

The artifice of teaching academic writing in an AI world: An e-portfolio approach for undergraduate students¹

Rab Paterson

Rikkyo University's Center for Foreign Language Education and Research

Kaori Hakone

Osaka Jogakuin University's Department of English & Interdisciplinary Studies

AI's arrival into the educational sector will have a powerful, foundation-shaking impact on education and teaching practices. Much like the Internet's emergence into the educational sphere in the 1990s and the development of online apps in the early 2000s, this will initially pose problems for educators until they adapt to AI. One of the major issues here is plagiarism. Therefore, this paper will help teachers incorporate AI-friendly teaching practices and guide students in appropriately using AI in writing classes to avoid plagiarism. Writing assignments usually have students start with research reading. In the approach covered in this paper, we show how they can ethically use a given set of AI research/reading apps to help complete their reading homework tasks. This paper will also give a brief overview of the pros and cons of these apps and a review of our personal experiences of using them in the classroom. Next, we will highlight ways teachers can create a classroom workflow of highly AI-proof experiential homework tasks (i.e., students cannot complete the task using AI as AI apps will not know what was done in the classroom or the students' classroom experiences). These tasks provide teachers with benchmark writing samples that can be checked using text analysis apps to check and compare against students' future work to determine if AI-driven plagiarism has occurred. The paper will conclude with the presenters' philosophical thoughts on AI in general and academic writing.

1. Introduction - the plagiarism issue

At Japanese universities (where the two authors have taught for numerous years and still teach), many freshmen undergraduate students are asked to write academic English language essays as part of their coursework. However, many of these students have never written these types of research papers in Japanese at high school, never mind in English. So, suddenly being asked to write academic papers in English shortly after entering university can be a daunting task for many of them. This pressure can and often does lead to plagiarism in students' work, as has been widely reported in Japan (Dunn, 2015, p. 33; Schraudner, 2015). Sometimes this plagiarism simply stems from a lack of students' linguistic skills, so they copy text instead (Pecorari & Petric', 2014; Wheeler, 2009), others argue it is due to differing cultural views of plagiarism and whether it is acceptable or not (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Chien, 2014). Irrespective of the different causes of plagiarism, it was and still is a problem that needs to be addressed at Japanese universities.

¹ This article is based upon a presentation delivered at The 5th International Symposium for Academic Writing & Critical Thinking, 'AI: Deliverance, diversion, or dystopia', on February 16, 2024, at Nagoya University.

Therefore, Paterson developed an initial e-portfolio² approach that later evolved into the version currently used, which utilizes collaborative writing with Google Documents³ to help guide students through the academic writing process to avoid plagiarism. This approach has been very successful. Paterson has widely presented it, most recently in an online workshop for Tokyo JALT (2024) in February this year, and received very positive feedback from attendees. Now with the arrival of AI into the educational sector, this approach has been modified by the authors to help account for the substantial change in the educational circumstances that students are now working under, due to AI's educational emergence and the effects it can have on plagiarism. Therefore, this paper will illustrate the way this evolved e-portfolio approach and the apps and tools⁴ contained within it are used by the authors in their writing classes to mitigate the chances of AI-driven plagiarism in students' academic writing. This edtech-driven approach is especially relevant given how Japan lagged behind other OECD nations in its adoption of educational technology (Igari, 2014, OECD, 2015), and this lagging behind did not result in any great improvements (Peña-López & OECD, 2016) at least until COVID forced some changes in Japan. In academic research cycles (Smith et al., 2013), students start by deciding on a topic, checking its validity as a subject worth investigating, finding some sources related to the field, and then researching (reading) these sources to get information. Then, this information is considered and evaluated in terms of how it relates to previously known knowledge by the student researchers and other newly gleaned information from their sources list. Students then attempt to mold all this old and new information together into a cohesive new opinion or idea to form an argument or thesis. Next, they start writing about their views and later edit their text to refine and improve it. Finally, they present the results of their research in some form, although the actual dissemination of their results can also occur earlier in the cycle (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013, p.106). Therefore, the initial e-portfolio approach used by this paper's authors follows this procedure and process.

2. Starting the e-portfolio process

First, students are given guidance on the suitability of their research topics. The e-portfolio previously mentioned has a pre-writing section where students fill in some sections with their initial ideas to help ensure their topic is academically acceptable. To start with, they go

through four steps to list their general or major field of study, then the more specific sub-topic they are looking at within the major field, then the controversy or argument they are looking at, and finally, their initial position on this controversy. Then they move on to the 5A's. These A's help students decide if their topic is: Academic in nature, Arguable in that the premise can be proven or disproven, Accessible in that English language sources can be found and examined, Achievable in terms of the pre-set course word limit and number of weeks in the semester, and Attractive in that others are currently researching it (or has been researched in the past). Then, they try to develop

² This initial e-portfolio was created by Paterson in late 2008 and continually improved, and from 2009 onwards this systematic approach was demonstrated to many other writing teachers at International Christian University's English for Liberal Arts program where he worked at that time, as well as giving workshops on it at many conferences and teacher training workshops both in Japan and worldwide on academic research writing.

³ Google Documents. <https://www.google.com/docs>

⁴ For clarity apps are defined as downloadable software and tools are defined as browser based extensions or websites that do not need to be downloaded.

research questions to focus precisely where and what they should look for in their research pre-writing phase. Students then form research groups with others working on related topics.

Following this, students then collaboratively create a list of resources, i.e., places where they can find books, articles, and other sources of information. These resources include online resources like Google Books⁵ and Google Scholar⁶, third-party apps / databases like JSTOR⁷, other online collections of materials as well as physical resources like libraries. Then, students create a list of the sources they found from these resources. Next, students are taught how to use Zotero⁸, a free, open-source platform neutral referencing and note-taking application created in 2006 by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. Paterson (2020) has written on this app, describing in detail why it is a very useful tool for researchers and highlighting student feedback from using it. In the e-portfolio process, after learning how to use it, students then import their sources' metadata to the app and start their note-taking (using the Cornell note-taking system generally for lecture-based sources and more specific notes for books and papers) and will eventually put the notes to be used in the final papers into the Zotero app for later use.

3. Research reading

After gathering all the sources, students then need to examine these sources via research reading. Therefore, several reading strategies are covered in this e-portfolio process. Many researchers argue that traditional style deep reading has been proven to offer more benefits in terms of understanding and longer-term memory of the text being read in this way, but the problem is that many students either do not do, or do not know how to do this type of deep reading (Applegate and Applegate, 2004; Kuh 2004; McCarthy and Kuh 2006). Furthermore, although there have been many empirical studies done on reading at the elementary and high school level in the US, there is relatively little done on reading at the university level in the US and Japan (Roberts & Roberts, 2008, p. 127). In response, some academics have given guidance on how to better read in this way (Bordt & Pager, 2005; Yamane, 2006), but most students at Japanese universities have little prior exposure to these approaches. So we start with teaching deep reading and have students do the reading discussion parts on their readings in this way as after the pre-writing work is finished, students create their own research groups with other students working on similar or related topics to share research results. So they discuss the fruits of their research reading on their topics in a group of their peers to aid deep reading, and as their information gleaned might also be helpful to the other members of their groups. However, despite the cognitive advantages of this deep reading method, it is very time-consuming, therefore, the e-portfolio approach also teaches faster reading techniques like skimming and scanning.

Skimming and scanning techniques definitely have their place in research reading as most students are under time constraints for their assignments. Being able to rapidly find interesting parts of a text, or the parts they already know they need, can be very advantageous. Therefore, these skills are taught to help students in identifying the relevant parts of the texts in the research stage. However, they have limitations in that the content read is not embedded in the readers' memory as much as

⁵ Google Books. <https://books.google.co.jp/>

⁶ Google Scholar. <https://scholar.google.co.jp/>

⁷ JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/>

⁸ Zotero. <https://www.zotero.org/>

deep reading, and their understanding level is also less (Rayner et al., 2016). Then, when these critical sections have been identified students revert to deep reading to get the maximum memory retention and understanding of these relevant parts of the readings. From our experience, and from student feedback, this combination of reading techniques works very well in practice.

Finally, the reading section of the e-portfolio process also covers lateral reading. Many studies (Breakstone et al., 2021; McGrew, 2024; Wineburg & McGrew, 2017) have shown that lateral reading (like the way fact-checkers read) can help students more accurately judge the credibility and reliability of the information they encounter online. Indeed a field study with high school students exposed to this type of reading over six hours of lessons showed a significant improvement in their ability to evaluate the credibility of online sources (Wineburg et al., 2022). With students at Japanese universities having libraries that possess fewer English language books than libraries in English-speaking countries, students have a higher reliance on online sources.

Here, there is the problem of fake or unreliable content, and many students still need to be taught how to evaluate the credibility of online sources. Therefore, there is a need for them to learn lateral reading techniques. However, this does not only help in evaluating sources, but it can also help broaden students' knowledge as once they are aware they do not need to just read vertically (as in traditional deep reading), they can also copy text from the readings and conduct searches on concepts, names, phrases, and other things and run a simple search in another tab to learn more about these points before continuing the vertical reading. The e-portfolio process then covers this vital skill in addition to the other, more traditional reading skills.

All the above techniques presuppose that students have a good enough vocabulary to understand what they have read. However, this is not always the case with Japanese undergraduate students reading in English. Research by Waring & Takaki (2003) indicated that while some vocabulary can be learned incidentally through graded readers, most of this vocabulary is not retained in the long-term time frame. This underscores the need for extensive graded readings in the research reading phase to bolster vocabulary development. However, the types of academic papers students are expected to read in the research phase of their writing is seldom available in graded reader formats.

Rewordify⁹, therefore, serves as a tool to create graded reader text at a micro or word level from original academic texts. It aims to simplify complex academic vocabulary for lower-level English language users. This functionality is particularly valuable in educational settings with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, assisting students to overcome language barriers and improving their overall comprehension and vocabulary skills. However, reliance on such tools should be balanced with direct engagement with original texts to foster deeper learning and retention, and here, Rewordify also keeps the original more linguistically complex text in addition to the simplified text. Furthermore, it also allows for the creation of quizzes on the target language.

Supporting this scaffolding of challenging text, Namaziandost et al. (2019) also suggest that challenging materials, when adequately supported, can significantly benefit English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading skills and motivation. This highlights the need for a balanced use of AI tools, supplemented by traditional educational methods, to help students achieve deeper understanding and retention of academic materials. According to Renandya and Iswandari (2021), extensive reading immerses L2 learners in rich, comprehensible language, enhancing language acquisition. They note that this can increase vocabulary acquisition, comprehension skills, and

⁹ Rewordify. <https://rewordify.com/>

overall language proficiency. Digital graded readers (of the type generated by Rewordify) can facilitate extensive reading by providing a range of reading materials at a variety of suitable levels, which increases students' engagement and learning. Therefore, in practice, AI type reading tools like Rewordify exemplify both the benefits and challenges of AI in education, but the benefits are obvious when used in conjunction with a range of reading approaches as described above.

4. Data extraction tools

As technologies increasingly permeate all aspects of society, education systems face the challenge of integrating these tools in a manner that is both ethical and effective. AI, with its capabilities, stands at the front of this integration, as it offers the potential to significantly enhance educational outcomes. However, it also raises concerns regarding ethical usage and the preparation of students for an unknown future. The deployment of AI in education requires careful consideration of the implications of ethical usage. One of the biggest concerns is ensuring that AI tools are used to support academic integrity rather than undermine it. Plagiarism is a significant issue in educational contexts (as covered above). Therefore, plagiarism must be explicitly addressed by educators to foster a culture of honesty and integrity in their students' academic research writing. In addition to the ethical considerations mentioned above, educational curricula must also evolve to improve technical proficiency.

Another useful tool for students in the research/data extraction phase are tools such as ChatPDF¹⁰ or PDF.ai¹¹. They are AI-powered tools designed to facilitate the comprehension of academic texts when they are in PDF formats. As such they exemplify the benefits and challenges of AI in education. ChatPDF, an AI-driven platform, facilitates the comprehension of academic texts by instantly generating questions and summarizing complex texts that have previously been imported into the online tool. Therefore, ChatPDF enhances efficiency in academic research and learning if used ethically and appropriately. ChatPDF, for instance, can generate a list of questions from the PDF text that can help users understand the detailed and specific content of academic papers imported. This interactive feature allows users to engage with the text directly, highlighting answers within the document, and also provides real-time responses to user-generated questions and any follow-up questions. Users can also share chats with others, enhancing student collaboration in their research groups, and the app can also export, delete, and reset results. These functions can be particularly helpful when dealing with a large volume of papers, or when conducting high-quality research within limited time constraints. The app also allows users to create a folder with the results gleaned from its analysis of many different PDFs. Therefore, this allows users to upload and organize academic papers on similar topics within a single folder. In summary, this app facilitates the comprehension of academic texts by generating questions and summarizing complex texts, but at a macro paper level rather than the micro 'word' level of Rewordify. This scaffolding can also significantly help EFL students quickly determine the relevance of academic papers via engaging directly with the text through an interactive interface that highlights answers and provides real-time responses.

However, it has limitations, such as the inability to interpret images and occasional inaccuracies in content interpretation. Therefore, a check by students is highly recommended as it is not a panacea for traditional research problems. Furthermore, like many AI tools, ChatPDF has some limitations in

¹⁰ ChatPDF. <https://chatpdf.com>

¹¹ PDF.ai. <https://pdf.ai>

understanding numeric concepts. For instance, it struggles with basic arithmetic, and it cannot summarize content within specific word counts. Additionally, many users report that content processed through AI apps and tools does not easily stick in users' memory when compared to more traditional reading methods, similar to how skimming, scanning and lateral reading results are not as memorable as deep reading, as mentioned above. While reading online and having AI find answers may seem convenient and offer quick access to information, they may not support deep comprehension and long-term retention of information. Lastly, any text generated by ChatPDF and similar apps will trigger AI-generated content warnings when tested by AI detection apps like Copyleaks. So, students will have to paraphrase any text created by these apps and tools before including it in their final papers to avoid plagiarism and accusations of unethical usage.

Therefore, integrating browser-based AI tools, such as ChatPDF¹² and Rewordify, into educational practices, while beneficial for the research task parts of academic writing, also raise important questions about the balance between short-term technological convenience and longer-term deep learning. Educators must consider not only the more immediate functional benefits of these tools but also their role in promoting responsible and ethical use of technology by students in their learning. This approach includes preparing students for a future that will require new kinds of literacy and an ethical awareness of this in a technologically saturated world.

5. e-Portfolio Writing Process

In all these classes from the start of the semester, the students are also tasked with writing (via Google Classroom's¹³ Tasks function where it is available, or on Blogger¹⁴ where it is not) after-class journal reports consisting of two paragraphs. Moon (2003, pp.8-9) found 18 educational purposes for such blog journaling, and in this e-portfolio process of writing, two of these are emphasized. The first is note-taking to provide a record of the class experience, as the first paragraph is a detailed report of what was done in class, and this teaches reporting skills. The second paragraph facilitates learning from experience and reflects on what they felt about the class. This type of writing also helps students develop their analytical writing skills. Additionally, and not mentioned by Moon, this journaling provides teachers with a set of two paragraphs from each class per student, and over a period of weeks, this builds up a body of written work from each student. With the contents of these two paragraphs writing tasks being reporting and reflecting on a class they experienced, this is not something that AI apps and tools can easily generate. Therefore, this writing serves as a benchmark sample of each student's actual normal writing level and this can later be compared with their final paper (if there are any suspicions of plagiarism or AI-generated content being submitted) to see if they are similar.

After a substantial part of the initial research has been completed, students then start to write first drafts of the various parts of their paper. Here, they also work with the same group members, with the members providing a peer review of each other's work. These students have recently entered university after high school and peer review has been shown to benefit younger researchers (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Liu & Sadler, 2003). As these papers and the peer review comments are

¹² Here this specifically refers to the browser based tool, not the many iOS apps which share a very similar name.

¹³ Google Classroom. <https://classroom.google.com/>

¹⁴ Blogger. <https://blogger.com>

written asynchronously on Google Documents, there is no need for students to be physically in the same place or time (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). All papers are shared with settings set to anyone with the link can edit, the comment and revision histories are freely available to teachers to check on the quality and quantity of peer feedback and provide corrective comments where needed. Therefore, teachers can see the paper gradually improving by redrafting various versions of each paragraph in response to the peer review comments. These comments can even take the form of questions or just ‘nice paragraph’ encouraging type comments and students have more time to comment when compared to paper-based commenting. However, face to face comments in class discussion time can also take place, giving the benefits of both commenting styles (Giesbers et al., 2014).

Lastly, when explaining this e-portfolio peer review process, a high-quality e-portfolio from previous years is used, but only after that student has given consent for their paper to be used in this way. Seeing the work of their *senpai* (seniors) being used in this way also serves as a motivational tool for the new cohort, as it shows their work could be highlighted in the next year to their *kohai* (juniors) if their written work is good enough. Some in-class studies have found this approach to be positively received by students (Joseph-Edwards, 2023) when used with peer feedback in the way the e-portfolio approaches writing with multi-draft peer-reviewed work.

6. The final e-portfolio checks

After the e-portfolio is finished, the students then use a range of text analysis tools linked to in the e-portfolio to run diagnostic checks on their final text. These range from tools such as Lextutor¹⁵ (to check what percentage of their text is drawn from the Academic Word List¹⁶ - AWL), Analyse My Writing (which checks a range of things including how repetitive the text can be, the readability level of the text, any passive verb usage, and other useful things), and PaperRater¹⁷ (basically a free version of Grammarly¹⁸ which also checks spelling, grammar, style, transition usage, and some other writing issues) as well as running the normal spelling and grammar checks Google Documents provides. Then, the text is improved, and all the final drafts of each section are copied into a new ‘clean’ document that is free of comments and formatted according to APA style.

Students then work in their groups on a Peer Review Checklist document which is also linked to in the e-portfolio. This checklist performs a macro level of analysis on a range of topics, including layout, fonts, flow, unity, style, and appropriate quality and quantity of references. After this group check, further edits are made to the clean copy and the final copy is uploaded into a class folder in Turnitin¹⁹ for a more detailed plagiarism check by students as the Turnitin folder is set to allow students to run checks, fix any issues and then resubmit and recheck until they are happy with the final results. This resubmission/re-editing process continues until all plagiarism issues are fixed to the student’s satisfaction, and their similarity index is at 10% or under, and all identified similarity text has been fully referenced where necessary.

Lastly, students then run their final text through Lextutor to identify their AWL usage percentage and Analyse My Writing²⁰ to see the Readability level of their text. This then can be compared to the

¹⁵ Lextutor. <http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/eng/>

¹⁶ Academic Word List. <https://www.uefap.com/vocab/select/awl.htm>

¹⁷ PaperRater. <http://www.paperrater.com/>

¹⁸ Grammarly. <https://www.grammarly.com/>

¹⁹ Turnitin. <https://www.turnitin.com/>

²⁰ Analyze My Writing. <http://www.analyzemywriting.com/>

same scores in these writing metrics generated from their earlier class review paragraphs, and if there is a glaringly obvious difference between the two it is possible AI text generation apps have been used in the final paper. Therefore, the final step is the teacher's checks of the papers in Turnitin. Until last year, Turnitin also had an AI checker built in. However, this is now a paid add-on feature for Turnitin, and the universities Paterson and Hakone currently teach at have not paid for this add-on. So, for the moment, the free AI checker used in the e-portfolio is Copyleaks²¹. However, these AI checks are only used if there is a suspicion that AI generation text apps have been used. As mentioned above this suspicion can arise if the writing metrics scores and paper scores are very clearly different. If the final paper is within an acceptable range of their earlier writing, then the papers can then be graded as normal by teachers, and the students can be justifiably proud of their work. This is the process authors are using in their writing classes, and it seems to be working well so far.

7. Concluding thoughts

With the rapid expansion of AI into education, many students have begun using it in one way or another for a multitude of tasks, and numerous tools and applications are available that educators may or may not even be aware of. Despite attempts by some educational organizations to prohibit the use of AI, this is likely to end up being a never-ending action-reaction vicious circle as students attempt to subvert bans and this leads to more restrictions. Besides bans, effective countermeasures could include allocating class time for students to write their work by hand within a time limit or providing assignments that AI cannot complete, thereby reducing the risk of learners relying too heavily on AI and thereby abandoning critical thinking. Rather than forbidding students from using AI altogether, educators should guide them in using AI ethically, responsibly, and in a way that respects academic integrity while also developing their English language skills. The role of educators is to foster a classroom environment that models effective learning practices and motivates students to use them.

The e-portfolio process described here attempts to do just that by providing a practical and motivational approach to academic writing that students can easily learn and use. It has continually evolved over the years since its inception in 2008, making use of newer apps, tools, and approaches as they become available. Most recently, it has incorporated various types of AI systems into the approach. It will continue to evolve as education and pedagogical theories do and as newer and more effective apps, tools and AI systems become available. Although this ongoing approach may seem ambitious, this e-portfolio approach will encourage students to engage with apps, tools, and AI systems in an ethical and meaningful way to improve their academic writing skills through the guided approach to practice, and the peer review process the e-portfolio approach advocates. Therefore, based on our positive experiences with it, we encourage other teachers and students to try using it and see the advantages it brings to academic research writing. Good luck!

²¹ Copyleaks. <https://copyleaks.com/>

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