

The Clause Structures the Higher-year Students of TMCIT Should Acquire: A Proposal for the Teaching Materials for the Third and Fourth Years

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Abstract

This study discusses what the teaching materials in the third and fourth years should be like with consideration for the goal for the fifth-year students. The main goal of the fifth-year students is the ability to write the abstract of their graduation thesis in English.

The results of the three surveys in this study show that neither TOEIC textbooks nor MEXT textbooks offer the sentence structures often used in technical writing. Without the knowledge of those patterns, their writings will consist only of single-clause sentences, which makes their writing look awkward as the abstract of a graduation thesis. Before moving on to the fifth year, the students need to acquire those structures and patterns for technical writing.

Each instructor, therefore, should provide the students with a wide variety of sentence structures, especially clause-combination patterns used in technical writing, in the teaching materials for the third and the fourth years, carefully checking and analyzing the deviation of the sentences used in the materials. In many cases, it will be required to use different copies from different passages in the fields of science and/or technology in order to meet the technical students' needs.

Keywords: technical writing, teaching material, clause-combination patterns, participial construction

1. Introduction

The main goal of the English teaching for the fifth-year students of the Tokyo Metropolitan College of Industrial Technology (hereafter abbreviated as TMCIT) is to have them acquire the ability to write the abstract of their graduation thesis in English. The present study is intended to help achieve that goal. For that purpose, this study proposes what the teaching materials in the third and fourth years should be like with consideration for the goal for the fifth-year students.

Most researches on writing instructions (e.g. Komuro ed. 2001[5], Tanaka et al. 2007[6]), and most writing textbooks in general (e.g. Strunk and White 1999[2], Zinsser 2016[3]) mainly discuss the process, the rules, and the styles of good writings. Most technical writing textbooks (e.g. Nakayama 2009[7], Kataoka 2016[4]) describe the characteristic features of technical writing with single-clause sentences in mind and the formats (paragraphs and chapters) of technical passages. All those elements are important in the instruction of writing for the higher-year students of TMCIT. However, there exist some more basic elements that they should acquire before the above, which are clause-combination patterns. Without the

knowledge on those patterns, their writings will consist only of single-clause sentences, which makes their writing look awkward as the abstract of a graduation thesis.

The research questions here are, (1) what kinds of clause-combination patterns the fifth-year students should be able to use in their writings, and (2) what kinds of teaching materials are appropriate for the third and fourth-year students before they start to practice writing in the fifth year.

2. Method

Three surveys were made to analyze the sentence structures, mainly the clause-combination patterns, in (A) technical articles (research papers and science magazines), (B) TOEIC textbooks for college students, and (C) MEXT textbooks for high school students (These three groups hereafter will be referred to as Groups A, B, and C). The target structures of the surveys were as follows.

Table 1 Types of Sentence Structures

A1: Basic single-clause sentences (ex) <u>John studies</u> engineering.
A2: Single-clause sentences with "There" + verb to BE (ex) <u>There is</u> no problem.

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B: Compound sentences (two clauses simply put together) (ex) John studies engineering <u>and</u> his brother studies literature.
C: Sentences with a subordinate “that-”clause which expresses the contents of the main predicate (ex) I know <u>that John is a hard worker.</u>
D1: Sentences with an interrogative clause in the subject position (ex) <u>What you did for me</u> was very important.
D2: Sentences with an interrogative clause in the object position (ex) Do you remember <u>what you did for me?</u>
E1: Sentences with an appositive “that-”clause in the subject position (ex) <u>The news that</u> John passed the test came as no surprise.
E2: Sentences with an appositive “that-”clause in the object position (ex) I have just heard <u>the news that</u> John passed the test.
F1: Sentences with a relative clause in the subject position (ex) The lab <u>where my brother works</u> is near here.
F2: Sentences with a relative clause in the object position (ex) I don’t know the lab <u>where my brother works.</u>
G1: Complex sentences with the subordinate clause before the main clause (ex) <u>When the door bell rang,</u> John stopped reading.
G2: Complex sentences with the subordinate clause after the main clause (ex) John stopped reading <u>when the door bell rang.</u>
H: Sentences with the formal subject “It” and a “that-”clause as the real subject (ex) <u>It</u> was amazing <u>that</u> John passed the test.
I: Cleft sentences (ex) <u>It</u> was John <u>that</u> repaired the TV.
J1: Sentences with a participle clause before the main clause (ex) <u>Waiting for John,</u> his wife made some tea.
J2: Sentences with a participle clause after the main clause (ex) Everyone in the room looked at John, <u>making him feel uncomfortable.</u>

3. Results of the Surveys and Discussions

Figures 1A, 1B, and 1C show the results of the surveys on Groups A, B, and C, respectively. As we can see in **Figure 1A**, which represents Group A, technical writing, the pattern most frequently used was single-clause sentence A1. Almost equally used were B, compound sentences and J2, sentences

with a participle clause after the main clause. What should be noted here is that pattern J2, so called “the participial construction,” is one of the most difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners of English to acquire, and it is used in technical writing to a considerable degree.

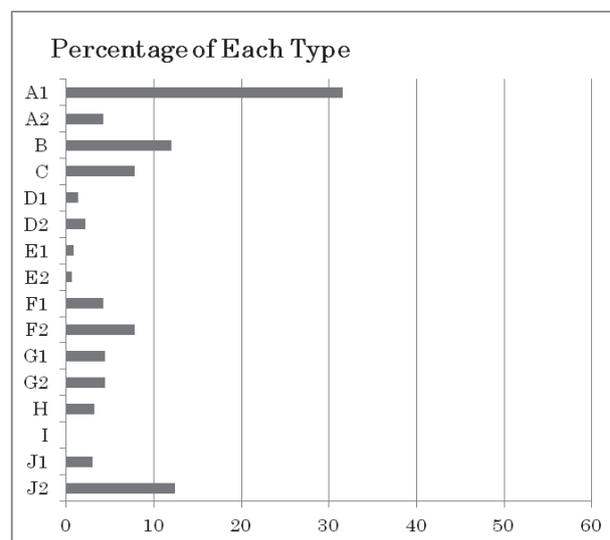


Figure 1A Types of Sentences Used in Technical Articles

As we can see in **Figure 1B**, which represents Group B, the TOEIC textbooks, and in **Figure 1C**, which represents Group C, the MEXT textbooks, more than half of the total were seen in patterns A1 and B. We can say that the sentences in the TOEIC textbooks and the MEXT textbooks are strongly biased toward single-clause sentences and compound sentences (with two clauses simply put together), whereas a wider variety of patterns are used in technical writings.

For analyzing and understanding the sentences in patterns A1 and B, the students do not need to think about the relationship between clauses, because they are simple sentences (A1) and simple combinations of simple sentences (B). The sentence structures that the students acquire naturally will be influenced by the structures that they encounter in their textbooks in the third and fourth years.

It is generally acknowledged that comprehension precedes production in second language acquisition since Krashen(1977)[1]. Therefore, the students first need to be able to understand the structures that they are expected to use in writing, before they move on to the fifth year.

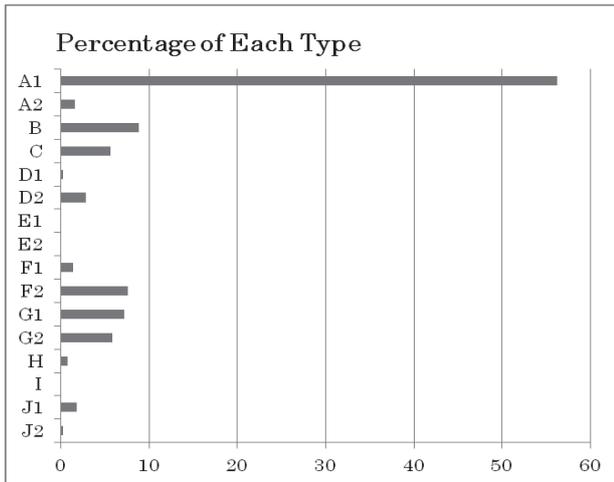


Figure 1B Types of Sentences Used in TOEIC Textbooks

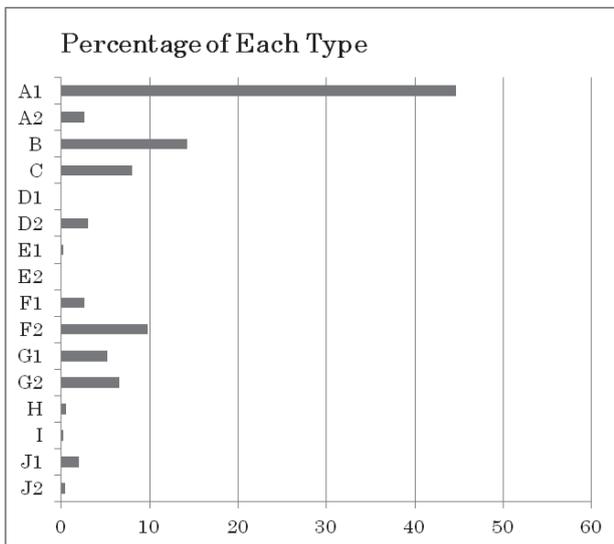


Figure 1C Types of Sentences Used in MEXT Textbooks

4. Conclusion

Most colleges of technology including TMCIT seek high scores in the TOEIC Test as one of their goals of English teaching, so they use TOEIC textbooks as the main textbook of the English classes in the higher years. However, the use of such textbooks is insufficient if the college aims to develop the technical writing skills in the fifth year, since those textbooks do not offer a variety of sentence patterns (especially clause-combination patterns) that are frequently used in technical writing, as seen in the results of the surveys in the present study. MEXT textbooks, which some colleges use, cannot be a good alternative, since the deviation of the sentence patterns is similar to that of the TOEIC textbooks.

Each instructor, therefore, should provide the students with a wide variety of sentence structures, especially

clause-combination patterns, in the textbooks or the reading materials for the third and the fourth years, carefully checking and analyzing the deviation of the sentences used in the materials. In many cases, it will be required to use different copies from different passages in the fields of science and/or technology in order to meet the college students' needs.

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Appendix 2 (TOEIC Textbooks Surveyed)

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Appendix 3 (MEXT Textbooks Surveyed)

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