

## Topic Prominence in Japanese EFL Students' Existential Constructions\*

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This paper investigates Japanese speakers' interlanguage constructions of English existential sentences with a locative sentential topic. Written sentences produced by four different levels of learners were compared. The investigation focuses on the following two issues: (1) the effect of learners' proficiency level on the degree of topic prominence in a relatively free writing task (Test 1) and (2) the effect of elicitation on production of target-like constructions (i.e., the subject-predicate structure) in a controlled writing task (Test 2). The results of Test 1 indicate that there was a general shift from topic-comment to subject-predicate structures as the students' proficiency increases. Interactions were also observed between the degree of topic-prominence and the location of the sentence in the students' writing tasks. The results of Test 2 suggest that although some students did not use the target-like structure in Test 1, this does not mean that they cannot use it under other conditions. The implications of these results are discussed.

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Recent research has noted topic prominence in interlanguage development, especially in its earlier stages. Based on Li and Thompson's (1976) topic-prominent versus subject-prominent typological framework, some researchers have attributed this phenomenon to transfer from the learner's first language. For example, in their now classic study, Schachter and Rutherford (1979) introduced what was later called "pseudo-passive" (Rutherford, 1983):

- 1a. ?Most of food which is served in such restaurant/have cooked already.
- 1b. ?Chiang's food/must make in the kitchen of the restaurant but Marty's food/could make in his house.  
(Schachter & Rutherford, 1979, p.7)

Such sentences are commonly seen in the English compositions of both Chinese and Japanese students. Schachter and Rutherford (1979) claim that these structures are not a malformation of passive sentences, as has been suggested by many ESL teachers, but are topic-comment constructions with omitted generic subjects (e.g., *they* or *one*). Noting that the canonical structures in both Chinese and Japanese have strong topic-prominent orientation,<sup>1</sup> Schachter and Rutherford hypothesized that these sentences are examples of typological transfer from first-language (L1) functions to second-language (L2) forms. In other words, learners with a topic-prominent L1 impose the pragmatic functions of the first language (i.e., the topic-comment structure) on the target language syntactic forms.

Rutherford (1983) subsequently investigated this phenomenon from a more dynamic perspective. By comparing the compositions of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean learners at different proficiency levels, he found that, as they progress, learners gradually move from topic-comment structures loosely organized by pragmatic word order toward target-like subject-predicate structures tightly organized by elaborate use of morphological devices:

- 2a. In my country man and woman chooses husband or wife Ø is very simple (Level 3)
  - 2b. Choose a good husband or wife, this is very important problem for everybody (Level 4)
  - 2c. ... choosing a husband and a wife is one of the essentials of life (Level 5)
- (Rutherford, 1983, p. 362)

Sentence 2a was produced by a student at the lowest proficiency level, and Sentence 2c by a student at the highest level. Rutherford observed that structures such as Sentence 2a, which rely heavily on the topic-comment order, are gradually reanalyzed into a tighter syntax with more interconnected use of grammatical devices (i.e., the gerund in this case) as the learners' proficiency level increases.

Similar phenomena have also been reported in case studies of those learning English in a natural setting. Heubner (1983) observed that the interlanguage of his adult subject (in his early 20s), through morphological syntacticization, progressed from the original topic-comment mode to the more target-like subject-predicate mode. Although the subject was not always successful in supplying morphemes in obligatory contexts, his interlanguage certainly became more target-like in terms of its functional structures.

In contrast, Sasaki's (1987) nine-year-old Japanese-speaking subject, Kazuko, made a drastic leap in both form and function during a 10-month observation period. Probably because of her age as well as the favorable circumstances under which she acquired the target language (e.g., Kazuko attended a local English-speaking elementary school), Kazuko quickly proceeded from her original "word-for-word translation-from-Japanese" type structures to more English-like subject-prominent structures. The following examples illustrate the development of complex subordinate constructions from paratactic coordinate constructions.

- 3a. Shoes is tiger give

┌───┐ ┌───┐  
topic comment

(The boy gave his shoes to the tiger)

- 3b. And then, Koji, my mother saw he is eating.

┌───┐ ┌───┐ ┌───┐  
topic subject topic  
└──────────┘  
predicate

(And then, my mother saw that Koji was eating)

- 3c. I was riding at that boat who man rode that

┌──────────┐ ┌───┐  
topic topic  
└──────────┘  
subject predicate

(I was riding that boat which the man rode)

- 3d. And then, I saw that it's dying.

┌───┐ ┌───┐  
subject topic  
└──────────┘  
predicate

(from Sasaki, 1987, p. 53–70)

Examples 3a–3d are ordered chronologically with 3a from one of the earliest observations (second month), and 3d from one of the latest (eighth month). In 3a, the copula *is* is used as a topic marker to signal the boundary between the topic and the comment whereas in 3c and 3d, the subject-predicate structures become primary, with the discourse topic retreating to secondary status.

The change from 3a to 3d shows that Kazuko's early interlanguage was strongly characterized by a topic-comment paratactic mode, and that it progressed toward a more syntacticized subject-predicate mode with the help of the morphological devices that make tighter subordination possible. Because Kazuko's first language has a topic-prominent orientation, some of her earlier productions exemplified in 3a can be explained as word-for-word translations from Japanese with the English word *is* functioning as does the topic marker *wa* in

Japanese. Thus, Sasaki (1987) speculated that one of the major reasons for the topic-prominence in Kazuko's earlier interlanguage was the influence of Japanese.

Fuller and Gundel (1987), on the other hand, have found that second-language learners, regardless of L1 background, produced more topic-comment structures in spoken narratives than did native English speakers. They collected 20 English (i.e., interlanguage) and 20 native oral narratives from speakers of both highly topic-comment languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) and relatively less topic-comment languages (e.g., Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish). They then analyzed these oral narratives, comparing them with five native English narratives, in terms of six different characteristics of topic-prominence (e.g., surface coding of topic, "double-subject" construction). A three-point implicational scaling was used to measure the topic-prominence of each narrative. Fuller and Gundel (1987) found that speakers of both less topic-prominent languages and more topic-prominent languages produced more topic-comment structures in their interlanguage narratives than did English native speakers.

More quantitative measures were applied in Duff's (1988) cross-sectional study. Using six topic-prominence criteria, she analyzed the results of three different writing tasks (i.e., two free compositions and one translation) produced by 608 Chinese middle-school students (first to sixth graders). Apart from a slight practice-effect in the production of the dummy subject *there* for those in the lowest grades, who had just finished studying the target structure, she found a general progression from less syntacticized topic-prominence to more syntacticized subject-prominence as the students' grade level increased.

Although the relationship between the students' grade and their proficiency level is not clear (e.g., the fifth graders were not necessarily more proficient than were the fourth graders), Duff's (1988) study is among the few that have attempted to capture the phenomena more objectively. In spite of their insightful findings, most of the studies described above

have been observational in nature, focusing mainly on qualitative aspects of the phenomenon. Because the environment in which the data were produced is often uncontrolled, it is difficult to determine which word really represented the topic of the discourse.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between the subjects' use of topic-prominent structures and their knowledge of the target-like subject-prominent structures is not clear in these studies. The subjects may not use subject-prominent constructions (e.g., the dummy subject *there* in existentials) because they simply do not know them. Or they may not use them because the knowledge has not yet become *automatized*, even though they possess the knowledge itself (cf. Bialystok, 1978, 1988; McLaughlin, 1987). They might be able to produce the target-like structures if these structures are elicited under appropriate conditions. Finally, subjects in these studies, with the exception of Duff (1988), were (mostly advanced) English as a second language (ESL) students living in English-speaking countries. For comparative purposes, it is important to collect more data on the performance of English as a foreign language (EFL) students learning English through formal instruction.

Thus, the present study adopts a quantitative approach to investigate topic-prominence in two controlled tasks performed by a relatively large number of Japanese EFL students: the first task (Test 1) tests the students' "automatic" performance; the second task (Test 2) tests the students' "nonautomatic" but usable knowledge. Only one kind of construction (i.e., existential sentences with a locative topic) is investigated so that the degree of topic-prominence can be measured on a standardized basis.

## TARGET STRUCTURE

An existential sentence with a locative topic was selected as the target structure for analysis in the present study. Before stating the reason for choosing the target structure, however,

the concept of *topic* should be defined. It is sometimes difficult to determine which word represents the major discourse topic of a sentence. This problem is related to the difficulty of defining the elusive nature of topic. Several researchers (e.g., Chafe, 1976, 1980, 1987; Gundel, 1977, 1978; Givón, 1979) have attempted to delineate the characteristics and nature of topic inside and outside the framework introduced by Li and Thompson (1976), but there is no widely accepted definition. In the present study, the definition from Chafe (1976), namely, "the frame within which the sentence holds" (p. 51) is adopted as the definition of topic for two reasons: (1) the definition has proved to be useful for many discourse analysis studies (e.g., the "pear stories" studies in Chafe, 1980) and (2) the idea of temporal, spatial or psychological *frame* is more comprehensive and, consequently, more suitable for explaining the topicality of existential sentence locatives than are other definitions of topic such as *givenness* (Gundel, 1978), *aboutness* (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1979), or *activatedness* (Chafe, 1987).

In many cases, both subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages have a similar word order for realizing an underlying proposition. This is particularly true when the subject of a sentence happens to be the topic of the sentence:

4. Hilary is a dancer.

subject	predicate

topic	comment

(subject=topic)

(Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 296)

In contrast, when the locative of an existential sentence becomes topicalized, the realized surface structure may differ radically between a topic-prominent language and a subject-prominent language. In Japanese, for example, the most natural word order of an existential sentence with a topicalized locative is "Locative (=topic)+Comment (=the rest of the sentence including the existential verb)" as in the example from Kuno (1971, p. 350) in which *tm*=topic-marker and *sm*=subject-marker.

The purpose of the present study is twofold. First, it inves-



tigates the effect of EFL learners' proficiency level on the degree of topic-prominence in their production of existential sentences with a locative topic, in a relatively free, but focused writing task. Second, it examines whether the subjects who produce topic-prominent constructions can actually produce the target-like structures if these structures are directly elicited in a highly controlled writing task. Two tests were conducted to answer the following questions: (1) Do Japanese EFL learners at different proficiency levels produce typologically different existential structures with a locative topic? and (2) Can Japanese EFL learners who use topic-prominent constructions produce target-like subject-prominent constructions if these constructions are directly elicited?

## METHODS

### SUBJECTS

Japanese high-school graduates ( $N=296$ ) with at least six years of EFL experience participated in this study. They were enrolled in a private preparatory institution to prepare for university entrance examinations.

The subjects were divided into four levels according to their average scores on three standardized English proficiency tests<sup>4</sup> administered during the first semester of 1987 (April to August). Level 1 ( $n=55$ ) consisted of students whose average scores fell more than one standard deviation below the mean. Level 2 ( $n=95$ ) included students whose average scores fell between the mean and one standard deviation below the mean. Level 3 ( $n=86$ ) consisted of students whose average score fell between the mean and one standard deviation above the mean. Level 4 ( $n=60$ ) contained students with average scores greater than one standard deviation above the mean.

## PROCEDURE

Two tests were given to the subjects in July 1987. Test 1 attempted to answer the first research question (Do Japanese EFL learners at different proficiency levels produce typologically different existential structures with a locative topic?) and Test 2, the second research question (Can Japanese EFL learners who use topic-prominent constructions produce target-like subject-prominent constructions if these constructions are directly elicited?). Prior to the administration of these tests, a pilot study was conducted with a smaller number of students ( $n=63$ ) in a similar private preparatory school. The results of the pilot study were taken into consideration when the tests were revised.

## TEST 1

In Test 1, a relatively unstructured writing task was designed to elicit existential sentences with a locative as its topic (in the sense of a spatial "frame" set for the sentence). A situation was established in which "Taro's school" (Taro is a name for a Japanese boy)—a place—was the most likely topic for the subjects' sentences. The subjects were first asked to read the Japanese instructions, and consult a table and a drawing that provided background information about Taro's school. (See Appendix.)

The subjects were then requested to write, in 10 minutes, as many sentences as possible about Taro's school based on the table and drawing. The instructions were written in such a way as to keep the students from carefully "monitoring" their writing (i.e., they were told that the number of sentences they could write was the single most important thing). The table and drawing were given to provoke existential propositions in the subjects' writing. All facts presented in the table were written in phrases rather than sentences (e.g., students: 27 *nin* [*nin* is a Japanese counter for persons.]). This was to avoid

cases in which presentation of propositions translated into Japanese sentences might influence the subjects' sentence formation in the target language.

Furthermore, based on the results of the pilot study, four additional instructions were given to the students. First, subjects were told to use *Taro's school* at least once in each sentence so that the researcher could easily locate the topic (i.e., *Taro's school*). Secondly, subjects were instructed not to use a pronoun for the topic, *Taro's school*, to avoid its superficial resemblance to nonreferential *it*, which Japanese speakers typically use as an introducer of new topics. For example, Takashima & Girard (1981) reported that their subject, Fumiko, frequently produced the nonreferential *it* followed by the copula *is* when she introduced a new topic, as exemplified in the following example.

7. I know, it's a I, I am, ah, very ah, popular.

Because it was difficult to distinguish between this kind of introducer *it* and the pronoun *it* for *Taro's school* in the pilot study data, this additional instruction was provided. Thirdly, subjects were told to think that each sentence was independent of all others. Such an unnatural condition was designed to elicit as many *introducer* type sentences with a locative topic as possible. Finally, subjects were informed that they could use the same sentence structure as many times as they wanted. This allowed them to use sentences they felt most comfortable with, instead of sentences they felt forced to use for the sake of adding variety to their production. Information provoking other types of propositions (e.g., the motto of *Taro's school*, students' uniforms) was also given in the table to hide the researcher's true intention.

The table and drawing presented 15 possible propositions from which the students could form existential sentences. The logical expression for some of these propositions follow:

$\exists$  27 students  $_x$  (  $x$  is in *Taro's school* )  
 $\exists$  15 boys  $_x$  (  $x$  is in *Taro's school* )

- ∃ 8 teachers <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)
- ∃ 2 female teachers <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)
- ∃ 5 classrooms <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)
- ∃ 1 library <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)

(Note: ∃ represents the existential quantifier.)

## TEST 2

Test 2 was administered immediately after Test 1. It was designed to determine whether the students who produced topic-comment type constructions in Test 1 could really produce the target-like subject-predicate structures if the latter were elicited directly. The possible subject-predicate structures in the situation provided in Test 1 (i.e., existential sentences with the dummy subject *there*) are usually taught in the first year of EFL instruction in Japan (cf. Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1983). Given that the subjects of this study had received six or more years of English instruction (at least three hours a week), they must have received some input with regard to these structures in the English classroom. If some of the subjects failed to use these structures in Test 1, it is not clear whether they never learned the structures despite their supposedly long exposure to them, or whether they simply did not use them under such writing conditions.

To answer these questions, a simple method was used to elicit the subjects' production of "there is/are . . ." structures. Test 2 consisted of only two items. (Item 1 is shown as Example 8a; Item 2 as 8b.) In these items, two Japanese existential sentences were given. Each of these had equivalent English sentences with two blanks. In the instructions, the students were told to fill in the blanks in the English sentences so that the sentences would match the given Japanese translation (for the readers' convenience, Romanized Japanese is given here along with an English gloss; once again *sm*=subject marker and *tm*=topic marker):

- 8a. Teiburu no ue ni takusan no ringo ga arimasu  
 Table of top on many apples *sm* exist  
 ( ) ( ) a lot of apples on the tables.
- 8b. Kono machi ni wa gonin no isha ga imasu  
 This town in *tm* five of doctors *sm* exist.  
 ( ) ( ) five doctors in this town.

The situation was set so that the students had only to provide the two missing words in each sentence (i.e., *there* and *are*). The existential verbs *is/are* in English are translated differently in Japanese according to the animacy of the logical subject in the sentence. Consequently, two sentences, one with an animate subject and one with an inanimate subject, were presented (the inanimate *apples* in 8a require *arimasu* whereas the animate *doctors* in 8b require *imasu*) to control any possible influence of the translation on the subjects' responses.

## RESULTS

### RESULTS OF TEST 1

Following the instructions of Test 1, the students wrote an average of 7.5 complete clauses (range=1 to 20,  $\sigma=3.3$ ). However, because most students at the lower levels wrote fewer than five clauses, and because the propositions they wrote on often did not overlap across all sentences, there were only a few common propositions on which most students wrote. To compare relatively representative production samples from each proficiency level, this study analyzed three propositions (616 clauses) for which more than half of the students at each level responded.

Proposition	No. of Clauses
1 $\exists$ 27 students <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)	209
2 $\exists$ 8 teachers <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)	187
3 $\exists$ 5 classrooms <sub>x</sub> ( x is in Taro's school)	<u>220</u>
	616

Considering the differences between topic-comment languages and subject-predicate languages discussed in the target language section, three relevant properties of topic-comment languages proposed by Li and Thompson (1976) were used for classifying the results.

1. *Surface coding*: Topic-prominent languages invariably have some kind of identifiable surface coding for the topic (e.g., position in the sentence, use of topic markers), but not necessarily for the subject.
2. *Dummy subject*: Topic-prominent languages do not possess *dummy* or *empty* subjects, such as the English *it* and *there*, or the French *il* and *ce*. They may be found in subject-prominent languages, and the existence of a dummy subject may move the sentential topic toward the end of the sentence as seen in the following English existential sentence with a dummy subject *there*:

9. There are twenty-seven students in Taro's school.

3. *Double subject*: Topic-prominent languages may have extensive use of so-called *double-subject* constructions, as exemplified in the Japanese sentence below:

10. Sakana wa tai ga oishii  
Fish, *tm* red snapper *sm* delicious  
(As for fish, red snapper is delicious.)

(Li & Thompson, 1976, pp. 466–469)

The sentences produced by the students were categorized into nine types.

1. *Topic-Comment type* (T-type): This type has a typical topic-comment structure with the topic locative in the sentence-initial position. It is not grammatical in English.
  - 11a. Taro's school is twenty seven students.
  - 11b. Taro's school students are twenty seven.
  - 11c. In Taro's school students are twenty seven.

The word order of the most common variation, 11a, is similar to 5a, which is a typical Japanese existential sentence with a locative topic. Example 5a is repeated here.

- 5a. Teiburu no ue ni wa nisatsu no hon ga aru  
 On the table *tm* two books *sm* exist.  
 (There are two books on the table.)

The word order of the other variations, 11b and 11c, is similar to 5b, another typical Japanese sentence with a locative topic. Example 5b is repeated here.

- 5b. Teiburu no ue ni wa hon ga nisatsu aru  
 On the table *tm* book *sm* two exist  
 (There are two books on the table.)

Unlike 11a, 11b and 11c have a double subject construction.

2. *"Have" type* (H-type): This type still maintains the word-order of the topic-comment structure, but is grammatical in the target language.

12a. Taro's school has 27 students.

12b. Taro's school consists of twenty seven-students.

3. *Topic+"Have" type* (TH-type): This category has both T-type and H-type features, but is not grammatical in English.

13. Taro's school has student in (sic) twenty seven.

4. *"The number of" type* (O-type): The central concern in this type of sentence appears to be the number of the things that exist. The locative topic moves leftward to the middle or to the end of the sentence. It can be grammatical as shown in 14a, or it can be ungrammatical as in 14b, 14c, and 14d:

14a. The number of the teachers in Taro's school is eight.

14b. Students of Taro's school is 27.

14c. Member of Taro's school is 27.

14d. The student are twenty seven men in Taro's school.

Although this type has not been analyzed as an existential sentence in past research (cf. Rutherford, 1983; Duff, 1988), it was included in this study because of its similarity to T-type constructions (see also Note 3 of the present study).

5. *Subject-Predicate structure without "there" type* (S-type): In this type of sentence, the topic of the locative moves to the end of the sentence, and the content of existence becomes the subject. Because the logical subject (e.g., 27 students) is introduced as new information, it is more common to use the dummy subject *there* (cf. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983), but the sentence is grammatical in English.
  15. Twenty seven students are in Taro's school.
6. *"It has" type* (I-type): This category has the dummy subject *it* in sentence-initial position, and the topic sentence-finally. The pronoun *it* in this construction is not exactly an equivalent of the nonreferential introducer *it* reported in Takashima & Girard (1981) because *it* is not followed by the copula *is*. This type of sentence is considered to be closer to the subject-predicate structure than are the above five types because of the existence of the dummy subject and the non-topic-comment word order. However, the sentence is not grammatical in English.
  16. It has twenty seven students in Taro's school.
7. *Existential "there" type* (E-type): This is the most typical existential sentence in English, with the dummy subject *there* in the sentence-initial position. It is grammatical and is reported to be used most often as an introducer in English (e.g., Lightbown, 1982; Chafe, 1987).
  17. There are twenty seven students in Taro's school.
8. *Topic-comment with "there" type* (ET-type): This type has the dummy *there* and a copula in the sentence-initial position just like an E-type sentence. However, the word order after *there is* is a typical topic-comment one.
  18. There is Taro's school homeroom (=classroom) in [sic] five.  
(There are five classrooms in Taro's school)



9. *"There"+Have type* (EH-type): This type has both E-type and H-type features resulting in a *double-subject* construction. This construction does not conform to standard English grammar.

19. There is Taro's school has 8 teachers.

The ratio of each type in the analyzed data is presented in Table 1, which indicates that the T-type (n=57), the H-type (n=267), the O-type (n=76) and the E-type (n=202) are the four major categories used by the subjects.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the percentages of the nine types for each of the four proficiency levels for Propositions 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Similar trends are seen in all figures. The topic-comment type (T-type), used by almost one-third of Level 1 (i.e., the lowest level), decreases dramatically as the proficiency level increases. The other types having a topic-comment orientation such as the TH-type and the ET-type are mainly found in the two lowest levels. In contrast, the E-type structure gradually increases from Level 1 to Level 4 (i.e., the highest level). The percentages of H- and O-type structures are fairly constant, showing similar percentages across levels. In general, as the proficiency level increases, the number of students using topic-prominent (and ungrammatical) types decreases, whereas the subject-prominent "existential there" type increases.

The chi-square analysis for the four major categories (i.e., the T-, H-, O-, and E- types) showed that the differences across levels for all three propositions were significant ( $\chi^2=47.3$ ,  $df=9$ ;  $p<.001$  for Proposition 1,  $\chi^2=45.1$ ,  $df=9$ ;  $p<.001$  for Proposition 2,  $\chi^2=23.0$ ,  $df=9$ ;  $p<.01$  for Proposition 3). Greater contributions came from the differences between the observed frequencies and the expected frequencies in the T-type cell and the E-type cell both at the lowest and at the highest level in the chi-square tables. This indicates that the percentage of the T-type is higher at the lowest proficiency level, and lower at the highest levels, and that the percentage of the E-type is lower at

*Table 1*  
*Percentages of Responses for Propositions 1, 2, & 3*

Type	Proposition 1		Proposition 2		Proposition 3		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
T	19	9.1	18	9.6	20	9.1	57	9.3
TH	1	0.5	2	1.1	1	0.5	4	0.6
H	85	40.6	74	39.7	108	49.0	267	43.4
O	36	17.2	27	14.4	13	5.9	76	12.3
S	1	0.5	1	0.5	0	0.0	2	0.3
I	2	1.0	2	1.1	1	0.5	5	0.8
ET	1	0.5	0	0.0	1	0.5	2	0.3
EH	0	0.0	1	0.5	0	0.0	1	0.2
E	64	30.6	62	33.2	76	34.5	202	32.8
Total	209	100.0	187	100.0	220	100.0	616	100.0

T=Topic-Comment; TH=Topic+"Have"; H="Have"; O="The number of";

S=Subject-Predicate structure without "there"; I="It has";

ET=Topic-comment with "there"; EH="There"+Have; E=Existential "there"

the lowest level, and higher at the highest level. Thus, the null hypothesis for the first research question, Do the Japanese EFL learners at different proficiency levels produce typologically different existential structures? can be rejected. The type of existential sentence structures used by these learners does vary according to the learners' proficiency level in the target language.

It is noteworthy, however, that the ratio of each type of structure in each level for one proposition is slightly different from that of the equivalent level for another proposition. The greatest differences lie between Figures 1 and 2 (Figure 1 for Proposition 1; Figure 2 for Proposition 2), and Figure 3 (for Proposition 3). In Figure 3, about 20% of the students at the lowest proficiency level used the E-type whereas fewer than 6% of the students at the same levels in Figures 1 and 2 used the E-type. In contrast, the students at the highest level in Figure 3 used more H-type constructions and fewer E-type construc-

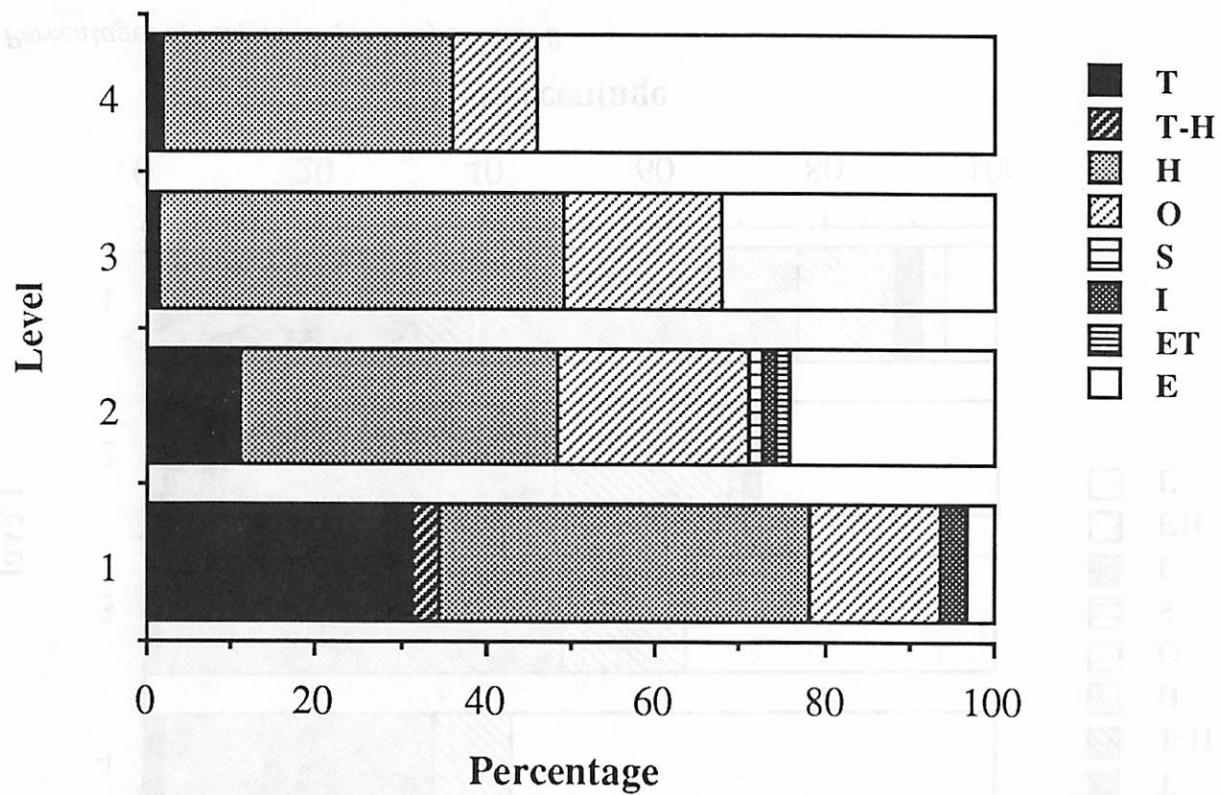


Figure 1. Percentages of responses for Proposition 1

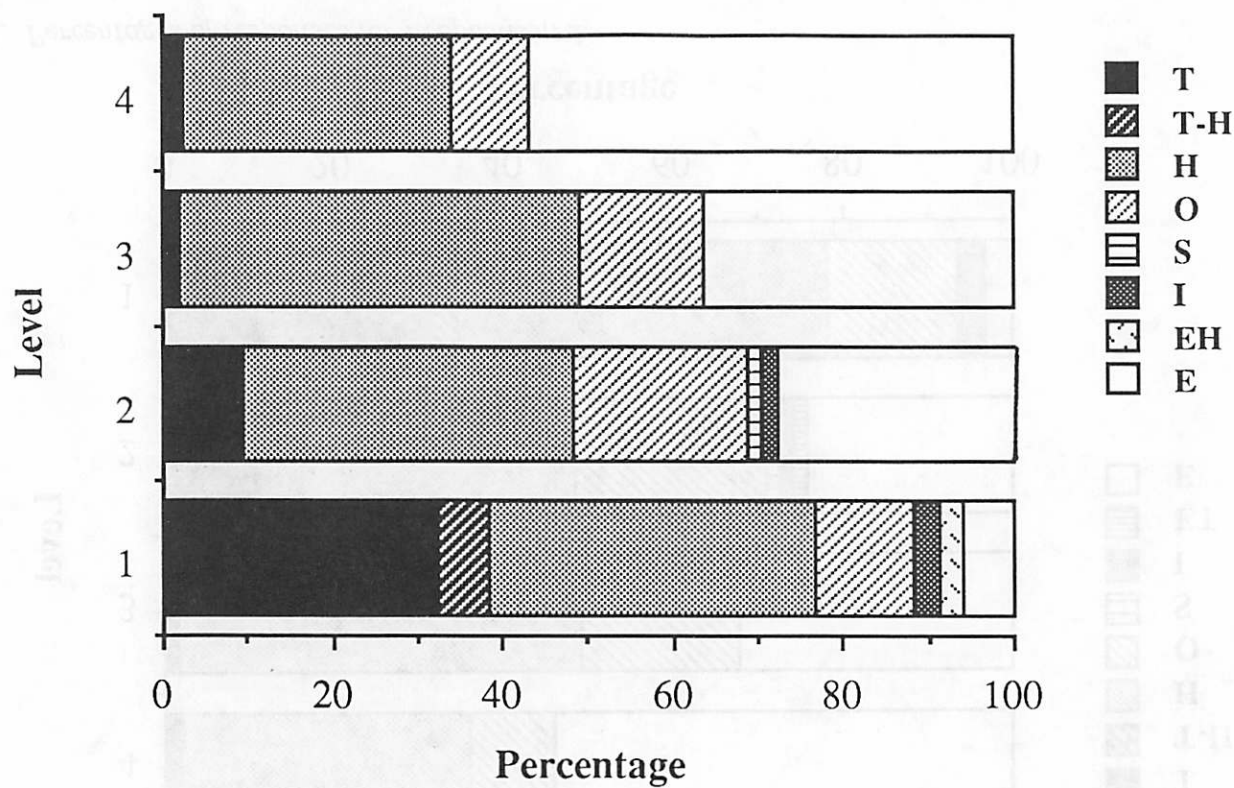


Figure 2. Percentages of responses for Proposition 2

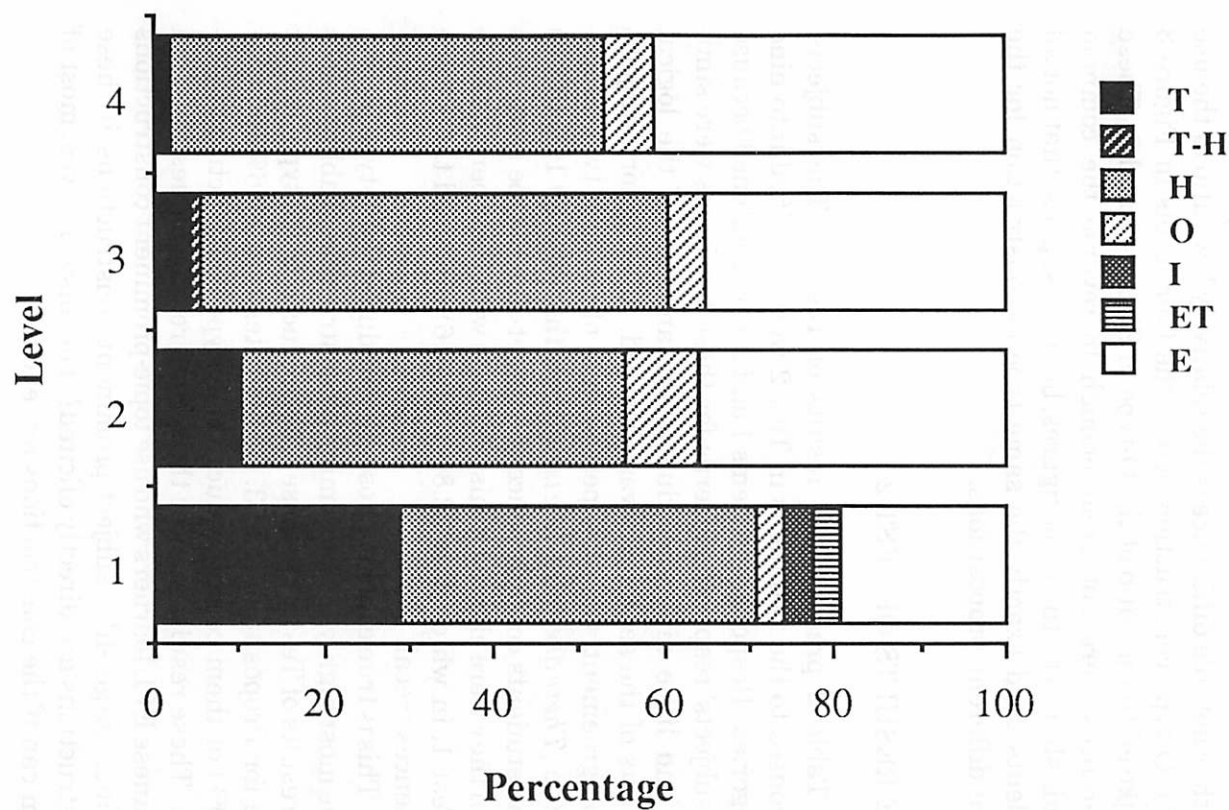


Figure 3. Percentages of responses for Proposition 3

tions than did those at the same levels in Figures 1 and 2. Another notable difference is the relatively low ratio in the use of the O-type construction across the four levels in Figure 3 compared to the ratio of the O-type in Figures 1 and 2. These differences were not great enough to reverse the common trends shared by the three figures, but they suggest that not all students used exactly the same type of construction for the three different propositions.

## THE RESULTS OF TEST 2

Table 2 presents the results of Test 2. The subjects' responses to the two items in Test 2 were classified into nine categories. Responses to Items 1 and 2 were combined because the subjects' response patterns for these two items were similar, and little difference due to the animacy of the logical subjects of the sentences was observed. If we ignore subject-verb agreement, the total percentages of the first two categories (i.e., *There are* and *There is*) indicate that 86% (69.1%+16.9%) of the students could produce the target-like E-type sentences when they were elicited. This contrasts with their performance in Test 1, in which only 32.8% (202/616) produced the E-type sentences (recall Table 1).

This is true even for those who produced the T-type in Test 1, the most highly topic-prominent construction. Table 3 shows the results of Test 2 for those who produced the T-type at least once for Propositions 1 to 3. It indicates that 80.6% (55.6%+25.0%) of them could produce the E-type construction if elicited. These results answer the second research question, Can Japanese EFL learners who use topic-prominent constructions produce target-like subject-prominent constructions if these constructions are directly elicited? The answer is yes, most of them can if the constructions are elicited.

*Table 2*  
*Percentages of Responses for Test 2*

Response	Items 1 and 2 Combined	
	Number	Percentage
There are	409	69.1
There is	100	16.9
We have	27	4.6
It is	12	2.0
Here are	9	1.5
There live	7	1.2
It has	7	1.2
Others	9	1.5
Blank	12	2.0
Total	592	100.0

*Table 3*  
*Percentages of Responses for Test 2*  
*of Those Who Used T-Type in Test 1*

Response	Items 1 and 2 Combined	
	Number	Percentage
There are	40	55.6
There is	18	25.0
We have	2	2.8
Others	7	9.7
Blank	5	6.9
Total	72	100.0

## DISCUSSION

The results of Test 1 show that there is a general shift in use of topic-prominent to subject-prominent structures as the students' proficiency level increases. The results of Test 2 indicate that although the students did not use the E-type

construction, it does not mean they could not produce it. These findings can be interpreted from several different perspectives.

First, despite the general change in use from topic-prominent to subject-prominent structures, there are slight differences in the ratio of some types of constructions between the sentences produced for Propositions 1 and 2, and those produced for Proposition 3 in Test 1. That is, lower-level students (i.e., Levels 1 and 2) used more E-type constructions for Proposition 3 than they did for Propositions 1 and 2; higher-level students (i.e., Levels 3 and 4) used more H-type structures and fewer E- and O-type structures for Proposition 3 than they did for Propositions 1 and 2. This, of course, does not mean that all the students who wrote one structure for Propositions 1 and 2, wrote another for Proposition 3. The total number of students who wrote for each proposition is different, with only partial overlap. However, a total of 60 students switched between Propositions 1 and 2, and Proposition 3. Presented below are the typical cases of such switching with representative examples.

Switch from E-type to H-type by higher-level students,  $n=16$

Proposition	Type
1 There are twenty-seven students in Taro's school	E
2 There are eight teachers in Taro's school	E
3 Taro's school has five classrooms	H

Switch from T-type to E-type by lower-level students,  $n=4$

Proposition	Type
1 Taro's school student is twenty seven	T
2 Taro's school teacher is eight	T
3 There are 5 room in Taro's school	E

Switch from O- to E- or H-type by all levels of students,  $n=12$

Proposition	Type
1 The number of Taro's school students are 27	O
2 The number of Taro's school teachers are 8	O
3 There are five crassrooms [ <i>sic</i> ] in Taro's school	E
or Taro's school has 5 classrooms	H



These differences might be related to the relative location of these sentences in the students' writing tasks. Because the students' responses tended to follow the order of the presented facts in the given table, sentences for Proposition 1 and 2 were written in earlier parts of the students' compositions whereas those for Proposition 3 were located in relatively later parts (i.e., Proposition 1 was presented in the second row, Proposition 2 in the third, but Proposition 3 in the sixth row of the table). Although they were instructed to treat each sentence they wrote independently, some of them may have treated their earlier sentences as a kind of "introducer" in an "equi-topic chain" (Givón, 1983), and the sentences they wrote later as "chain medial" or "chain final" sentences.

Lightbown (1982) noted that *there* existential sentences are often used as an introducer by English-speaking children; similar findings have been reported for adults' spoken narratives (Chafe, 1987, p. 37). This may also be true with the higher-level students in this study. It is possible that they used the E-type construction (i.e., *there* existential sentences) for the earlier sentences as introducers, and once the topic (i.e., Taro's school) was considered to have been established, they switched to the H-type construction, which often focuses more clearly upon the topic than does the E-type sentence (Ed Keenan, personal communication, June, 1989).

The lower-level students, on the other hand, may have assumed that the T-type construction is most appropriate as an introducer, whereas the E-type functions as a chain-medial or chain-final sentence in the already established equi-topic discourse chain. Givón (1983) proposed a universal tendency whereby topic-comment constructions tend to be located chain-initially, and comment-topic construction chain-finally in spoken narratives. Because the topic is located at the end of the sentence in the E-type construction, it could be regarded as a kind of functional "comment-topic" type of sentence. Thus, the lower-level students' switching from the T-type to the E-type construction can be explained in this context: they used the T-

type as a new-topic introducer because of its topic-comment structure, and they used the E-type as a chain-medial or a chain-final sentence because of its comment-topic structure. In other words, they followed what Givón (1983, 1984) proposes as a universal tendency of topic continuity rather than using the introducer *there* specific for English.

Finally, fewer students at any level used the O-type for Proposition 3 than for Propositions 1 and 2. Because the word order of the O-type constructions can be classified as intermediate between topic-comment and subject-predicate, students at any level might have thought that it was not appropriate as a chain-medial or chain-final sentence.

That some of the lower-level students (although the number is small) who used the T-type for Propositions 1 and 2, used the E-type for Proposition 3 confirms the results of Test 2. That is, most of the students who used other types of constructions in Test 1 (especially the ungrammatical topic-prominent constructions) could produce the E-type constructions under Test 2 conditions. They did not use the E-type, either because they chose not to, or because it did not occur to them. The former reason is related to the topic continuity system in their interlanguage, and the latter to the concept of automaticity (cf. Bialystok, 1978, 1988; McLaughlin, 1987). When they switched from the T-type or H-type to the E-type, the students may have chosen not to use the E-type for earlier sentences so as to follow their own interlanguage rules of topic-continuity. When they continued to use only one topic-comment type in Test 1, they may not have used the E-type because it had not yet been automatically accessed (Bialystok, 1988). In these students' interlanguage representation, the topic-comment structure must be automatic whereas the target-like subject-predicate structure may be nonautomatic.<sup>5</sup> Under less-controlled conditions as in Test 1, the use of the topic-comment structure is so automatic that the students do not even "think" of using other types of constructions. However, the subject-predicate counterpart has also been stored as part of their English proficiency.

This knowledge is accessed and used when it is elicited under appropriate conditions such as in Test 2.

## CONCLUSION

The results of Test 1 demonstrated that for these Japanese EFL learners, there is a general change from the use of topic-prominent to subject-prominent structures as their proficiency level increases. This finding supports previous conclusions that interlanguage production, especially at earlier stages, is characterized by topic-prominence. On the other hand, the results of Test 1 have also suggested that the learners may switch structures they use according to their view of topic continuity in the discourse. In this study, some subjects switched from topic-prominent to subject-prominent, or from subject-prominent to topic-prominent, even though they were instructed to treat each sentence independently. When dealing with more coherent discourse data (i.e., beyond the sentence-level), we might have to be even more careful about the relationship between the type of sentences the learners produce and their locations in the discourse. The results may differ depending upon where the structure is found.

The results of Test 2 show that just because students with lower proficiency did not use the target-like subject-prominent structures, it does not mean that they could not use them. In fact, most of them could if these structures were directly elicited. The existential structure *There is(are)* is usually taught in the first or second year of EFL instruction in Japan. The structure is generally regarded as "basic" in the EFL curricula. Nevertheless, lower-proficiency students found it difficult to produce this construction under Test-1 conditions because it contradicts the canonical representations in their interlanguage. That there are some structures which seem superficially basic but are actually difficult in terms of acquiring automaticity, bears important implications for teaching

English in an EFL setting. The teachers cannot assume that their students have "acquired" a target structure just because they can successfully supply correct forms in Test 2-type grammar tasks. The students may use nontarget-like structures in less-controlled tasks such as Test 1. Moreover, they may have a nontarget-like view of topic-continuity in using the target structure. Further opportunities to use these structures in different types of tasks are necessary for the students to achieve true automatic control.

Because there were no other language groups used in this study, it is difficult to be certain of possible causes for the topic-prominence in the data. The students' production of topic-prominent constructions may be evidence of a universal stage of language acquisition (Givón, 1984), or it may simply be evidence of straightforward transfer from the first language. This issue cannot be resolved until similar structures are investigated across various languages. In particular, attention should be directed towards subject-predicate first languages to find evidence that does or does not support the proposed universal stage of topic-prominence in interlanguage.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Although Schachter and Rutherford (1978) note that Japanese was classified as both topic-prominent and subject-prominent by Li and Thompson (1979), they reported that Japanese produced sentences such as 1 because of the topic-prominent characteristic of Japanese.

<sup>2</sup>Givón (1983) points out that it is possible for a sentence to have more than one topic. For example, there can be four NPs providing old-information in the following sentence, each is therefore, topical.

As for **Joe**, **he** gave **that one** to **Mary**

<sup>3</sup>There are two other types of existential sentences that English speakers are likely to produce:

i. This university has 6,000 students.

ii. The number of the students of this university is 6,000.

The verb *have* in Example i is called *existential have*, and such sentences have been accepted as an existential sentence by some linguists. This type of sentence sometimes has clearer focus on the locative topic because its order follows the topic-comment structure (Ed Keenan, personal communication,

June, 1989). In contrast, sentences such as Example *ii* are not generally regarded as existential sentences because they focus on quantity rather than on existence itself. Nevertheless, sentences similar to Example *ii* were included in this study because they are "logically equivalent to existential sentences" (Ed Keenan, personal communication, June, 1989), and comparable to the topic-comment type sentences commonly observed in the compositions of lower-level students.

<sup>4</sup> The definition of a standardized test here follows Henning (1987). The tests were "administered to a large group of examinees" (more than 1,400 students), and the results were "analyzed and normed for use with other samples from that population" (p. 197). These tests were part of the 1987 YMCA Comprehensive Practice Tests for Entrance Examinations and consisted of several subparts: grammar, reading comprehension, pronunciation, usage, vocabulary, sentence construction, and translation. The full score on the English part was 200 for all administrations.

<sup>5</sup> Bialystok (1988) suggests that formal learners of a second language are typical examples of those who possess the "analyzed and non-automatic" competence.

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## APPENDIX

### THE CHART AND DRAWING FOR TEST 1 WITH THE INSTRUCTIONS

(The chart and instructions were originally written in Japanese. They were translated for the readers' convenience.)

The following table presents facts about Taro's junior high school. Taro's school is in a small village that is surrounded by mountains. Based upon this table and the drawing provided below, write as many sentences about Taro's school as you can on the next page. Spend no more than 10 minutes on this task. Assume each sentence you write is not related to any other sentence (i.e., as if each sentence were independent of the others), and use the phrase *Taro's school* at least once in every sentence you write. Do not use a pronoun (e.g., *it*) for *Taro's school*. You need not follow the order of facts presented in the table. You may skip any facts about Taro's school you cannot write about. You may use the same sentence structure as many times as you like. The number of sentences you can produce is the single most important consideration in this task. Feel free to tear off this page and put it beside the one you are writing on.

Table A-1  
Taro's School

Year Founded	1886
Students	27 nin* (boys: 15 nin*; girls: 12 nin*)
Teachers	8 nin* (male teachers: 6 nin* female teachers: 2 nin*)
School Motto	Independence and Friendship
School Building	1 building, wooden, two stories
Classrooms	5
School Facilities	1 library; 1 swimming pool; 1 field
Extracurricular Activities	a baseball club a tennis club an English club a brass band
School Uniforms	summer: boys: white shirt, navy-blue trousers girls: white shirt, navy-blue skirt winter: boys: black jacket girls: navy-blue jacket

\*nin is a Japanese counter for persons.

