
TITLE

Investigating the Cognitive Constructs Measured by the Aptis Writing Test in the Japanese Context

This is a summary of a report by Yumiko Moore and Sathena Chan as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

The Course of Study developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been the official National Curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Japan since 1947. The latest version (MEXT, 2009) strongly emphasises acquisition of all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the importance of preparing students to use these skills in the target language use context. With regard to writing skills, the heavy reliance on translation and indirect word-reordering tasks in writing assignments and assessments in Japan has raised concerns (Moore, 2015; Takahashi, 2012). The present study examined the context and cognitive validity of the Aptis Writing test, which involves direct writing tasks, in the Japanese academic context.

The study addressed two research questions:

RQ1: What is the construct of academic writing in English at Japanese universities?

RQ2: To what extent does Aptis Writing Part 4 resemble the contextual features of Year 1 writing tasks sampled at a single Japanese university, and elicit the cognitive processes students employ to complete these tasks in real-life?

HOW WE DID IT:

To answer the research questions, this project used a mixed-methods approach utilising an online survey, document analysis, expert judgements, interviews and questionnaires.

An online writing task survey was conducted with 91 lecturers from 49 universities in Japan to investigate the predominant writing activities in Japanese universities. Based on the results of the survey, we sampled 25 writing tasks from one of the universities. These real-life tasks were then analysed against a range of contextual and cognitive parameters. Thirty-eight university students participated in the study. Each of them completed the Aptis Writing Task 4 (Parts a and b) on a computer and filled in a cognitive process questionnaire for each part. 20% of the participants were interviewed individually to describe their writing processes on the Aptis tasks.

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WHAT WE FOUND:

For RQ1, the most important findings include:

- the genres most commonly assigned to Year 1 students in Japanese universities were essays, summaries and reports
- students were expected to perform a wide range of language functions, including describing, reasoning, organising, expressing personal view, evaluating, and synthesising.

However, when we sampled writing tasks from one of the universities, we observed that writing in English was rare for Year 1 modules. Apart from the English Department, almost all other subject modules required students to write in Japanese. The most common writing tasks assigned in the English department included short continuous discourse, guided essays and argumentative essays on personal and social topics. These tasks require the Year 1 students to relate personal experiences or viewpoints using language functions such as describing, reasoning, organising and evaluation, and expressing personal views. However, the former two task types were mainly used for pedagogical purposes to prepare student to complete the argumentative essay tasks.

For RQ2, a summary of the findings suggests that:

The Aptis Writing Test, Part 4, resembles the real-life argumentative essay tasks in terms of key parameters including topic domain, cognitive demands and language functions. The Aptis Writing Test Part 4 tasks outperformed the sample real-life tasks in terms of clarity of writing purpose, knowledge of criteria and intended readership, all of which are essential for a valid writing assessment task. However, when considering the writing constructs ultimately expected of Japanese students in the general academic context, a wider range of academic genres, such as summary and report, and some more demanding language functions such as synthesis, should also be represented in the Aptis Writing test.

Regarding cognitive validity, a reasonable percentage of the participants reported using most of the processes during the different writing phases of *conceptualisation*, *meaning and discourse construction*, *organising*, and *monitoring and revising*. On average, more than 40% of the participants reported using conceptualisation and organising processes on Part 4a (i.e. the informal email). Almost 60% reported using meaning and discourse construction processes. However, only a few students engaged in monitoring and revising on Part 4a. More participants engaged in the target processes on Part 4b. About 45% of participants reported engaging in meaning and discourse construction, organising and low-level monitoring and revising processes. More than 50% engaged in conceptualisation and revised their writing at a high level on Part 4b. However, taking notes or highlighting important parts in the notice were rarely reported due to lack of tools. Also, the process of linking important ideas seemed to be under-elicited by the Aptis tasks.

Considering the comparatively low English proficiency of Japanese students and their unfamiliarity with direct writing assessments, the results are encouraging in that students engaged in most of the target processes on the Aptis Writing Test Part 4. A few suggestions as to how Aptis could better cater for the needs of Japanese university students are made in the full report.