The Significance of Studying in an EMI Program： Through the investigation of Japanese L1 students' senior thesis writing experiences

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1.Introduction

This study examines the perspectives of Japanese L1 students on their experience of writing a senior thesis (*sotsugyōronbun,* in short *sotsuron*) in an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) program. While EMI programs have been criticized for their educational significance to some extent, the present paper tries to consider the significance of studying in an EMI program by investigating how students reflect and evaluate their experiences writing a thesis in English.

It is common in Japanese universities to make students write a senior thesis as their capstone project of their study. A senior thesis is understood as the major accomplishment of students' studying (Doi & Oda, 2011; Kawagishi, 2020; Kitano, 2011; Seki, 1982; Shinoda & Higeta, 2015) and is believed to have an educational significance (Kitano, 2011). This is no exception for EMI programs in Japan, where about 80% of universities offering full-degree EMI programs (i.e., English-Medium Degree Program: EMDP (Shimauchi, 2016)) have a senior thesis or a graduation project in their curriculum (Azegami, 2021).

EMI programs are often described as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English"(Dearden, 2014, 14). Conducting an EMI program is believed to enhance students' English proficiency, though "(i)t may or may not include the implicit aim of increasing students' English language abilities"(Bradford & Brown, 2017, 330). In the Japanese context, as Iino & Murata (2018) explain, an EMI program "is primarily introduced to attract international students as well as home students who want to have more exposure to globally used English as a lingua franca while residing in their own home countries"(Iino & Murata, 2018, 404). As such, an EMI program is implemented in the context where English is not daily used by a majority of students and faculty members. Therefore, within this circumstance, English is used as the main academic lingua franca.

Since EMI students are studying in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) environment, they are required to write their thesis in English in most cases. However, even though

they have spent time to be capable of studying in English, writing in English is still considered to be challenging for Japanese L1 students (Adamson et al., 2019; Suzuki, 2010). This study examines how Japanese L1 students evaluate their senior thesis writing experiences. It shows that students express not only challenges regarding language proficiency but also non-linguistics matters. It also shows that students possess a positive view on their thesis writing experiences which insists the educational significance of EMI programs in Japan.

This paper first outlines the related studies on students' writing experiences in EMI programs in the Japanese context and shows how the present research could contribute to filling in the knowledge gap. The following section then explains the method used in this research. The analysis of the collected data will be presented accordingly. Finally, the concluding remark is presented.

2. Related Studies

Along with the increase in the number of universities offering EMI programs in Japan, related studies have been conducted. Especially, there are a growing number of descriptions of what EMI programs' stakeholders (i.e., undergraduate students and lecturers) are experiencing (Adamson et al., 2019; Adamson & Fujimoto-Adamson, 2021; Adon, 2021; Iino & Murata, 2016; Konakahara et al., 2019; Murata et al., 2017; Murata et al., 2019; Hino, 2017; 2019, Sugimoto, 2020; Toh, 2016; Tsukada, 2015). Of these studies, those focusing on Japanese students (or Japanese L1 students) often report students' challenges and improvements in their English language proficiency. (Brown, 2017; Hino, 2017; 2019; Shimauchi, 2018). However, most studies reporting the improvement focus on speaking and receptive skills (e.g., Iino & Murata, 2016; Macaro et al., 2018; Uchihara & Harada, 2018). Moreover, the subjects of many studies are mainly first- or second-year students. Studies focusing on senior students' writing experiences are still scarce in the domestic context.

Still, some studies report writing as part of their project. According to the survey conducted on Japanese L1 students, writing a paper is considered one of the most challenging skills of the four skills (i.e., speaking, writing, listening, and reading) (Azegami, 2019; Sugimoto, 2020).

In fact, challenges of writing experiences by English L2 students in EMI programs outside Japan are commonly reported (Kaufhold, 2015; Kirkgöz, 2009; Salter-Dvorak, 2014; Tran, 2009; Xu & Zang, 2019). The described challenges often stem from a lack of students' language proficiency and difficulties adjusting to academic conventions. Moreover, most of these challenges are reported from the research at the post-graduate level.

Even though empirical studies on writing experiences in Japanese EMI programs

exist, students' perspective on writing experience or writing itself is missing in the related studies mentioned above. Furthermore, most of them are based in non-Japanese post-graduate settings. In order to fill in the gap, this study will focus on senior undergraduate students' writing experiences in an EMI program and their perspectives on the experiences. Among the writings, a senior thesis is being focused on because only few studies have considered the later stage of undergraduate study in Japan. Through the examination of the students' perspectives on writing experiences, it attempts to supplement the body of literature on EMI empirical studies in Japan.

3. Method

The present paper is based on two sets of qualitative data: interview data on Japanese L1 senior students and observation notes of an advanced seminar (*zemi*) in an EMI program. The data was collected in a full-degree EMI program implemented at a private university located in Tokyo. This EMI program was chosen because it is one of Japan's pioneering universities implementing a full-degree program. The program is characterized by its highly interdisciplinary curriculum allowing students to pursue a bachelor's by taking courses in English. In their third year, students choose whether or not to join a *zemi* to write a senior thesis. In most cases, students choose to join a *zemi* and write a thesis. The full-degree EMI program was chosen as the research site because such programs are expected to require students to write a thesis in English.

Interviews were done two to three times with 4 Japanese L1 senior students who had joining an advanced seminar. Their brief profiles are shown in Table 1. In the semi-structured interviews, participants were made to describe their ongoing senior thesis writing experiences and to evaluate their thesis after they had finished writing it. The semi-structured interview was employed because the author expected to discover their personalized writing experiences, even though data collection through semi-structured interviews may lead the research to result in low validity.

In addition, the advanced seminar was observed for two semesters (FY of 2021). This advanced seminar is a sociolinguistics seminar. It was conducted in a hybrid of English and Japanese. The students were required to present their research progress at least once a semester and write the thesis in English. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the seminar was conducted online and face-to-face. Notes were taken during the seminar so that they could be used to facilitate the conversation in the interview session.

Participants	Research Topic	Overseas experiences before university	Career after graduation
Participant A	English education policies in Japan	None	A government official
Participant B	English education policies in Taiwan	3 years in Taiwan and New Zealand	A consultant
Participant C	Relationship between English learning and katakana usage	None	A banker
Participant D	Japanese language and gender	None	A consultant

Table1. The profile of the participants

The analysis was mainly done based on the audio data of the interviews. The interview data were transcribed and narratively analyzed to highlight important aspects of the participants' perspectives on the writing experiences. The narratives were being focused on because it is "valuable when we want to capture the nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from the perspective of those who experience it." (Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik, 2014, 8).

4. Findings and Discussion

From the analysis, students'(1) confidence and a sense of accomplishment in completing a large project (i.e., senior thesis) in English, (2) evaluation of their thesis (thought they could have done more to make their thesis better), and (3) difficulty of writing in English as a foreign language have been revealed as common highlighting aspects of their experiences. The following section explains the above three points by showing interview extracts.

4.1 Confidence and A sense of accomplishment

Participants expressed a sense of accomplishment and confidence in completing the thesis in the interview. A sense of accomplishment seemed to stem from two aspects: writing a long paper and writing in English (i.e., a foreign language).

When Participant C referred to a sense of accomplishment, she mentioned the length of the thesis. She mentioned this when the author asked what she feels about finishing the senior thesis.

     Extract 1:
     C: 他のレポートに比べて、字数が多くて。でもなんとか書き終えられたって感

じですね。

[Compared to other reports, I needed to write a lot. But I managed to finish writing the thesis.] (translated by the author)

Similarly, Participant A also mentioned the word length but noted that she felt a sense of accomplishment in writing longer texts in English.

Extract 2:

A: 英語で、母国語じゃない言語で長い文章を書ききるって経験はたぶんしないじゃないですか。他の学部に行ってたら、普通に日本語で卒論書いてるだろうし。もちろん、卒論ってやっぱ、特別だから日本語で書いてもやり遂げたって思うでしょうけど。でも英語で書いたっていうのは達成感を感じる部分ですね。

[You probably don't experience writing long texts in English, a language that is not your native language. I would have written my thesis in Japanese if I had gone to another school (Japanese-Medium Instruction [JMI] programs). Of course, a thesis is special, so even if I had written it in Japanese, I would have felt that I had completed it. But writing it in English gives me a sense of accomplishment.]

Author: たしかに日本語で書いてても卒論はほかのレポート課題と違う特別感ってきっとありますよね。それでもやっぱり英語で書いたっていうのがAさんの中で達成感を感じる大きな部分ってことですかね？

[I agree that even if you write it in Japanese, a thesis will be special. Even so, is writing in English still a major part of your sense of accomplishment?]

A: そうですね。母国語じゃない言語で書いたっていうのが大きいです。

[Yes. Writing in non-native language is the main factor that gives me a sense of accomplishment.] (translated by the author)

In this EMI program, a senior thesis is to be written in approximately 8,000 words in English. Since neither Participant C nor A had ever written 8,000 words in English, they felt great accomplishment after writing their thesis. However, while writing the thesis, some participants also expressed their anxiety. The anxieties were heard when the author asked concerns regarding writing the thesis.

Extract 3:

D: 書けるかな。ちょっと心配です。卒論って英語じゃないとダメでしたよね。（中略）今までのレポートとかと違うから、ちゃんとしなきゃって思います。

[I wonder if I can write the thesis. I am a little worried. The thesis has to be written in English, right? … It is different from the reports I've written in the

past, so I think I need to do it thoughtfully.] (translated by the author)

Extract 4:
C: やっぱ（8000words って）長いですよね。やっぱ、卒論は研究をするものだから。
[Writing 8000 words is long. It is because writing a thesis is doing a research project.] （translated by the author)

Participant D expressed concern about writing lengthy sentences in a foreign language. During the seminar, she checked with her supervisor about the word count, asking how many A4 pages would 8,000 words be. It is evident that writing in English is also challenging for the senior students (e.g., Kirkgöz, 2009; Salter-Dvorak, 2014; Tran, 2009). However, on the other hand, as Participant D stated "thoughtfully," she tried to make full use of her past writing experience to write the thesis. She later mentioned that experiences of the English report assignments she did throughout her four years in the program were helpful.

Participant C, as with Participant D, also expressed concern. She recognized that thesis project involves reading literature, collecting data, and conducting mathematical analysis, and she was concerned about whether she could put them together in English. She eventually conducted a qualitative study but, noted that she had read more literature compared to her other writing assignments. She mentioned that the reading comprehension skills she had developed in other classes were helpful.

Despite the anxiety and difficulty of writing a longer paper in a foreign language, the participants finished their thesis by making use of their past experience in the classes at the EMI program. In Tran's (2009) study, it was reported that master's students tried to form their professional identity by using their own experience and other resources to complete their master's thesis. Similarly, the participants in this study also used their experiences to tackle the challenges of writing the thesis in English, albeit at the undergraduate level.

Along with a sense of accomplishment, expression regarding confidence could also be heard. After finishing his thesis, Participant B reflected that his self-affirmation had enhanced.

Extract 5:
B: 英語で書き終えた達成感はもちろんあります。あの、もともと自己肯定感は高くないんですけど、高くなったと思いますね。
[Of course, I feel a sense of accomplishment after finishing writing the thesis

in English. Well, I didn't have high self-esteem, but I think it has become stronger.] (translated by the author)

The above extract illustrates that self-affirmation came from a sense of accomplishment. In addition to completing the thesis, Participant B also mentioned that he felt his ability to write in English had increased, and his writing speed had improved, which also contributed to gain self-affirmation. Furthermore, as a sign of confidence, he mentioned that if he had the opportunity to write in English at work, he would undoubtedly be able to write better than others.

Besides Participant B, Participant C and Participant A also commented that the experience of completing their thesis in English gave them confidence. Both comments were heard when the author asked whether they could connect the writing experiences with their future career.

> Extract 6:
> C: うーん、卒論を書いた経験が直接役に立つかはわからないですけど、動じることはないかなって思います。これ（卒論）が書けたんだから何がきても大丈夫みたいな。あと集中して書くってこともできると思います。
> [Well, I don't know if the experience of writing the thesis will help me directly, but I don't think I won't be perturbed. I think I will be fine no matter what happens because I was able to write my thesis. Also, I'm sure that I can stay focused to write in English.] (translated by the author)

> Extract 7:
> A: 政策について書いたので、文科省が出している資料を読むことが多かったから、教育行政としての目線をあらかじめ知っておけてるっていうのは役立つかなって。役立つかはわからないですけど、それを英語で書いたっていうのは自信にはなる。
> [Since I was researching policies, I often read materials published by the Ministry of Education. So, I think this experience helped me to know how educational administration thinks about English education in advance. I don't know if it will be helpful (in my future work), but the fact that I wrote it in English gave me confidence.] (translated by the author)

Extracts 6 and 7 depict that the experience of writing a thesis has given them confidence and has led them to look ahead to the future. It seems that the participants have found a connection between their experience of writing the senior thesis in

English and their future career. While the significance of studying in EMI programs is being questioned, utterances regarding future prospects insists that studying in such programs affords not only challenges/difficulties but also positive visions to students.

4.2 Evaluation of the thesis

The participants were also asked how they felt about their thesis in the interview. While a sense of accomplishment and confidence were expressed, negative evaluations of the senior thesis were heard.

> Extract 8:
> B: 思い描いていたものかって言われると、う〜ん、違うかもしれないです。ギリギリになってしまったし、資料とかももっと目を通せばよかったって思うところもあります。あと、もっときれいにまとめたかったですね。
> [If you ask me if it was what I envisioned, well, perhaps not. It was a very tight schedule, and I wish I had looked through the materials more carefully. I also wanted to summarize my thesis more neatly.]
>
> Author: ギリギリになったり、資料に目を通せなかったのは、何か理由がありますか？
> [Is there any reason why the schedule became tight and why you couldn't look though the materials?]
>
> B: ちゃんとタイムマネジメントができてなかったってだけですね。
> [It's just that I couldn't manage the time properly.] (translated by the author)

Extract 8 describes a regret for time management and writing organization. Tran's (2009) and Salter-Dvorak's (2014) studies made a similar point. However, Participant B did not state that language deficiency was the reason why he could not write the thesis as he had hoped. He believed that it was because of poor time management. What Participant B mentioned contradicts with what Suzuki (2010) reported: Japanese L1 students at an EMI program think language deficiency prevents them from pursuing their studies as they wish. Yet, it can be said that B was accustomed to writing in English, partly because he had longer overseas experience than the other participants. However, Participant A, who had less overseas experiences, also evaluated that time management was one of the factors that prevented her from writing her thesis the way she expected to[i].

Furthermore, Participant C also did not express any negative things about her thesis

related to language deficiency but mentioned about the thesis' specialization.

> Extract 9:
> C: 専攻が決まってない中で、ずっと言語系の授業を取ってきたから、その流れで言語学のゼミに入って、言語（について）の卒論を書いて、書いたんですけど、専門的に深められたかはわからないなって。
> [While this EMI program does not have a major, I had taken linguistics classes for a long time. So, I joined the linguistics seminar and wrote my thesis on language studies. But I am not sure if I was able to deepen my specialization.] (translated by the author)

Participant C mentioned that one of the characteristics of the EMI program is that it is broad and shallow. She stated that she felt her thesis was also shallow, and Participant D stated the same. As a criticism of the EMI program, Participant D pointed out that she could not learn enough of the course contents in a foreign language. However, in the case of Participant C, language deficiency was not a factor, but rather the interdisciplinary curriculum and the class options were the reasons why she could not deepen her expertise. When the author asked if she could have deepened her specialization if the language had been Japanese, she answered that she was unsure but stated that she might have felt the same way even in Japanese.

One criticism of EMI programs is that teaching in a foreign language prevents adequate learning of course contents (e.g., Macaro et al., 2018; Toh, 2016). However, in Participant C's case, language deficiency was not a factor, but rather how the curriculum was organized was the reason for not being able to deepen her specialization.

Despite the different reasons given by the individuals, they all evaluated that they were able to complete the thesis, but not as well written as they wanted it to be. However, according to their perspectives, this was not due to language deficiency but due to other non-language factors (e.g., time management and curriculum policies). These non-language factors are commonly witnessed in the L1 thesis writing as well (Kawagishi, 2021; Shinoda & Higeta, 2015). The EMI students also face similar issues as of JMI students which insists that both students are likely to be working hard to meet the standards of the thesis.

4.3 Difficulties
Nevertheless, the difficulty of writing in a foreign language was still mentioned. The

difficulties where heard when the author asked if they have any problems in writing the thesis. By referring to Japanese language, Participant A mentioned as follows.

> Extract: 10
> A: 例えば、論文書くときでも、本当に日本語で書けばパッと思いつく表現とかも何か英語だと、たぶん自分で自分が言いたいことが本当にその英語で伝わっているのかがちょっとわからないときがたまにある。でも、かといってこの表現をしたら本当にわたしが今日本語で考えている言いたいことがそのまま英語になってるのかって言われたらわかんない。それは多分、英語のネイティブの人じゃないと分からないから、そこら辺で結構難しさは感じますよね。（中略）卒論書くときもなんか、「あぁ、 こういう思いをするんだな。」と思ってます。
> [For example, when writing a paper, even though I can come up with the expression in Japanese, there are times when I am not sure if what I am trying to say is being correctly expressed in English. And I don't know if the English expression really expresses what I'm thinking in Japanese. I think this could only be done by a native English speaker. … When I write my senior thesis, I think, "Oh, this is what I have to go through."] (translated by the author)

When the author interviewed her before she started writing the thesis, she mentioned that she would probably have trouble finding the correct phrasing. While students are under the EMI program, they must be aware of standards and conventions in English writing, especially when writing a thesis. What Participant A pointed out overlaps with the difficulties that English L2 learners face in writing, as reported in the past studies (e.g., Kirkgöz, 2009; Salter-Dvorak, 2014; Tran, 2009)

Furthermore, Participant A pointed out that in addition to the difficulty of writing in a foreign language, the ease of writing depends on the topic; since her topic was about English education policy in Japan, she stated that most of the research materials were in Japanese.

> Extract: 11
> A: テーマが日本に関連することだったから資料は当然日本語。そこから英語にするのが面倒、というか大変で。これ英語だとなんて言うんだろうって止まって考えないといけない。
> [Since the theme was related to Japan, the documents were written in Japanese. It was troublesome, or rather difficult, to translate them into English. I had to stop and think about how I would translate this in English.]

Author: 翻訳作業が必要みたいな感じですか？
[Is it like you need to do a translation?]

A:うーん、翻訳というよりは、頭の中で一旦変換が必要で、それで時間がかかってた感じです。
[Umm, it's not so much a translation, it's more like converting it once in my head. That's why it took so long.] (translated by the author)

Participant A described the difficulty of the Japanese-English converting process. When the author asked her if she had done something to overcome this problem, she answered that she had asked her friends working on a similar topic. She made use of human resources outside of the seminar.

On the other hand, while acknowledging the difficulty of reading materials in non-English languages and writing in English, Participant B stated that he did not think it was that difficult because all Japanese L1 students in the EMI program face the same difficulties. Instead, he stated that reading the documents objectively and writing logically were more challenging. In order to overcome this difficulty, Participant B consulted his Taiwanese friends whenever he had questions about documents related to Taiwan. In addition to this, he mentioned that his seniors (*sempai*) in the EMI program were also helpful in learning the writing styles.

In addition to the difficulty of writing in a foreign language, Participant C described a similar difficulty in constructing her own opinion as Participant B did.

Extract12
C: 日本語と英語の、その変換っていうんですかね、は、たしかに大変でした。（中略）あと、意見を組み立てるのが苦労して。わたしは最初に何を書くかアウトラインをざっくり書くタイプなんですけど、本当にこの流れでいいのかとか考えてて。先生に質問を聞きに行ったときも、初歩的な質問ばかりで、そもそも卒論って何？ってところからでしたよね、わたし。何を書けばいいか曖昧だった。
[It was indeed difficult to translate between Japanese and English. … I also had a hard time putting together my opinions. I am the kind of person who roughly outlines what I am going to write at the beginning, but I wondered if this was really the right way to go. When I went to ask questions to the professor, all I got were very basic questions, like, "What is a thesis, anyway? I started from the very beginning. I was not sure what I should write.] (translated by the author)

Participant C described the difficulty of writing with a proper understanding of academic writing (e.g., the way of building her argument and the thesis format). This illustrates her concern about being able to adapt to academic conventions, as noted in Tran's (2009) and Salter-Dvorak's (2014) studies. In order to solve her concern, she actively asked questions to her supervisor and tried to understand the academic discourse. Although the participants in Tran's (2009) and Salter-Dvorak's (2014) study were at the post-graduate level, the same was true for the undergraduates in the present study.

4.4 Wrap up

To some extent, the findings above overlaps with the findings from the related studies introduced in the present paper. Even though the participants were seniors who had studied in the EMI program for 4 years, they faced challenges regarding the foreign language. Writing in English is a difficult task for Japanese L1 students, even if they are senior students. Moreover, since a senior thesis is a large project, they expressed how tough it was for them.

Furthermore, it was found that factors other than languages, such as time management and curriculum features influenced how participants evaluated their senior thesis. They expressed that they could not write the thesis they had envisioned because of these factors. It is interesting to note that despite their difficulties in writing in a foreign language, they did not mention anything about language deficiency to evaluate their senior thesis.

It was also revealed that the participants expressed a sense of accomplishment and confidence after overcoming challenges using their own resources. Although they were anxious about whether they could finish writing their thesis, the fact that they completed it so in a foreign language seemed to have given them a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

In previous EMI studies, first- or second-year students' challenges and difficulties, especially receptive skills, have been the central focus. The present study tried to fill in the knowledge gap by showing that senior undergraduate students evaluated their writing experiences and their thesis positively, insisting that students may find significance in their experience in the EMI program.

5. Concluding Remarks

Perspectives on writing experiences and the thesis were revealed based on the interviews with the participants. Overall, they expressed a sense of accomplishment and confidence in completing their senior thesis. One factor for expressing such expression was their efforts to overcome the anxieties and difficulties they felt. The

efforts were made mainly by relying on human resources (e.g., friends, seniors, and the supervisor). Among the anxieties and difficulties, the difficulty of writing in a foreign language was also discovered. This finding overlaps with what the previous studies have reported. However, it appears that the participants in this study did not describe the difficulties of writing in a foreign language from language deficiency. Instead, they described the difficulties from a language user's perspective (e.g., section 4.3). The use of human resources and experiences gained in the EMI program could be heard for overcoming language difficulties (e.g., section 4.1).

Although existing studies mostly focus on difficulties or challenges learning in EMI programs, it is meaningful that the present study was able to reveal that students have a positive view of their experiences (i.e., experiences of working on their senior thesis). Since one of the objectives of implementing EMI programs is to develop human resources capable of foreign language (namely English), the present study's finding (completing a capstone project in English and gaining a positive view of their experiences) may be considered an educational significance of the foreign language education policy in higher education.

However, due to the present study's small-scale research, it is difficult to generalize whether the participants' sense of accomplishment stemmed from the fact that they wrote in English. Experiences mentioned by the participants perhaps could be heard from the students in JMI programs. Moreover, the non-linguistic matters mentioned in the interview are sociologically not surprising. As such, comparative study with JMI programs is deemed necessary for further research to reveal the uniqueness of thesis writing experiences in the EMI program. Since both EMI and JMI students are required to meet the standards of the senior thesis, a comparison of standards across EMI programs and JMI programs would also be valuable.

Furthermore, the present study was conducted in a particular context of the EMI program, so its results cannot be generalized. However, it offers insights into writing practices in EMI programs in the Japanese context, especially for those who are planning to write a thesis in English (e.g., senior students and zemi supervisors). In order to obtain further knowledge, a larger-scale study that invites more Japanese L1 students from other EMI programs in Japan would accumulate empirical knowledge to reveal how senior students are dealing with a senior thesis in English.

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[i] However, she also pointed out that language problem was another factor that prevented her from writing the thesis that she hoped.