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The Relationship between Writing Tasks in Textbooks and CAN-DO Lists in terms of Task Difficulty*

Yoko Suganuma Oi
Waseda University

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The purpose of the study was twofold. First, it investigated the kinds of writing tasks in textbooks used by senior high school students in Japan. Second, it examined the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels of the writing tasks in English-language textbooks for Japanese senior high school students. The study focused on the authorized "English Expression I" Japanese textbooks. The series of seven "English Expression I" textbooks contains 100 writing tasks, which were analysed to see how their types matched the CEFR criteria. Rasch modelling was then used to assess the difficulty of six selected writing tasks. A total of 158 Japanese senior high school students participated in the main research. They were asked to write six English compositions without using a dictionary and were given twenty minutes to write each composition. The research was conducted over a period of one week. The results of the modelling suggest that writing a self-introduction is more difficult than other writing tasks, such as writing about interests and daily life. More than half of the writing tasks in the textbooks were categorized as writing about "oneself" rather than writing about "others", and most tasks belonged to the CEFR A1 level.

Keywords: writing tasks, CEFR can-do descriptors, textbooks for high school students

1 Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) classifies language learners into six levels, which are each further divided into three subsidiary levels. CEFR provides "can-do" descriptors for each level. An estimated 80% of Japanese English learners are at level A (basic; Negishi, Takeda, & Tono, 2010). It is also assumed that the English proficiency of many Japanese students is below the A1 level, which means that these students have difficulty with daily conversations (Koike, 2009). A

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similar judgement was reported from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology (MEXT). MEXT conducted two nationwide large-scale English language assessments in 2014, in which students from randomly selected public junior and senior high schools in Japan participated. The reading and listening abilities of most senior high school students supposedly belonged to the high A1 or low A2 levels of CEFR, but for writing and speaking more than 80% of the students presented at a level lower than A1. Based on these results, MEXT proposed as a national goal for English proficiency that senior high school students should achieve the A2 or B1 level before graduating from senior high school (MEXT, 2014).

The relationship between CEFR can-do descriptors and the difficulty and types of tasks in the textbooks has, however, received little consideration. In particular, writing task difficulty and type have not been investigated in terms of CEFR criteria. There may therefore be a gap between the national English language proficiency goal and the difficulty of the writing tasks in English textbooks for high school students. Writing tasks in textbooks for high school students appear to target level A proficiency. For instance, the can-do descriptor for Creative Writing at level A1 states that the student "can write simple phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary people, where they live and what they do" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 62). Tasks similar to this are found in the textbooks. The relationship between the difficulty of writing tasks in the Japanese English-language textbooks and the CEFR can-do lists has not yet been researched in any detail, so this would be a meaningful subject for investigation.

Clarifying the difficulty of writing tasks according to the CEFR can-do lists would not only help teachers choose writing tasks, but would also assist students in writing English compositions more effectively and encourage students to improve their writing step-by-step. This information would also contribute to syllabus design for writing education. If the level of the task is explicit in textbooks in terms of CEFR, teachers will be able to teach students English writing skills more efficiently; this makes the investigation of the textbooks' writing task difficulty a matter of urgent concern.

2 Research Questions

This study investigates the difficulty and types of writing tasks in terms of CEFR criteria so teachers and textbook writers can effectively organize writing classes and edit textbooks, respectively. The clarification of task difficulty in the textbooks may also encourage students to complete the task, because it could allow students to make a better estimate of the task difficulty in relation to their writing ability. The following two research questions were

considered to examine the relationship between CEFR and the difficulty of writing tasks in the textbooks.

1. What kinds of writing tasks are contained in the "English Expression I" textbooks for Japanese high school students?
2. For what CEFR level are the writing tasks in the "English Expression I" textbooks for Japanese high school students intended?

3 Background of the Study

3.1 CEFR and can-do descriptors

The CEFR has been in development since the 1970s, when the Council of Europe conducted a series of projects to create descriptions of the structural features of particular languages. These projects aimed to facilitate labour mobility across member states with "transportable and interpretable credentials" (McNamara, 2011, p. 502). The CEFR is grounded in an action-oriented approach to the needs of language learning based on real-world situations and social interactions (Little, 2006). The goal of the CEFR is to recognize language learners as both individuals and social agents (Council of Europe, 2001).

The CEFR and English language proficiency (ELP) have basically had distinct, transparent, and positive attitudes towards the formulation of can-do statements, even at low language proficiency levels. The central idea of the project was to develop independent integrity and can-do statements, and it did not allow the interpretation of other descriptors for creation (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 30). The descriptors were devised to be user-oriented for teachers and learners (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 39). The capacity of the CEFR to bring curriculum, pedagogy and assessment into closer interdependence has also been discussed, and CEFR has provided a foundation for setting learning purposes, developing activities and materials and designing assessment tasks (Little, 2011, p. 382).

The CEFR categorizes language learners into six levels based on an action-oriented approach: A1 and A2 (basic), B1 and B2 (independent) and C1 and C2 (proficient) language users. These are further divided into subcategories (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 32). The CEFR "can-do" statements are based on the progression in proficiency of language use and behavioural objectives. The development of language proficiency is linked with formative assessment of language proficiency, while the behavioural objectives aim to educate individual learners (Green, 2010).

There are three aspects of the CEFR can-do descriptors: (1) kinds of tasks, (2) quality of language and (3) conditions of language activities (Tono, 2013). The can-do descriptors also have general principles by which the descriptors can be observed and assessed. For instance, level A expects learners to communicate and exchange information in a simple way, whereas

learners at level B1 can achieve most goals and express themselves on a range of topics; that is, B1 level users "Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc." (Council of Europe, 2001, p.24). B1 level users are also expected to write paragraphs, rather than just simple sentences. B2 level users can deal with more abstract ideas and discuss argumentatively, even in an academic context. The can-do descriptors at level A focus on "persons and places" in simple, familiar contexts, whereas level B users can concretely express various ideas on topics of interest (Tono, 2013). The highest CEFR rank is the C level, and it is expected that C1 level users can "express in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length." C2 level users are expected to be able to "write clear, smoothly, flowing text in an appropriate style" with an effective logical structure" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 27). This is in contrast to level A users, who can write simple notes, messages and letters, and level B users, who are able to describe personal experiences and matters about familiar events, interests, places and jobs.

3.2 Characteristics of Japanese high school textbooks

"English Expression" is the name of the subject set for Japanese high school students that was analysed in the current study. The objective of "English Expression I" is to "develop students' abilities to evaluate facts, opinions, etc. from multiple perspectives and communicate through reasoning and a range of expression, while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language" (MEXT, 2009). For the content of writing activities, "English Expression I" includes tasks such as "writing a brief passage in a style suitable for the audience and purpose" (MEXT, 2009). Home life and activities at school are presented as situations likely to occur in the everyday lives of students. The specific task difficulty is not clarified, however, and the description of activities is often limited and ambiguous. Based on the learning objectives for the national course of study, textbooks are compiled and must be authorized in Japan. A discussion of the task difficulty in textbooks may promote the more efficient teaching of English writing.

3.3 Definition of a "task"

There are various definitions of what a task is, although the notion of tasks in language education has been considered since the 1980s. Nunan provided the following definition: a "communicative task [is] a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure" (1989, p. 10). According to this view, a task is thought to include communicative language use and has a

common goal for both teachers and learners. Bygate, Cook, Iannou-Georgiou and Jullian (2003) noted a difference between a task and an exercise: a task is an activity using practical integrated skills, and an exercise is an opportunity to practice new skills and knowledge. Ellis (2003, p. 16) also stated, "A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes." From this perspective, learners are expected to complete a task assuming a real language use situation.

The current study adopts Ellis' (2003, p.16) definition because it combines language educational goals with language assessment and stresses the importance of pragmatic language use in the classroom. In Ellis's view, a task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically to achieve an outcome that could be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content were conveyed. The CEFR also takes an action-oriented approach, in which the language activity is the observable performance of tasks, either a real-world task or a classroom task.

3.4 Item response theory

Classical test theory (CTT) is the simplest approach to estimating measurement error and assumes that all measurement errors are random. It is widely used in the context of norm-referenced testing. Several limitations have been identified regarding CTT estimates: (1) each CTT reliability estimate can only address one source of measurement error at a time and thus cannot provide information about the effects of multiple sources of measurement error and how these differ; (2) CTT treats all errors as random so CTT reliability estimates do not distinguish systematic measurement errors from random measurement errors; and (3) CTT reliability estimates and standard errors of measurement (SEM) are assumed to be equal for scores at all ability levels (Bachman, 2004, p. 174). Item response theory (IRT), by contrast, is based on the idea that the performance on a test item can be predicted by a set of factors called traits or abilities. The relationship between performance on test items and the set of traits underlying such performance can be described by the item characteristic function or the item characteristic curve (ICC; Hambleton, Swaminathan, & Rogers, 1991). IRT contains three models: (1) the one-parameter logistic model (1PLM); (2) the two-parameter logistic model (2PLM); and (3) the three-parameter logistic model (3PLM). This study adopted the 1PLM because of the limited number of samples and practical usefulness.

4 Methodology

The current study contains two studies. The first aimed to categorize the writing tasks in textbooks, in order to prepare for the further study, which analysed the difficulty of tasks in the writing textbooks used in Japanese high schools.

4.1 Categorizing writing tasks in textbooks

Three preliminary surveys were conducted before the analysis of writing task difficulty level and addressed the following questions: (1) To what extent are CEFR level A tasks found in the seven government-approved textbooks? (2) What are the six most frequent types of writing task in the textbooks?

The two Japanese English teachers examined the textbooks to analyse the kinds and levels of the writing tasks and answer the questions above. They first examined seven textbooks individually (Appendix 1), and then discussed their decisions when they differed. It took two days to reach a consensus on the categorization of levels and kinds of writing tasks. Then 11 Japanese English teachers, including the teachers who categorized the tasks, developed an assessment rubric. They discussed which rubric elements would meet teachers' needs for evaluating high school students' English compositions, and they found three assessment components useful (see Table 1).

4.1.1 Development of the writing assessment rubric

First, six writing assessment rubrics used for existing tests of English language learners were analysed and compared, including: (1) Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT); (2) International English Language Testing System (IELTS); (3) Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP); (4) Teaching of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP); (5) Global Test of English Communications Computer Based Testing (GTEC CBT); and (6) GTEC for STUDENTS. None of these rubrics aligned well with the tasks in the textbooks, however, in terms of either length or content. Therefore, 11 highly experienced Japanese English teachers developed a writing assessment rubric that met the needs of high school teachers.

In the course of their discussions, the teachers agreed on the importance of task fulfilment. Some teachers mentioned that a topic sentence written by students showed the extent to which they understood the task and played a role in developing the written text. Although this is a basic element of writing, even highly proficient students did not always write a topic sentence. Composition length and description of examples were also among the components of task fulfilment. All of the teachers stressed that task fulfilment should be of prime importance in the assessment criteria.

The teachers then considered the consistency of the writing. This study primarily concerns narrative writing tasks, such as those related to personal experiences and daily life, which do not have the same structure as argumentation. Logical consistency makes the written text easier for readers to understand, so coherent writing is more likely to produce reader-centred texts. The teachers therefore wanted to see some level of reader awareness in the students' texts.

Finally, the teachers discussed the importance of accuracy and generally supported the importance of logical consistency over language accuracy. They also mentioned, however, that they tended to focus on the accuracy of language use in class because of the need to prepare students for entrance examinations. Some teachers stated that feedback on students' mistakes in writing was also important.

Thus, the writing assessment criteria consisted of three components: task fulfilment, accuracy and organization (Table 1). Task fulfilment component assessed the extent to which a student was able to accomplish the task and write within the word limit. The accuracy component evaluated whether students used grammar and vocabulary appropriately, as well as spelling correctly. Finally, the organization component examined whether the students could organize sequences of information and ideas and use a range of discourse markers for explanation, exemplification and detail. In this study, organization does not necessarily mean the structure of text in terms of introduction, body and conclusion, but rather primarily concerns the consistency and coherence of the written text. The three components were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale (highest score possible 9 points), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Writing Assessment Rubric

Components	Assessment criteria	Score			
		0 Poor	1	2	3 Good
Task fulfilment	Addresses all parts of the task, e.g. number of words, presents responses/positions relevant to the task.				
Accuracy	Produces error-free sentences.				
Organization	Sequences information and ideas. Uses a range of discourse markers.				

4.1.2 Assessor training

Before the main study, one Japanese English teacher and two native-speaking English teachers who had taught English from 5 to 25 years were asked to evaluate two English compositions written by Japanese senior high school students twice, using the same assessment sheet. At first, they separately assessed students' compositions and compared their assessment with one another. When they found differences between each assessor's standard criteria, they discussed which points to focus on during the assessment. Because the values for the inter-rater reliability of the two training assessments were high, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, we went forward with the main study.

Table 2. First Assessment Training

	A	B	C
A		.72**	.68**
B	.72**		.59**
C	.68**	.59**	

Table 3. Second Assessment Training

	A	B	C
A		.81**	.72**
B	.81**		.78**
C	.72**	.78**	

Note: ** p<.001.

4.2 Analysing difficulty levels of writing tasks

In the further study, 158 Japanese high school students, aged 16–17 years, wrote six English compositions without dictionaries for one week, taking 20 minutes for each composition (Appendix 2). The six English compositions tasks were chosen based on the results of categorizing textbook writing tasks (see 5.1). One Japanese and two native-speaking English teachers assessed the students' English compositions, using the rubric developed during the preliminary study (see Table 1). That is, each teacher completely assessed a total of 948 English compositions. The total scores from the three teachers were analysed using Rasch modelling (1PLM) to establish the item difficulty of the writing tasks in the textbooks, using Winsteps® version 3.92.1. The Rasch model included item difficulty and latent trait parameters in a logistic function (Muraki, 2011, p. 30).

5 Results

5.1 Categorizing textbook writing tasks

Two Japanese English teachers analysed the level of the writing tasks in seven government-approved textbooks, "English Expression I". They examined the extent to which these match level A tasks according to the CEFR. These textbooks were chosen because they primarily nurture students'

expressive skills and attitudes through English communication such as writing and speaking.

The teachers identified a total of 100 writing tasks, which they then classified into 26 categories in terms of topic and type (Table 4). More than half of the tasks (55/100) concerned descriptions related to "oneself", while far fewer tasks (14/100) involved describing other people or events. There were also several tasks on social topics, such as environmental issues and aging society. There was only one argumentative task. The use of narrative tasks, especially those that instruct the student to write about "myself" or describing "my something", more easily allow learners to adapt their writing to their level of English proficiency. Such tasks make it possible for the assessors to evaluate students' writing from level A1 ("Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences") to level B1 ("Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence"), because more proficient writers can use their more highly developed skills to express themselves even on a familiar topic.

Table 4. Most Frequent Writing Tasks in the Seven "English Expression I" Textbooks (n=57)

	Tasks	No./100
1	Travel (experience of travelling, places where they want to travel, study abroad)	7
2	Hobbies and other interests	5
3	School life (club activities, activities after school)	4
4	Planning & scheduling (planning for summer vacation, weekends)	4
5	Comparison of different cultures	4
6	Environmental issues	4
7	Town or community	4
8	Self-introduction	3
9	Junior high school days	3
10	Favourite subjects and classes	3
11	Favourite foods, healthy foods, recipes	3
12	Topical social issues (e.g. birth rate, aging society)	3
13	Friends	2
14	Japanese yearly events	2
15	Movies, actors and actresses	2
16	Favourite sports	2
17	One day	1
18	Future (goals/dreams)	1
19	Weather	1
20	Treasure	1
21	Music	1

22	Health	1
23	School uniform	1
24	Newspapers or computers	1
25	A person I respect	1
26	Volunteering activities	1

Note. The table shows the names of writing topics. Due to space limitations, only 57 tasks are shown.

It was difficult to distinguish tasks at a particular CEFR level, because many tasks could be classified as either A1 or B1 depending on the learners' English proficiency. The same task might provoke one learner to "write simple isolated phrases and sentences" (A1), while another might "write straightforward connected texts […] by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence" (B1; i.e. writing more extensively, coherently and consistently than the A1 level student).

More than half of the tasks were assessed as ranging from CEFR levels A1 to B1, and about one third of the tasks were ranged between A1 and C2 (Table 5). The latter tasks focus on social issues, and writers are expected to present ideas and facts coherently, giving examples and reasons to support their views. There were fewer B2 level tasks than C2 level tasks, which suggests that the number of B2 level tasks should be increased to bridge the gap between level A and level C tasks.

Table 5. CEFR Levels of Tasks in Japanese High School Textbooks

Task CEFR level	No./100
A1–B1	55
A1–B2	14
A1–C2	31

5.2 Assessment of writing task in terms of CEFR level

Drawing on the results of the preliminary study, six writing tasks were selected for use in the analysis of writing task difficulty levels based on the frequency of their occurrence in the textbooks: (1) self-introduction; (2) travel; (3) interests; (4) food; (5) schedules; and (6) my future.

5.3 Difficulty levels of the writing tasks

The compositions for the six English writing tasks were evaluated by three teachers. The Pearson's correlation coefficients for the ratings of the three teachers showed significant positive relationships for all sessions (Table 6). Based on these results, the item difficulty of the six English composition tasks was calculated using Rasch modelling (1PLM) in Winsteps Version 3.92.1.

Table 6. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients of Teacher Ratings

Session (1)

	A	B	C
A		.81**	.87**
B	.81**		.89**
C	.87**	.89**	

Session (2)

	A	B	C
A		.89**	.91**
B	.89**		.88
C	.91**	.88**	

Session (3)

	A	B	C
A		.9**	.88**
B	.9**		.92**
C	.88**	.92**	

Session (4)

	A	B	C
A		.93**	.92**
B	.93**		.87**
C	.92**	.87**	

Session (5)

	A	B	C
A		.89**	.87**
B	.89**		.88**
C	.87**	.88**	

Session (6)

	A	B	C
A		.93**	.91**
B	.93**		.93**
C	.91**	.93**	

Note: **p<.001.

5.3.1 Summary of Rasch modelling and fit statistics: Students' writing proficiency and item difficulty

The information-weighted mean square fit statistics (infit MNSQ) and outlier-sensitive mean square fit statistics (outfit MNSQ) indicate the degree of misfit of observations to Rasch modelled expectations (Rasch, 1980). McNamara (1996, p. 173) states, "values in the range of approximately .75 to 1.3 are acceptable for Rasch modelling." If values are outside this range, they are interpreted as representing misfit. Table 7 presents a summary of the Rasch modelling results and fit statistics for students' writing proficiency. The infit and outfit MNSQ values for students' proficiency are 1.01 and 0.96, respectively, so the analysis shows a good fit for the Rasch model.

Table 7. Results of Rasch Modelling and Fit Statistics (n=158)

	Total Score	Count	Measure	Model Error	Infit MNSQ	Infit ZSTD	Outfit MNSQ	Outfit ZSTD
Mean	7.3	18.0	44.33	6.45	1.01	0	0.96	−0.1
SD	2.2	0	8.62	1.36	0.39	1.2	0.56	1.0
Max	11	18	56.87	8.22	2.39	3.0	2.79	3.0
Min	0	18	−0.27	5.63	0.54	−1.4	−0.18	0.54

Real RMSE=6.59; true SD=5.55; separation=0.84; person reliability=0.41
Model RMSE=6.17; true SD=6.01; separation=0.97; person reliability=0.49
SE of person mean=0.69

Person raw score-to-measure correlation=0.98
Cronbach's alpha individual raw score for "test" reliability=0.37; SEM=1.74

Table 8 presents the item difficulty for the writing tasks. The infit and outfit values for item difficulty are 1.00 and 1.02, respectively. The analysis indicates that the data fit the Rasch model well. The reliability for students' writing proficiency is 0.49 and for item difficulty is 0.98. The writing tasks did not present differences in students' writing proficiency, with an individual raw score "test" reliability of 0.37.

Table 8. Results of Rasch Modelling and Fit Statistics for Item Difficulty (n=6 items)

	Total score	Count	Measure	Model error	Infit MNSQ	Infit ZSTD	Outfit MNSQ	Outfit ZSTD
Mean	64.2	158.0	50.00	2.16	1.00	0	1.02	−0.1
SD	41.0	0	14.74	0.49	0.09	1.1	0.15	1.1
Max	129	158	76.14	3.66	1.20	3.3	1.14	0.8
Min.	8	158	27.50	1.70	0.88	−2.1	0.74	−2.3

Real RMSE=2.21; true SD=14.58; separation=6.59; item reliability=0.98
Model RMSE=2.18; true SD=14.58; separation=6.68; item reliability=0.98
SE of person mean=3.58
Item raw score-to-measure correlation= −0.99

5.3.2 Item map of English composition tasks

Figure 1 presents the students' writing proficiency and the item difficulty of the writing tasks on the same scale. The left side shows the students' ability, and the right side presents each item and the names of the six writing tasks. The upper part shows higher ability levels and the difficulty of the tasks. The lower part shows lower ability levels and the easiness of the tasks.

As can be seen, the relative difficulty of the tasks was as follows, from most difficult to easiest: self-introduction (most difficult), travel, interests, food, schedules and my future (easiest). The differences of difficulty between interests, food, schedules and my future were not significant. The item difficulty for the self-introduction was notably higher than for the other tasks, while writing about the future was the easiest task. Before the study commenced, it was assumed that writing about interests would be easiest.

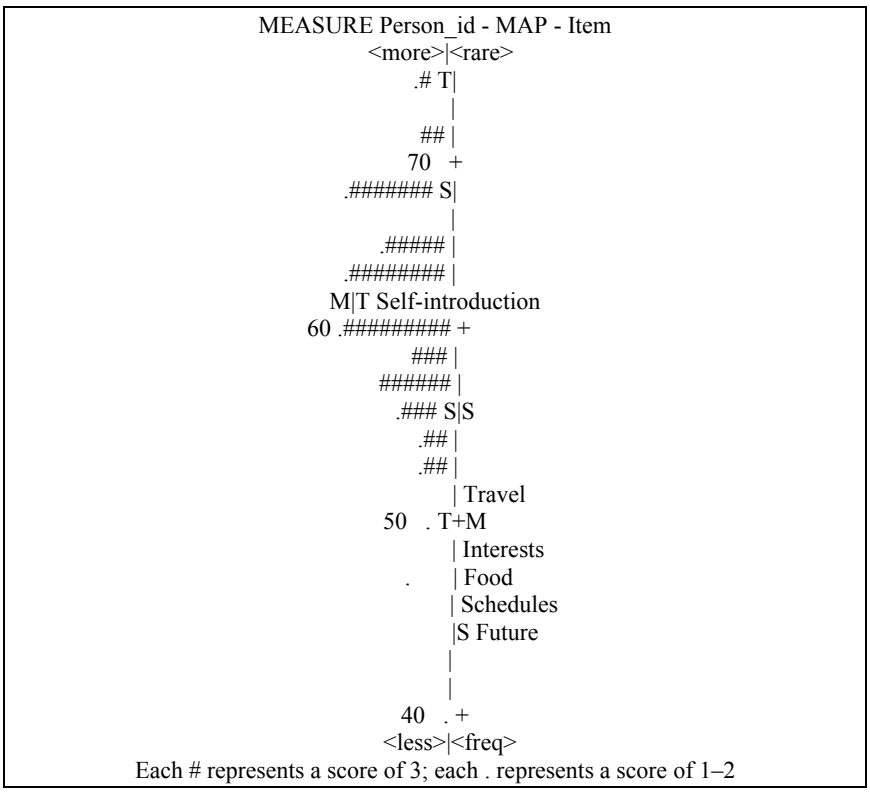

Figure 1. Item map of English composition tasks

6 Discussion

6.1 CEFR levels of the writing tasks in textbooks

The writing tasks in the "English Expression I" textbooks are mostly categorized as CEFR level A and require students to write simple sentences. For many of these tasks, however, students could be assessed as being at a higher level based on their English proficiency and writing skills. More proficient writers could write more cohesive sentences and demonstrate greater coherence in their compositions, organizing paragraphs to be more persuasive or impressive and using exemplification and reasons. The more proficient students may also develop the topic of the composition, as well as using discourse markers more effectively. This indicates that the difficulty of the task depends on the learners' level of proficiency. Teachers should therefore devise appropriate ways of presenting writing tasks to their students, arranging the content and order of tasks to adjust the level to the ability of

individual students, particularly for tasks evaluated at the A1 level according to CEFR can-do descriptors.

It is worth noting that more than half of the tasks in the textbooks ask students to describe themselves or write about familiar topics, such as their interests, friends and family, and there are fewer tasks about others than about the self. This may be because it is easier for novice writers to focus on the self and describe themselves or the people close to them. Most of the tasks are narrative or descriptive rather than argumentative.

6.2 Differences in item difficulty between CEFR level A writing tasks

Although more than half of the writing tasks were classified as targeting CEFR level A skills, there were differences in item difficulty depending on the writing task. The self-introduction was the most difficult of the six tasks considered, although most of the students were already familiar with creating self-introductions in both Japanese and English. Compared to the other tasks, it was more difficult for students to link ideas together coherently when introducing themselves, and the students tended to write discrete ideas or facts without connecting their sentences. This indicates that students need to develop greater reader awareness in such tasks.

Travel was the second most difficult category, because the writers had difficulty explaining their experiences in detail, even when they did manage to write a topic sentence to present the travel destination. Compared to other tasks, such as favourite food and interests, writers needed to be able to explain more detailed issues. The writers also needed to use the past tense, because they were supposed to write about their past experiences of travel. In short, describing experiences and schedules were more difficult than describing favourite foods and interests, which students were able to accomplish using simple sentences. The task on the future was found to be the easiest of the six tasks. When students wrote about their future, they first presented their future job or vision of future life as a topic sentence and then wrote about the background and reasons; the writing assignment had an implied structure that made it easier for the students to organize a paragraph.

All six writing tasks were classified as narrative tasks, but the ease of writing differed for each student. For the self-introduction, the writers had the freedom to select the point of self-introduction, and the students were expected to narrow down the main point on their own. This meant that the students needed to be conscious of the presence of the readers to make their writing more plausible. Although the self-introduction was not an argumentative task, the degree of freedom in terms of focus made it different from the other tasks and increased the difficulty of this particular narrative task.

Although the tasks in the textbooks were categorized as being CEFR level A narratives, each task had different features and levels of difficulty.

Tasks were not necessarily arranged in the textbooks from easiest to the most difficult. Despite being one of the more difficult tasks, it seems natural that the self-introduction task should come first, so teachers must devise ways to organize it in class. Al level writers have difficulty in narrowing down points when writing such a text, so teachers should be encouraged to help students clarify what they want to focus on.

The travel and schedule tasks are connected to the study of particular tenses, so students need to be given time to practise the usage of the appropriate tenses before such writing tasks. Although writing tasks are connected with the study of grammar and language use, their order in the textbooks has not been thoroughly evaluated in terms of the relationship between grammar and content. The order of writing tasks in textbooks should therefore be reconsidered based on the difficulty of tasks and learners' development not just in terms of content, but also the related linguistic aspects.

7 Conclusion

Most of the writing tasks in the textbooks considered, "English Expression I", can be categorized as being level A according to the CEFR. However, learners' perception of the difficulty of a certain task varies due to differences in their English proficiency. This is because the student who has higher English proficiency can express what they want to write with well-organized structure and elaborate expressions. For instance, it is possible for them to describe their ideas and experiences more effectively by presenting examples and reasons with accurate language use. Thus, teachers should devise how to present or develop writing tasks in class, paying attention to individual students' English proficiency. More than half of the writing tasks concern describing oneself. In contrast, only 14 of the 100 tasks aim to describe others. Most of the tasks are also narrative, not argumentative. The tasks are supposedly arranged such that the students will find it easy to write on the topics, as most are familiar and close to the students' lives. However, the order of the writing tasks in textbooks should be reconsidered as some textbooks ignore the actual difficulty of the tasks. For example, a B1 task may appear immediately after an A1 task, or a C2 task may come just after an A1 task. In this case, the level of difficulty is suddenly increased, so teachers need to be careful to organize such tasks.

Moreover, there are differences in terms of item difficulty depending on the task, even if they are classified at the same level, i.e. A level in the CEFR. When writers are expected to describe the situation objectively, the tasks present higher item difficulty. In contrast, tasks requiring students to write about favourite things indicate lower item difficulty. Thus, teachers and textbook writers need to organize writing tasks carefully, even if the tasks are supposedly all categorized as level A in the CEFR, because what it transpires

is the most difficult task such as writing a self-introduction, commonly comes first in textbooks.

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Appendix 1

Lists of Textbooks

Textbook title	Publisher
Vision Quest English Expression I Advanced	EIRINKAN
MY WAY English Expression I	SANSEIDO
Vivid English Expression I	Daiichi Gakushusha
NEW FAVORITE English Expression I	TOKYO SHOSEKI
MAINSTREAM English Expression I	ZOSHINDO
UNICORN English Expression I	BUN-EIDO
Departure English Expression I	TAISHUKAN

Appendix 2

Examples of Student English Compositions

Example 1

One of my favorite foods is ramen. I have two reasons why I like it. Firstly, it is cheap, so students can pay it easily. It usually costs from 500 to 1000 yen at once. If ramen's price were expensive, it would not be so popular. Secondly, it is also delicious, but it is cheap. Generally speaking, delicious foods are usually expensive. Therefore, I like ramen very much.

Example 2

My favorite food is gratin, because it is very delicious and my mother often cooks it for me. Gratin includes much calcium because it has cheese or cream sauce. As I don't like milk, gratin helps me to have much calcium. So gratin is good for my health, therefore I want to cook it well instead of my mother in the near future.

Yoko Suganuma Oi
Graduate School of Education
Waseda University
1-6-1, Nishi-Waseda, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, 169-8050
yokosuganuma@suou.waseda.jp

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