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## Topic Marking in English Composition by Japanese EFL Learners

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## Topic Marking in English Composition by Japanese EFL Learners

Miki Shibata

The current study examines how a topic-comment structure in Japanese influences second language (L2) learners' written production in English, which is a subject-predicate oriented language, under the assumption that the L2 learners transfer their first language (L1) syntactic characteristics into the target language. The results show the strong influence of topic-prominent syntactic characteristics over the written production by the subject-prominent language (i.e., English).

### 1. Theoretical Background

The most prominent difference between a subject and a topic is that the former is sentence-internal while the latter is discourse-dependent (Li and Thompson, 1976). The subject is a purely syntactic relation between verb and noun phrase (NP). In English the subject is the NP which a verb agrees with and receives the nominative case from the verb while in Japanese the postposition *ga* performs the function of marking the grammatical relations between a NP and a verb. Furthermore, the subject is selectionally related to the verb. That is, the semantic role of the subject depends on the meaning of the verb. On the other hand, the topic is not determined by the verb; the topic does not have any grammatical relation with the verb, and topic selection is independent of the verb. The speaker has considerable freedom in choosing a NP regardless of the meaning of the verb.

Li and Thompson (1976) proposed that the languages could be categorized into four types based on the prominence of the notion of topic

and subject: (i) languages that are subject-prominent; (ii) languages that are topic-prominent; (iii) languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent; and (iv) languages that are neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent (p. 459). According to their typological claim, English is a subject-prominent language while Japanese is a subject-prominent and topic-prominent language.

In Japanese, the topic and the subject are morphologically marked. The former is marked by the sentence-initial phrase marker *wa* and the latter by the nominative particle *ga*. On the other hand, in English, a subject-prominent language, topic is not necessarily linguistically manifested but the subject must appear at a position where a verb governs and semantically controls. Consider the Japanese examples in (1).

- (1) a. Taro ga hashit-ta.  
       NOM run-PAST'  
       'Taro ran.'
- b. Taro wa hashit-ta  
       TOP run-PAST  
       'Taro ran.'

*Taro* is presented as the agent of running by means of the subject marker *ga* in (1a). On the other hand, *Taro* in (1b) is topicalized with the topic marker *wa* while preserving the status as the agent of running. However, the English equivalent for both (1a) and (1b) is *Taro ran*.

Besides the nominative marker *ga*, the topic marker *wa* replaces the accusative case marker *o*, the zero marker  $\phi$ , and the possessive marker *no* as presented below:

- (2) a. *Kono hon* wa *chichi ni morat-ta*.  
       This book TOP father from receive-PAST

'(I) received *this book* from my father.'

b. *Chichi ni kono hon o morat-ta.*

Father from this book ACC receive-PAST

'I received this book from my father.'

(3) a. *Kyoo wa haha to kaimono ni it-ta.*

Today TOP mother with shopping to go-PAST

'Today (I) went shopping with my mother.'

b. *Kyoo  $\phi$  haha to kaimono ni it-ta.*

Today mother with shopping to go-PAST

'(I) went shopping with my mother today.'

(4) a. *zoo wa hana ga naga-i.*

Elephant TOP trunk NOM long-NPST

'Elephants have a long trunk.'

b. *zoo no hana ga naga-i.*

Elephant POSS trunk NOM long-NPST

'Elephant's trunk is long.'

The object NP *kono hon* 'this book' in (2b) is topicalized in (2a). In (3a) the temporal adverb *kyoo* is a topic, which is presented by the zero marker  $\phi$  in (3b). The topicalized NP *zoo* 'elephant' in (4a) modifies the subject NP *hana* 'trunk' in (4b).

Previous studies on the role of syntactic typology in L2 acquisition have reported two contradictory findings. One is that the process of L2 acquisition is characterized by an early universal topic-comment stage. And the other is that L2 learners transfer topic-prominent features from their native language to a target language at an early stage. Fuller and Gundel (1987) compared highly topic-prominent languages (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, and Korean), and less topic-prominent languages (e.g., Arabic, Farsi, and Spanish). They found no differences in topic-

prominence in English oral narratives by the two language groups. This finding supported the former, that is, regardless of native languages L2 learners start to mark topic-comment structure in the L2 acquisition process. On the other hand, Onaha (2003), studying three Japanese ESL speakers of English, reported the typological transfer of topicalization from their L1 to L2 spoken discourse. Jin (1994) also found that L1 syntactic features were transferred to L2, investigating the conversational context produced by 46 English native speakers learning Chinese as an L2. Sasaki (1990) investigated the Japanese EFL learners' compositions focusing on existential sentences with a locative sentential topic. She found that there was a general change from the use of topic-prominent to subject-prominent structures as their English proficiency increased. Sasaki's study, however, did not argue if the learners' production was due to a universal stage or transfer from their L1.

Presenting the structural consistency between their English sentences and the Japanese equivalents, the current study suggests that the Japanese EFL learners transfer topic-prominent structure from their L1 to English. The syntactic subject is most frequently topicalized and marked by the topic marker *wa* (Mikami, 1960; Noda, 1996). This fact camouflages the topic marker *wa* as the subject marker. Since the *wa*-marked NP appears in the initial position which is identical with the English syntactic subject, the Japanese learners may wrongly assume that the topicalized NP which is marked by *wa* in the Japanese equivalent can appear in the sentence initial position in English.

## 2. Study

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 58 college students attending required English courses in Japan. All of them had completed six years of

English education at junior high and senior high schools before entering university in Japan. Before the semester started, all freshmen took the English placement test, which was internally designed based on Practical English Exams Level 3 and Level pre-2. Based on their score on the test, they were placed into 3 levels: high, middle, and low. Their levels do not indicate the students' absolute proficiency. The high level does not mean that the students are considered advanced, but are a higher level than the middle and low students. Table 1 shows the score and level of each course.

**Table 1. Test Scores and Levels**

Course	Year	N	Score	Level
Grammar 1	1	21	72 - 50	High
Grammar II	2	18	55 - 37	Middle
Composition	2	19	79 - 56	High

N = Number of participants

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

I examined the English daily journals written by 58 Japanese college students, focusing on the semantic relationship of verb and sentence subject. They kept English journals every single day between April, 2000 and December, 2000 to fulfill course requirements.

The present qualitative study argues the tendency drawn from the actual excerpts in the journals. I identified the sentences which interpretation indicated the semantically inappropriateness, consulting one English native, who is from England, as an informant to ask whether these sentences were semantically appropriate. All semantically inappropriate sentences were grouped into eight categories for analysis.

Although the excerpts included other types of ungrammaticality such as subject-verb agreement and missing articles, these errors were

disregarded since they were irrelevant to my research interests in the current study. Misspelled words were also left uncorrected.

### 3. Results

The total numbers of sentences and words appearing in the journals from the three courses were as follows:

**Table 2. Number of Sentences and Words from Each Course**

Course	Sentences	Words
Grammar I	8,794	56,576
Grammar II	7,035	44,290
Composition	8,909	60,451

Table 3 shows the number of sentences for each category. Since the task was writing a daily journal, time adverbs (e.g., *today*, *tomorrow*) appear most frequently throughout the categories.

**Table 3. Number of Sentences and an Example from the Actual Production for Each Category**

Pattern	Cases	Example
I. NP-V-NP		
a. NP + verb + subject NP	29	Today died my dog of house in Fukuoka.
b. Time adverb+verb+(object NP)	32	Tonight went to bed earlier than usual.
c. NP + is + SV(O)	23	She was everything went well while.
d. Location + verb + (object NP)	10	This restaurant could choose three favorite side dishes.
e. Object NP + verb	5	Last vacation has to enjoy!
II. NP + is + adjective		
a. Time adverb + is + adjective	92	Today was very tired.
b. [Part time job] + is + adjective	51	Today's job was so tired.
c. Location + is + adjective	2	My work shop was not busy.

### 3.1. NP-V-NP

a. *NP + verb + subject NP*. In this pattern, the sentence initial NP indicates time or location. As shown in excerpts (5) and (6) below, the time adverb (e.g., *tomorrow*) and the location NP (e.g., *our school*) appear in the syntactic subject position where the verb assigns the thematic role. Although they are in the syntactic subject, the time adverb and the location NP cannot be interpreted as the semantic subject. Instead, the object NPs (i.e., *school* and *its summer vacation*) seem to correspond to the thematic role that the verb assigns to the subject.

(5) a. Tomorrow finish school. (#2)<sup>2</sup>

b. *Ashita wa gakkō ga owa-ru*  
tomorrow TOP school NOM finish-NONPAST  
'School will finish tomorrow.'

(6) a. Our school begins its summer vacation. (#31)

b. *Watashitachi no gakkō wa natsu-yasumi ga hajima-ru.*  
Our school TOP summer break NOM begin-NONPAST  
'Summer break will begin at our school.'

Interestingly, however, the Japanese counterparts for the excerpts are all interpretable. The object NP in each excerpt satisfies the thematic role assigned to the grammatical subject NP, marked by the subject marker *ga* in the Japanese translations. This shows that the Japanese learners put the subject NP in the object NP position since the syntactic subject position is occupied with the time adverb or the location NP, which is topicalized.

The following excerpts show that the intransitive verb seemingly functions as the transitive.



(7) a. Today died my dog of house in Fukuoka. (#21)

b. *Kyoo wa fukuoka no ie no watashi no inu ga shin-da.*  
Today TOP POSS house POSS my dog NOM die-PAST  
'Today, my dog I had in Fukuoka died.'

(8) a. Okinawa come a typhoon. (#37)

b. *Okinawa wa taifuu ga ki-ta.*  
TOP typhoon NOM come-PAST  
'The typhoon came to Okinawa.'

The intransitive verbs *die* in (8a) and *come* in (8a) have two arguments respectively: *today* and *my dog*, and *Okinawa* and *a typhoon*. However, the time adverb *today*, and the location NP *Okinawa* cannot be construed as the agent although they appear in the subject position. Semantically the NP in the object position indicates the thematic role that should be assigned to the subject NP. *Today* and *Okinawa* are marked by the topic marker *wa* in the Japanese equivalent as presented in (b). There is the positional consistency between the subject NP in (a) and the topicalized time adverb or location NP in (b).

The strong tendency of topicalization is evident in the passive construction. In the passive sentences (9) and (10) below, the topicalized location NP appears in the syntactic subject position and the object NP is not moved to the subject position.

(9) a. Okinawa was issued a Typhoon warning. (#45)

b. *Okinawa wa taifuu keihoo ga dasa-re-ta.*  
TOP typhoon warning NOM issue-PASV-PAST  
'In Okinawa the typhoon warning was issued.'

(10) a. All dishes are used tomatoes. (#5)

b. *Subete no ryouri wa tomato ga tsukawa-re-te i-ta.*

all dishes TOP tomatoes NOM use-PASV-PAST

'For all dishes, tomatoes were used.'

In the English passive construction, the object NP is raised to the subject NP position in order to get the nominative case. The NPs a *typhoon warning* and *tomatoes* are originally in the object position so they should have been in the subject position in the passive construction. However, the excerpts show that the NP in the syntactic subject position marks the location, which is unlikely for them to receive the thematic role from the verb in the object position and be raised to the subject position. All subject NPs above are marked by the topic marker *wa* in the Japanese translation as shown in (9b) and (10b). Interestingly, the NP in the object position in the English sentence is passivized in the Japanese translation, marked by the subject marker *ga*. But since the subject position is occupied with the topicalized NP in the English sentence, the object NPs cannot be raised up to the subject position so they remain in the original position.

Without topicalization, in the Japanese passive construction *Okinawa* and *all dishes* originally appear in the postpositional phrase as shown in (11):

(11) a. *Taifuu keihoo ga Okinawa ni da-sare-ta.*

Typhoon warning NOM in issue-PASV-PAST

'A typhoon warning was issued in Okinawa.'

b. *Tomato ga subete no ryouri ni tsukawa-re-te i-ta.*

Tomatoes NOM all POSS dishes for use-PASV-STATE-PAST

'Tomatoes were used for all dishes.'

The Japanese EFL learners seemed to translate the topic-comment

structures word for word, presented in (9b) and (10b) into English, which produced the semantically inappropriate sentences.

The excerpts presented above suggest that the Japanese EFL learners overgeneralize the use of the sentence initial NP for the topicalized NP. Since the syntactic subject position is occupied by the topicalized NP, the postverbal position is the only position in which the semantic subject can be syntactically expressed.

*b. Time adverb + verb + (object NP).* This pattern of inappropriate sentences shows that the time adverb appears in the grammatical subject position. However, the time adverb is not semantically qualified to meet the semantic characteristics of the thematic role that the verb assigns to the external argument. Unlike the pattern of NP + verb + subject NP, there is no semantic subject to indicate the agent of the event.

- (12) a. ..., but today had no test why I don't know. (#5)  
b. Next week have many tests. (#45)  
c. Because, today held beach party with schools my friends. (#56)  
d. This evening looked for nice dish restaurant. (#41)  
e. Tonight went to bed earlier than usual. (#41)  
f. This year earn a credit too hard. (#45)  
g. Tomorrow will go to China at last. (#48)

Notice that there is no semantic subject phonologically realized throughout the excerpts above. From the context of the excerpts in (12) the missing subject must be the writer, expressed with the first pronoun, which is commonly omitted in Japanese. The Japanese EFL learners must assume that it is allowed that the first pronoun does not syntactically appear in English like their L1. The pattern of NP + verb

+ subject NP observed in the previous section showed that the Japanese EFL learners appeared to present the semantic subject in the postverbal position when it must be phonologically realized and there is no object NP. The pattern of Time AP + verb + (object NP) suggests that the semantic subject does not appear at the surface level when it is the first pronoun.

Interestingly, as shown in (13), some learners inserted the auxiliary *be* between the time adverb in the syntactic subject position and the verbal predicate. The verb either has the base form or is inflected into the progressive or the past.

- (13) a. Every Monday morning is feel so tired. (#6)  
b. Today was cooking with my friend. (#7)  
c. Today was started new part time job. (#35)  
d. Tomorrow is planing beach party with Chinese evening class. (#45)  
e. Tomorrow is go on the boat again. (#51)

Although the motivation for each inflection is not clearly identified, the auxiliary *be* insertion suggests that the Japanese EFL learners linguistically mark the topic in English. They plausibly assume that the sentence initial position is for a topic in English as it is in their L1 and the auxiliary *be* can function as a topic-marking device in English. The same tendency was also found in Sasaki (1990).

c. *NP + is +SV(O)*. In this pattern, there are two grammatical subjects; one in a main clause and the other in the embedded clause. The initial subject is the NP marked by *wa* in the Japanese equivalents. For instance, in the following excerpts, the event having happened *today* is

described in the embedded clause. The time adverb is topicalized and raised to the syntactic subject position.

- (14) a. Today is my friend come from Kobe. (#18)  
 b. Today was few customers came at store. (#24)  
 c. Today was I watched movie. (#32)

In the following excerpts other types of NPs are topicalized and appear in the syntactic subject position.

- (15) a. She was everything went well while. (#13)  
 b. *Kanojo wa subete ga umaku it-te i-ta.*  
 she TOP everything NOM well go -PROG-PAST  
 c. *Shibaraku subete ga kanojo ni umaku it-te i-ta.*  
 For a while all/everything NOM her for well go-PROG-PAST  
 'Everything went well for her for a while.'
- (16) a. Nago is still Typhoon stay...!! (#45)  
 b. *Nago wa mada taifuu ga i-ru.*  
 TOP still typhoon NOM stay-NPST  
 c. *Taifuu ga Mada Nago ni i-ru.*  
 typhoon NOM still in stay-NPST  
 'The typhoon still stays in Nago.'
- (17) a. That is my mother made. (#23)  
 b. *Sore wa watashi no haha ga tsukuri-mashita.*  
 That TOP my mother NOM make-PAST  
 c. *Watashi no haha ga sore o tsukut-ta.*  
 My mother NOM that ACC make-PAST  
 'My mother made that.'

The NPs *she* and *Nago* are originally in the PP as shown in the (15c) and (16c) respectively. In (17a) the object NP is topicalized: The object NP followed by *wa* is raised to the syntactic subject position and the object marker *o* is erased as indicated in (17b). All initial NPs in the excerpts are marked with the topic marker *wa* in the Japanese counterparts (15b), (16b), and (17b), which is grammatical and interpretable.

All excerpts presented above suggest that the Japanese EFL learners mark the topic by separating it from the comment by means of the copula. The excerpt (18) clearly shows this assumption.

- (18) My summer vocation is best of memory is I join to Kin town immigrants experiment program. (#51)

There are two topics in (18); *my summer vacation* and *best memory*. Both of them are isolated from the comment 'I join to Kin town immigrants experiment program' by putting the copula after each of them. Both NPs are marked by *wa* in the Japanese equivalent. In the previous section the auxiliary *be* separates the topic from the comment structure. Both patterns show that the copula *be* and the auxiliary *be* play a role of marking the topicalization in the Japanese EFL learners' mental representation for the English sentences. The consistency between the English sentence and the Japanese translation implies that the Japanese mental representation of syntactic structure seems to play a role in constructing a sentence in English.

*d. Location + verb + (object NP)*. The sentences are acceptable when the location NP is personalized as the agent, and the predicate indicates the property of the subject NP.

- (19) a. ..., so that place can give a lot of entertainments. (#41)  
 b. Okinawa Christian Junior College held graduation today. (#45)  
 c. This shop makes delicious cakes. (#46)

The location NP is personalized in the excerpts (19). In this case, they can be marked by *ga* and interpreted as the agent. On the other hand, the location NP cannot be personalized in (20). It is impossible for the restaurant to choose the dishes. Without topicalization each location NP must originally appear in the PP as shown in (c).

- (20) a. This restaurant could choose three favorite side dishes. (#41)

b. *Kono resutoran wa mittsu no saido disshu ga erabe-ta*  
 this restaurant TOP three POSS side dishes NOM choose-can-  
 PAST

c. *kono resutoran de mittsu no saido disshu ga erabe-ta.*  
*This restaurant at* three POSS side dishes NOM choose-can-  
 PAST

'We could choose three dishes at this restaurant.'

- (21) a. The place can drink as much as you want 1000 yen for 2hours. (#45)

b. *Sono basho wa 2-jikann 1000yen de nomitaidake nome-ru.*  
 The place TOP 2 hours with as much as you want drink-can-NPST

c. *Sono basho de 2-jikann 1000yen de nomitaidake nome-ru*  
*The place at* 2 hours with as much as you want drink-can-NPST  
 'You can drink as much as you want for 2 hours with 1000 yen  
 at the place.'

Interestingly, when a location NP is personalized, the subject marker *ga* can mark it. In (19) in which the location NPs are

personalized, both topic marker *wa* and subject marker *ga* can mark them. On the other hand, it is not possible for the subject marker *ga* to replace the topic marker *wa* in (20b) and (21b). This phenomenon supports the above argument: The location NP is canonically in the PP and it appears in the grammatical subject position when topicalized.

*e. Object NP + verb.* In this pattern, the NP in the subject position is semantically interpreted as the theme of the predicate, and the semantic subject is missing. The Japanese translation and English sentence that the learners meant are provided along with each excerpt.

- (22) a. My car can't drive, can't move in this morning. (#6)  
 b. *Watashi no kuruma wa unten deki-na-i.*  
     My car TOP drive be able to-NEG-NPST  
 c. I can't drive my car.
- (23) a. The Milky Way couldn't see because it was cloudy. (#41)  
 b. *Ama no gawa wa mie-nakhat-ta.*  
     Milky way TOP see-can-NEG-PAST  
 c. I couldn't see the Milky Way because it was cloudy.
- (24) a. Last vacation has to enjoy! (#45)  
 b. *Saigo no yasumi wa tanoshima-nakerebanaranai.*  
     last vacation TOP enjoy-have to:NPST  
 c. I have to enjoy the last vacation.

There is no agent in both (a) and (b). That is, there is no semantic subject in (a) and no *ga*-marked NP in (b). The semantic subject is the first person pronoun as shown in (c). Since the first pronoun is commonly omitted in Japanese, the Japanese learners in the present study may not be sensitive to the explicit marking of the subject in English.



They might have not yet acquired the knowledge that the subject NP must be phonologically expressed.

### 3.2. NP + is + adjective

The initial NP in this pattern is topicalized and is not semantically appropriate to receive the thematic role from the adjective.

*a. Time adverb + is + adjective.* The adjectives frequently appearing in this pattern are *tired* and *busy*, which require the human subject for the semantic subject in order to receive the *experiencer* role from the adjectives. Therefore, the time adverb does not satisfy the semantic requirement of the adjectives. In (25) the time adverb is topicalized, which must be marked by *wa* in the learners' mental representation. Since the missing semantic subject is the first pronoun recoverable from the context, the *experiencer* role assigned by the adjective is not syntactically realized, which turns to be ungrammatical in English.

- (25) a. Today is free. (#2)  
b. Today was very tired. (#54)  
c. Today was very sad all day. (#54)  
d. ..., so now is very sleepy. (#40)

The adjectives for climate such as *hot* and *cold* also appear. Although my informant accepted the sentences, she yet prefers the sentence *It is hot today* to *Today is hot*.

*b. [Part time job] + is + adjective.* A part-time job was frequently mentioned in the journals. When they described their part-time job, the adjective such as *tired*, *free*, *busy*, *hard*, and *easy* were frequently used. But the sentences are semantically inappropriate since those adjectives

require the human subject. The excerpts are presented below along with the appropriate sentences that my native informant suggested:

- (26) a. Today, part time job is free. (#2)  
b. I had the day off. /Today was my day off.
- (27) a. Part time job was very busy today. (#22)  
b. I was busy at work. / It was a busy day at work.
- (28) a. Today's job was so tired. (#51)  
b. Today's job was so tiring.

c. *Location + is + adjective*. My informant accepted the following excerpts since the adjective such as *hot*, *cold*, and *warm* describes the quality of the place that appears in the syntactic subject position.

- (29) a. Yokohama is so hot, (#5)  
b. It was november already, Okinawa is not cold. (#10)

The following excerpts, however, are problematic since the NPs *my work shop* and *school* are not semantically qualified to be the semantic subject of adjectives *busy* and *free*.

- (30) a. My work shop was not busy. (#2)  
b. because tomorrow school is free. (#2)

To sum up, all excerpts presented above show the consistency with the Japanese equivalents. It appears that the NP in the syntactic subject position of the English sentences is a topic, which is marked by the topical marker *wa* in their mental representation of the Japanese equivalent.

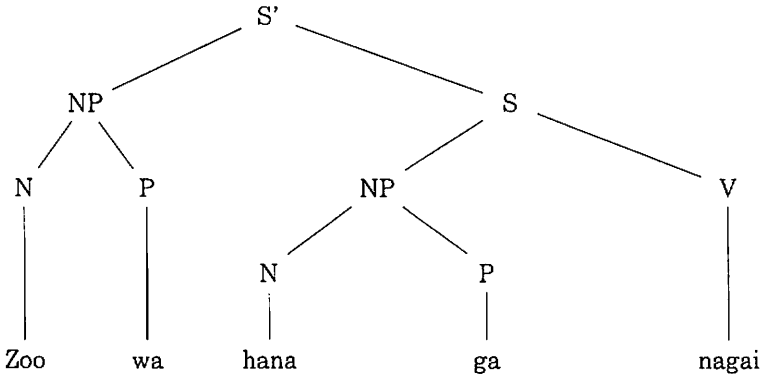


the target language, which suggests that the Japanese EFL learners' production is due to straightforward transfer from their L1.

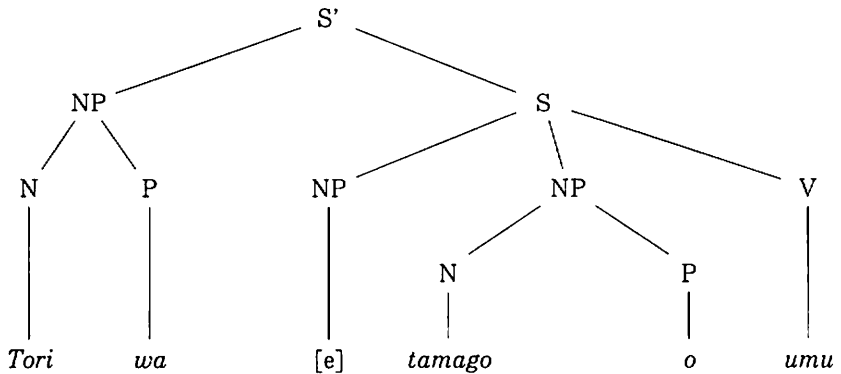
Another indication of my study is that even if the Japanese EFL learners produce the NP-V-NP sentences, this does not guarantee that the sentence initial NP is projected as the subject in their mental representation. They may not consider the external NP to be the subject but simply the position for the *wa*-marked NP in Japanese equivalent, which leads them to the non-distinction between the topic and the subject. As long as the nominative case marked NP is topicalized, the English sentences that the Japanese EFL learners produce still have the S-V-O word order. The initial NP satisfies the role of both syntactic and semantic subject. This syntactic phenomenon deceives the Japanese EFL learners. In other words, the topic marker *wa* camouflages itself as the subject marker. Given this, the topic-predicate structure in Japanese happens to resemble the subject-predicate structure in English, which enables them to produce grammatically appropriate sentences when the external argument is topicalized. Fortunately, the Japanese learners can express intended meanings in the target language through translation of the native language. But this is not the case for the NPs with other case markers. At the surface level or the syntactic level, the sentences that these Japanese EFL learners produce are seemingly grammatical since the syntactic subject position is fulfilled with the NP. At the semantic level, however, the sentences are inappropriate in English since the external NP is not semantically qualified to satisfy the thematic role assigned by the verb. The thematic role semantically limits the possible NP for the semantic subject. In short, the sentences produced by the Japanese EFL learners are syntactically correct but not semantically.

The Japanese grammarians have agreed that the topic appears in a separate node, which is the sentence initial position (e.g., Kuno, 1973; Saito, 1985; Shibatani, 1990; Tateishi, 1994). Shibatani, for instance, presents the following structures for the Japanese topic-comment construction (p. 274):

- (32) a. *Zoo wa hana ga nagai*  
 elephant TOP nose NOM long:NPST  
 'An elephant is such that its trunk is long.'



b. *Tori wa [e] tamago o umu*  
 bird TOP egg ACC lay  
 'A bird lays eggs.'



The NP, external to the S and dominated by S', is referred to as topic and the S as comment. In (32a) two NPs occupy the topic and subject positions respectively. *Zoo* 'elephant' is the topic and *hana* 'nose' is the subject of the comment structure. On the other hand, the syntactic subject in (32b) is left empty but it is understood as referring to the topic. In other words, the topic *tori* 'bird' plays the role of syntactic and semantic subject as well as the topic. The Japanese EFL learners' written productions suggest that the mental presentation of the Japanese syntactic structure should be transferred to their L2 production. The mental representation seems to be persistent in the process of L2 acquisition, and the topicalized NP must suppress the subject NP arising in the syntactic subject position when the learners construct the English sentence. Furthermore, transferring the Japanese syntactic feature that the pronouns in the subject position are normally omitted, they did not appear in the English sentences produced by Japanese EFL

learners. In this case, the semantic subject is missing and the subject position in the comment structure leaves empty (i.e., [[*topic NP*][[*e*][*V X*]]). At the surface level it appears as [[*topic NP*]-*V-X*].

When the semantic subject needs to be syntactically realized, the learners in the current study seem to have two strategies to do so. One is that the semantic subject is positioned in the object NP since it is the only available grammatical position: [[*topic NP*]-*V*-[*semantic subject NP*]]. The other is that the semantic subject appears in the subject position of the comment structure. In this case, the copula is inserted between the topic and the comment, marking the topicalization: [[*topic NP*]-*COPULA*-[[*semantic subject NP*]-*V-X*]]. Both [[*topic NP*]-*V*-[*semantic subject NP*]] and [[*topic NP*]-*COPULA*-[[*semantic subject NP*]-*V-X*]] follow the English canonical word order, demonstrating that either a regular verb or a copula follows the initial NP. This implies that the Japanese learners may not have much difficulty to acquire the canonical word order of English since the positive evidence and the formal instruction are available from their very first learning experience. However, the linguistic device of grammatical relations in Japanese may preclude them from realizing that thematic roles are assigned positionally in English. English is a configurational language, in which the subject and the object are expressed in terms of sentence structural position and the alignment relation between thematic roles and structural positions must be obtained. On the other hand, Japanese is a non-configurational language, in which grammatical relations are expressed by means of case marking (Zobl, 1989).

One plausible explanation of the Japanese EFL learners' performance is the influence of the textbooks used and the teaching approach. I examined the basic sentence structures in a set of junior high school English texts from the seventh to the tenth grade published by three

different publishers. Two out of three series provide the Japanese translations for all example sentences. In most, if not all, sentences the grammatical subjects are translated to the *wa*-marked NP in the Japanese translation. This fact may motivate the Japanese EFL learners to place any *wa*-marked NP in the syntactic subject position in English. Along with the textbooks, the grammar translation method seems to be still widely utilized in Japan. In this method, translation is a main task. The subject NP in the English sentences is most frequently translated into the *wa*-marked NP. The repetitive exposure could enforce the learners to connect the initial NP position and the topicalized NP in the English sentences.

## 5. Conclusion

The current study demonstrated that Japanese EFL learners assume that any topicalized NP freely comes to the subject position regardless of their semantic relationship to a lexical verb in English as occurs in their L1. Corder's (1981) statement "Purely superficial formal correctness is no guarantee of absence of error" (p.39) accounts for the unique structural patterns that I observed in the Japanese EFL learners' writing.

One may point out that we found a small number of examples comparing to the total number of sentences that the Japanese EFL learners produced. This is because most sentences started with the first person pronoun or animate subject which satisfies the thematic role that the verb assigns to the external argument. The first person pronoun and the animate subjects might be marked by *wa* in their mental representation and appear in the sentence initial NP in the English sentences through translation, which happens to produce the syntactically appropriate and interpretable sentences.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> List of abbreviations: ACC = Accusative, CONT = Contrast, NEG = Negative, NOM = Nominative, NPST = Non-past, PASV = Passive, POSS = Possessive, PROG = Progressive, TOP = Topic

<sup>2</sup> The number in the parenthesis indicates the participant's ID number.

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## 論文要旨

日本語と英語の最も基本的な単文の文構造を比較すると、前者は文頭の名詞句に主題 (topic) が、後者は主語が現われるという統語的相違点が見られる。日本語と英語の文では、異なる特徴を持つ名詞句が文頭に現れることになる。主題は、そこに現れる名詞句が後続の動詞から意味的制約を受けないため、比較的自由に多様な意味を持つ名詞句が現れる。一方、主語の位置に現れる名詞句は動詞から意味的制約を受けるので、そこに現れる名詞句は意味的に限定されることになる。本研究では、日本語母語話者の英語習得過程において、日本語の文構造の特徴がどのように彼らの英文の産出に影響するかを調査した。日本の大学で英語を学習する日本人母語話者58名に毎日英語でジャーナルをつけてもらい、そこに書かれた文をデータとし、NP (名詞句) -VP (動詞句) (-NP (名詞句) あるいは節) の文構造の点から英文とその日本語訳を比較・分析した。その結果日本人学習者が産出する英文は、Last vacation has to enjoy の文のように文頭に名詞句があらわれているが、必ずしもそれは動詞と意味的つながりを持った主語でないことがわかった。この結果から日本語学習者がSVOという英語の語順を産出できても、文頭の名詞句を主語と認識しているわけではないと示唆される。