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Developing Research Skills: Engaging with Japanese Social Issues in an English Medium Seminar

ABSTRACT

In this paper we report on a project conducted in a semester-long introductory English-Medium Instruction seminar in 2023 that aims to cultivate research and analytical skills for students to both help prepare for their graduation theses and utilize in their lives beyond university. To provide background, we first contextualize the seminar. We then outline the previous project iteration, followed by the rationale for updating. We introduce four discrete strategies: building knowledge, comparing sources, identifying stakeholders, and developing an awareness of underlying issues in individual stories. To date, students have demonstrated they are able to recognize and potentially reconcile different viewpoints. However, identifying broader, overarching concepts that enable them to connect different stories in other contexts remains a challenge. We conclude by outlining suggestions for improvement, hoping to provide an example for other teachers aiming to develop student research skills in similar contexts.

Keywords: EMI, research skills, curriculum internationalization, pedagogy, Japan

The LD30 conference encouraged us to engage with students to enrich their lives and empower them to be active learners who can make a difference in the world. In this paper, we aim to help achieve this goal through presenting concrete research strategies utilized in a project conducted in a first and second year English-Medium Instruction seminar class. First, we provide context for both the project and class within which it takes place. We outline difficulties with past attempts to achieve similar goals, and then explain our rationale for the updated project on which we report here. We next provide our ideas for the revamped research project, followed by an interim report on student outcomes and conclude with concrete suggestions for both improvement and broader application by other teachers.

CONTEXT AND GOALS

The research project in this report was completed by first- and second-year students through two cycles in an introductory seminar class in 2023. Students take a total of four introductory seminars,

which are samplers for the 24-unit “courses” that are available to them in third and fourth year. Course, when used in this paper, will refer to this sense of the word. Our introductory seminar is for Course I, a course focused on Japan in international society; other courses are focused on language or literature. The course students choose determines their seminar and required electives for graduation. In addition to introducing the course, one of the main objectives of the class is to develop students’ academic skills, including research skills, so that they are equipped to take Course I in their senior years.

In this project, we focus on developing foundational skills to find, compare, and utilize different information, which ideally enable students to become more media literate, more flexible to better understand different points of view, and more creative in approaching problem solving. Research skills at university contribute to their compulsory graduation thesis in fourth year. Strong research skills also provide students with essential skills for life beyond university through enabling them to “identify a problem, collect informational resources that can help address the problem, evaluate these resources for quality and relevance and come up with an effective solution to the problem” (St. Louis Community College Libraries, 2023).

At the outset, many students report a lack of familiarity with research, and have difficulty imagining research as a skill that applies practically to their lives. For example, many do not connect the process of planning a trip, which involves checking times, finding a place to stay, places to eat, and sites to visit to research skills that have crossover into the classroom. We therefore face both conceptual and practical challenges in developing research skills in our context.

HOW THE PROJECT HAS BEEN ORGANIZED IN PREVIOUS YEARS

Although students have completed a group research project each semester since we have been teaching this seminar, this year we changed the task to deepen students’ understanding of research. Previously, we had given students a research assignment that investigated change in Japan. Students were tasked with researching a contemporary issue in Japan through a historical lens, examining the past and present situations and making predictions about the future based on their research. The objective was having students recognize that change in society is normal, and something to take charge of rather than to be feared or resisted without consideration. The goal of the project was worthwhile, and students often found the project interesting, with many making efforts to present their information well. However, we became dissatisfied with the project for a number of reasons, and from this year changed the approach.

THE RATIONALE FOR CHANGING

We decided to change the project primarily because it was not developing students’ ability to think as researchers sufficiently. The content produced often demonstrated shallow understandings of the topics at hand. Rather than expanding the students’ awareness, the project tended to reinforce students’ propensity to see history as a linear narrative, with events relayed chronologically without a sense of causation. To illustrate, a typical example might be:

‘School lunches originated in Yamagata in the Meiji era and then they became common in Japan, and it used to be common to have whale meat and bread. Now there is more variety of food and also now some local governments have problems because parents don’t pay. In the future, there might be insects in school lunches because insects have a lot of protein.’

Moreover, students did not recognize competing narratives or different perspectives about changes, nor did they recognize that history is a product of choices and not predestined. Projects commonly lacked broader themes and concepts, making it difficult to see meaningful connections between the past, present, and future, as well as between their topics and other changes in Japan or abroad.

Students' difficulties were partly a product of shortcomings in the design of the original project, which did not include explicit steps to ensure that students identified aspects of change and continuity, nor did it require students to address different perspectives. This made it difficult for students to overcome a kind of historical determinism or "naive realism" (The Decision Lab, n.d.), apparently not uncommon among contemporary university students.¹ Although the marking criteria included using a variety of different sources, the project instructions themselves did not require showing different or competing perspectives. As such, the use of different sources tended to be superficial rather than a way to broaden understanding of an issue. Description through examples tended to dominate at the expense of conceptual analysis of change. Additionally, the segmentation into past, present, and future commonly resulted in groups allocating one section to each member, resulting in students researching different aspects independently and an overall lack of cohesion.

Based on these experiences, we decided to overhaul the project entirely and set about reestablishing our goals, shifting from chronology to breadth of understanding. To help students visualize the expectations, we provided our own example with a presentation using a contemporary, controversial news topic. This modeled the final product for students, explicitly presenting the requirements. Students were also provided with a list of sentence frames that they could use for the presentation. These provided important scaffolding, as few students had created an English-language, research-oriented presentation before.

CHANGES IN FOCUS

We made five main changes from the original, outlined in the table below:

Previous project	Current project
Students conduct a chronological investigation in the change of an issue over time	Students identify a contemporary, controversial issue in the news and focus on a range of perspectives
Focus on past, present, future	Focus on identifying stakeholders and their different, competing, and overlapping perspectives
Requirement to use different sources, but no in-depth explanation or evaluation of the merits of sources	Long-term focus on developing the habit of using different sources, and different types of sources and explaining why they chose them
Chronological focus that does not require conceptual links between events	A clear focus on identifying the concepts and issues within a story
Loosely structured presentation with accompanying report.	Structured presentation with sentence frames provided

THE FOUR UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

In re-making the project, we wanted to foster skills that are applicable to a wide variety of situations and have students produce work that is more analytical and coherent. To achieve this, we decided that the project needed a more systematic approach by breaking research skills down into discrete parts, and introducing them incrementally over the semester. This approach is founded on four research principles.

The first principle is that knowledge is necessary to understand and think critically. Students are encouraged to read widely to build their knowledge. In the preparatory stage, students are introduced to the idea of different types of sources. This endeavor is supported by the university library, which provides student-oriented introductions to accessing books and online databases. At this stage, we also introduce the merits and demerits of social media, going to experts, and finding

¹ Our thanks to Ken Ikeda for this insight.

the original source of information. Students research a news story from different types of sources to raise awareness of the way they can be used and their limitations. Noticing the differences between the ways news stories are told prepares them to question sources.

Having drawn attention to knowledge, the second principle is the importance of sourcing knowledge from different media in order to get different perspectives on the same issue. We provide examples with strong contrasts to highlight the importance of this. For example, we compare the Japanese and Korean government's respective websites about Takeshima/Dokdo. In a domestic example of differing views, students compare the front-page reports of the state funeral of former Prime Minister Abe from six Japanese newspapers. The broad spectrum of opinion helps students understand the dangers of relying on a single source and impresses the need to research from different sources and different types of sources and to interrogate the information they find. Furthermore, providing concrete examples of differences in perspective according to the media source helps students to understand why clearly referencing information is so important.

The third principle is issues having multiple stakeholders, and the idea of stakeholders having different perspectives on the same issue. Students can understand this through the hypothetical example of an easily imagined campus issue (i.e., potential sales of alcohol on campus). They can use their own experiences to imagine multiple perspectives on one issue and how different groups might have different concerns (i.e., those of students compared to staff compared to local neighborhood residents). Critically, the assignment requires students to look for stakeholders' common interests as well as their points of disagreement. This helps students move beyond entrenched opinions to a mindset where they can bridge differences, fostering a constructive mindset for problem solving in the face of conflict and opposing interests.

The final principle is focusing on identifying broader issues within a story. The ability to identify issues in their targeted news stories helps students apply what they are researching to other contexts in different times and places. As a requirement of the project, we have students identify the underlying issues in their story. Issues that they identify may include political concepts, such as globalization; sociocultural concepts, such as justice, gender, human rights; or environmental concepts, such as sustainability, pollution, global warming, etc. For example, a group of students researching the foreign trainee program in Japan may identify a concept such as labor rights, and connect it to sweatshop labor in Bangladesh, or human rights, through which they may identify similar issues in the treatment of foreign labor in the Middle East or Singapore. Students may also identify the issue of immigration and compare the situation of the trainees to those of other immigrant groups in Japan, such as foreign students. As trainee labor arises from combining the need to supplement a declining labor force with providing foreign aid, students may compare Japan's system to alternative foreign trainee labor schemes such as the one in South Korea, or alternative forms of development aid. Drawing out the issues to find comparable stories helps to train the students to think from a broader perspective and consider their topic more deeply and with greater connection to the international sphere. This stage is challenging, as students often lack knowledge of current affairs and are not accustomed to identifying broader issues, let alone doing so with a view to compare, and therefore still needs refining in design and implementation.

THE PROJECT

For the research project, students are split into small groups (2 or ideally 3 students per group) and choose a news story to investigate. The project is completed as a group in keeping with Course I objectives to create "a learning community that requires communication, cooperation, and collaboration" (Fujishima & Johnson, 2023, 139). Students have weekly tasks to develop their understanding of the news story, and present their research in the form of an oral presentation in week 14 or 15 of the semester.

Students are given a rubric to ensure the objectives of the project are clear. The rubric is split into two sections: content and presentation. For content, students are required to: (1) identify their topic and explain its importance, (2) identify multiple stakeholders, (3) identify different perspectives, (4) identify issues that can be connected to other stories, and (5) use different sources effectively. For presentation skills, students are required to (1) present information in an easy-to-understand way, (2) have good expression and delivery, (3) have good eye contact and engagement with the audience, and (4) have good preparation, fluency, and confidence overall. Importantly, we are judging on presentation skills and not on English ability (inasmuch as their presentation is understandable). The reason for not focusing on English is that this seminar is designated as a content class, specifically separate from language classes where language proficiency and acquisition are assessed.

OUTCOMES SO FAR

At present, we have only completed one semester with the new project and are in the process of doing it for a second time. Although the project design can still be improved, students are developing a better awareness of research skills than they did in previous iterations, based on the content of their presentations and student reflections.

All groups fulfilled the basic requirements of using a variety of different types of sources (for example, academic articles, mainstream media, social media, and official government websites). All groups also identified different stakeholders and their perspectives. Most groups were able to find and explain points of agreement and differences between stakeholders. One factor contributing to most students achieving these goals is that the project is highly structured. Because the rubric also serves as a checklist for tasks to do, students are more easily able to see whether they have addressed each requirement. Most groups were able to identify issues in order to make connections to other contexts. One group, for example, connected the issue of the coverup of Johnny Kitagawa's abuse of minors with the coverup of abuse in the Boy Scouts in the United States. Students verbally expressed surprise that it was not just a "Japan issue."

Having students able to shift from seeing a news report as just a "story" to being a story with perspectives to be understood and issues to be analyzed suggests evidence of progress. However, not all groups were able to make links effectively. Whether students will be able to apply this to future projects in seminar and elective classes within the course remains to be seen.

There has been no attempt yet to quantify student understanding using a questionnaire; however, students have been given project reflection cards which have open questions such as what they enjoyed, found difficult, and learned about researching through the project. Students' reflections show an understanding of the need to source information widely. For example, a first-year student commented:

"I have learned how to gather information from various sources rather than making decisions based on one article alone" (Student A).

Students show an understanding of the fact that different people have different points of view, and that consciously considering issues from the perspective of various stakeholders is something they will be able to apply to future projects (and hopefully life):

"I have never thought about anything from the perspective of a stakeholder or that person until now. This time, I was able to think about stakeholders and research them and learn research topics with various opinions that I couldn't think of myself, and I learned that there is also this way of research" (Student B).

At the same time, the reflections also contained comments that showed these strategies were unfamiliar and challenging for some students: *"I struggled to get information from various sources."* (Student C).

In addition to comments about the research aspects of the presentation, students, particularly first years, wrote in their reflection cards that they were nervous and lacked confidence to present in English.

FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS & BROADER APPLICABILITY

We have four main ideas for how to improve in the future. First, spend more time on the project throughout the semester. If we can rewrite the class materials to integrate the research strategies of knowledge, sources, stakeholders, and issues more explicitly inside the core class materials rather than as a separate research project, it would reduce cognitive load and allow more time for students to expand their thinking through research.

Second, we could add a questioning component into the project.² Good research relies on good questions. Integrating questioning into the project more explicitly is likely to help students' overall understanding of the purpose of research and develop their curiosity. Brainstorming questions about their news story is also likely to deepen engagement with the project.

Third, we could highlight the transferable skills students develop through the research project. Greater understanding of the relevance of the task would hopefully lead to increased student motivation (c.f. Frymier & Shulman 1995) and also help them recognize that they can use the skills in other contexts.

Finally, we need to consider alternative ways of scaffolding to enable students to gain a deeper understanding of what they are doing, decrease cognitive load, and shift focus towards skill development. With more scaffolding, students can potentially focus on developing skills rather than spending time worrying about how to present, which can be a barrier for learning as noted above.

Overall, this project, which introduced research skills incrementally, has improved students' ability to approach research, take account of a wider range of sources, and develop a consciousness to look from various perspectives, all abilities needed not only in academic contexts but also in life more generally. Although this paper is a case study of an EMI seminar, educators working to cultivate similar skills may benefit from engaging in these incremental, concrete-foundation approaches irrespective of teaching language.

The LD30 conference theme urged us to action by making a difference for the future. The theme echoes a growing international awareness that education needs to evolve so that it prepares students to be able to contribute to a rapidly changing world and solve global problems (OECD, 2020). In light of this, it is our hope that students will be taught to interrogate complex social issues from various viewpoints and develop a habit of questioning and looking for more information to be better equipped to meet the needs of society. The wide variety of projects shared at LD30 both by educators and students reaffirmed the importance of coming together to innovate and exchange ideas. We hope that the project outlined here can be a helpful step to understanding and solving problems based on a strong foundation of respect, understanding, and a will to improve.

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