

Perceptions of College Students on Academic Writing during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan

Writing Pedagogy and Support during a State of Emergency

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COVID-19 パンデミック状況下の日本における 大学生の授業課題レポート執筆にまつわる意識調査 ——緊急時のライティング教育と支援——

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how the pedagogical situation of a society experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic could be improved, especially from the perspective of risk communication related to writing pedagogy. During a pandemic-related state of emergency in Tokyo, a survey on life and learning was conducted for 254 liberal arts students at Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan.

The questionnaire was prepared with a research design based on Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory from the Antient Greek period. 44.5 % of students feel a change in their learning style due to the pandemic, and there is a perceptual gap between their natural comfortability with writing style and exact procedure. Currently, 84.5 % of the students write on a computer. However, for brainstorming, they prefer handwriting with a pencil and memos or a smart phone. For building trust, they prefer face-to-face or LINE meetings to online meetings. Regarding online courses, they would like to have more discussions along with watching/reading learning materials. Individual support services, such as the academic writing center, seminars and field work are popular for writing training. The results can contribute to the preparation of a practical writing class for use during a pandemic or other disaster .

Keywords: COVID-19, online class, academic writing, risk perception, crisis communication

1. Introduction

Since early 2020, society has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; human life now requires things not experienced before such as maintaining appropriate social distance from other people, wearing a mask, washing hands carefully and gargling after coming home. The new way of living is to avoid “closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings” (Japan Government, 2020). The pandemic, which the World Health Organization (2020) declared on March 11, 2020, has lasted longer than expected.

Several researchers have discussed the influences of COVID-19 on the perceptions of the public. Nikcevic and Spada (2020) explain that the pandemic brought psychological influences such as “fear, anxiety, perceived threat, and stress,” which could cause COVID-19 anxiety syndrome.¹

In general, it is a big challenge to continue a sustainable society under these conditions. This is a situation that calls for risk/crisis communication. Studying the case of risk/crisis communication after the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tateno and Yokoyama (2013) illustrate that a key use of crisis communication was to provide sufficient information for people to make a proper decision in their daily lives for risk management after the incident. Communication of risk/crisis is delivered to manage the difficult situation.

As a genre of writing as a craft, environmental writing (including environmental literature, science writing, and nature writing) has dealt with the relationship between the natural world and human beings for a long time, whether the story is fiction or nonfiction.² This genre can be extended to include the pandemic story about public health issues due to viruses from the natural world. Like these works of literature, environmental writers have described numerous aspects of the natural world and human beings in various stories.³

The context of risk communication and environmental literature/writing could be extended to the discourse of education in academic writing under the risk perception of natural phenomena such as a pandemic or disaster. The case of COVID-19 has also changed the way education is provided in college, and teachers now prepare lectures and, at the same time, prepare careful support for their students' learning in this special situation; they must teach classes while the world around them is practicing the communication of risk and crisis, including official government acts such as state of emergency declarations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, which is the case of this study, Tokyo's Aoyama Gakuin University, introduced online Webex meeting systems to continue to provide classes to its students safely, with students of some courses taking online classes for multiple semesters (Aoyama Gakuin University, 2021). Other courses taught in classrooms at campus are prepared carefully according to mitigation rules such as allowing only a minimum number

of attendees, making sure classrooms are well-cleaned, and cautioning students not to speak too loudly, in order to prevent spread of the disease. (Aoyama Gakuin University, 2020).

According to a perception study by Abbasi (2020), most of the students in their study thought that the e-learning program in online courses is beneficial for the acquisition of knowledge, while they preferred to learn practical skills such as clinical skills and technical skills in clinics and laboratories.

In theories and practices of writing education, each discipline has a different approach (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2019; Holdinga et al., 2021). Currently, many courses provide students with writing assignments related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social change resulting from it. This occasion gives students the opportunity to think about the current situation objectively and academically by searching the literature of their own research interest. However, a previous study in Japan insists that some students need special support for self-efficacy and self-esteem during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Arima et al., 2020). More research is needed about writing an assignment during many constraints due to the pandemic, such as limited access to library information, limited meeting opportunities in the academic community, or less opportunities to talk to classmates. They are not ready to receive sufficient writing education in a situation of emerging change due to the pandemic.

With this background, this research aims to clarify the current perceptions of students about the aspects of writing education in the risk/crisis communication period to improve student learning and writing support for students even during the pandemic.

2. Methodology

A perception survey was selected as the method of this study as follows:

2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed based on two characteristics. First, it can look at the balance of the logical, ethical and emotional aspects of the current situation during the stay-home period due to the pandemic, based on the classical rhetorical theory of Aristotle.⁴ The theory has been applied in various fields of pedagogy, psychology, social science, and politics (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990). The logical aspect is mainly related to the daily schedule of the students and their way of learning. The ethical aspect of the questionnaire is communication about building trust with the instructor of the students' class or the academic advisor. The emotional aspect is more about the feelings of the students, especially how they can be more comfortable and less anxious even in a pandemic situation, when writing a paper or doing other learning activities.

Secondly, the questionnaire was prepared based on research on risk communication using an approach of social psychology (Tateno & Yokoyama, 2013). Previous research insisted that the public and academic community should take a risk in daily life in the social context to become aware of risk and prepare for risk beforehand with the appropriate knowledge (Engdahl & Lidshog, 2014).

This time, a study field is within the framework of a perception study conducted on students in the academic community in the pandemic risk situation to better practice writing. Furthermore, being careful about the current tough situations of the respondents, the questionnaire did not necessarily include some basic questions about the study of risk perception, such as anxiety, feeling stress, to reduce emotional pressure on students as respondents to the survey.

The questionnaire has four types of questions: 1) daily life during the stay home period, 2) perception of how to write a paper, 3) ideal writing support, and 4) preferable style of writing training.

2.2 Perception study

The selected respondents were students from Aoyama Gakuin University, who were attending a liberal arts course, called “Vision of Science and Technology.” There is no expected specific tendency or specialization in the profiles of the respondents.

At the end of the spring 2021 semester before the conclusion of the class, the online survey was conducted through the course web site on the online course system CoursePower. This site facilitated the online survey during the class.

2.3 Data analysis

After the perception study was conducted, the data was statistically analyzed by looking at the ratios of selected options of answers for each question. The perception tendencies of the respondents were investigated by categorizing them into six sections: 1) Demography of the survey respondents, 2) Daily schedule of the respondents during the stay-home period, 3) Perception regarding the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 4) Perception of writing an assignment during the pandemic, 5) Perception of access to writing support, 6) Preferable style of academic writing training.

3. Results

3.1 Profile of respondents

The number of students who responded to the questionnaire was 254. All responses were

Table 1. Demography of survey respondents

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Grade		
Freshman	188	74
Sophomore	41	16.1
Junior	23	9.1
Senior	1	0.4
No response	1	0.4
Total	254	100
Gender		
Male	158	62.2
Female	95	37.4
No response	1	0.4
Total	254	100
Age		
18	106	41.7
19	85	33.5
20	44	17.3
21	14	5.5
22	1	0.4
23	1	0.4
24	1	0.4
25	0	0
26	1	0.4
No response	1	0.4
Total	254	100
Department		
Science and Engineering	145	57.2
Social informatics	44	17.3
Global Studies and Collaboration	41	16.1
Community Studies	22	8.7
Economics	1	0.4
No response	1	0.4
Total	254	100

Table 2. Daily schedule of the respondents during stay-home period

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Hours for study after school		
Almost none	13	5.1
0 to 30 minutes	24	9.4
30 minutes to 1 hour	61	24
1 hour to 2 hours	77	30.3
2 hours to 3 hours	45	17.7
3 hours to 4 hours	18	7.1
More than 4	11	4.3
No response	5	2
Total	254	100
Club activity after school		
Almost none	174	68.5
0 to 30 minutes	21	8.3
30 minutes to 1 hour	11	4.3
1 hour to 2 hours	12	4.7
2 hours to 3 hours	14	5.5
3 hours to 4 hours	5	2
More than 4	5	2
No response	12	4.7
Total	254	100
Hobby after school		
Almost none	12	4.7
0 to 30 minutes	18	7.1
30 minutes to 1 hour	43	16.9
1 hour to 2 hours	82	32.3
2 hours to 3 hours	65	25.6
3 hours to 4 hours	15	5.9
More than 4	13	5.1
No response	6	2.4
Total	254	100

valid for the analysis of this study. The number is the same as that of the students attending the course.

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the respondents. Most of them are students in the College of Science and Engineering (57.2%), the School of Social Informatics (17.3%), the School of Global Studies and Collaboration (16.1%), or the College of Community Studies (8.7%) on the campus of Sagami-hara campus, located in Kanagawa Prefecture, of Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan. One respondent at the College of Economics was taking the course from the Shibuya campus of the university. The grades of the respondents were freshman (74%), sophomore (16.1%), junior (9.1%) or senior (1%). In terms of gender balance, 62.2 % were male and the other 37.4 % were female students, and one student (0.4%) did not respond. Regarding their age, most of them were between 18 and 21 years old. Demographic data was almost the same as expected.

Table 3. Perception regarding changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Do you think that the pandemic changed a student's way of learning?		
I don't think so.	26	10.2
I don't think so very much.	38	15
Yes or No.	70	27.6
I think so.	85	33.5
I think so very much.	28	11
No response.	7	2.8
Total	254	100

Which learning activity increased during the pandemic?

Watching educational materials	121	34.6
Writing a paper	100	28.6
Reading a scholarly publication	61	17.4
Having a discussion	9	2.6
Nothing in particular	48	13.7
No response	11	3.1
Total	350	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

Which learning activity is your favorite during the pandemic?

Having a discussion	108	35.1
Watching educational materials	82	26.6
Reading a scholarly publication	54	17.5
Writing a paper	31	10.1
Nothing in particular	29	9.4
No response	4	1.3
Total	308	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

Table 4. Perception of writing an assignment during the pandemic

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Which device do you use for writing a paper?		
Computer	215	84.6
Notebook or paper	19	7.5
Smart phone	7	2.8
Tablet	9	3.5
No response	4	1.6
Total	254	100

Which tool do you use for brainstorming?

Computer	122	48
Notebook or paper	62	24.4
Smart phone	18	7.1
Tablet	14	5.5
Don't do brainstorming	33	13
No response	5	2
Total	254	100

Which tool do you think is the best to use when brainstorming?

Pencil	117	17.8
Smart phone	117	17.8
Memo	100	15.2
Ballpoint pen	93	14.1
Notebook	90	13.7
Computer	72	10.9
Schedule book	31	4.7
Tablet	24	3.6
Brush-like pen	3	0.5
No response	12	1.8
Total	659	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

3.2 Student daily life during the stay-at-home period

In the survey, the next questions shown in Table 2 were about the schedule of the students during the stay-at-home period. After taking online classes, most respondents study for 30 minutes to one hour (24%), one hour to two hours (30.3 %), two hours to three hours (17.7%) or so.

Regarding time, except for study after school, they spend 30 minutes to 1 hour (16.9%), 1 hour to 2 hours (32.3%), 2 hours to 3 hours (25.6%) or so on their hobby. 68.5% of them do not spend time on a club activity, which means that they do not participate in the club activity for now.

3.3 Perception of how to write an assignment

Table 3 shows some tendencies with respect to the changes in the learning style in the daily life of the students during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, in terms of their change in

access to their course from a classroom to the Internet and the switch to the new technology of online courses, almost half of the students, 44.5 % in total, think (33.5%) or think very much (11%) that the way of learning style has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other students think that there is no change at all (25.2%), think yes or no (27.6%).

More detailed questions about their change of learning style were answered the revealed an increase in the frequency of watching visual educational materials (34.6%), writing a report (28.6%), reading literature (17.4) and having discussions (2.6%). A supplementary question shows that during their free time, they tend to have more access to YouTube and related visual content, SNS (social media), or movies. This means that their activities in their private lives have shifted more to digital/internet, visual-oriented communication, rather than writing or reading.

Table 5. Perception of access to writing support

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Who do you contact when you need support for writing?*		
The Internet	188	31.8
Friends	148	25
By myself	88	14.9
Scholarly publication	80	13.5
Senior students	35	5.9
Teachers	27	4.6
Others' papers	21	3.5
No response	5	0.8
Total	592	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

Table 6. Preferred type of academic writing training*

	Number (n)	Ratio (%)
Individual support	90	21.6
Writing seminar	81	19.5
Field work	52	12.5
Laboratory visit	35	8.4
Museum visit	35	8.4
Writing workshop	31	7.5
Support by mail	30	7.2
Library visit	21	5
No response	41	9.9
Total	416	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

Before the pandemic, who did you contact for writing support?*

Friends	94	22.1
The Internet	92	21.6
By myself	54	12.7
Scholarly publication	40	9.4
Teachers	29	6.8
Senior students	26	6.1
Others' papers	7	1.6
No response	84	19.7
Total	426	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

Which communication style do you prefer to use with teachers?*

CoursePower	141	33.8
Face-to-face meeting	137	32.9
LINE	57	13.7
Email	39	9.4
Online meeting	26	6.2
Other SNS aside from LINE	7	1.7
No response	10	2.4
Total	417	100

* This question accepts multiple answers.

On the other hand, a question about the students' favorite learning activities showed that they tend to prefer more interactive style styles as in-class discussion (35.1%) followed by watching visual educational materials (26.6%), reading literature (17.5%) and then writing a paper (10.1%).

3.4 Perception of the writing process

Table 4 shows the answers to three questions asked in the survey. One is about which device is used for writing the overall draft of their class assignments, the second question is about which device is used for brainstorming, and the third question is about which tool is thought to be the best - for writing when brainstorming.

As a result, 84.6% of the students responded that they usually use their computer to write a paper. About half of the respondents, 48%, answered that they use a computer for brainstorming. Interestingly, to come up with a good idea and think about concept/organization of a paper during brainstorming, respondents thought the ideal tool to be a pencil (17.8%), a smart phone (17.8%), memos (15.2%), a ballpoint pen (14.1%) or a notebook (13.7%). Only after these tools was the, computer (10.9%) selected, followed by a schedule book (4.7%), a tablet (3.6%) and a brush-like pen called fude-pen in Japanese (0.5%).

3.5 Ideal writing support

Table 5 shows the data on the questions regarding writing support. To get writing support, respondents access the Internet (31.8%), speak with their friends (25%), study all by themselves (14.9%), and look at scholarly publications (13.5%). Unlike before the COVID-19 pandemic, they speak more with their friends (22.1%) than accessing the Internet (21.6%). Before the pandemic, they studied less by themselves and had less chance of looking for scholarly publications (9.4%).

The questions in Table 5 are asked to select multiple answers. Compared to the situation before the pandemic, in the current situation the respondents selected more answers, which means that they now access more varied ways of receiving writing support than they did before the pandemic.

Whether before or during the pandemic, students continue to have few opportunities to try to make an appointment to speak with their teacher (before the pandemic 6.8%, during the pandemic 4.6%) or senior students (before the pandemic 6.1%, during the pandemic 5.9%).

The preferred communication style of receiving advice from a teacher is, the responses show, via an online course web site such as CoursePower (33.8%), face-to-face meeting (32.9%), LINE (13.7%), Email (9.4%), online meeting (6.2%) and on the SNS (1.7%).

3.6 Style of academic writing training

When students replied to the question of their ideal way of academic writing training, the answers include individual support (21.6%), a seminar (19.5%), field work (12.5%) and other styles such as a laboratory visit (8.4%), a museum visit (8.4%), a writing workshop (7.5%), mail support (7.2%), a library visit (5%) as shown in Table 6.

4. Conclusion

The survey unveiled the perception of current students about their lives and learning; how they live their lives every day, how they think about their study, especially their writing, and how teachers and support facilities on the university campus could support students' learning at home. There are several limits in terms of the survey. One is about the demographic tendency. More than half of the respondents were from the College of Science and Engineering. If a student survey could have been taken from all departments on all campuses of the university, the results would be more comprehensive. Another limit was on the comparison of the results before and after the occurrence of the pandemic. This time, the results were analyzed based on the perceptual responses of each student before and after the onset of the pandemic. Further research would be necessary to examine the differences of overall tendencies in regard to students' perception of academic writing before and after the occurrence of the pandemic.

Here are the points to conclude the discussion.

4.1 Student academic lives and information

For the safety of students, an online class teaching style was implemented during the pandemic, and students mainly did not go to on campus classrooms as frequently as before during the pandemic from 2020 to today. The results in Table 3 show that 44.5% (Answer: Think so 33.5% and think very much 11%) of the students feel there has been a change in their learning style due to the pandemic, which confirms a large extent of change to their academic lives.

A high proportion (68.5%) of the respondents do not participate in a university club activity, which coincides with the findings that many students study by themselves without information from other friends or senior students (Table 2). However, according to the survey result, students understand more than before the pandemic that there are many types of options to get information from the Internet, friends, scholarly publications, senior students, and teachers (Table 5). That may be an optimistic aspect of the change that gave students the opportunity to be more proactive to obtain appropriate academic information. That is also supported by the finding that students reporting they consult scholarly publications becomes

higher after the pandemic (13.4%) than before it (9.5%), although these percentages are still lower than those of the Internet and friends.

A university library has good potential to improve this situation for students to access proper academic information, especially regarding scholarly publications, for their study or research. Although the respondents did not select the visit to a library as the most favorite opportunity in the survey (Table 6), combined with other popular activities, such as individual support or a seminar, the library could be a more helpful place for students looking for scholarly publications when writing a paper.⁵

4.2 Student perception of learning

Some gaps were found between student perceptions and the current ways of learning. One involves their favorable activities while taking an online course. The majority of learning styles favored for online classes are to watch or read educational materials along with the lecture. This time, the survey shows that 35.1% of the students would like to have more opportunities for discussion even during the online class (Table 3).

Table 3 also shows the perceptions of the students who were doing their writing assignments. 28.6% of the students responded that writing assignments increased during the pandemic; however, writing a paper is a less favored activity than other learning activities such as class discussions and watching/reading educational materials. This strongly suggests that, during the pandemic period, writing support for students' class assignments is more important than before to enable students to keep up with their learning in class.

4.3 Perception of writing a paper during the pandemic

The survey also looked at the more detailed perceptions of students regarding writing papers (Table 4). There is a perceptual gap between their natural comfortability of writing style and their current exact procedure of writing. Now, 84.5 % of students usually write with a computer. However, for brainstorming, many students prefer to use a pencil, memos, or a smart phone, rather than a computer.

4.4 Pedagogical implication

These interesting results, especially that many students prefer to use a pencil when they are brainstorming ideas, can be used to design a practical writing course. Specifically, implementing handwriting activities is a key option even during an online class and writing a paper with digital devices.⁶ For example, during an online class, an instructor could assign a brainstorming activity to be written with a pencil on a paper or notepad, and then the students

make use of the drafts, either the papers or the online screen. The survey shows that a smart phone is another popular tool for brainstorming, which can be further investigated. Either way, the instructor of the online class could recommend handwriting activities or the smart phone memo function for brainstorming as an option to drafting a paper with a computer more smoothly.

4.5 Writing support and training

According to the results of the survey shown in Table 5, students tend to have fewer opportunities to speak with senior students and teachers during the pandemic. Furthermore, the respondents think that the individual support style is the most preferable support for the training of academic writing (Table 6). Combining these results, individual support from senior students at the academic writing center could be a preferable approach for learning support during the pandemic due. That could be applied to other situations of risk/crisis communication under strong anxiety feelings, such as natural disaster.⁷

In terms of receiving academic advice from professors, to build trust, students prefer to use the online class website, face-to-face meetings, or LINE interactions more than the standard communication tools such as emails or online meetings. For writing education, it is also an appropriate step for teachers and students to discuss about how to communicate regularly to develop a paper from onset until submission.

In conclusion, based on the perceptual changes of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ways of teaching writing and ways of supporting writing can be adjusted according to the new styles of life and learning of the students. These results can contribute to the development of a practical writing class more suitable for writing instruction and support during a pandemic or other prolonged disaster.

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Notes

- ¹ Ahorsu et al. (2020) set the first measure to look at COVID-19 fear, then clinics and psychologists started to look at the specific emotional response during the pandemic.
- ² Naturalism movement in writings and other expressions also includes environmental writing (Hasegawa, 1992). The environmental literature describes both sides of nature; a good side is a spring season of beautiful blooming flowers or a fruitful harvest time in autumn, and a bad side is about a natural disaster, earthquake, flood, hurricane, or typhoon to devastate a town (Iwayama & Beppu, 1992). At that point, the craft has an aesthetic sense of expressing a natural place and requires ethical attitudes to natural places and animals to protect the environment and animal rights when people bring technology to the natural place. The story there could become “utopian or dystopian narratives” according to its storyteller (Ikta et al., 2008).
- ³ The examples of literature are “Walden or life in the woods” by Thoreau (1854), “Silent spring” by Carson (1962), “Big-two hearted river” by Hemingway (1925) or “La peste” by Camus (1947). Furthermore, in Japan, novelists have also written many similar topics of nature and human being. The examples are “A handful of sand” by Ishikawa (1910), “Descendants of Cain” by Arishima (1918), and “Muddy area” by Miura (1982).
- ⁴ Aristotle’s communication theory is called “three rhetorical appeals” to be persuasive academically and in other genres. It can be applied to speech communication and written communication.
- ⁵ As an example of a field work as writing training, there is a SantaFe Science Writing Program (2021).
- ⁶ Handwriting gives more information about its writers, such as their psychological or physical condition and a way of understanding the topic, while the merit of digital information is readability and convenience for submission.
- ⁷ The limit of individual support by learning facilities such as academic writing centers is that sometimes students would need support to use such facilities. It is necessary to do frequent public relations activities for learning support through newsletters, web sites, and other information outlets to students so that they can use them according to their needs. The recommendation to use such support from class instructors or other facilities at campus is also a good way.

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