXT, 2017). An example of active learning is a structured peer review activity whereby students provide constructive feedback to one another on their drafts of a writing task. Although teachers around the country await new guidelines, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the release of the proposed 2022 CoS guidelines for high schools.

The Japanese University Entrance Exam

Under the purview of MEXT the Common Test for University Admissions is produced by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations. The Common Test is a high-stakes test as it is used by national, public, and private universities to vet university applicants for admissions. It is administered in over 700 university sites throughout Japan, and every year approximately half a million students take the Common Test, which includes English writing and listening components. The test is intended to assess the ability of students to express what they think, make judgements, and identify and solve problems for themselves.

Prior to 2020 MEXT had planned to outsource the English component of the Common Test to private test providers that assess English using integrated tasks. Integrated tasks require the test-taker to produce written or spoken language based on their listening or reading comprehension and are used by tests providers such as The International English Language Testing System (IELTS). For example, students might be required read a news story and compose a written response to it based on a writing prompt. The research shows integrated skills tasks enhance assessment authenticity and validity by providing background knowledge to examinees (Gebril, 2018). However, due to regional disparities regarding access to test centers, and the high cost of external tests for students, in 2020 MEXT decided against the use of private English test providers.

MEXT is currently in the process of revising how English will be assessed in future iterations of the Common Test. However, it is understood that they intend to shift the focus of the English high school CoS towards productive language skills, particularly English writing. As part of this initiative MEXT aims to use the writing component of local university exams. The Common Test is usually used to filter applicants in conjunction with another university-based exam. Designed by the professors at the individual universities, the local university exams often include an English composition section that normally entails composing a short essay or summary writing task (Watanabe, 2016). According to Chiwaki et al., (2021) MEXT intends to encourage universities to design integrated skills English exams that assess English writing and to provide “preferential treatment” to those universities that do. It is hoped that this emphasis on written English in local university exams will filter down to the teaching and learning of English writing in high schools and address the lack of positive test washback (the effect of a test on teaching and learning) regarding writing composition in high school curricula (see Kowata, 2015).

The Challenges Faced by Japanese High School English Teachers

The proposed shift in focus towards English writing composition in Japanese high schools poses several challenges to Japanese high school teachers of English. Japanese high school English classes are usually quite large with teachers often required to teach multiple classes

of up to 40 students (Nishino, 2008). From a pedagogical perspective, large classes can have a severe impact on a teacher's time because evaluating and providing feedback on student writing is very labor intensive. This is a key factor in the findings of writing instruction research from studies in different high school contexts in Asia, Europe, and the U.S. The research shows that, in general, students in high school classrooms write infrequently and typically spend much less than an hour each day on writing (Graham, 2019; Graham et al., 2016). This is problematic as writing is an iterative process that involves allocating time to planning, drafting, revising, and editing. An iterative process that is particularly important for students writing in a second language. As Harris and Silva (1993) point out, the variety of concerns and questions of students writing in their second language means that the English writing classroom, as a sole resource, is insufficient for students to become proficient in English writing.

Moreover, the impact of the proposed shift towards English writing on a teacher's time is compounded by the fact that Japanese high school teachers are extremely busy with additional duties. For example, managing school clubs, preparing for school events such as sports day or culture festivals as well as attending to their responsibilities as homeroom teachers (Hirose & Harwood, 2019). The demands and issues outlined above strongly suggest that English writing support is required beyond the classroom in Japanese high schools.

Writing Centers

In the 1970s writing centers were introduced in universities in the U.S. to support student writers (Harris, 1992). Typically, a writing center offers one-to-one tutorials in which a writing tutor discusses a draft of writing assignment with a student. Writing center tutors are not proof-readers or editors of a student's work. They avoid offering suggestions or opinions on the content of student writing. Instead, they usually employ a non-directive approach and use Socratic questioning to prompt students to discuss how their writing could be improved. This focus on the writer is intended to facilitate student's attempts to revise their own work through dialogue and the discussion of the principles and processes of writing (Ianetta & Fitzgerald, 2016).

In general, writing centers are staffed by either trained student (peer) tutors or professional tutors, depending on the funding and educational philosophy of the institution the center serves. The student peer tutoring model is very common, and popular with students as they often view tutorials with professional tutors as "merely an extension of the work, the expectations, and above all the social structure of traditional classroom learning" (Bruffee, 2016, p.325).

Since the 1970s writing centers have grown in number and now universities and colleges around the world increasingly provide a writing center that offers one-to-one tutorials. Writing centers have also been successfully introduced into high schools in the U.S. to support younger student writers. U.S. high school writing centers predominantly use the peer tutoring model and have older more proficient students tutoring students that need support with their writing.

The research regarding the benefits of peer tutoring is well documented (Badger, 2009). The benefits include enhanced engagement, communication, and independence skills; the promotion of critical thinking as well as an increased precision in how students express their

thinking (Smith et al., 2005; Topping, 1996), and increased comprehension of course content, confidence, and learner autonomy (Topping, 2005).

Writing Centers in Japan

In 2004, writing centers were introduced in four universities in Japan (University of Tokyo, Sophia University, Waseda University, and Osaka Jogakuin College). All four university writing centers adopted the U.S writing center model (Johnson et al, 2008). Since 2004 the number of writing centers at Japanese universities has grown steadily (Delgrego, 2016; Nakatake 2013). This is due, in part, to two large scale government funded projects, and the subsequent expansion of English medium of instruction (EMI) courses in Japanese universities. The Global 30 Project in 2009 was introduced to promote the internationalization of Japanese universities and to encourage high caliber international students to study in Japan (MEXT, 2009b). In the project, 13 leading Japanese universities were selected to develop EMI degree programs and enhance international student support. The Top Global University project introduced in 2014 added a further 24 high-ranking universities to "enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan" (MEXT, 2014). In response to these project directives Japanese universities began offering EMI programs to attract international students and foster globally minded Japanese students. There are now "87 degree programs fully taught in English" (Bradford et al., 2022, p.1) in Japan. The rapid introduction of EMI programs in Japanese higher education created a need for students to seek writing support outside of the classroom, which has led to university writing centers being established throughout tertiary education in Japan. Given the autonomous nature of seeking help from writing center tutorials noted above, university writing centers are often part of or housed within student self-access centers.

Although few in number, writing centers have also been established in Japanese high schools. The first high school writing center was opened at International Christian University High School (ICUHS) in Tokyo. As the names suggests, ICUHS is affiliated with the International Christian University (ICU). ICUHS is located on ICU's Tokyo campus, and many ICUHS students graduate high school and continue their education at ICU. The next section provides an overview of the ICUHS writing center. The overview is intended to serve as an example of how a physical high school writing center operates and to facilitate understanding of how a virtual writing centers could operate in high schools throughout Japan.

The ICUHS Writing Center

The ICUHS writing center opened in 2010. It was initially intended for high school students to receive support for their Japanese writing; however, after a few months, students started to arrive at the writing center requesting help with their English writing assignments. Since 2013 the writing center has provided approximately 150 tutorials each year to support their students with their English academic writing.

The ICUHS writing center uses a peer tutor model whereby undergraduate students that attended ICUHS are employed as writing center tutors. In the Japanese context there are several benefits to this model. As graduates of ICUHS the university students employed as tutors are a known quantity. In Japan relationships are paramount so first-hand knowledge of writing center tutor candidates provides the school with several assurances. Principally, it is enables ICUHS to select trustworthy, reliable, and academically capable former students with the appropriate social skills to provide writing support for their current high school students.

Furthermore, the fact that the ICUHS writing center tutors have attended and graduated ICUHS means that they have official *senpai* status within the school. When Japanese enter junior high school, they are initiated into *senpai* - *kohai* relationships. A senpai is a student who is older or superior in ability (a senior). A kohai (a junior) refers to someone who started at the school after their senpai. Senpai - kohai relationships are ubiquitous in Japanese society. Senpai's have higher social status and are traditionally shown deference and respect by their kohai's because they are thought to have more experience, wisdom, or knowledge. However, the relationship is interdependent as the senpai is expected to provide support, friendship, and advice to the kohai (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). This traditional Japanese relationship transfers well to the writing center peer tutor context where experience and knowledge of the tutor should be respected by the student, and knowledge and advice should be imparted in a friendly and supportive manner by the tutor.

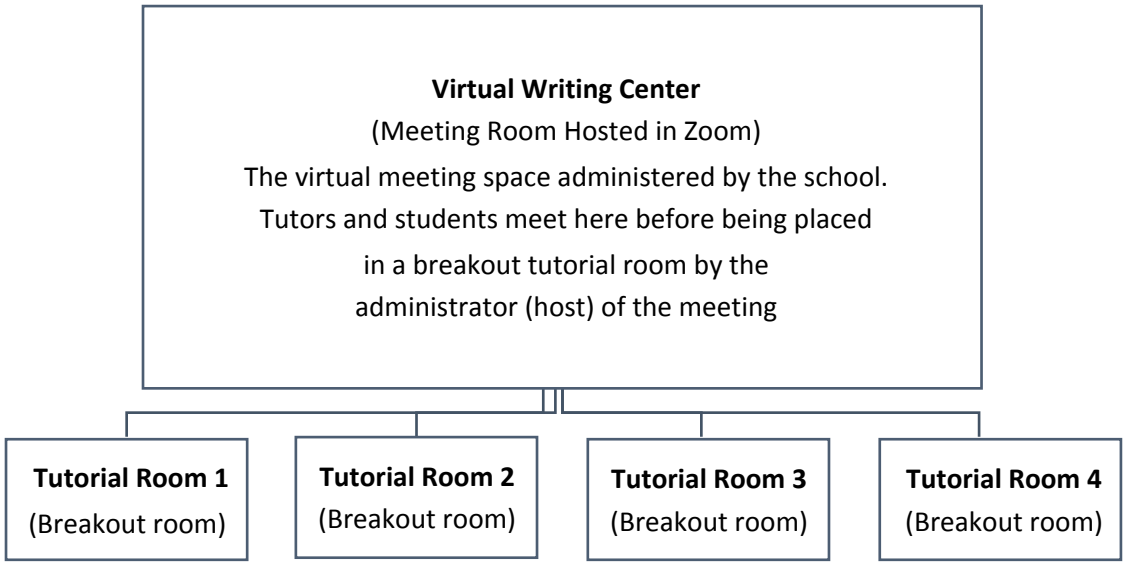
Online and Virtual Writing Centers

Since the advent of the internet, online services have been provided by university writing centers in the U.S. Indeed, Hughes (2015) documents the history of the University of Wisconsin-Madison online writing center and traces it back to 1995. Early online writing centers were restricted by the technology of the time and offered a miscellany of, largely asynchronous, services (Breuch, 2005). Tutor services were often provided via email with document exchanges between the tutor and student and typed feedback given by the tutor on those documents. The introduction of synchronous collaborative file editing applications such as *DocVerse* in 2010 and *Google Docs* in 2012 enabled similar text-based tutorials to be offered synchronously. Although Skype and videoconferencing applications were available at this time, they were unreliable due to issues related to internet connectivity and bandwidth (Raign, 2013).

In the last decade bandwidth (the volume of information that can be sent over an internet connection in a measured amount of time) has greatly increased. Coupled with the rapid development of videoconferencing applications such as *Zoom* this has led to many university writing centers offering virtual tutorials with synchronous online video and document sharing functionality. Also, the closure of campuses and social distancing requirements brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic provided an impetus for writing centers to open virtually and offer writing support for students taking classes online.

An example of a virtual writing center (VWC) is provided by Harwood and Koyama (2021) who created a VWC using the Zoom videoconferencing application (see Figure 1). In short, the VWC was created each day in the form of opening a Zoom meeting and using breakout rooms as private tutorial spaces. Tutorials are scheduled with students using an online form created using *Wufoo* forms. The Zoom meeting hyperlinks and passwords are emailed to tutors and provided to students who book an appointment. When the tutors and students connect to the Zoom meeting, they are assigned a breakout room: a function that allows the meeting host to create and manage multiple separate private meeting spaces within the Zoom meeting.

Figure 1. A Visual Representation of a VWC Using the Zoom Video Conferencing Platform



Harwood and Koyama (2021) note that breakout rooms have several affordances for students and tutors. Students can discuss their writing in private with tutors and receive face-to-face verbal feedback in a one-to-one setting. They can also share their writing document using the screenshare function. The tutor can read the student writing in the breakout room and clarify their verbal feedback using the virtual whiteboard and chat functions.

Rationale for Introducing Virtual Writing Centers in Japanese High Schools

As outlined earlier, MEXT's goals and policy guidelines regarding English writing in high school classrooms pose several challenges to Japanese high schools and their English teachers. VWCs have numerous affordances that could address some of these challenges. The high school VWC model proposed here is a virtual version of the physical ICUHS writing center discussed earlier. It would operate in the same way as the VWC shown in Figure 1. However, because high school students are minors and the responsibility of their high school, students would need to connect to the virtual tutorials at school using designated school spaces and computers.

On the one hand, the ICUHS writing center model is possible because the high school and university share the same physical campus. On the other hand, VWCs would enable all high schools to implement a ICUHS writing center model because prospective tutors would not need to be physically present in the school. Therefore, the high schools' former students could be employed as virtual tutors and conduct tutorials from all over Japan, irrespective of their physical location or the location of their university.

As with the ICUHS writing center, former high school students that have the academic and social skills to provide writing support for current high school students could be selected as virtual writing tutors by the English teachers at high schools that open virtual writing centers. The value of employing students that have graduated from the high school they would be tutoring at is significant. As with the ICUHS writing center, the fact that the tutors would have been taught by the teachers that would be teaching the students that attend the VWC would give the tutors official senpai status within the school. This is important because the

students seeking writing support at the VWC will know that their teachers have approved their former students as suitable tutors and assume the kohai role in the tutorial. Another upshot of such tutors is they may also have relevant experiences with the writing assignments, which can facilitate them to provide more useful feedback to their kohais. Moreover, teachers at the school will also be able draw upon their previous teacher/student relationship when selecting prospective tutors and training them as virtual tutors.

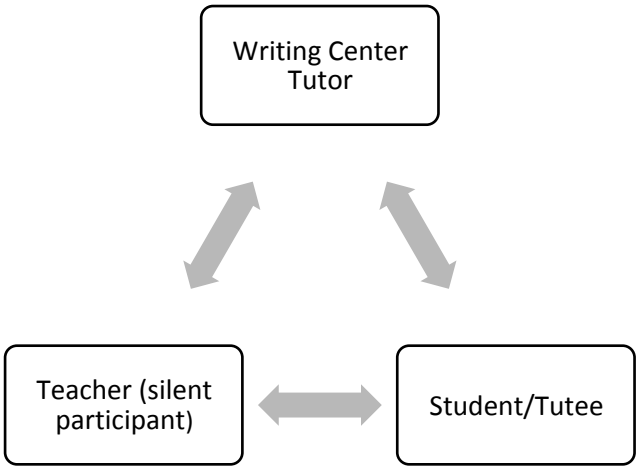
VWCs provide other advantages as the technology can be exploited for training tutors (Rosalia, 2013). Virtual tutorials in breakout rooms can be recorded and utilized as learning objects by teachers that oversee the VWC. For example, recordings can be used for the training of appropriate strategies and techniques for giving feedback. Tutors can view recordings with teachers and reflect on what techniques they employed and how they could improve their tutoring in similar interactions in future tutorials. Furthermore, if a tutor wants to observe another tutor or a teacher wants to show a new teacher a model of an experienced tutor, they do not need to schedule an observation. They can simply view example tutorials selected by the teacher for training purposes. The ability to record tutorials also offers schools an extra layer of surveillance and security when dealing with accusations made by tutors or students about inappropriate conduct or behavior in the virtual tutorials.

Factors to Consider when Introducing VWCs in a Japanese High Schools

Teacher buy-in: Often when a new initiative is introduced in a school, concerns surrounding teacher buy-in, and implementation emerge. Teachers need to believe in the value of the initiative or reform for it to succeed. Turnbull (2002) identifies six predictors of teacher buy-in to new initiatives, "adequate training, adequate resources, helpful support from the model developers, school-level support, administrator buy-in, and control over the reform implementation in their classrooms" (p.248). Teachers, then, will require training and support for the implementation and running of VWCs. Resources and equipment such as laptops and secure videoconferencing applications should be budgeted for and allocated. Opportunities to meet and visit existing (model) VWCs and their creators should be organized and facilitated by school principals and administrators. Most importantly, teachers should oversee how the VWCs support the teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Tutorial issues: A common tutorial issue concerns the role of the writing center tutor because tutors are in a tutorial triangle with the student and the student's teacher. Although, tutors provide one-to-one support to students, the student's teacher is a silent participant in the tutorial (see Figure 2). This is because the teacher specifies the requirements of a writing assignment, and the requirements shape what is focussed on in tutorial sessions, even though the teacher is not present.

Figure 2 . The Tutorial Triangle



The tutorial triangle can lead to issues related to how the tutor conducts the tutorial. Tutors will, at times, perceive themselves as teachers and become more "teacherly" in tutorials. This inevitably leads to issues such as tutors evaluating student writing, providing suggestions and opinions on content instead of asking Socratic questions, and even questioning the pedagogy of the instructor (Thonus, 2001). These are perennial writing center issues, but they can be mitigated, to a large extent, through regular training sessions.

Therefore, schools must decide upon and clearly define their expectations of the tutor's role in virtual writing centers. High school English teachers should provide detailed descriptions of the tutor's role and ongoing training for their VWC tutors. The descriptions of the tutor's role should acknowledge how tutors are frequently caught between the expectations of the teacher regarding their students writing and the expectations the student has about the role of the tutor. Including high school English teachers in the decision-making of the implementation VWCs is important. Listening to teachers concerns and advice regarding operational decisions such as tutor recruitment, training, and tutorial scheduling will also boost their buy-in of VWCs.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview and analysis of MEXT curricula directives, and the challenges faced by Japanese high schools implementing them. It has argued that for the objective to improve students written English to be met that Japanese high schools will need to provide support and resources to Japanese teachers of English and their students. Writing centers as a student resource and their growth over the last 18 years in Japanese universities has been discussed. The operation and affordances of the first Japanese high school writing center has also been discussed and used to illustrate how virtual writing centers could provide writing support to high school students beyond the classroom. In addition, suggestions regarding how to mitigate pedagogical issues within tutorials have been outlined. The introduction of VWCs into Japanese high schools is an ambitious proposal, but one that provides a practical and workable solution to a pedagogical issue. However, their implementation requires the buy-in of school administrations and teachers in order for the initiative to succeed.

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