

A Task-Based Approach to Entrance Exam Essay Question Preparation

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Introduction

In the Japanese private high school where I teach--as in most high schools throughout Japan-- third year students spend a lot of their time preparing for University entrance exams. In English classes, the 'grammar-translation' method is still used quite extensively by classroom teachers to train students for the type of questions they will see on the *National Center Test*, and on private and public college entrance exams. But in addition to grammar and reading comprehension questions, many of the top public and private universities now include short essay writing sections on their tests, in which students have to respond to a Japanese or English prompt with an English essay.

Task-based learning theory makes a common sense distinction between two types of tasks: target tasks, and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks are those real world tasks which the student hopes to actually perform some day (such as a job interview, for example), and pedagogical tasks are classroom activities which give the student opportunities for practice of the skills involved in the target task. Here, I would like to use this task-based framework to briefly explore the short essay section of Japanese university entrance exams as a target task, and consider pedagogical tasks (classroom activities) which can help EFL students succeed on exam day.

Though 'teaching to a test' may seem unappealing to some instructors, essay test question preparation can also be framed in task-based terms, whereby a student's answering an entrance exam essay question on testing day is seen as the "target task" for which various "pedagogic tasks" are developed in order to facilitate success. Such a framing opens the door to various strategies that can help students gain competence and confidence for answering entrance exam essay questions while at the same time providing valuable learning opportunities.

The Nature of the Tests

A look at university entrance exam past papers reveals several very challenging aspects to the tests themselves which frequently confound student test-takers. First and foremost among these challenges is time. Most tests are ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes in length and include complex grammar and reading comprehension questions in addition to one essay question based upon a Japanese or English prompt. This means that by the time many students reach the essay question portion of the test, they may only have a short time remaining to understand the essay question, organize their thoughts, and compose an intelligible response. Furthermore, test questions almost always impose word limits for students. This means that students must, within fifteen to twenty minutes, be able to produce an essay which is not only well-written, but also extremely concise.

A final challenge for students is topic complexity. Many of the essay question prompt students to opine on complex societal problems, write about strange hypothetical situations, or interpret pictures or cartoons. For students who have not yet developed good critical thinking skills and familiarity with English rhetorical style, never mind linguistic skills, such tasks are difficult to impossible.

Classroom Strategies

The aforementioned challenges can, however, be approached many months--if not years--before exam day through various pedagogical tasks which will help students gradually gain competence and confidence. Several Japanese books consolidate representative samples of exam questions and help students develop strategies and key vocabulary. Books like this, or the actual past papers themselves are the best sources for entrance exam questions to use for practice in the classroom.

Get Students Used to the Ticking Clock

One strategy for dealing with the issue of time pressure is to challenge students to write under time constraints early and often. Time limited free writing, brainstorming, as well as essay writing tasks themselves help students become comfortable with the challenge of a ticking clock. In the classroom though students can be given significant preparation time or various forms of input before they are compelled to write on a given topic, thus diminishing the stress associated with writing on a topic one has never even thought through before.

Deal with Word Limits

In addition to time constraints, word limits also constrain students and provide additional stress at test time. The instructions of most tests stipulate word count ranges or limits within which student essays are expected to write their answers. Many tests even ask students to count the words in their essays and record the number on their answer sheets. The word count limits and ranges vary significantly by university and question type, but as a rule short answer questions generally ask for answers as short as 20 - 30 word, whereas long answer questions can require anywhere from 40 to 200 words. The best strategy for contending with word limits is simply to get students used to the look, feel, and common structures of typical essays at various lengths. Students become good at counting words by line, but this time is probably better spent on planning, composition, and editing.

Build Familiarity with the Question Forms

As I mentioned above, different universities typically require essay question answers on different topics and of varying lengths. The good news though is that universities seem to stay fairly consistent on this from year to year. Thus, if a teacher becomes familiar with the strata(s) of university to which students in a given class are applying, he or she can structure and sequence tasks according to the types of questions which students might see on test day.

A broad look at the various questions which universities use also reveals certain large thematic categories which teachers can use as focus points for preparing their students. Example of some of the main categories are: agree / disagree questions, opinion response to a text, reaction and/or interpretation of a cartoon, hypothetical questions, and questions about future plans. Some types of questions, such as these last two, clearly seek to elicit responses whereby students demonstrate their facility with discrete grammatical areas such as the subjunctive mood, or future aspect. Teachers can thus focus on relevant grammatical structures, offer model paragraphs, and explicitly teach students about which types of grammatical forms are likely to be necessary in response to certain types of writing prompts. I generally integrate the skill of becoming aware of such characteristics into my lessons, thus training students to have a good eye for what grammatical patterns a given question might be trying to elicit.

Some exam questions seem to have less discrete grammatical focus, and instead call for students to display vocabulary competence by offering opinions on various topics. Once a teacher identifies the key vocabularies which these questions draw from, he or she can add vocabulary exercises to class time, or assign vocabulary learning for homework before specific writing assignments.

Develop Test-taking Skills

Once students are familiar with the various types of questions which are common on university entrance exams, teachers can help them develop test-taking skills and strategies for attacking these questions. Essay question prompts are given in both Japanese and English, but either way, students need to be able to quickly recognize the key points which they must write about. Simple exercises in which students underline key words in sample questions can help students ensure that they address the entire scope of the prompt in their essay. This type of exercise too can be done under imposed time constraints, thus

helping students to improve their scanning and skimming techniques.

Students can also be encouraged to practice quick brainstorming and outlining activities with which they can make thumbnail sketches of their essays before they start writing. Of course, such strategies will only work for students who have some extra time when they begin their essays. Given this, another important component to teach students about is time management. Students should consider their own test-taking styles, strengths, and weaknesses, and decide accordingly when during their test to work on the writing section. The writing sections of university entrance exams in Japan almost always come at the end of the test, but that does not mean students have to work in the prescribed order.

Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of teaching Japanese high school students English essay writing is helping them develop critical thinking skills vis-à-vis western style rhetorical conventions. In Japan, there is a specific format of essay writing which is typically taught to students in their high school Japanese lessons (it is taught, but not often practiced). The style differs from the common western five paragraph essay, and so, following this form, students may produce writing which is somewhat more elliptical in nature than what is common in standard Western discourse. This could perhaps be thought of as an example of what linguists call 'interference'--whereby L1 knowledge is transferred to the L2, but here it is seen taking place on the narrative level (rather than, or in addition to the lexical and sentence levels). And though it would be presumptuous (and perhaps imperialistic) to teach students that such a form is unacceptable for English essay writing, it is nevertheless prudent to teach and expose students to more linear essay forms which address the university entrance exam prompts efficiently (efficiency is at a premium). In doing this, teachers need to remember though, that students may have had few opportunities to develop and exercise critical thinking skills in their other classes. Teachers may thus see deficiencies in students' abilities to think about problems critically. This can be true even among student who have a strong grasp of English grammar, who might be able to excel on multiple choice questions, and even translation problems. Still, various exercises can be used to help students develop critical thinking skills while simultaneously working on linguistic competencies.

Other critical thinking activities might include group brainstorms, listing the 'pros' and 'cons' of ideas and positions, listing 'for' and 'against' arguments, mapping processes, and recognizing true/false or logical and illogical statements based upon conjunction use (students in Japan, for example, frequently confuse "so" and "because"). In all of these activities, I find that I need to constantly switch between focusing on proper phrase construction, sentence construction, and paragraph construction and ordering.

Provide Rich Input for Students to Engage With

One of the most obvious things teachers can do to help students develop good writing is to expose them to well-written sample essays. The type of short essays writing required on university entrance exams may differ significantly from the type of writing students see in their text books, so just increasing students familiarity with sample answers goes a long way and seems to have considerable influence on their writing. Short sample essays can be presented in dictation form while students listen for missing words or phrases as they read through the text. Students seem to benefit from aural as well as textual input as a means of engaging different learning styles, and also perhaps activating different cognitive faculties for processing language.

Providing outlines of sample paragraphs based upon their structures also seems to help students to conceptualize various essay forms and become familiar with common time order words and other rhetorical devices. Once students gain some familiarity with these forms, they can of course be asked to make or fill-in structure outlines on their own. Also, word puzzles whereby students arrange sentences into logical order are fun group activity that focus students on essay structures and forms. Later, this can even be done at the word--rather than sentence--level.

Conclusion

In the article, I have chosen to focus mainly on the broad issues associated with helping students to prepare for entrance exam questions, and the practices which I have found to be most effective. I have mainly discussed issues related to form and content, and have not focused on the sentence-level grammar and vocabulary problems that many students encounter. This is because I generally communicate these issues directly to students in written form when I correct the essay assignments which

they submit regularly (based on past paper university entrance exam questions). Related to this though, I have sometimes consolidated malformed sentences and/or essays and presented them in class (anonymously) to students to correct themselves or in groups. Since different students in the same class often make the same writing errors, this has a positive effect in raising awareness of errors and thinking through solutions collectively. Several exam preparation text books also focus on common errors by providing example for students to correct themselves. Such texts can be used in advance of writing assignments in order to raise student consciousness about common errors before they are even made.

Here, I have tried to explain my perspective on how university entrance exam essay questions can be used as target tasks within a task-based teaching framework. Though the context of my observations relates to the particulars of the Japanese entrance exam system, it is my hope that some of the essay writing related pedagogical tasks which I have discussed will have broader application.

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