Expressing Ability and the Language Boom in Japan
— An Introductory Note on the Technique of the English Composition —

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Interests in the languages of English, and also Japanese as the mother tongue, have raised in Japan, resulting in expending a lot of endeavor to acquire the language ability. But the Japanese way of recognizing a language is not free from a kind of bias, which prefers a passive acquisition of words and phrases. I would like to advance a suggestion to improve the technique of teaching the English Composition by specifying this tendency and analyzing the students’ works.

It is a cliche that the English taught at schools in Japan is not practical or useable after more than six years of hardship. Such criticism did have an effect to reduce unnecessarily complicated writings to be deciphered in the entrance examinations and to lead the English teaching to a more sound direction. But its best destination cannot be a square of “English Conversation” where you are obliged to go shopping or get lost. In the typical courses of so-called English Conversation you learn some useful expressions which you can use in everyday life, then you try to use them in order to fasten them in your mind. There is a tendency common to most of the English lessons in Japan even though that way of teaching is the most popular one. It is a lack of building expressing ability, which seems to derive from our little understanding of language.

Expressing ability is one of the basic language ability. It must be fundamental, and common to all individual languages¹. In this report I would like to deal with the students’ compositions and our attitude toward languages from the viewpoint of this ability.

1. Examples of Compositions

〈 Example 1 〉

The task: Write about 'My Favorite Things' as much as possible within ten minutes.²

I announced my forty students about 16 years old that the number of the words was to be thought more than what was said. The following are the top three ones with the most words³.⁴

(Student A) My favorite sports. I'm very bussy now. Because I'm making Robotto for Robocon. So, I want to go fishing. I like fishing very much. I have many rules. My fishing is black bas fishing. I'm going to go fishing when I balk home.

(Student B) I like volley ball. Because volley ball is very interesting and very hard. I'm happy when I play volley ball, I can play volley ball. It is very tired. I have not been able to play volley ball yet. Because I have not played volley ball for a year. I want to play volley ball.

(Student C) Takesi, I like car. Because It is very fast and good. I want to be eighteen years old. So I can drive car. My dream is to drive car to
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Hakuoka. My uncle is in Hakuoka, and cousin, aunt. Hakata is big city.

Student A started with a topic of Robocon®, changing to fishing with an vague conjugation 'so', and drifting without any focus. Student B talked of a single topic, volley ball, but the relationship between the sport and himself is not written. The composition of Student C has a flowing cohesion from a yearning for cars to having a drive to Hakata, although we want to ask him what the point is.

Perhaps the first graders are not accustomed to expressing themselves in English, or possibly also in Japanese. In their junior high school days they probably used their ability only when they put the given sentences into English. This task must have been the first time for them to create the story by themselves. They must have written down the sentences which occurred to them one after another in the Japanese and then translated into English. Their compositions are weak in delivering their point as a whole, and consequently, they convey no intention to make their readers convinced.

例文2
The task: Read the article saying that dodge ball is being prohibited as it is too dangerous to play in schools, arrange the arguments of pros and cons, and then give your own opinion.

The students of the group this time are around 19 years old, have learned the structure of newspaper articles, and already experienced free compositions with certain topics a couple of times.

Most of the students wrote about defending dodge ball, while only three took objection to the sport, and other two students said neither Yes nor No. These are the compositions against dodge ball:

(Student D) I agree with what opponents say. Because I think dodge ball is most danger sport in all of the ball game; besides my friend suffered hurt when I am playing dodge ball with my friends in childhood. But I think dodge ball is good as long as each dodge ball player go easy on with throw ball to other players.

(Student E) I don't like dodgeball. Because I'm not good to take a ball. and I throw ball at my ally when it is took easily, so I want to play other suports, ann think that dodge ball is dangerous and injure someone.

Even after reading several good reasons for and against the sport, the grounds pointed out by the compositions are merely an accident in the childhood or their likes and dislikes. Many of the students never go into the points argued in the article. They are so uncertain that these students are not thought to maintain their opinions decisively.

One of the two students who did not clarify their attitude said:

(Student F) I can't say for or against. I think that dodge ball makes children strong and patient. And the more children play dodge ball, the more their playing ability is high. But dodge ball is certainly violent. Strong boys win weak boys and girls. It would connect bullying. Weakers would wound. It is important to make a justice in playing dodge ball.

Though Student F appears to have played fair with dodge ball and this kind of opinion like his is highly thought of in the cultural context of Japan, in fact he did nothing but trace the TIME article. In the field of arguments his composition will be surely worthless.

In spite of the TIME article, most of the students defend dodge ball. Let me cite three of them:
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(Student G) I like dodge ball. That is why I agree dodge ball. It is pleasant to play to dodge ball. dodge ball is dodging and throwing balls at one another simple sports. dodge ball is easy to understand. Anybody can play it. That is why Opponent's Opinion is but I'm not sure. Opponents are to take things too seriously They don't have to worry about a thing like that.

(Student H) I like sports. So I like dodge ball too. Because dodge ball can be played by many people. And playing dodge ball is very pleasant. I can't believe this criticism. I think that schoolkids are playing sports than studying.
Dodge ball is played by children and adult. I often played dodge ball with classmate childhood. My childhood is very good.

(Student I) I think that the dodge ball is good. Dodge ball is easy. The rule isn't difficult. We play it anywhere. When I was elementary school student, I play it with my friends in a noon recess. We used to excited the dodge ball. Certainly, it may risky. If a boy doesn't throw hard and make a hit, the other boys make make fun of a boy. But, the patern is not always happen. So, the dodge ball is good.

Some of the points are referred to, their own attitudes toward dodge ball are mentioned, yet the students do never state their opinion by consciously and strictly opposing what are said in the article. It is also a disappointment that no original viewpoints beyond the TIME article can be found in about sixty of those compositions. In general they are emotionally written.

Incidentally, you can discover a mound of treasure as the material for error analysis:

(Student J) I think dodge ball is very funny game. Because dodge ball is playing with a lot of friends when I went elementary school. Dodge ball played in physical culture. Dodge ball is little danger. But dodge ball is very exciting game. When I playing doge ball, my throwing ball hitting an enemy. At that time, I very very pleasant. But I hitting ball is regret. Therefore dodge ball is exciting.

Clearly, this Student J translated his sentences into English after having made them in Japanese. Some students recently utilized translation softwares, which is easy to recognize due to certain features⁹. But as is known well, the students' incentive to utter would wither when you correct words and their usages into details. It is a better alternative to let the students express themselves freely with little attention to failures in order for them to attain some fulfillment.

In the domain of Textlinguistics, the term TEXT is defined as follows:


And the seven “Kriterien” are cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality⁹. They will surely help cultivate the procedures of composition teaching. In order to brush up the students' compositions above, they have to learn the coherence, that is, so to say, the will to express something eagerly by the whole paragraph of sentences.

2. A Boom for the Japanese Language

It is said that the fad for the Japanese language is on. I would like to point out a certain common issue found in both the boom and the students' poverty of expressing ability.
The article of the Asahi-shibun on October 26, 2002, tells about the boom for the Japanese language with the headline JAPANESE SOLD WELL IN THE PUBLICATION DEPRESSION. The pioneer was "A Drill Book of the Japanese Language" by ONO Susumu (Iwanami Shinsho, 18 million copies); the advocate of this time is "The Japanese Language to be Read Aloud" by SAITO Takashi, which has been sold since the beginning of this year (Soshi-sha, 14 million); and its follower is "The Japanese Language as a Common Sense" by SHIBATA Takeshi (Gento-sha, 7 million). There is a sigh drawn by the publishing companies, saying no other publication than Harry Potter, the Japanese or the English Language is sold.

The books by ONO and SHIBATA are concerned with the correction of the usages, while a chain of books by SAITO deal with a unit as a paragraph, or at least longer than a sentence, which is a remarkable feature. Because the materials of SAITO's are from the Japanese popular poetry, dramas, and the like, such as the very first paragraph of 'Heike Monogatari', the 'michi-yuki' part of 'Sonezaki Shinju', and NAT-SUME Soseki's 'Yume Ju-ya', it is inevitable that the texts are becoming to be read aloud, without thinking of utilizing the expressions somehow in everyday language activities by modifying them. Mr. SAITO himself proposes the method of appreciating the texts through the human body, that is, he advocates feeling the texts.10

The publishing company 'Bungei Shunju' issued a special magazine with the title "The Beautiful Japanese Language --- Acquiring the Language Ability" in September of 2002. They asked 116 celebrities to write about some tips to brush up their language. The topics of so many essays are classified roughly into words, grammar, usage of phrases, ways of speaking. And most of them require us to speak Japanese like this or like that, to use some expressions which the writers think are beautiful. The masterpieces or the "beautiful" phrases should be learned and uttered as themselves. There is no room for subjectivity of the public.

Only three of all essays refer to the construction of a text: TAKANISHI Mika "I think it is very important to practice talking coherently"; MIURA Shumon "I was moved by the lucid construction of an essay written by an ancient Chinese poet and an order form at the military practice, but I was also touched by the delicate sensitivity of OKAMOTO Kanoko at my adolescence"; MURATA Kiyoko "If you have enough faithfulness to write so that others understand you and you communicate with others, anyone can write good compositions".

The declination to larger units than words, like Mr. SAITO, is to be seen in an overwhelming sale of SUZUKI Yoich's "DUO" (ICP, 1994) in the field of English for Entrance Examinations. Instead of listing the words like failure, steady, support, venture, 'but for', and 'result in' respectively, the wordbook gives a sentence 'But for his steady support, my venture would have resulted in a failure' so that the students can learn the words and phrases at one time. Students preparing for the college entrance examinations welcomed it greatly, and that is why it has been a long seller and scores of similarities came out. That way of enumerating the lexicon, however, does not rapidly promote an active working knowledge of the students. Though it appears to save much more labor than the old wordbooks for the entrance examinations, the sentences are not available unless the students apply them paradigmatically in the practical phases.

The bestsellers supporting the Japanese boom, the wordbook of DUO, and most of the English how-to books in Japan have the same technique in common: to raise the readers' ability by letting them memorize the phrases and the knowledge per se. This way of learning may give you some pieces of satisfaction or superiority temporarily, but it never creates any effect on
3. The Situations Around

While the interest of the Japanese language is declined in the usage of the words and phrase, the American people can be said to be different. In the situation of the conflict between 'English Only' and 'English Plus', by indicating any kind of the correct English one may have to show a certain status sociolinguistically which one belongs to. In such countries as America, where diversity and individuality are valued, the basis for brushing up their own tongue lies in the expressing ability to make themselves understood properly. It consists of 'logic', which has a long history from the ancient Greece.

Books on how to make a speech in America emphasize several forms of arguments. For example, Nicholas Capaldi’s “How to Win Every Argument” (MJF BOOKS, New York. The first publication 1971) teaches us how to construct your arguments and even how to attack your opponent’s arguments. It will be very interesting if you compare Capaldi’s book with NAGASAKI Kazunori’s “How to Improve the Way of Speech” (Mikasa-shobo, published first in September 2000, and its 6th impression was in May 2001.) The latter advises you the usages of the words, the body language, abundant topics, and how to escape from getting nervous. Its aim is, however, to build up better relations, to become a pleasant person to talk with, or to attain a favorable impression. After all, the point is how to be receptive emotionally.

NAGANUMA Kotaro’s “Various Compositions for Thinking” (Chikuma Shinsho, 1998) would be one of the exceptions. It copes with the logic in various texts of the Japanese essays and says, “The books with the title ‘Readers of Sentences’ derive from the motive of reconstructing the expressive subject when its culture or its thought is going into crisis,” and it explains the constructions of modern essays by famous writers. The book, however, takes up rather famous excellent essays and does not aim at improving the compositions of ordinary people.

4. Indication of Change

But even in Japan, there are several phases of a slight indication toward the expressing ability.

Jam Network’s “Parents Cultivate the Expressing Ability” (Shufunotomo-sha, 2002) shows that in bringing up children we have to cultivate our children’s powers of guts, logic, understanding, response, vocabulary, persuasion, and presentation so as to make themselves understood.

According to the NHK Education which was broadcast on September 27, 2002, some elementary schools have begun to put emphasis on expressing at various subjects. In Okazaki Municipal Yahagi-Higashi Elementary School, they have established three stages. The 1st and 2nd graders: to speak with clear pronunciation and to listen to the very last. The 3rd and 4th graders: to talk with a clear plot and to listen to the main point of the story. The 5th and the 6th graders: to talk one’s own opinion logically comparing with that of the other pupils and to listen to what the speaker intends to convey. At the end of the NHK program, HIRATA Oriza made a comment: “Japan is an island country, a village society, where presumption of what others want to say or do is a virtue. That has created various beautiful culture. But if we could add the ability of dialogue and of explaining oneself to the ‘current’ appreciating–each–other culture, then both the Japanese culture and communication would become more and more fruitful.”

And, one more thing. In the course of the Japanese education, there is a scene where the composition lesson is taught as a kind of subject with the consideration on the text level: the
preparation for the composition test of the college entrance examinations. Since the students have to learn to write just as the judges would like, there have appeared dozens of textbooks. Here is an example: HIGUCHI Yuichi’s “Consolidating the Foundation of Composition in the Entrance Examinations to Make Rapid Progress in the Deviation” (Gakushukencyu-sha, 1996). It says that there are four points to be remembered: i) A composition has to state yes/no definitely, ii) A composition has to have a pattern, iii) Make a note if you have enough time, iv) Learn to apply the technique of citation. The essential elements of the composition are definition, phenomenon, result, reason (cause), historical progress, geographic situation, and countermeasure12.

5. A Conclusion

"Japan is a society without dialogues, where people avoid making a severe argument," says NAKAJIMA Yoshimichi13. That might be the reason why we have a weak will to express ourselves openly by words. Or we are prone to begin with lengthy and excessive introduction such as greetings of the seasons, asking after others’ health, and so on, in order to make the encounter much softer.

Therefore, at English Composition, the teachers of English have to encourage their students to have the will to express their own opinions and communicate with others verbally. We tend to leave the construction of the compositions to the students' sensitivity. In order to improve this sort of teaching technique, the teachers have to analyze the expressing ability. And it has to be based on the western logic mentioned above, now that we live in a global multi-cultural world.

Yet, I would add another opinion though it may be the fifth wheel on a coach. Long introductory remarks in an E-mail or such a business-like letters are obstructive, to be sure. But the Japanese tradition requires a mutual reliance even on business, which could be another aspect of Japanese ‘weak’ optimism. There could be a direction of co-existence, where you do not have to defeat others. “Tradition is not always the best. It cannot be helped but we did that way. We have no other choice hereafter. Preservation of tradition is equal to resignation to fate,” is a word by TAKASHIMA Toshio14. So fatal a conservatism is not easily supported, for there should be room for innovation. But we have to take the bent of the compositions by the Japanese students into consideration, because it is too stubborn to remove and may be of some use in the cross-cultural context if it is elaborated effectively.

[Footnotes]

1 Considering this way, we are reminded of the cognitive science, but in this paper I’d like to keep away from examining the concept.
2 The first graders of Hiroshima National college of Maritime Technology.
3 As a matter of fact, the composition with the most words is omitted because it is composed of some sentences from the textbook. She might have misunderstood my instructions.
4 The compositions of the students A to J are all sic and they are cited as a whole.
5 The inter-collegiate contest of robots.
7 The first graders in the Department of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science at School of Engineering, Kinki University.
8 The time is surely coming when the English teachers have to consider the ways of coexistence with such softwares: Putting first into Japanese easy to be recognized by the computer, be sure to check the sentences after the softwares, or such pieces of advice.
10 Some critics attack him, saying that his method believes in the authority of the past educated culture (“A dangerous relationship between the reading-aloud boom and the educational policy” Asahi Shinbun, July 21, 2002). or that reading aloud leads to a sort of Totalitarianism (“Rondan” December 2002, Iwanami-shoten).
11 These samples are a result of my wandering through the woods of libraries, so the choice of these books are neither systematic nor inclusive.
12 ibid. p.22.
"A Society without Dialogues" (PHP-Shinsho, 1997). The double elimination of eliminating the others and eliminating the confrontation is namely the complete rejection of individualism that allows the Japanese people to confront the others as an individual. (p.191)

"Kanji and the Japanese People" (Bunshun-shinsho, 2001) p. 235