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Enabling PhD students to participate as writers in international debates (0010)

Programme number: M12

Research Domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Abstract

Writing for publication in English is a significant challenge for Japanese PhD students. They not only have the usual anxiety experienced by PhD students writing for publication but also the added burden of being told continually that Japanese students are no good at English. We adopted an approach that was effective in western higher education: structured writing retreat. A retreat was run for twelve students from the Graduate School of Human Sciences at Osaka University (funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). We describe a six-month evaluation of this retreat: post-retreat feedback from students, follow-up workshops two months later and focus groups after four and six months. We used containment theory to explain how this retreat created a structure that contained students' anxieties about writing for publication in English, enabling them to participate as writers in international debates.

Introduction

Writing for publication in English is a significant challenge for just about anyone who attempts it. For many, it creates high levels of anxiety. This is particularly true for Japanese graduate students who have been continually told that they are unlikely to achieve the required level of competence in English:

The ... widespread conviction that Japanese people are somehow congenitally bad at learning foreign languages lurks in the background of both the current very strong push for improved English teaching and the general lack of interest in teaching other foreign languages in the school system (Gottlieb 2012: 19).

In our country, there exists an obsession about or complex towards English almost as if it were part of our ethnic DNA. ... freeing ourselves from this has to be the starting point of English education (Osako 2010: 22).

Japanese students have these beliefs to work with when writing for publication, which intensifies anxieties related to academic writing generally and writing for publication particularly.

We know that academic writing can be associated with guilt, fear and anxiety (Moore 2003), and we know that structured writing retreats can address these emotional responses and, by containing writing-related anxiety (MacLeod et al. 2012), can prevent them from inhibiting writing for publication. This is why we decided to run our first retreat primarily for Japanese graduate students writing for publication in English, although international students were also welcomed.

The retreat

This retreat was advertised to PhD students as ‘an intensive writing camp’, in a supportive, non-surveillance environment that would stimulate research-oriented discussions and provide writing strategies. For those who signed up to attend (ten

Japanese and two European students whose native language was not English), guidance notes were provided, explaining the underpinning principles of structured writing retreat, the writing warm up, goal-setting, writing activities to use, progress reviews and the programme.

The programme was based on the established structured writing retreat (Murray and Newton 2008, MacLeod et al. 2012), adapted to run over a different timescale and with an additional introductory session. The facilitator provided suggestions in English, and these were translated into Japanese.

Evaluation

Post-retreat feedback suggested that, for ten participants, it had similar short-term effects to retreats held in other settings and cultures. It provided containment (Bion 1962, Macleod et al. 2012): reduced writing-related anxiety, increased productivity and confidence and improved pacing (i.e. recognising the importance of regular breaks – which was a significant discovery for the Japanese students). The medium-term impact of structured retreat was gauged at follow up writers' group meetings. The long-term impact was assessed in focus groups four and six months after the retreat, in terms of reported writing practices, written outputs (journal articles written and/or submitted) and other outcomes.

Participants' responses in feedback discussions and focus groups suggest that it does this by making writing the primary task. This is achieved through goal setting and monitoring, which, in turn, develop self-efficacy in writing (Zimmerman and Bandura 1992). Most participants also found the discussions useful. The use of English made switching from Japanese easier, although Japanese translations were appreciated too.

However, one negative response conveyed a rejection of the containment model: annoyance at having to stop for lunch, feeling sleepy and 'unable to write' after lunch, back pain resulting from carrying books and laptop, expensive venue, reluctance to talk about writing to a 'stranger' and 'random writing' done at retreat would be hard to tidy up afterwards. This student thought the retreat could have been run on campus.

However, we should add that this student, one of two students who were non-Japanese and non-native speakers of English, had not been entitled to financial support for the retreat and had some dissatisfaction from the start of retreat.

Conclusions

Japanese PhD students participating in this structured writing retreat did increase their confidence in writing for publication in English. Thereafter, we developed links between researchers and graduate students in Education at our universities, and it is hoped that these links will extend their ability to participate in international debates.

There are implications for supervisors/thesis advisors in the UK, Japan and other higher education cultures (Murray et al. 2012): structured writing retreats provide a forum for both developing publications and sharing ideas about research. In this way, students learn a considerable amount from each other.

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