

# Japan's New Directions for Improving Junior High School Students' Discourse Competence in English

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In April 2012, junior high school education in Japan began to be conducted based on the revised course of study produced by the central government. In the section on 'general policies regarding curriculum formulation,' teachers are expected to foster in students 'a zest for life' through educational activities. In particular, teachers should be committed to fostering students' ability 'to think', 'to make decisions', and 'to express themselves'. English teachers are expected to think about fostering learners' language skills to think logically and express their ideas and feelings effectively in the target language. The author argues that, initially, students need to understand and be aware of coherence in English passages and conversations. In order to contribute to this, a diagnostic test for evaluating learners' discourse competence in English, especially in relation to coherence, was developed and given to 498 junior high school students. The results of the survey indicated that the students lacked understanding in some areas of discourse competence. To remedy this, instruction and teaching materials should be more oriented towards making students aware of coherence in discourse, and they should be given more exercises or activities to develop their logical thinking and to express their ideas coherently in class.

## THE BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

Since April 2012, junior high school education in Japan has been based on the revised course of study produced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. In the 'general policies regarding curriculum formulation' section, teachers are expected to foster in students 'a zest for life' through educational activities. In particular, teachers should be committed to enhancing students' ability 'to think', 'to make decisions', and 'to express themselves'. The focus should be on developing the language skills necessary for learners to think logically and express ideas and feelings effectively in every school subject. English language education is no exception, and a lot of good practices following the new directions have been conducted in the classrooms and reported from all over the nation.

### Language Ability and Language Skills

As people think, make decisions, and express themselves, they use languages. Unfortunately, a lot of educational reports, including the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey conducted by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), have said that more care should be provided in Japanese school education to

foster students' ability to think, to make decisions, to express themselves and other abilities that are necessary to solve problems by using acquired knowledge and skills. Therefore, the course of study encourages teachers to enhance students' language ability so as to foster 'a zest for life.' In the context of foreign language teaching, teachers are expected not only to improve learners' L2 ability but also to enhance their fundamental ability to use language for thinking logically and expressing their ideas and feelings effectively. This language ability is often equivalent to one's learning ability in a lot of European countries. This ability should be acquired through every educational activity in each subject. Consequently, teachers have now been thinking about fostering learners' language skills to think logically and express themselves effectively in all the subjects at each level.

### Fostering Logical Thinking and Improving Discourse Competence in L2

It has been discussed for a long time what sub-components one's foreign language ability consists of, and it is now agreed by a lot of researchers that it consists of several different competences, such as grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences (see, e.g., Bachman & Palmer 1996, Canale 1983, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 1995, Savignon 1983). Of these sub-components, discourse competence has the most to do with logical thinking ability, as it is the ability to combine pieces of information together over the 'sentence level'. Celce-Murcia *et al.* (ibid) describes its importance (see Figure 1) and explains it as follows:

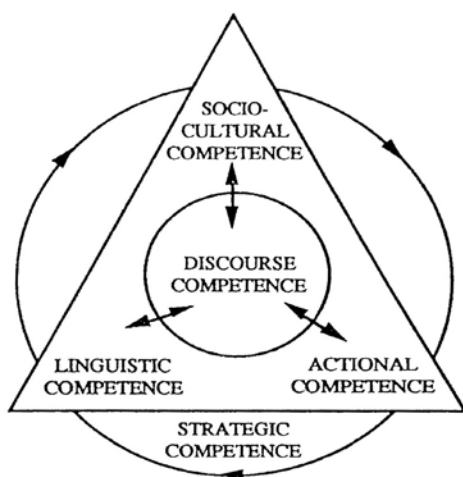


FIGURE 1

Schematic Representation of Communicative Competence by Celce-Murcia, *et al.* (1995)

Discourse competence concerns the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, sentences and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text. This is where the bottom-up lexico-grammatical microlevel intersects with the top-down signals of the macrolevel of communicative intent and sociocultural content to express attitudes and messages, and to create texts. (p.13)

There are two aspects to consider when discussing discourse competence, namely 'cohesion' and 'coherence', but the latter should be paid more attention when it comes to understanding and producing a certain amount of utterance or passage. In keeping with the general policies stated in the revised course of study above, students are expected to understand and be aware

of coherence in English conversations or passages. Celce-Murcia, *et al.* (ibid) explains coherence as below, and shows an interesting example:

The most difficult-to-describe area of discourse competence appears to be coherence, i.e., the degree to which sentences or utterances in a discourse sequence are felt to be interrelated rather than unrelated. It is obviously easier to describe coherence in written than in oral discourse. (p.15) (emphasis added)

The picnic was a complete failure. No one remembered to bring a corkscrew. (p.31)

The appropriate interpretation of the example above will probably be “No one brought a corkscrew and we could not open wine bottles. So, we could not drink any wine and did not enjoy the picnic at all.” Unless the listeners (/readers) do not have the background knowledge that we need a corkscrew when we open a wine bottle, the utterance makes no sense to them. The most important thing discussing coherence is whether there is “shared information” between a sender and a receiver of communication. It is essential to increase the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and word usage, but it is not good enough if we want to foster learners’ logical thinking ability in the context of L2 learning. We need to raise their awareness of ‘discourse,’ especially ‘coherence.’

## THE STUDY

### Developing a Diagnostic Test to Evaluate Japanese Learners’ Discourse Competence in English

To evaluate learners’ discourse competence in English, especially in relation to coherence, a diagnostic test was developed. Tanaka (1994) suggests six different types of test items to assess learners’ discourse competence. Four types of them were used, with one other type added, to create the diagnostic test to evaluate students’ awareness and understanding of coherence (see Appendices 1, 2, and 3). The table below shows what question items the test consists of:

TABLE 1. Contents of Diagnostic Test for Junior High School Student.of Japan

Section	Questions	Point	# of Qs	Sec. Point
A	Choose appropriate connectives	1	4	4
B	Predict what comes next	2	10	20
C	Guessing what connectives miss and translate two sentences	2	3	6
D	Add two appropriate sentences	4	4	16
E	Put sentences in correct order	4	1	4
Total				50

## The Survey

The developed test was given to 498 junior high school students in one prefecture in Japan. They were from 14 classes at nine different junior high schools. The survey was conducted from November 2012 to January 2013. The participants worked on the test for 25 minutes. There were five points the author wanted to examine in this study:

- (1) whether students could choose appropriate connectives to combine two sentences,
- (2) whether they could understand the context of a passage and predict what comes next,
- (3) whether they could understand the relationship between two sentences without a connective,
- (4) how well they could produce a coherent passage,
- (5) whether they could arrange the correct order of sentences.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows the descriptive data of the survey. The average score was 29.31 out of 50, which is 58.62% correct. The average score for Section D was 7.93 out of 16, which means only 49.6% was correct.

TABLE 2. Descriptive Data of Diagnostic Test for J.H.S. of Japan

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Points	(4)	(20)	(6)	(16)	(4)	(50)
Mean	2.86	12.49	3.71	7.93	2.31	29.31
S.D.	1.39	5.33	2.15	5.30	1.98	13.10
Max.	4	20	6	16	4	50
Min.	0	0	0	0	0	2

Table 3 shows the percentages for correct and wrong answers for each test item. As for Section A, two-thirds of the students got right answers to all the questions. Question 3 of Section C was the most difficult since only one-third (34.7%) wrote correct answers. In Section

TABLE 3. Percentages for Correct and Wrong Answers

	A				B										C			D				E
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
4																		25.1	26.3	20.9	21.3	57.8
3																		15.5	14.5	14.7	15.7	
2					52.2	72.9	65.5	64.5	62.2	46.4	73.9	71.1	68.1	47.8	75.9	71.9	34.7	26.5	24.3	19.3	25.5	
1	69.5	69.7	80.5	66.5											2.21	0.6	2.81	11.6	10.6	14.1	10.8	
0	30.5	30.3	19.5	33.5	47.8	27.1	34.5	35.5	37.8	53.6	26.1	28.9	31.9	52.2	21.9	27.5	62.4	21.3	24.3	31.1	26.7	42.2

D, where students should add two more sentences after the given sentence, only one-fourth or one-fifth of them wrote two appropriate pieces of information.

## DISCUSSION

### Overall Review

It is often said that participants will answer around 60% or more correctly in good diagnostic tests. The average score was 29.31 out of 50 points, which means 58.62% was correct. Therefore, we could probably say that the test had the appropriate level of difficulty. However, in Section D only one-fourth or one-fifth of the students added two appropriate pieces of information to each given sentence, and the standard deviation was rather big (5.30 in a total score of 16). One reason for this result may be that students are just not used to the format of questions of this kind, as some junior high school teachers mentioned in the feedback comments.

### Section A

Section A examines whether students can choose appropriate connectives to combine two sentences. It has four multiple-choice questions, but there are five choices to select from because the author wanted to maintain the reliability of the survey. More than two-thirds of students got right answers to each question.

TABLE 4. Percentages for Choices in Section A  
(Shaded cells signify the correct answers.)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
when	7.8	2.8	80.5	6.0
or	5.8	5.2	3.2	5.0
because	7.4	69.7	4.4	14.1
but	69.5	7.2	4.2	7.2
so	8.8	14.5	7.0	66.5
others	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.2

However, a little more than 14% of the students could not understand the relationship between cause and effect properly in Questions (2) and (4):

(2) I don't like him (            ) he is not friendly.

(4) She is always nice to everybody, (            ) she has many friends.

It sounds illogical if the reason why she is always nice to everybody is “she has many friends.” The fact that “she is always nice to everybody” should be the reason itself. It seems like the students need more practice chances to think logically not only in their L2 but also in their L1.

On the other hand, four-fifths of the students (80.5%) chose “when” to refer to the time of the event. We may say that it is not so difficult for students to understand the reference to the ‘time.’ In summary, we could say that Japanese junior high school students have knowledge about connectives in general, but some students have difficulty thinking about the events logically, especially the “cause and effect” relationship.

### Section B

Section B tries to assess whether students can understand the context of a passage and predict what comes next. The test items were created to find the following questions:

- (1) (2) (3) whether they can understand the logical development of a passage,
- (4) whether they can get the main idea of a passage,
- (5) (6) whether they can understand contradictory development of a passage,
- (7) (8) whether they can guess a cause or a reason for some event in a passage,
- (9) (10) whether they can understand resultative development of a passage.

The questions in this section were all multiple-choice type questions. Most of the question items were made by modifying the ones shown in Mikulecky and Jeffries (1997). Table 5 shows the percentages for choices of each question item.

TABLE 5. Percentages for Choices in Section B

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
a	7.6	7.2	65.5	12.4	12.7	14.5	13.7	12.0	4.0	14.3
b	25.9	12.4	17.1	64.5	13.5	12.0	4.2	71.1	68.1	47.8
c	52.2	7.4	10.0	13.1	11.2	46.4	73.9	8.0	16.1	21.7
d	13.9	72.9	7.2	9.6	62.2	26.5	7.4	8.4	11.2	15.5
others	0.4	0.0	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.6	0.8

The mean score of the section was 12.49 out of 20, which means 62.5% correct. In this paper, let us discuss Questions (6) and (10), in which more than half of the participants took the wrong choices.

First, the test items dealing with ‘contradictory development of a passage,’ namely Questions (5) and (6), seemed to be difficult for students to understand. In particular, the correct rate for Question (6) was the lowest of all the questions (46.4%).

- (6) What happened to Lisa yesterday? She wasn’t in class. Bill told me she had some family problem. Do you know about it? I called Lisa’s home, but ...
  - (a) she was at home. (14.5%)
  - (b) Bill doesn’t know. (12.0%)
  - (c) there was no answer. (46.4%)

(d) she has no telephone. (26.5%)

There are three people in the passage, Liza, Bill, and me. Therefore, it can be a little complicated to understand the whole idea of the passage. Those students who selected the choice (d) should have noticed logically “If she has no telephone, I cannot call Liza’s house.” However, more than one-fourth made this wrong choice.

Second, more than half of the students made the wrong choices in Question (10). Only 47.8% of them answered correctly.

- (10) We are going to have the autumn festival soon. It’s one of the biggest events in our town. It has a history of more than 100 years, so everybody is now very
- (a) healthy. (14.3%)
  - (b) excited. (47.8%)
  - (c) old. (21.7%)
  - (d) lucky. (15.5%)

About one-fifth of all students (21.7%) answered the choice “old.” Those students read the preceding sentence and might have thought everybody was also “old.” They should have understood that the big event was coming and guessed everybody’s excited feelings, but they could not. If we want to predict what comes next, we need to understand not only the preceding information but also the whole passage.

### Section C

In Section C, students are asked to translate two sentences adding an appropriate missing phrase, so that they can demonstrate whether they have understood the relationship between the two sentences without a connective. As the purpose of the study is discussing students’ awareness and understanding of coherence, they did not get any points even if they correctly translated the given two sentences separately. As a couple of junior high school teachers helping with the study said in their feedback comments, students are not used to this type of question item. The mean score was not so high, 3.71 out of 6, which means 61.8% correct. Since more than 70% of the students appropriately answered Questions (1) and (2), namely 75.9% and 71.9%, let us examine in more detail Question (3), in which only one-third of the students (34.7%) interpreted the information logically. The two given sentences were:

- (3) My best friend Aya moved to Tokyo last month. We can send e-mail to each other every day.

If we want to put some appropriate connective so as to reach the correct interpretation, we need to add some contradictory phrase (such as ‘but,’ ‘however,’ or ‘still’) in the L1: My best friend Aya moved to Tokyo last month, but we can send e-mail to each other every day.

However, a lot of students interpreted the information as follows: My best friend Aya moved to Tokyo last month, so we can send e-mail to each other every day. They should have noticed that we can send e-mail to each other wherever we are. Those students should have paid more attention to the word 'can'.

The results of the survey indicated that the students' discourse competence had not been sufficiently cultivated. To remedy this, students should be made more aware of coherence in discourse through classroom instruction, and given more opportunities to develop their logical thinking and to express their ideas coherently in class.

#### Section D

This section asks students to add two sentences to the given information and tries to find how well they can produce a coherent passage. If they write one correct coherent sentence, they get two points. So if they add two appropriate sentences, they get a full mark of four points. As there are four questions, the total score for this section is 16 points. The mean score was 7.93 and the standard deviation was 5.30, which was rather big. The junior high school students of Japan are familiar with translation work from Japanese to English, but it is often the case that they are not given enough opportunities to express their ideas freely in the target language. Actually there were quite a few students who wrote only one sentence or no sentence at all.

However, a lot of students tried to express and produce their unique ideas in English. The following are the examples which some good students of English wrote on the answer sheets:

- (1) I am very sleepy, but \_\_\_\_\_  
I must study now. It's very hard for me.  
I must study for the exam tomorrow. So I want to drink a cup of coffee.
- (2) I like tennis very much, so \_\_\_\_\_  
I want to play tennis now. But I can't play tennis well.  
I went to see a tennis game. It was very interesting.
- (3) I want to be a cook, because \_\_\_\_\_  
I like to make dinner with my mother. It's very fun.  
I'm good at cooking. I often cook for my family.
- (4) I like music very much. \_\_\_\_\_  
And I like children. So I want to be a music teacher.  
I love singing songs and playing the piano. I can't live without music.

Around one-fourth of the students wrote well and got a full mark of 4 points. Some of them wrote very informative and touching passages in simple and correct English. Indeed, a lot of Japanese students can write correct English sentences without much difficulty if they are given the information shown as examples above in the L1 and are asked to put it into English. However, in this study around 20 to 30% of the students got no points in any task, which should





with understanding ‘cohesion,’ and 381 students (75.5%) put (c) just before (a). Three-fourths of the students probably understood correctly that ‘she’ indicates ‘Yumi’; this kind of interpretation may not be so demanding for junior high school students.

Third, 372 students (74.7%) put sentence (b) last, which means just before the given sentence “I hope you can come to the festival.” These two sentences are closely related and considered a kind of ‘adjacency pair,’ and, according to those students, sentence (b) should be at the end. Eventually, the above data results show that more than two-thirds of the students noticed at least one of these three points when deciding the order of the four sentences, but only 57.8% could integrate their decisions.

### Correlation between Question Sections and Total Score

Table 7 shows the correlation between each question section and the total score.

TABLE 7. Correlation Between Question Sections and Total Score

	Section A	Section B	Section C	Section D	Section E	Total
Section A	1	.557**	.363**	.506**	.443**	.664**
Section B		1	.458**	.668**	.568**	.897**
Section C			1	.448**	.343**	.622**
Section D				1	.521**	.883**
Section E					1	.696**
Total						1

\*\*  $p < .01$

The correlations between Section B and the total score and also the one between Section D and the total score are extremely strong ( $r=.897$ ;  $r=.883$ ). We can say that when we want to know how much learners are aware of and understand the ‘coherence’ of passages, we can have them predict what comes next or add a couple of following sentences (or utterances). In other words, good students of English can guess the logical development of passages and are creative enough to add appropriate information. Also, the correlation between Section B and D is rather strong ( $r=.668$ ). This indicates that if learners can make a logical prediction about information after a passage, they can also add logical information to a given key sentence, or vice versa.

### CONCLUSION (PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS)

If we want to enhance students’ abilities ‘to think’, ‘to make decisions’, and ‘to express themselves,’ we need to help them become aware of the ‘coherence’ of information. Some students do not understand cause-and-effect relationships appropriately, as we have seen in the discussion in Section A. The discussions in Sections B and C tell us that junior high school students easily misunderstand contradictory relationships of information, in particular when no appropriate connective is given. The scores of Section D suggest that Japanese junior high school students should be given more practice to produce coherent passages freely as well as

translation work. The results of Section E show that about 40% of the students have difficulty properly understanding comparative relationships among sentences. Also, the figures showing correlations between question types and the total score indicate that both prediction tasks, which ask students to guess what comes next, and information-adding tasks, which ask students to put in additional information, would be beneficial in helping students understand the process of logical thinking and what 'coherence' is like.

In our daily language use, we often do not bother using transitional words or phrases to connect the information, but we can still communicate with each other well as long as there is some shared information between the people involved in communication. Students should be given more exercises to be aware of 'coherence' in and out of class and to develop their logical thinking and language skills. The test items used in the diagnostic test of this study will give foreign language teachers some ideas about what exercises or tasks they can use and develop when helping students become better communicators in the L2.

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APPENDIX 1

**Diagnostic Test to Assess Discourse Competence  
for Junior High School Students of Japan**

**【A】** Choose the most appropriate word for each blank from below.

- (1) It was raining. I didn't have an umbrella, (            ) I had to go out.
- (2) I don't like him (            ) he is not friendly.
- (3) He was reading (            ) I saw him at the library.
- (4) She is always nice to everybody, (            ) she has many friends.

[ when, or, because, but, so ]

**【B】** Choose the most appropriate information to follow each passage.

- (1) John never drinks tea in the morning. He always drinks coffee. But he often drinks tea in the afternoon. He drinks tea and eats a cake
  - (a) at 9:00.
  - (b) at 12:00.
  - (c) at 4:00.
  - (d) for breakfast.
  
- (2) Do you have any milk? There is a very hungry little cat here. It doesn't have a mother, and it wants something to
  - (a) love.
  - (b) fish.
  - (c) do.
  - (d) eat.
  
- (3) John came to work late again. He comes late almost every morning. What is the problem? Why is he often late? Doesn't he have a
  - (a) clock?
  - (b) bus?
  - (c) bedroom?
  - (d) desk?

(4) For breakfast, Bill often eats eggs or meat. He always has bread and fruit. He drinks coffee or tea and juice, sometimes he also has cake.

- (a) Bill doesn't like to eat a big breakfast.
- (b) Bill likes to eat a big breakfast.
- (c) Bill doesn't eat any breakfast.
- (d) Bill eats only a small breakfast.

(5) Ms. Brown has 15 cats. She has some gray cats and some brown cats. She also has a beautiful, young white cat, but she has

- (a) no brown cats.
- (b) no little cats.
- (c) no brown dogs.
- (d) no black cats.

(6) What happened to Lisa yesterday? She wasn't in class. Bill told me she had some family problem. Do you know about it? I called Lisa's home, but

- (a) she was at home.
- (b) Bill doesn't know.
- (c) there was no answer.
- (d) she has no telephone.

(7) These shoes are very beautiful, but they are also very expensive. I can't buy them now because I don't have much

- (a) time.
- (b) power.
- (c) money.
- (d) shoe cream.

(8) Mary is getting a new dress. It's very pretty. Mary is very happy, but her mother is not happy. The dress is very

- (a) pretty.
- (b) expensive.
- (c) old.
- (d) long.

(9) There are three people in Jane's office. They all want to use the computer a lot, but there is only one computer. So they must get another

- (a) car.
- (b) computer.
- (c) office.
- (d) worker.

(10) We are going to have the autumn festival soon. It's one of the biggest events in our town. It has a history of more than 100 years, so everybody is now very

- (a) healthy.
- (b) excited.
- (c) old.
- (d) lucky.

**【C】** Translate the two English sentences into Japanese by adding an appropriate connective phrase to combine them.

- (1) I'm hungry. I want to eat something.
- (2) We cannot go on a picnic today. It's raining outside.
- (3) My best friend Aya moved to Tokyo last month. We can send e-mail to each other every day.





APPENDIX 2

**Diagnostic Test to Assess Discourse Competence  
for Junior High School Students of Japan (Answer Sheet)**

**【 A 】**

(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
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**【 B 】**

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)

**【 C 】**

(1) \_\_\_\_\_

(2) \_\_\_\_\_

(3) \_\_\_\_\_

**【 D 】**

(1) I am very sleepy, but \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(2) I like tennis very much, so \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(3) I want to be a cook, because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(4) I like music very much. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**【 E 】**

①            ②            ③            ④  
(      ) → (      ) → (      ) → (      )

Grade (      ) Class (      ) No. (      ) Name (                      )



## 要 約

### 日本人中学生の英語「談話能力」伸長のための新たな方向性

達 川 奎 三

広島大学外国語教育研究センター

キーワード：中学生の英語談話能力，一貫性，診断テスト

2012年4月から日本の中学校では、新学習指導要領で示された「生きる力」を育むという基本理念に基づき、「知識や技能の習得とともに思考力・判断力・表現力などの育成」を重視した指導をすることとなった。具体的には、「基礎的・基本的な知識及び技能を習得させ、これらを活用して課題を解決するために必要な思考力，判断力，表現力等を育むとともに，主体的に学習に取り組む態度を養うためには，言語活動を充実させる」という指針が示された。言語そのものを学習対象とする英語科教育において、「思考力・判断力・表現力の育成」を議論するには、「談話能力」の育成や伸長を考慮することが不可欠である。小論では，日本人中学生の英語「談話能力」について測定を試み，その結果を報告するとともに，そこから窺える課題の一端を考えてみる。筆者の作成した「日本人中学生の英語『談話能力』診断検査」の調査結果から，（1）中学生には「原因－結果関係 (cause and effect relationship)」や「全体としての理解が求められる談話 (discourse requiring global understanding)」の理解などに課題があること，（2）「談話の先を推測するタスク」と「与えられた情報に続く英文を作り出すタスク」のスコアに相関が強いことなどが分かった。論理的「思考力」「判断力」そして豊かな「表現力」を育てるためには，「一貫性」をより意識させる指導が必要である。具体的には，“plus one (sentence) activity”と呼ばれているような表現活動，つまり「後に続く発話やセンテンスを考え，表現させる機会」をできるだけ多く確保することや，それを支援する教材開発が求められている。生徒が英語で論理的思考や判断を行い，豊かな表現力を身につけるための練習機会を英語教師はもっと保障すべきである。