Chapter 5

English Writing Instruction in Senior High Schools in Japan: A Historical Ecological Approach

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Introduction

This study was motivated by the results of a series of studies (e.g., Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2011) that investigated the development of English writing ability in Japanese university students. In these studies, most participants reported that they had not learned how to write a coherent paragraph-long text[1] in their high school English classes. For example, in Sasaki (2013), which followed the development of 22 Japanese students' views about writing in both Japanese and English, all the respondents said that they had not learned how to organize a coherent paragraph in English in high school and that during their high school days, they believed that writing in English meant "filling in blanks with appropriate words or phrases" or "translating one to two Japanese sentences into English," especially in test situations. Similarly, Rinnert and Kobayashi

1 In this chapter, I define the word "coherent" as "sequentially logical" (adapted from Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 166).

(2009) reported that a substantial number of Japanese university students did not receive sufficient training in how to write a coherent text in English when they entered university. Because studying English has been virtually compulsory in both junior and senior high schools in Japan since 1962 (Sasaki, 2008), this suggests that many graduating high school students with at least six years of English education[1] may not be able to write a coherent paragraph, to say nothing of a longer text. Moreover, now that over 95% of Japanese junior high school graduates proceed to senior high school (e.g., 98.4% in 2014; Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture, Japan, 2014, henceforth, MEXT),[2] this is probably a fair representation of the overall English writing ability of 18-year-old Japanese students. With the increased importance of English as a means of communication in this rapidly globalizing world, this (if true) is not desirable. However, these results may be confined to the participants in my own studies as well as in Rinnert and Kobayashi's because our numbers were small and our participants were not randomly selected from the wider population of Japanese senior high school graduates.

The present study thus examines the goals of English writing instruction in Japanese senior high school, paying special attention to the goal of teaching how to write coherent texts as well as to the English writing ability of graduating senior high school students as the ultimate product of such instruction. Of course, examining the true state of English education even at a particular grade level in one country is a formidable task (cf., Wall, 1996), and space is limited. However, since no study (to my knowledge) has ever addressed this question, this study should be a useful first step. Furthermore, this hope may be aided by the fact that Japanese education is centrally controlled by the government through legally-binding curriculum guidelines known as the "Course of Study"

1 Until 2011, English education in Japanese public schools started in the first year of junior high school (at the age of 12). Since April 2012, it now starts in the fifth grade (at the age of 11) as part of a new subject termed "Foreign Language Activities," which was put into effect by the 2012 Course of Study.

2 On January 6, 2001, Japan's Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture changed its name to Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, with MEXT as its official abbreviation.

(see below). Examining the objectives of these guidelines should therefore explain a great deal about the current situation nationwide. That is, if we examine the results of a nationwide survey of English writing abilities and the goals set by the curriculum guidelines, we may be able to have at least a general idea of the current state of English writing instruction as implemented in the country. Although the findings of this study are bound to be provisional, the selected methodology and materials (see the Method section) are designed and selected with such a first step in mind.

In the study, I thus ask the following two questions:

(1) What skills and knowledge are expected to be achieved by the third (final) year of senior high school English classes by the current Course of Study, that is, the legally-binding curriculum guidelines promulgated by the government?

(2) To what extent do the ability and skills of Japanese senior high school students reflect the goals set by the Course of Study? If there is a discrepancy, what might be possible reasons for it?

I hope that answering these questions will provide practical hints on how to improve the current state of English writing instruction in Japan, which is the ultimate purpose of this study.

Method

In the following section, I outline the methods used in carrying out this review of the ecological setting in which English writing instruction is often carried out in Japanese schools. The following will outline the chosen theoretical lens, the historical ecological approach, as well the use of retrocasting to analyze materials in order to better understand the social setting of L2 writing instruction in Japan.

Gaddis' (2002) Historical Ecological Approach

I chose an ecological perspective as the theoretical framework for the present study because I have learned that educational practices can be affected by multiple and unexpected factors such as "socio-political, economic, academic, and historical/cultural factors in different periods" (Sasaki, 2008, p. 64). Such a belief concurs with the basic principles of many ecological perspectives (e.g., van Lier, 2004). Among various types of ecological approaches, I selected Gaddis' (2002) historical-ecological method because it is unique in its claim that a study should be designed to serve the researcher's intended purpose, which best fits the fact that I do have a specific purpose for conducting the study. To explain how one can design a study according to one's purpose, Gaddis uses a map-making metaphor, whereby a study should focus on a particular set of variables necessary to explain a given phenomenon so that the results will most effectively serve the given purpose, just as a "highway map will exaggerate certain features of the landscape and neglect others" (p. 33). However, the resulting map and the representation of "reality" it constructs must of course be a valid one, supported by evidence convincing enough for the reader to feel that the results are usable. Lastly, Gaddis claims that this act of "reality" representation should be revised through constant verification in light of changes brought about by the study itself, an approach that is highly suitable for the present study as a first and provisional step. Lastly, Gaddis' approach was helpful when I analyzed the data because, unlike some ecological approaches, he illustrates how his theory can be put into practice through a method he calls "retrocasting" (p. 65), accompanied by several practically usable techniques (see below).

Retrocasting Techniques Used in the Study

Retrocasting, which has been used mainly in historical studies, means tracing the history of the targeted phenomenon through our "imagination with

logic" (Gaddis, 2002, pp. 40-41). A researcher uses "surviving structures" that remain in the present to infer how they reached their current state. Because multiple and unexpected factors may have influenced the end-product (i.e., the current structure), researchers can include *ex post facto* as many variables as they like if they seem relevant. The inference does not have to be correct (if anything can ever be called "correct"). However, as mentioned above, the results of the restoration should be in the form that can best serve the intended purpose of the study.

To summarize, researchers start with existing evidence (the current structure) and infer how it came about (the processes). While imagining these processes, researchers can include as many potential explanatory variables or factors as they like. However, the choice should be based on how useful the end-product of the analysis is. To decide which variables should be focused upon, Gaddis suggests following two rules, adapting the strategies used by historian Clayton Roberts (cited on pp. 98-99 in Gaddis, 2002):

1) Assign greater importance to immediate rather than distant causes; and

2) Find a "point of no return" at which the target phenomenon became the present state as a result of changing from a stable state to an unstable state (the current state), and find what critically caused the unstable state.

In this study, the remaining structures are the students' English writing ability as compared with the intended goals set by the Course of Study (i.e., the structures' background). If the students' ability turns out to be too far removed from the intended goals (especially in terms of writing coherent texts), I will explore why this happened (the processes) by searching for possible causes among the most immediate ones that may have critically influenced the discrepancy between the instructional goals and the students' ability. To make my analysis convincing, I will use the students' own (emic) accounts in addition to the historical background surrounding the current structure.

Goals Set by the Current Course of Study (2003 to 2012) as the Background

Before describing the state of the English writing ability of Japanese senior high school students (i.e., the remaining structure as the target of this study), I present the goals intended to be met by the Course of Study, the official set of curriculum guidelines, as the sociocultural background to be compared with that ability.

The Course of Study is a set of curriculum guidelines promulgated by Japan's Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MEXT) for primary to secondary education, covering kindergarten to senior high school. The first Course of Study was issued in 1947 for the new school system, starting in April of that year, after Japan was defeated in World War II. At the time, Japan was under the control of the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Allied Powers, and starting a new school system was one of the democratizing actions conducted under GHQ guidance (see Sasaki, 2008). Modeled on the US school system, Japan's system changed to six single-track years in elementary school, three years each in junior and senior high school, and two or four years in college or university. Since then, the Course of Study has been revised six times at approximately ten-year intervals to accommodate sociocultural change. The Course of Study for senior high schools was promulgated in 1947, 1960, 1970, 1978, 1989, 1999 and 2009, and except for the first one, all were put into effect three to five years later (1963, 1973, 1982, 1994, 2003 and 2013, respectively). Henceforth, to avoid confusion, I will use the years during which each Course of Study was effective instead of its promulgation year. Except for the initial 1947 document, the other six Courses of Study have had legally-binding force, and the curricular content as well as the textbooks used in all primary and secondary schools in Japan were devised according to the Course of Study in force at the time.

The most current Course of Study for senior high schools came into effect in April, 2013. However, since it has not been in place for very long, this is too short a period to gauge its effect, and I therefore target the last Course of Study, which was put into effect in 2003. This Course of Study was promulgated in 1999, a time "characterized by the introduction of the government's new educational policies, followed by public criticism of the results of these policies" (Sasaki, 2008, p. 73). However, while conceding the potential importance of the social background, I focus here on the Course of Study as the most immediate influence.

For this Course of Study, the overall objective for English education for senior high schools, which I translated as no official translation is available, is as follows (Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, 1999):

> To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information, intentions, and ideas, expressing one's own ideas, deepening one's understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.

The term "communication" was used for the first time in the 1994-2002 Course of Study, whereas prior to that, the words "understand" and "express" were used, and it was taken up again in the 2003-2012 version. This was supposed to respond to the societal need for schools to cultivate more practical English skills for a rapidly globalizing society rather than knowledge and appreciation of the language itself (Sasaki, 2008). Another common feature between these versions was the focus on "fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages," which was also added to the 1994-2002 document for the first time in the history of Courses of Study as a result of a paradigm shift in education from treating academic ability as consisting of knowledge and skills as opposed to having a positive attitude toward a given task (Abiko, 1996). This was in reaction, starting in the 1980s, against the excessive past emphasis on cramming facts in school, especially for university

entrance examinations, which was believed to cause various educational problems such as bullying and dropping out (Sasaki, 2008). To reduce such a burden on students, the 2003-2012 Course of Study also cut about 30% of the content of the syllabus across all subjects. Thus, for English, the number of new words to be introduced in senior high school fell from 1,900 to 1,300, and the number of elective subjects was reduced from seven to six (one subject equals about 29 class hours). Finally, in terms of the skills to be taught, the objectives for the 2003-2012 Course of Study promote the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing with equal weight. However, the fact that the two required subjects for graduation among the six English subjects were Oral (but not Written) Communication I and English I (emphasizing all four skills) suggests that written communication was not seen as being as important as oral communication.

Steering our focus toward writing instruction, we can see that the general objective described above only mentions "appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc.," which is quite vague. Furthermore, the description of one of the two required subjects, labeled "English I," only suggests an activity consisting of "writing by sorting out one's own ideas or the information gained through listening and reading in English" and makes no mention of learning how to organize a coherent text specifically. We can thus infer that the minimum English writing ability required by the government for high school graduation is not necessarily related to writing in a manner that is "sequentially logical" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 166), especially as the minimum level for the other three skills seem similarly vague. On the other hand, given that the elective subject of English Writing is taken by most senior high school students unless they are in a vocational school (Yamamoto, 1999), the goal for this subject is probably the highest level Japanese senior high school students are expected to achieve. Let us therefore examine the most relevant part of the description (which I underline below) in the Course of Study for Writing (which I translated as no official translation is available):

A) Objectives:

To further develop students' writing ability to appropriately convey information and ideas according to the given situation and purpose and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through this ability.

B) Content:

1) Language activities:

Conduct the following communication activities by creating actual language use situations in which students can send and receive information and ideas by:

a) Summarizing content heard or read in a manner appropriate to the given situation and purpose;

b) Writing one's own ideas by synthesizing what one hears or reads;

c) Organizing the content one wants to convey and writing in a manner appropriate to the given situation and purpose so that readers can understand it easily.

2) Treatment of language activities:

a) Points to consider in teaching:

To effectively conduct communication activities mentioned in 1) above, teachers should consider the following points, as appropriate:

i) Dictating spoken and written texts;

ii) Using necessary phrases and expressions to convey ideas and feelings;

iii) Writing while paying attention to the organization and development of the text.

b) Language use situations and functions:

Teachers should select and practically combine situations and functions as appropriate to achieving the goals mentioned in A) when conducting the activities mentioned in 1). In such cases, teachers should create opportunities for the students to experience actual communication by selecting language use situations such as letter or email writing.[1]

We can see here that the two underlined sections clearly indicate that the Course of Study expects a majority of senior high school students to have gained the ability to write a coherent text in English by the time they graduate, even though the chosen examples of letter and email writing suggest that these imagined texts may not be academic but practical.

Japanese Senior High School Students' Ability to Write a Coherent Text

As mentioned earlier, all 22 participants in Sasaki (2013) reported that they had never learned how to write a text beyond the paragraph level while in high school. However, it is possible that these participants may in fact be exceptional. Therefore, as a more solid "remaining structure" worth analyzing, I present the results of a nationwide test (henceforth, the "Senior High School Test") conducted by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIEPR) in 2005. In the past, NIEPR conducted two nationwide tests targeting all pubic and private senior high schools in order to check whether the Course

1 These two writing modes have now been replaced by "various situations according to the students' needs" in the equivalent subject of "English Expression I" in the 2013 Course of Study.

of Study in force at the time had been properly implemented. The 2005 test applied to the 2003-2012 Course of Study, and the 2002 test covered for the 1994-2002 Course of Study. Because 27.5% of the 2005 items overlapped with those of the 2002 test, we can also compare the changes in these items between the two tests.

For the 2005 test, over 150,000 graduating senior high school students (or 13% of all such full-time students for the given year in Japan) were randomly selected from 2,333 departments in all public and private senior high schools in the country. All the test-takers had studied under the 2003-2012 Course of Study since their first year in senior high school. These students took the test in one of two versions (A or B)[1] in up to three out of 12 subjects (50 minutes per subject), including English, from six fields (e.g., math, science, foreign languages, etc.). Some test items differed in content or specifications according to the versions while others shared the same content or specification across versions. For the English test, the items seemed to differ in content across the two versions (though the content was not revealed) but shared common specifications for all items (see Table 1). A total of 29,880 students took Version A or B of the English test. Both versions consisted of 26 items, with 10 listening items (Items 1 to 10; multiple choice), 9 reading items (Items 11 to 19; multiple choice), and 7 writing items (Items 20 to 26; descriptive). All items were related to the content of English I, one of the two courses required by the 2003-2013 Course of Study for senior high school graduation (recall the previous section). Furthermore, when the test was given, the participating students and their teachers also answered questionnaire items about their motivation to study, their perception and understanding of the given school subjects, and their learning or teaching activities.

Table 1 presents brief specifications, (averaged) percentages of those who answered the item correctly (henceforth, accuracy rates), and expected accuracy rates (the accuracy rates expected if the teacher spends the standard amount of

1 NIEPR (2007) does not mention the reason(s) for using two versions.

Table 1 Specifications, Accuracy Rates, and Related Information Regarding the English Items in Versions A and B of the Senior High School Test

Version	Item number	Main skill to be measured	Ability to be tested	Item type	Average % of those who answered the item correctly (accuracy rate)	Expected (average) accuracy rate	% of no answer
A (n=14,915)	1-3	Listening	Ability to respond when spoken to in English	Multiple Choice (MC)	63.0	68.3	Not reported (NR)
	4-6		Ability to comprehend the details of a spoken text	MC	66.0	66.7	NR
	7-10		Ability to comprehend the main point of a spoken text	MC	65.2	60.0	NR
	11-12	Reading	Ability to comprehend the details of a written text	MC	63.6	65	NR
	13-15		Ability to comprehend the main point of a coherent written text	MC	61.1	60	NR
	16-17		Ability to understand the logical development of a written text	MC	61.7	60	NR

(to be continued)

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Version	Item number	Main skill to be measured	Ability to be tested	Item type	Average % of those who answered the item correctly (accuracy rate)	Expected (average) accuracy rate	% of no answer
A (*n*=14,915)	18-19		Ability to understand the writer's intention in a written text	MC	59.4	67.5	NR
	20	Writing	Ability to write a coherent text consisting of more than 3 sentences	Descriptive	21.7	45.0	28.5
	21-23		Ability to fill in blanks with an appropriate word or phrase	Descriptive	43.8	58.3	NR
	24-26		Ability to write a sentence using scrambled words	Descriptive	63.2	61.7	NR
B (*n*=14,965)	1-3	Listening	Ability to respond when spoken to in English	MC	60.8	70	NR
	4-6		Ability to comprehend the details of a spoken text	MC	51.3	63.3	NR
	7-10		Ability to comprehend the main point of a spoken text	MC	64.5	66.3	NR

(to be continued)

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Version	Item number	Main skill to be measured	Ability to be tested	Item type	Average % of those who answered the item correctly (accuracy rate)	Expected (average) accuracy rate	% of no answer
B (*n*=14,965)	11-12	Reading	Ability to comprehend the details of a written text	MC	69.3	62.5	NR
	13-15		Ability to comprehend the main point of a coherent written text	MC	72.7	63.3	NR
	16-17		Ability to understand the logical development of a written text	MC	69.3	60	NR
	18-19		Ability to understand the writer's intention in a written text	MC	66.3	62.5	NR
	20	Writing	Ability to write a coherent text consisting of more than 3 sentences	Descriptive	25.0	45	22.8
	21-23		Ability to fill in blanks with an appropriate word or phrase	Descriptive	51.7	53.3	Not reported
	24-26		Ability to write a sentence using scrambled words	Descriptive	48.4	60	Not reported

time covering activities suggested by the Course of Study for the given year for the 26 English items in Versions A and B) (NIEPR, 2007). For the purpose of this study, I present below a more detailed explanation of the seven Writing items (Items 20 to 26) shared by the two versions (NIEPR, 2007).

- Item 20 requires the students to write a coherent text using more than three sentences about a given topic. The opening of the sentence was given. This item is intended to measure the students' ability to write such a coherent, and responses were evaluated in terms of quantity and organization (coherence). The presence of this item in this test implies that students were in fact expected to write a short coherent text even at the required English I level.
- Items 21 to 23 require the students to explain a picture or situation by filling in blanks using appropriate words and phrases.
- Items 24 to 26 require the students to form a sentence from four to six scrambled words occurring in a conversation between two people.

The figures presented in Table 1 suggest that final-year senior high school students were weakest at writing a coherent text consisting of more than three sentences (Item 20). First, the accuracy rates for Item 20 in Versions A and B were the lowest among all the items (21.7% and 25%, respectively). Moreover, they were much lower than the expected accuracy rates. That is, the students failed to achieve the level of ability expected (i.e., writing a short coherent text) if teaching the particular skill successfully met the goals set by the Course Study for English I. Moreover, about one in four students wrote nothing for Item 20. Of course, we have to take into consideration the fact that the participants in this survey included students from various types of high schools, some of which did not require English classes beyond the required English I level. In fact, the survey revealed that 36.6% of these students did not take the Writing class, while 27.9% did not take the Reading class. Yet, Table 1 shows that even a majority (63.3%) of those final-year senior high school students who took the Writing class (which clearly required the ability to write a coherent text, as mentioned above) could not write a text consisting of more than three related sentences.

How did this come about? Recall that the 22 participants in Sasaki (2013) said that their perception of writing during senior high school consisted of filling in blanks with appropriate words or phrases or translating Japanese sentences into English in tests. The averaged accuracy rates for Items 21 to 23 (in both versions of the test), which show the students' ability to fill in blanks, and the accuracy rates for Items 24 to 26 (also in both versions), which show the students' ability to form a correct sentence from scrambled words were both much higher than the accuracy rates for Item 20, which requires them to write a coherent text (again in both versions), thus concurring with these accounts. Furthermore, the teachers' questionnaire (n = 887) reveals that only 18.8% ("agree" and "agree to some extent" combined) had conducted the activity consisting of "writing by sorting one's own ideas or the information gained through listening and reading in English," as was suggested by the description of the required English I subject in the 2003-2012 Course of Study. The fact that this figure is lower than those for similar items for listening (38.2%) and reading (66.3%) suggests that high school teachers are not enthusiastic about cultivating the students' ability to write a coherent text compared to their ability to listen or read such a text. (Note, however, that the figure for speaking was only 16.7%.)

These results bring to mind the fact that many participants in my previous studies (e.g., Sasaki 2004, 2011) also reported during interviews that their high school English classes tended to emphasize what was likely to be asked in university entrance exams. In fact, many teachers and researchers report similar views (e.g., Negishi et al., 2010). The teachers' responses to the questionnaire items regarding writing activities administered alongside the 2005 Senior High School Test may be a natural reaction on their part if we consider that about half of these students—for example, 49.3% in 2006 (MEXT, 2006)—proceeded to tertiary education while the 2003-2012 Course of Study was in effect. We can easily imagine that in a meritocratic society such as Japan, effectively preparing students to enter prestigious universities was most appreciated by the students as well as their parents (Kanatani, 2009). If writing and speaking coherently was

not measured in the university entrance exams, we cannot blame the teachers for not teaching these skills even if they were required to do so by the Course of Study. With this in mind, we will now check what was tested in the university entrance exams taken by the participants in the 2005 Senior High School Test as a possible "immediate" cause. Because space is limited, I will focus mainly on the 2006 "Center Exam," which many participants in this test must have taken to enter university the following year.

Content of the English Test in the 2006 Center Exam

The Center Exam is given by the National Center for University Entrance Examination (NCUEE) to university applicants in January for the year during which they hope to enter university. The first test, known as the Common Test, was given in 1979 for public universities only. The test was originally created at the government's initiative in response to the public sentiment that the entrance exams asked too many questions that were beyond what the Courses of Study required of senior high school education, which caused excessive competition among university applicants (Sasaki, 2008). The Common Test (and its successors, known as "Center Exams" since 1990) is given once every year, and the NCUEE claims that the test given each year covers only the content suggested by the Course of Study in force at the time (NCUEE, 2015). After the test was renamed "Center Exam" in 1990, more and more private universities started to use it. Today, all public universities and a majority of private universities use this test for admission. For example, in 2013, 573,271 applicants took the test in an average number of 5.69 subjects to apply for places in 163 (or 100%) public and 520 (or 86%) private universities.

All items in the Center Exam are multiple-choice, and a test in one subject lasts from 60 to 80 minutes. All tests are given over two days. After taking the test, the applicants calculate their scores on their own to decide which university to apply to (see Sasaki, 2008 for details of the procedure). While some universities require no further exams, others require yet another test in

written or multiple-choice form (usually given in February and March). Based on this, we can safely say that the Center Exam is the most influential university entrance exam in present-day Japan. I would therefore like to examine the 2006 Center Exam as a possible explanatory variable for the writing ability of those who took the 2005 Senior High School Test, which was not only "immediate" but also "convincing" as well as "usable" (in Gaddis' terms) for the purpose of this study.

The 2006 English Center Exam was a special case because for the first time in its 26-year history, it included a listening subtest, which was given as a separate test from the main English test (i.e., some universities did not require scores on both the main English test *and* the listening test for admission, though the number of such universities was small). The main test lasted 80 minutes and consisted of 50 multiple-choice items for a maximum score of 200. The listening test lasted 30 minutes, followed by a 30-minute practice period using earphones, and had 25 multiple-choice items for a maximum score of 50. As claimed in the very name of the test, all 25 listening test items mainly measured the participants' ability to listen to English, although they also required other skills and knowledge (e.g., reading the instructions as well understanding the oral texts). In contrast, what the 50 main items (Items 1-50) measured is not as obvious. I therefore present their content below, with my interpretation of what abilities these items mainly measured in parentheses:

Items 1-2: Find the correct location of the stress in each word (pronunciation, but indirectly through written forms);

Items 3-6: Find the part of words that carries the most stress in given contexts (speaking, but indirectly through written forms);

Items 7-16: Insert the most appropriate word or phrase in the blanks in a sentence (grammatical knowledge);

Items 17-19: Insert the most appropriate sentence in the blanks in a 4-sentence conversation between 2 people (speaking, but indirectly through written forms);

Items 20-25: Sort scrambled words to form a sentence (grammatical knowledge);

Items 26-27: Fill in the two blanks in a 100-word text with appropriate phrases (reading);

Items 28-29: Fill in the blanks in a 50-word text with an appropriate sentence (10 to 20 words long) (reading);

Items 30-32: Fill in the most appropriate three blanks out of six in a 300-word text with an appropriate sentence (10 to 20 words long) each (reading);

Item 33: Find the most appropriate word or phrase to fill in the blank in a sentence related to a given text (measuring the ability to comprehend a text) (reading);

Items 34-37: Find a particular piece of information in a given text (about 400 words) and a related graph (reading);

Items 38-42: Read a 400-word long conversation between two people and answer questions related to its content (reading);

Items 43-50: Read a 700-word long text and answer comprehension questions (by searching for information or inferencing) (reading).

Overall, 18% of the 50 main English test items appear to measure mainly abilities related to speaking (but indirectly through written texts), while 32% measure grammatical knowledge, and the rest (50%) measure abilities related to reading. Meanwhile, no item in the main test appears to measure writing ability, especially in the sense of writing a coherent text. After taking the Center Exam, some students may have taken exams that required descriptive answers for the universities of their choice. However, according to Kanatani (2009), who investigated additional exams given in 2007 (the following year) by 18 major public and private universities, 11 of them (or 61.1%) required translation of Japanese sentences, and only seven (or 38.9%) required applicants to write a coherent text either additionally or exclusively. As Kanatani notes, these are some of the most prestigious universities in Japan out of 756 universities in operation in 2007. Moreover, those universities were exceptional in requiring written answers as the entrance exams of many other universities had been moving in the opposite direction and required no written answers (i.e., consisting entirely of multiple-choice items) in order to decrease the rating burden.

To summarize the above information concerning the Center Exam and the additional entrance exams, most university applicants in 2006, including the participants in the 2005 Senior High School Test, probably did not have to write a coherent text similar to the one tested in the Senior High School Test for their university entrance exams. No wonder that only 18.8% of the 882 teachers who responded to the questionnaire reported having their students write a text "by sorting out one's own ideas or the information gained through listening and reading." This is in sharp contrast with the fact that 66.3% of the same teachers had their students "read to understand the writer's intention and the main point of the given text," or that 38.2% of them had their students "listen to understand the speaker's intention or the main point" (NIEPR, 2007). Given this, I speculate that whether or not a given skill is required in university entrance exams is probably the most immediate "point of no return" that lowers the students' ability to write a coherent text compared to their reading ability (see Table 1). This speculation is further confirmed by the questionnaire results, which shows that as few as 16.7% of the teachers had the students practice speaking coherently because speaking performance is also rarely required in university entrance exams (Kanatani, 2009). Finally, recall that Sasaki's participants' view of writing during their high schools days was filling in blanks or translating Japanese sentences in tests. Given the results presented here, we can infer that such a view was probably formed through repeated classroom activities as their teachers must have known that these activities, but not writing a coherent text, would be tested in the university entrance exams. In fact, many items in the 2006 Center Exam required filling in blanks activities (e.g., Items 26-32), and over half of the 18 prestigious universities investigated by Kanatani (2009) required their applicants to translate Japanese sentences into English in their additional exams following the Center Exam.

Conclusions and Suggestions for the Future

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1) The Course of Study required teachers to teach "appropriately conveying information and ideas" (the overall objective) and how to "write while paying attention to the organization and development of the text" (for the subject of Writing taken by about 65% of all senior high school students);

2) However, only about 25% of test takers could write a coherent text consisting of four or more sentences, while another 25% could write nothing;

3) Only 18.8% of the teachers taught how to write a coherent text;

4) The Center Exam had no section requiring the applicants to write a coherent text, and very few universities required this ability in their additional entrance exams, which is probably one of the main causes for the gap between the goals stated in 1), the students' actual proficiency stated in 2), and the teachers' attitude stated in 3).

Following Gaddis (2002), I started with the government-mandated goals as the background for the structure of the English writing ability of Japanese senior high school students. Noting a gap between these goals and the students' ability, I concluded that the content of the university entrance exams, and especially the nationwide Center Exam, is the most likely cause for this gap. Although I could not identify any other factor that seemed as powerful, the results of this study are subject to further revision (as mentioned earlier), and I expect future studies to uncover other factors as convincing as pressure from the entrance exams (for example, the lack of the kind of training that would enable teachers to teach their students to write coherent texts might be a good candidate; see Oi, 2012). Leaving such further investigation to future studies, I would now like to conclude by pursuing its ultimate purpose, which was to make suggestions on how to improve the current situation. Because the findings of the study summarized above indicate that the current situation may not

improve unless educational policies at governmental level change, I suggest a number of measures the government might take to improve the situation, hoping that these will be the most effective and useful.

First, if the Center Exam were to include descriptive items similar to those in the Senior High School Test, the situation might change dramatically. In fact, this is what happened to the high school students' listening ability when they took the 2005 Senior High School Test. In March, 2000, the NCUEE announced the introduction of a listening section in the Center Exam, starting in 2006. Hence, the participants' performance on the 2005 Senior High School Test (described in this study) was especially relevant because many of them must have had extra preparation for this newly-added listening subsection. In fact, the effects of such preparation are apparent when we compare the changes in the scores for overlapping items (see above) between the 2002 and 2005 Senior High School Tests. Of the 52 items on the 2005 test, 21 (7 listening, 8 reading, 6 writing) overlapped with the 2002 items. The results reveal that among these overlapping items, four (57.1%) of the seven listening items were the only items whose scores were significantly higher in 2005 than in 2002 (NIEPR, 2007). That is, the students' listening ability significantly improved between 2002 and 2005, whereas their reading and writing ability did not. We could easily attribute these results to the introduction of the listening section in the Center Exam in 2006, whereas other sociocultural or academically-related events surrounding these students during the years between 2002 and 2005 do not seem as immediate (Sasaki, 2008). For these students, the introduction of a listening section in the Center Exam was clearly a "point of no return" in terms of improving their English listening ability.

My second suggestion also relates to university entrance exams because it seems crucial if teaching practices are to change in Japan. I suggest that the NCUEE use external and well-established commercial measures (e.g., TOEFLiBT, IELTS, TOEIC Speaking/Writing) that require the ability to write a coherent text as additional components of the Center Exam. If submitting a writing score to a university of choice in addition to the overall Center Exam

score worked in favor of those who did so (e.g., a maximum of 50 additional points, as in the listening subtest), this would surely provide an incentive for some applicants to practice writing a coherent text. Clearly, we must also consider whether the purpose of each of these tests may match that of the university entrance exams (i.e., to measure how successfully each applicant might function as a university student in a given academic field) in order to avoid an invalid use of the test (Messic, 1988). However, I would still recommend that the NCUEE consider including some kind of a measure of the ability to write coherently even though this would be conducted by an external organization. If such as test measured the students' ability to write based on information gained through other skills (i.e., an integrative type of test), as recommended by the 2003-2012 and the 2013 Courses of Study, it would be even more advantageous (although we would also have to consider the difficulty level of the test). Considering that it took the NCUEE at least five years to introduce the listening subtest, using an external measure as a makeshift response might be better than having no such test because even a makeshift test could create a washback effect similar to that related to the students' listening skills, as we saw above.

Finally, publicizing the importance of writing ability in today's world in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country such as Japan may have a beneficial impact. Fortunately, the 2013 Course of Study has begun to emphasize the four skills more equally than did the 2003-2012 Course of Study, which put greater emphasis on oral proficiency. For example, as part of the general objectives, the aim of writing and speaking is now to "convey information and one's ideas appropriately" as opposed to "expressing one's ideas" in the 2003-2012 version. Furthermore, in Communication English I, one of the two required subjects in the 2013 Course of Study, one activity that seems to cultivate students' ability to write coherently, namely "Reading and writing while paying attention to the main point or topic sentence and words and phrases that make the text cohere," has been added. In these descriptions, we can see that even at the minimum required subject level, the 2013 version of

Course of Study values the students' ability to write a coherent text more clearly than did the previous Courses of Studies. This might be a manifestation of the government's awareness of the fact that such skills have become particularly important as a result of developments in IT that are making this shrinking world intensely competitive (e.g., MEXT, 2002, but see also Kubota, 2013). If so, I hope that such awareness at government level will influence English teachers so that a greater number of them will try activities that aim to improve their students' ability to write coherently, as suggested by the 2013 Course of Study, even though such skills may not be tested in university entrance exams in the near future.

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