

Interview with a Student: Writing the Senior Thesis in English

Mr. Masaharu Hirata, graduating class of
March 2020

Advisor: Professor Jeremiah Alberg

Major: Philosophy and Religion

Senior Thesis Title: The Natural Goodness
of Man by Rousseau and Beaumont's
Pastoral Letter against Emile, or On
Education

Interview date: February 13, 2020



Staff: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. ICU is aiming to raise the percentage of students writing their senior theses in English to 45% by 2023. The percentage was 33% in the academic year 2018-19. At the same time, about 40% of the students who wrote the senior thesis in Japanese said that they “had considered writing the senior thesis in English” (according to a survey regarding the language used for writing the senior thesis in the academic year 2018-19). CTL hopes to encourage students who are considering writing the senior thesis in English to take on that challenge. To this end, in this interview, we would like you to talk about what writing the senior thesis in English was like — we believe that future students will benefit from your story.

Question 1: Before coming to ICU, how did you study English?

Hirata: Apart from taking English classes at high school, I learned through “Kurzgesagt — In a Nutshell,” which is available on YouTube. This is a 10-minute animation series on scientific topics like “what is light?”, and it has English subtitles. I also took online classes offered by Khan Academy, mainly classes about mathematics. Even if I didn’t understand the English, I could grasp the things being discussed using my subject knowledge in mathematics, and the classes helped me to study both English and mathematics. I also got to study how English is used in actual situations through this website.

Staff: Were you in the science stream in high school?

Hirata: No, I was in the humanities stream.

Question 2: When did you start thinking about writing your senior thesis in English? And when did you decide to write your senior thesis in English?

Hirata: In April of my fourth year, my senior thesis advisor, Professor Jeremiah Alberg (professor of philosophy and religion, and peace studies), encouraged me to write in English, and that was when I decided. He instructed me to first write 10 pages in the spring term. It was very tough and I wondered whether I should switch to Japanese, but I continued in English.

Staff: Is it usual to start writing in April?

Hirata: This, apparently, is up to your advisor. I had a friend who did the research first and then started writing.

Staff: So you read the literature and wrote at the same time.

Hirata: Yes. The theme of my thesis was Rousseau's *Emile*. The original is in French, but I can't read French. Therefore, I read a Japanese translation first to understand it and took quotes from an English translation of it. The majority of the literature that I found were in Japanese, and Professor Alberg recommended publications written in English that I could take a look at. Japanese was the language that I used to read and understand the material. I went with the method of first writing things down in Japanese and then translating what I have written into English. I attempted to skip the step of writing in Japanese and tried writing in English from the start, but this approach didn't work for me — reading in Japanese meant that I would think in Japanese. So I decided to stick to the method of first writing things down in Japanese and translating into English.

Staff: That must have been tough.

Hirata: Yes. It took a lot of time and effort. Nonetheless, an advantage of this method was that I was forced to really think about what I was writing. In the process of translating things into English, I realized there were some vague areas. The vague areas appeared reasonable in Japanese but could not be glossed over in English.

Question 3: How was the ELA? In particular, did the ELA help you to develop your writing skills? Which stream were you in?

Hirata: I was in Stream 3. In ARW (Academic Reading & Writing) and RW (Research Writing) courses offered in the ELA, I learned how to structure and write a paper as well as things about verbs. Since I was an ELA student, I learned more about how to write papers in English than in Japanese at ICU. I have the impression that English could be more suited to writing theses than Japanese.

Question 4: Did you take any foundation courses or area major courses that placed importance on assignments involving writing in English?

Hirata: In my second year at ICU, I took the Introduction to Philosophy (PHR106) course taught in English by Professor Alberg. We submitted two papers, one at mid-term and the other at the end of term.

Staff: That means you learned the basics of writing a paper in the ELA and specialized in a field. Your studies prepared you well for the senior thesis.

Hirata: Writing papers for specialized courses and writing the senior thesis are both writing about your field of specialization, but writing in the ELA is different. In my field of specialization, you could acquire knowledge in Japanese and write in English, but for assignments in the ELA, the literature was available in English only. Therefore, in the ELA, you needed to use English for both understanding the material and writing.

Question 5: We believe that you used the proofreading service. How did you learn about this service? You have used both the “proofreading via email” service and the “proofreading with a one-to-session” service. How did you use these two types of services?

Hirata: I started using the proofreading service after it was recommended to me by Professor Alberg. I started using the service after I had finished writing up most of the thesis. I used it for the first time on January 17. Since there was a limit to the number of words you could have proofread, I calculated how many days it would take to have my entire thesis proofread. The limit was 1,500 words per day, and I realized that using the email service alone would not be enough. So I started to make use of “proofreading with a one-to-one session” as well. I noticed that in email proofreading, if the proofreader didn’t understand a part, he or she would just add a comment saying “this part is unclear.” On the other hand, in the sessions, the proofreader will point out the places that were unclear and will suggest ways to make it

better. Therefore, I used “proofreading with a one-to-one session” for sections that I had worked hard on or sections that I thought were interesting. I used “proofreading via email” for the other sections.

Question 6: When in the academic year was proofreading necessary? What other support could be offered for students writing the senior thesis in English?

Hirata: I started using the proofreading service when I was almost done with writing my thesis, but I feel it would have been better if I had made use of it from the spring term, when I had just begun writing. I cannot think of other services that would be useful, but it would be good if students can get an idea of what actually is done in proofreading. Though I knew there was such a service through things like digital signage, I thought it was not a service for me. If there are samples of proofread text on the website, more students may use the service.

(Staff: We have followed Mr. Hirata’s advice; a sample is now available on the proofreading website.)

Question 7: Were there times when you found writing the senior thesis tough? Which stage did you find the most difficult and why?

Hirata: I wrote 10 pages in the spring term, 20 during the summer holidays, 10 in the autumn term, 10 in the winter term, and after that, another 10 pages. I struggled the most when I was writing the last 10 pages. It was around the winter holidays, and I was trying to write more in a shorter space of time.

Staff: That was tough. Was it worth writing the last 10 pages?

Hirata: Yes. To write the last 10 pages, I read *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, which Rousseau had published before *Emile*. As a result, I was able to examine *Emile* more deeply from a new perspective.

Staff: You read *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* and wrote 10 pages in a short space of time. That was tough, wasn’t it?

Hirata: Yes, but it was worth it.

Question 8: How do you feel now that you have finished writing your senior thesis? Do you

feel a sense of achievement?

Hirata: When I saw my thesis in bound form, I thought, "Wow!" In the end, I had written 60 pages, so it was thick. I did feel a sense of achievement.

Question 10: What was writing the senior thesis in English like for you?

Hirata: It required a lot of time and effort. However, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the things I wanted to write by putting in the time and effort.

Staff: What would you say to yourself if you could go back and speak to yourself in the spring term, when you made the decision to write in English?

Hirata: Write something every day, even if it is just 200 words. That's what I'd say.

Question 11: What advice would you give to students considering whether they should write the senior thesis in English or not?

Hirata: Whether you write in English or in Japanese, writing is just a form of expression, and the most important thing is to know what you want to write. However, if I had chosen to write in Japanese, I might have become satisfied with using vague expressions and I might have neglected to think deeply about the things I wanted to write about. Writing in English allowed me to identify the sections that I did not really understand. I was able to develop my ideas further and revise what I had written. In addition, through using the proofreading service, I realized that what I had written did not really convey what I wanted to say to readers. This realization led me to write from the reader's perspective. There were other advantages to writing in English. For example, the amount of information in the literature was greater, and there were established styles like MLA style and APA style, meaning you had a common platform to base your writing on. I could also use tools like Grammarly or RefWorks.

Staff: Do you have a final piece of advice?

Hirata: You may be surprised, but writing the senior thesis in English is something you can accomplish if you try.

Staff: Thank you very much, Mr. Hirata, for sharing your valuable experiences with us.