Effectiveness of a Blended Learning Approach for Research Proposal Writing and Oral Presentation Skills Among International Graduate Students: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation Study

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Abstract: This study evaluated the effectiveness of a blended learning course designed to develop research proposal writing and oral presentation skills among international graduate students at a public university in Japan. Using a mixed-methods pre- and post-evaluation design, the study examined 17 graduate students' self-reported competencies before and after participating in a course combining online instruction via Google Classroom and Zoom with intensive face-to-face workshops. Results demonstrated substantial improvements in both skill areas. For research proposal writing, the percentage of students rating their skills as "Good" or "Excellent" increased from 21.5% to 75.7% post-course. Oral presentation confidence showed similar gains, with "Very confident" or "Extremely confident" ratings rising from 9% to 62%. Students particularly valued the immediate feedback and peer interaction provided by face-to-face sessions, while appreciating the flexibility and accessibility of online components. The findings support the effectiveness of blended learning approaches for developing complex academic skills, demonstrating how online and face-to-face modalities can complement each other synergistically. The study provides evidence for constructive alignment principles in skills-based courses and offers practical insights for graduate education program design. Future research should incorporate objective performance measures and larger, more diverse samples to further validate these significant results.

Keywords: academic writing, oral presentations, blended learning, graduate education, research skills, self-efficacy; constructive alignment

1. Introduction

The development of academic writing and oral presentation skills represents a critical component of graduate education, particularly for international students pursuing advanced degrees in non-native languages. Writing competence, for one, is said to be a priority for graduate students, supervisors, and institutions, owing to the expectations of enhanced research productivity (Catterall et al., 2011). Similarly, oral presentation is not only important for academic success, but a crucial skill for proposal defense, conference presentations, among others (Tian & Mahmud, 2018).

Despite their importance, many graduate programs struggle to provide comprehensive training that effectively addresses both writing and presentation competencies within time and resource constraints.

A comprehensive course on research proposal writing and oral presentation at a graduate school in a public university in Japan was designed to address this gap through a blended learning approach combining online instruction with intensive face-to-face sessions. This outcomes-based course employed constructive alignment principles (Biggs, 1996) to ensure that learning activities and assessments directly supported the achievement of well-defined goals focused on research proposal writing and oral presentation skills.

The course aimed to improve students' abilities across four primary domains: (1) constructing well-structured and logically organized research proposals; (2) adhering to academic writing conventions, formatting, and citation styles; (3) creating visually appealing and impactful presentation slides; and (4) demonstrating confident and persuasive oral presentation techniques resulting in audience engagement.

While blended learning approaches have gained increasing attention in higher education (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006), their specific application to research communication skills development among graduate students remains underexplored, particularly in the context of international students studying in a university in Japan. This evaluation study therefore seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does a blended learning course improve graduate students' self-reported competencies in research proposal writing?
2. To what extent does a blended learning course improve graduate students' self-reported competencies in oral presentation skills?
3. How do students perceive the relative effectiveness of online versus face-to-face components of the blended learning experience?
4. What factors contribute to or hinder the development of research communication skills in a blended learning environment?

By examining these questions through both quantitative and qualitative data, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of effective pedagogical approaches for developing crucial academic skills among graduate students, while identifying opportunities for course enhancement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Graduate-Level Research Communication Skills

Graduate school is about more than just memorizing the necessary facts and information in a student's major field. It can be a time to hone communication skills (both written and oral) to be used throughout one's personal and professional life. The ability to communicate effectively has always been a useful skill as it involves listening and reflecting what is heard, deciding how to resolve conflict, and how to relay ideas and points with clarity and brevity.

According to Johnson (2025), in graduate school, articulation of ideas and viewpoints through writing and in impromptu conversations is often done through solo and group presentations. Collaboration and negotiation are also required in work sharing for group projects aside from the need to provide constructive feedback.

2.2 Blended Learning in Graduate Education

Thus, higher educational institutions are continuously exploring new practices of teaching to improve students' engagement and learning. Many universities have started to experiment with blended learning (BL), a teaching pedagogy combining face-to-face and online education, as one promising and innovative teaching approach. Around the globe BL has become a widespread mode of instruction in universities (Pechenkina et al., 2018; Smith & Hill, 2019). However, some note that the effectiveness of BL on the development of teacher leadership has been an understudied issue internationally (Gallego-Arrufat et al., 2015).

In a study conducted in a major university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on how students perceive blended learning, results revealed the importance of institutional support, accessible technology, and tailored teaching methods in improving student engagement and learning outcomes (Al-Mekhlafi et al., 2025). The same study found that challenges include internet access and differences in student readiness. These findings are particularly relevant as educational institutions worldwide increasingly adapt to digital learning environments, making it a useful resource for improving teaching strategies and ensuring that blended learning meets the needs of diverse student populations.

Meanwhile, Wirawan and Bandu (2016) studied the implication of self-efficacy training, belief in one's own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task, for international students (SETIS) as they faced various transitional challenges which may affect their academic performance. Results showed that there are four key elements of the SETIS, namely: goal-setting, effort explanation, modeling, and sharing and evaluation. The implementation of SETIS follows the common rule in conducting effective training including needs assessment and post-training evaluation.

2.3 Self-Efficacy and Skill Development

Such pre- and post-training evaluations are indeed important especially in light of constructive alignment in effective teaching and learning processes. According to Biggs (2103), constructive alignment (CA) is an educational approach that ensures a clear and direct connection between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods. It emphasizes the importance of designing learning experiences that directly support students in achieving the intended learning goal.

Hence, constructive alignment (CA), as applied to skills-based learning, means designing teaching and assessment around what students should learn, rather than just focusing on the content. This ensures that intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessments are all closely aligned, fostering a more meaningful and effective learning experience.

2.4 Constructive Alignment in Skills-Based Courses

Although the general idea of CA has been around for some time, Schuster (2019) reports that it is only recently that it has been implemented on a reasonably large scale. Part of the reason for this is that the massive expansion in tertiary education involves a diverse range of students and of teaching subjects so that teaching and assessment need to be reviewed on an institution-wide basis with emphasis upon outcomes at institutional, program and unit levels. CA provides a framework for adjusting teaching and assessment to address the attainment of those outcomes and the standards reached. Research further indicates that CA is effective in this but it initially requires time and effort in designing teaching and assessment and, as a systems approach, it is important that supporting institutional policies and procedures are actually in place.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods evaluation approach combining quantitative measures of self-reported competencies with qualitative analysis of student feedback. The evaluation utilized a pre-post design to assess changes in students' perceived knowledge and skills before and after participation in the course.

3.2 Participants

The study population consisted of 17 graduate students enrolled in the Intermediate/Comprehensive Course on Research Proposal Writing and Oral Presentation at a graduate school in a public university in Japan, between April and July 2024. Initially, 19 students signed up for the course, but one did not pursue enrollment and another dropped the course, resulting in 17 completers. Of these, all 17 participated in the course, with 18 responding to the pre-course survey and 16 responding to the post-course survey. Demographic data revealed that 75% of participants were female and 25% were male. Age distribution showed that half of the students were 22 years old, with the remainder ranging from 23 to 32 years. The majority (81.3%) were enrolled in Master's programs, while 18.7% were pursuing doctoral degrees. All participants were in their first year of graduate study. Their fields of study included soil science (23.5%), food and environmental economics (17.6%), and various other agricultural specializations.

3.3 Course Structure

The course employed a blended learning approach consisting of:

1. **Online Component:** Asynchronous activities via Google Classroom and synchronous sessions via Zoom, including lectures, discussions, and writing exercises focused on research proposal structure, academic writing conventions, and presentation design.
2. **Face-to-Face Component:** A three-day intensive in-person workshop emphasizing practical application of skills through collaborative activities, presentation rehearsals, and immediate feedback from instructors and peers.

The curriculum was organized around the four primary learning objectives previously described, with activities and assessments constructively aligned to support these outcomes.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through pre- and post-course surveys administered via Google Forms. The pre-course survey, completed before the first session, gathered demographic information, self-assessments of current knowledge and skills, and course expectations. The post-course survey, administered after course completion, included self-assessments of knowledge and skills, evaluations of course components, and open-ended questions about the learning experience.

Self-assessment items used 5-point Likert scales for research proposal writing skills (1=Very Poor to 5=Excellent) and oral presentation skills (1=Not at all confident to 5=Extremely confident). These items addressed specific competencies within each domain, such as "Identifying a research gap" (writing) and "Creating PowerPoint Presentations that are clear, concise, and creative" (presentation).

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis involved descriptive statistics and comparative analysis of pre- and post-course responses, calculating frequency distributions, percentages, and visualization of trends through charts. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from open-ended responses, with content coded according to emergent themes related to learning experiences, perceived benefits, and suggestions for improvement.

4. Results
4.1 Research Proposal Writing Skills

The pre-course evaluation revealed that the majority of students (77.6%) rated their research proposal writing skills as Average, Poor, or Very Poor across the assessed dimensions. Participants reported particularly low confidence in "Identifying a research gap" and "Writing the significance of the study," while feeling somewhat more competent in "Creating a proper title" and "Citing sources within the paper."

Post-course responses demonstrated substantial improvement, with 75.7% of ratings falling in the Good or Excellent categories. The most dramatic improvements occurred in areas initially identified as weaknesses, such as "Writing the significance of the study" and "Developing coherence in various sections." Notably, every assessed dimension showed improvement, with no ratings in the Very Poor category after course completion.

These quantitative changes were reinforced by qualitative feedback, with students explicitly acknowledging their growth in specific areas. One participant noted, "I learned how to write a research proposal as well as introduction, methodology section with proper objectives and significance." Another stated, "In research proposal writing, I went from not knowing how to emphasize the key points to being able to state my research questions clearly and then the importance of my research can be better illustrated."

4.2 Oral Presentation Skills

Pre-course assessment of oral presentation skills revealed that 56% of responses fell in the "Slightly confident" or "Not at all confident" categories, with no students rating themselves as "Extremely confident" in any dimension. Areas of lowest confidence included "Presenting my study in face-to-face events" and "Answering questions related to my study."

Post-course data showed dramatic improvement, with 62% of responses in the "Very confident" or "Extremely confident" categories. The most substantial gains appeared in "Delivering an engaging discussion and presentation of my study" and "Presenting my study via online platforms." Even dimensions with relatively higher initial confidence, such as "Creating PowerPoint Presentations," showed significant improvement.

Students' comments reflected these quantitative improvements. One participant remarked, "I can improve creating presentation slides," while another noted, "In my oral presentation skills I can better deliver an engaging discussion and presentation of my study, which I didn't have before." A third student commented, "From this course, I think I could more confidently share with others about my research."

4.3 Online vs. Face-to-Face Learning Components

The evaluation of learning modalities revealed distinct perceptions of online and face-to-face components, with both making unique contributions to the learning experience.

The online component received positive feedback for several aspects:

1. **Platform functionality:** Many students appreciated Google Classroom as a central hub for the course. One participant noted, "It made it very easy to communicate with tutors and complete our tasks, especially when receiving private comments about our work."
2. **Accessibility of materials:** Students valued having course modules and syllabi provided in advance, enabling preparation for upcoming sessions.
3. **Communication channels:** The digital environment facilitated ongoing interaction with instructors. As one student commented, "The chat in Google Classroom allowed us to express our doubts and ask questions without worrying."
4. **Flexibility:** The ability to access recordings of lectures was beneficial for review and for students who missed live sessions.

Despite these advantages, some students reported technical challenges, particularly with internet connectivity during Zoom lectures and navigating the Google Classroom interface.

The face-to-face component received overwhelmingly positive evaluations, with many students considering it the most valuable part of the course:

1. **Immediate feedback:** Students appreciated the real-time guidance from instructors. One noted, "Feedback can be received from the teacher in a timely manner and appropriate improvements can be made."
2. **Peer interaction:** In-person sessions facilitated collaborative learning and networking. A participant commented, "The discussions and activities done together helped each other memorize the points we learned during online classes."
3. **Practical application:** The workshop format provided opportunities to apply skills in authentic contexts, particularly through presentation rehearsals.

The primary criticism of the face-to-face component concerned its duration, with many students expressing a desire for more in-person sessions. Comments like "I want more days" and suggestions for extending the face-to-face component to a week or more were common in the feedback.

4.4 Overall Course Experience and Expectations

Analysis of pre-course expectations and post-course experiences revealed high levels of satisfaction with the learning outcomes. Students' initial expectations focused primarily on improving English language skills, developing academic writing abilities, enhancing presentation techniques, and building confidence in research communication.

Post-course feedback indicated that these expectations were largely met or exceeded. Many students reported substantial gains in confidence, with one remarking, "Before the class, I became tense when I spoke in English, but I realized if I have confidence in my research, it could go well." Others highlighted the acquisition of specific skills, such as the student who noted learning "for the first time that there are verbs that are appropriate and not appropriate for expressing about research."

Beyond academic skills, students also valued the social and personal growth aspects of the course. Several mentioned making friends and developing a supportive network of peers. One participant summarized, "I won't forget the experience I do in the class!!! I learned a lot and made many friends during the course!"

5. Discussion
5.1 Effectiveness of Blended Learning Courses

The results of this study highlight important implications for blended learning in the context of teaching international students who may also be ESL students.

Blended learning has generally provided many benefits to students, particularly in promoting their collaborative skills and autonomy (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019). Through the use of a learning management system, this graduate course provided students with a space to engage with both their fellow classmates and their tutors even prior to the face-to-face component of the class. Students were also

encouraged to raise questions and to submit several drafts of their work. With resources such as a course booklet, recorded lectures, and additional references being readily available for their review, students further enhanced their language skills through self-directed learning. Onah et al. (2020) had similar findings with regard to the use of an online platform for sharing lecture content and strengthening student interaction.

5.2 Development of Writing and Presentation Skills

Findings revealed an initial difficulty among learners in articulating their research gap and ensuring coherence in their paper, which is unsurprising given that these are aspects of writing that international students tend to struggle with (Lee, 2002). Connor (2009) specifically found non-native speakers to lack variety in their use of transitional devices, as well as in establishing a substantial and fluid progression in their arguments, which is closely related to the aforementioned difficulties with discussing the research gap. Similarly, students reported having low confidence in presenting papers in face-to-face events and in answering forum questions prior to the start of the course, with their limited vocabulary contributing to their difficulties.

This study finds support for close guidance in improving the writing and presentation skills of international students, as the exchanges between tutors and students and the continuous revisions of drafts allowed students to have a deeper understanding of effective writing and presenting.

5.3 Implications for Course Enhancement

Despite the overall success of the course, the evaluation revealed several opportunities for enhancement:

1. **Extended face-to-face component:** The authentic experience provided by the workshops in the face-to-face component of the course was found to be beneficial in further developing the confidence of the students in writing and presenting their research. Because tutors could give not only immediate, but also robust feedback that includes how students carry themselves during a presentation, students felt greater support in their learning.
2. **Differentiated language support:** The existence and popularity of other digital platforms and applications that offer gamification and collaborative features may help bolster the language skills of students in a more dynamic way.
3. **Enhanced peer interaction:** Because the students found the social aspect of the course to be instrumental in developing their skills and confidence, more activities can be devised to promote peer interaction.
4. **Advanced applications:** Requests for instruction in journal article writing and specialized presentation contexts indicate potential for developing advanced modules or follow-up courses for students seeking to apply their skills in specific professional contexts.

These potential enhancements align with the concept of "continuous improvement" in educational design, suggesting iterative refinement based on systematic evaluation of outcomes and processes.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This evaluation study has demonstrated the effectiveness of a blended learning approach in developing research proposal writing and oral presentation skills among graduate students. The research revealed substantial improvements in self-reported competencies across all dimensions of research proposal writing, with the percentage of "Good" or "Excellent" ratings increasing dramatically from 21.5% pre-course to 75.7% post-course. Similarly, there was significant enhancement of confidence in oral presentation skills, with "Very confident" or "Extremely confident" ratings rising from just 9% pre-course to 62% post-course. The study also found that online and face-to-face learning components made complementary contributions to student development, with the online format providing flexibility and resources while the in-person sessions facilitated immediate feedback and authentic practice opportunities. Additionally, the research documented high levels of student satisfaction, with reported outcomes generally meeting or exceeding initial expectations for both skill development and confidence building.

6.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

These findings have several implications for graduate education and academic skills development: Theoretically, the results support the value of blended learning approaches for developing complex academic skills, reinforcing previous research by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) and Graham (2006). The improvement in self-efficacy across multiple dimensions suggests that well-designed educational interventions can enhance both confidence and competence in academic communication.

Practically, the study demonstrates the importance of constructive alignment in skills-based courses, showing how clearly defined objectives and aligned activities can lead to comprehensive skill development. The differential effectiveness of online and face-to-face components highlights the importance of leveraging the unique strengths of each modality in blended learning designs.

For instructors and program designers, the findings suggest several best practices: (1) integrate online and face-to-face learning experiences in complementary ways; (2) address both conceptual understanding and practical application of skills; (3) provide opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning; and (4) offer personalized feedback tailored to individual needs and proficiency levels.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that may be considered when interpreting the results. First, the focus on self-reported competencies rather than objective performance measures limits the ability to assess actual skill improvement. A separate research could incorporate pre- and post-course evaluation of writing samples and presentation recordings to provide more objective measures of skill development.

Second, the small sample size (17 participants) and specific context (agricultural science graduate students in Japan) limit the generalizability of the findings. Additional research with larger and more diverse populations would strengthen the external validity of the results.

Third, comparative studies examining different pedagogical approaches would provide valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of various strategies for developing research communication skills.

Future research directions might include longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of skills training on academic and professional outcomes, comparative analyses of different blended learning designs, and investigations of the role of specific instructional strategies in developing research communication competencies among graduate students.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable evidence for the effectiveness of blended learning approaches in developing essential academic skills among graduate students. The comprehensive improvement across multiple dimensions of research proposal writing and oral presentation abilities suggests that well-designed blended learning environments can significantly enhance students' academic communication competencies and self-efficacy.

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