Critical Thinking and Discussions in a Japanese University EFL Setting

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This paper presents a curriculum that develops learners' critical-thinking ability through the utilization of Bloom's taxonomy and discussions in a Japanese university EFL global topics course. Bloom's taxonomy distinguishes levels of thought processing based on the degree of cognitive demand. Japanese university students were given explicit training in Bloom's Taxonomy and discussion skills and then required to lead small group discussions. To measure the success of the study, students' questions and reflections were assessed. Results indicate that students were able to create higher order critical-thinking questions, which resulted in more meaningful discussions. However, findings also suggested that giving more time to develop students' awareness of the different degrees of difficulty within each level would further develop students' communicative competence. Though the testing was done at 2 universities in Japan, these principles can be utilized in many other contexts.

本論文では、Bloomの分類法を利用し、日本の大学のEFLグローバルトピックコースでディスカッションを行い、学習者の批判的思考能力を育成するカリキュラムを紹介する。Bloomの分類法は、認知（認識）要求の程度に基づいて思考処理のレベルを区別する。日本の大学生には、Bloomの分類法とディスカッションスキルを明示的に訓練した後、小グループディスカッションを行わせた。成果を測るために、学生の質問と感想を評価した。結果は、学生が高次の批判的な思考の質問を作成することができたことを示し、より有意義な議論につながった。しかし、結果はまた、各レベル内で異なる難易度に対する学生の意識を高めることに、より多くの時間をかけることが、学生のコミュニケーション能力をさらに高めることを示唆した。日本の2つの異なる大学で試行されたが、これらの理論は他の多くの状況でも利用できるであろう。

Despite the demand for more communicative English curriculums in Japan, the need to pass fact-oriented university entrance examinations continues to place high priority on rote learning and the memorization of grammar and vocabulary (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2008). Consequently, students have limited experience in creating questions in English. Moreover, the questions in English that they are comfortable using tend to be yes/no or short-answer questions that require little critical thought. However, the students' inability to create higher order critical-thinking questions in English should not be an indicator of their overall critical-thinking ability, but rather that critical thinking in English is unfamiliar to them.

The aim of this paper is first to briefly discuss linguistic and sociolinguistic concerns that affect Japanese students' abilities to perform the higher level linguistic activities, such as the critical-thinking and discussion skills in English required by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2008, 2011, 2016). Next, I will introduce a curriculum that incorporates Bloom's taxonomy and develops critical thinking through English discussion. Finally, the paper concludes with the results of the study and future considerations.

Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Concerns That Affect Japanese Students' Ability to Discuss in English

Linguistic Concerns

There is a discrepancy between the official communicative language teaching (CLT) policy of MEXT (2008, 2011, 2016) and the classroom realities in Japan. In CLT the focus is on the meaning rather than the form of the language (Nishino, 2008; Savignon & Wang, 2003). The priority is to communicate ideas so that they are understood, and the linguistic form is of secondary importance. This is in contrast to form-focused instruction that emphasizes the knowledge of grammatical rules and prioritizes the production of the correct form (Savignon & Wang, 2003). English education in Japanese secondary schools

has been dominated by the latter—specifically, the *yakudoku* system of word-for-word translation of English into Japanese (Gorsuch, 1998). One major factor for this justification to maintain traditional methodologies in Japanese junior and senior high schools is the necessity to prepare students for the high-stakes English language university examinations that predominately test form (Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2008). The emphasis on passing university entrance exams serves to inhibit conversational skill development (Nishino, 2008; Sawir, 2005; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). Studies of Japanese exchange students found that the students perceived that their lack of speaking proficiency was due to the emphasis in Japan on reading and writing in English with few opportunities for speaking (Sawir, 2005; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). According to one student, in order "to pass the examination in English, we don't need to speak English" (Sawir, 2005 p. 573). Furthermore, the lack of opportunities to hold meaningful discussions in English affected the Japanese students' conversational abilities abroad (Yanagi & Baker, 2016). Nishino (2008) examined Japanese teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the range of communicative activities they used. The study found that, without their native-English-speaking assistant language teachers, most Japanese teachers classified and used activities such as games and information-gap tasks as "communicative activities." Yet these activities only require lower levels of cognitive processing. Communicative activities that require deeper cognitive processing were used by Japanese teachers less (e.g., role play—19%, discussion—24%, and debates—5%). However, this study did not measure the degree to which (e.g., how often) these higher order tasks were included in the curriculum by those who used them. Thus, although test preparation and traditional classroom activities have familiarized students with responding to questions that have a concrete answer (usually related to language form), many students may have limited experience in creating or responding to questions that require deeper thought in English. Moreover, given that most Japanese classrooms are teacher centered (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2008), students may not have experience with interactive communicative activities not only in English, but even in their own native Japanese. As such, phrases that signal acts such as disagreement or clarification and the creation of higher order questions may also be unfamiliar to them in Japanese. Therefore, the teacher must preteach these phrases and provide models of higher order questions prior to requiring students to engage in discussion.

Sociolinguistic Concerns

Hofstede's (1980, 2011) cultural dimension framework is one of the most widely cited and applied theories in psychology, sociology, marketing, and business management research (Sondergaard, 1994). The model distinguishes cultures according to six dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint. Although Hofstede's theory has been broadly adopted among many disciplines, it has also been widely challenged (McSweeney, 2002; Sondergaard 1994). However, despite this opposition, comparison of other different models that examine cultural distance and dimensions show only limited advancement from the Hofstede framework (Magnusson, Wilson, Zdravkovic, Zhou, & Westjohn, 2008). Moreover, there have been a significant number of replication studies that have confirmed his findings (for a complete review see Eringa, Caudron, Rieck, Xie, & Gerhardt, 2015).

According to Hofstede (2011), Western, including English-speaking, cultures tend to be classified as individualistic with self-determination to achieve personal (individual) goals. This is in contrast to Eastern collectivist values that place value on a sense of self that is interconnected with others and the harmony of interpersonal relationships. For Westerners, being different and having unique ideas is regarded highly. For Japanese, sharing similarities and being part of a group are desired.

Another characteristic of collectivist societies is the notion of face. According to face-negotiation theory there are three *face* concerns: *self-face*—the concern for one's own image, *other face*—the concern for another's face, and *mutual face*—a concern for a collective or relationships (Ting-Toomey & Korugi, 1998). Individualistic countries also have a similar notion of face (Oetzel et. al, 2003). However, individualistic cultures prioritize tasks and face preservation is of secondary concern. In contrast, for collectivist cultures, including Japan, face is a primary concern, particularly to maintain relationships and can supersede a task. Research has found that individualists have high self-face concern that leads towards conflict strategies, but collectivists have high other-face concern that results in avoiding conflict (Oetzel et al, 2003). The free-flowing style of discussion and debate commonly practiced in North America or Europe is not as frequently practised in Japan because people prefer to avoid the risk of offending other people. Rather Japanese spend more time finding similarities or a common ground through which they can develop their relationships. As a result, the teacher must be cognizant of pragmatic strategies that equip students with the ability to state disagreement while respecting face concerns.

Revised Bloom's Taxonomy

Both the original Bloom (1956) taxonomy and the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) have widely been used as a way to organize and write educational goals (Athanassiou, McNett, & Harvey, 2003). In the revised Bloom's taxonomy, tasks that have

lower cognitive demands require one to remember, understand, and apply knowledge as well as use skills that have higher cognitive demands that require one to analyze, evaluate, and create ideas (Figure 1). In this study, the revised taxonomy provided a framework to, first, raise the students' metacognitive awareness about question formation, and second, provide model question stems (Appendix A) to assist them with creating self-generated questions.

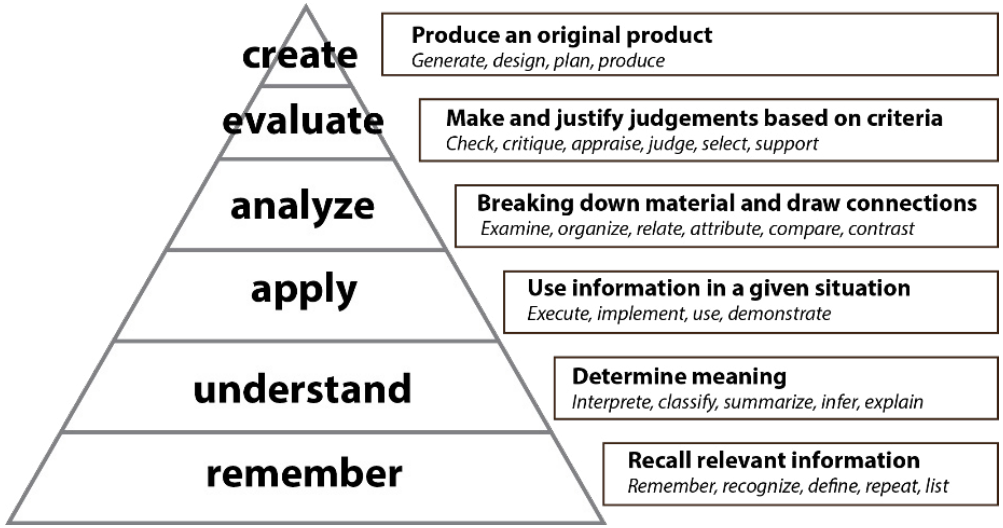

Figure 1. The revised Bloom's taxonomy adapted from Krathwohl (2002).

Course Focus and Participants

The objective of the course was to enable students to:

1. discuss global topics in English,
2. make questions that encourage higher order critical thinking, and
3. disagree in a pragmatically appropriate way.

The course was conducted in two 1st-year and three 2nd-year classes at two different universities in Tokyo. English proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to lower advanced (TOEIC scores 315-650; Appendix B describes the levels). Class sizes ranged from 22 to 32 students.

Course Sequence

Stage 1: Shifting From Short "Q&A Interactions" to Maintaining a 5-Minute Conversation on One Topic

Initially most students can make yes/no questions such as "Have you. . .?" or "Do you. . .?" Although yes/no questions are useful to introduce new topics, they are not sufficient to maintain a conversation. Learners first practiced making WH questions (Appendix C) on familiar topics. Then the "answer, add, ask" pattern was introduced: *answer* refers to students *answering* the question, then they *add* extra information, and finally *ask* a follow-up question. Figure 2 illustrates the difference in students' questions before and after introduction of the activity.

Before the activity	After the activity
Partner A: Do you like sushi?	Partner A: Do you like sushi?
Partner B: Yes.	Partner B: Yes (*answer*), my favorite is *maguro* (*add*). How about you? (*ask*)
Partner A: Me too.	Partner A: I like *maguro* too (*answer*), but my favorite is *uni*. (*add*) Where is the best sushi restaurant in Kichijoji? (*ask*)
Partner B: What kind of sushi do you like?	(conversation continues).
Partner A: I like *maguro*. How about you?	
Partner B: Me too. I like *uni* too.	
(conversation stalls).	

Figure 2. Before and after introducing "answer, add, ask" activity.

Stage 2: Transitioning From "Conversations" to "Discussions": Introducing Bloom's Taxonomy, Discussion Phrases, and Teaching the Pragmatics of Disagreeing

The objective of this stage is to scaffold students as they develop their interactions into deeper discussions. Linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic concerns are discussed below.

Linguistic Concerns

Students must first be equipped with the linguistic knowledge of a variety of English phrases to ask and give opinions and to agree and disagree (see Appendix D). Also, the revised Bloom's taxonomy and question stems were introduced to the students. In

particular, the students practiced creating and answering *analyze*- and *evaluate*-type questions on familiar topics.

Sociolinguistic Concerns

A brief intercultural training that explained the different cultural values between individualistic and collectivist cultures raised the learners' awareness of cultural differences.

Pragmatic Concerns

Pragmatic strategies and discourse markers that helped to promote other-face and maintain harmony in a discussion were taught and practiced. For instance, the previous "answer, add, ask" pattern taught in Stage 1 was changed to "respond, opinion, ask." In order to "save other-face" when disagreeing, the initial response in the pattern should be positive (e.g., "That is a good point," or "I see your point"), before stating disagreement. Students found disagreement much easier to give and receive when beginning their responses with a positive statement.

Stage 3: Addressing More Difficult Topics

After several weeks of practicing Stages 1 and 2, the next stage addressed more challenging global issues. The class was divided into groups of three or four people. Students were tasked to work together to prepare a 3-minute presentation and questions to lead a 7-minute discussion on a global topic. The purpose of the presentation was to inform listeners about a topic prior to discussing it more deeply. For instance, one topic was world religions. Each class was divided into several groups, and each group was responsible for the presentation and discussion about one religion. One 90-minute class period was given for group work to prepare for the presentations and discussions. Group work was guided by a worksheet so that the students knew what was important to include in their presentations (see Appendix E). The following week, the groups were separated into new groups. Each new group had a member that was in charge of a different religion (Figure 3). Presentations and discussions were held simultaneously in the small groups. One teacher observed six to seven groups. After the discussion of each topic, all members were required to complete peer and self-evaluations. A postdiscussion self-reflection was also assigned to the students.

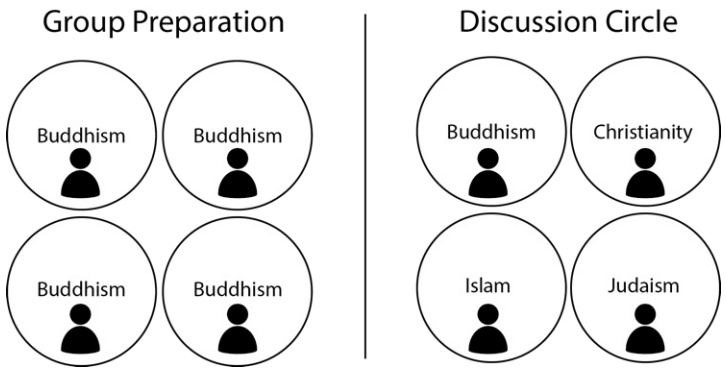

Figure 3: Group formations for world religions.

Outcomes

The following results were collected through the observation notes of the teacher and the students' evaluations and reflections.

Promoted Critical Thinking

Most students commented that the discussions encouraged them to think more deeply about topics. They also expressed surprise and appreciation for new and different opinions that were shared by their classmates. Many mentioned that they changed their minds during the discussion after hearing new perspectives (Figure 4).

> I learned a lot of people having various opinion. I learned opinion that I can't think of when I make a question in discussion. It was very refreshing.
>
> I learned that there are many different customs for each religion. And I also learned that there are still many things I don't know. I was happy to learn about various religion.
>
> Hiroyuki said "religion reduces fear of death" that was an opinion I never thought, so I was very impressed.

Figure 4. Comments reflecting enhanced critical thinking. Usage errors not corrected.

Enhanced Students' Ability to Create Higher Order Questions

The application of the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), increased students' awareness about the different levels of questions, and the stems helped them create questions that promoted deeper, more meaningful discussions. In reflections and peer evaluations students were able to recognize the impact of questions on discussions (Figure 5).

> You should make more analyze or evaluate questions.
>
> Most questions were closed-ended questions, so we could not discuss deeply.
>
> It was difficult to evaluate topics we have not thought deeply about, so next time I want to make all questions, "analyze" type questions.

Figure 5. Comments about question types. Usage errors not corrected.

Furthermore, students demonstrated the ability to create higher order questions that deepened their understanding about different topics. In the first student-led discussions it was common for many students to create lower order (*remember*- and *understand*-type) questions related to their presentations (Figure 6).

> What is the Japanese ranking for overtime hours worked in the world?
>
> Which country has the most deaths per 100,000 in the world?
>
> Do you know about arsenic levels in rice?

Figure 6. Lower order questions at the start of the course. Usage errors not corrected.

However, by the end of the first semester, most questions generated by students for their discussions were higher order, *analyse*-, *apply*-, and *evaluate*-type questions (Figure 7).

- What do you think we should do to reduce the world's poverty gap?
- What do you think the government should do to eliminate poverty in Japan?
- What are you doing to counter global warming?
- How do you think about Japan's carbon dioxide emission superpower compared to other countries?
- What do you think is the condition of happiness?
- Why do you think Japan has a lower degree of well being than Russia although it has security?
- What do you think is good for raising Japanese happiness? (outside security)
- Can you live about 120 yen a day? How do you know that there are many people living at 1.25 dollars a day?
- What do you think knowing that a child who doesn't have food and dies of starvation still enters the world?

Figure 7. Self-generated higher order questions. Usage errors not corrected.

Encouraged the Active Use of English

There were many times when students would use Japanese; however, for the most part students used the phrases to frame their thoughts and were able to use the "respond, opinion, ask" pattern to continue the discussion for 7 minutes. Even if someone had switched to Japanese, by using the phrases to return their thoughts to English they would often then continue to state their thoughts in English. As such, these phrases and

patterns acted as a sort of "trigger" to change back to the L2. Many students reflected that discussions improved their English skills (Figure 8).

> I learned important things in conversation. For example, response to other people. I was able to know new words and expressions I did not know until now and increase the variation of response to conversation. Besides reaction I think that the ability to speak has improved.
>
> Before I had no chance to talk in English. So it was very difficult to talk in English... But I learned most conversations [I] can talk if I remember important words. For example, "I agree with you," "I think that" and "How about you?" etc. And I understood that rejoinders are very important in conversation. Because I felt really pleased when my opponent in pair work said "that's great" during conversation, so I want to use it from now.
>
> The best thing about my discussion was that I could express my opinion without denying other's opinion. However, as I often couldn't express my opinion well I want to improve it. For that, I want to discuss more.
>
> This class was very hard for me. But now, I am really satisfy. My TOEIC score went up 80 compared with last year. I think this result was thanks to this class.

Figure 8. Comments regarding improved English skills. Usage errors not corrected.

Enhanced Social Relationships

Another positive feedback was that through the group work students felt that they could develop better relationships with their classmates (Figure 9).

> I can make a lot of friends through this class. Thanks to them, I take the classes every week.
>
> I like this class because I can make new friends...When I will be second grade, I want to recommend this class to my junior!!!

Figure 9. Comments regarding enhanced social relationships. Usage errors not corrected.

Development of Discussion Skills in the L1

Many students mentioned that they had never learned how to discuss or create questions in Japanese, and that they could apply what they learned in this course to their Japanese discussions. In particular, several students pointed out that the "positive response + opinion" pattern was helpful for them to express disagreement to others. Also, others mentioned that the repeated discussions helped them become more comfortable with saying their opinions. This sentiment is best illustrated by the comments of one student:

> I could learn the effective ways to pass the baton to other person in discussion. In Japanese discussion, everyone just said each other's opinion, but in English way it is necessary to admit other's opinion first, and then said own opinion. At the beginning of this semester, it was a little difficult for me because I did not get used to English way. However, I was able to use the discussion phrases easily and effectively at the end of the semester thanks to practice in class. As I already described, this way is not familiar in Japanese discussion style, but after taking this class, I become to think that I can use this way in Japanese discussion, too. If I say "I agree with you" or I can understand what you said" before describing own idea, I can show how I think people's idea and give the reliefs. Therefore, I would like to use this discussion phrases in Japanese discussion. (Chihiro, 3rd-year law student, usage errors not corrected)

Future Research Considerations

The results demonstrated a number of positive outcomes; however, four challenges emerged. The first challenge was that the activity sequence requires group work for both the preparation and the discussion sections. Although most students made a strong effort to prepare good presentations and discussions, there were cases of individuals who did not make an equal effort to contribute.

The second challenge, given the simultaneous nature of the discussions, was that it was impossible for the teacher to be present at all times. As such, there were many interactions that the teacher missed, which could have affected their evaluations. Future research could explore different methods to capture feedback more efficiently.

A third challenge was that although, in general, the discussions served to enhance critical thinking about a wide variety of global issues, in some cases they served to reinforce stereotypes. For instance, on the topic of world religion one student asked the following question: "What image do you have of Muslims?," and the answer that

they prepared was "I do not have a good image." The ensuing discussion reinforced the negative with all members agreeing and stating the reasons why. Future course applications could incorporate a session that directly addresses stereotypical thinking.

The fourth challenge was that the results suggest that within the different levels posited by Bloom, there appears to be a range of difficulty that depends on topic knowledge and can be confounded by linguistic knowledge. For instance, two questions asked by students were "Do you think Confucianism is right?" and "Why do you think Islam is increasing?" These questions could provide deeper critical thinking if students had previous knowledge about the topics. However, in both cases, the 3-minute presentations the students prepared had insufficient information for the other group members to give an opinion, so the discussion stalled. In other words, just because the question can be typified within the taxonomy to lend itself toward a higher level of thinking does not mean that it promotes higher level thinking. Future research should consider how to introduce Bloom's taxonomy of questions and develop higher order questions with interlocutor linguistic and knowledge limitations in mind.

Conclusion

Despite calls for reforms of English education in Japan (MEXT, 2008, 2011, 2016), many university students have limited experience in using English for critical thinking and discussions (Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2008; Sawir, 2005; Yanagi & Baker, 2016). As university English classes change from language focused to communicative-skill focused, teacher awareness about the linguistic and sociolinguistic needs of the learners must be enhanced. This study illustrated how one course sequence accommodated linguistic and sociolinguistic concerns to develop critical-thinking and discussion skills. Utilizing the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) as a framework, student-generated questions progressed from lower order *remember*- and *understand*- type questions, to higher order *apply*-, *analyze*-, and *evaluate*-type questions. The direct instruction and practice of generating and responding to higher order questions fueled student inquiry and promoted critical thinking. The active use of English through meaningful discussions increased student interest and motivation to use English. Moreover, students' social relationships were enhanced, their speaking ability improved, and enhanced pragmatic awareness could be applied to their L1. Finally, the outcome of frequent student-led discussions employing higher order discussion questions served to cultivate a responsive community that empowered students to think more critically about global issues—a competence that will continue to develop throughout their lives.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Question Stems Based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002)

REMEMBER—*remember information*

- Can you remember.....?
- Where is.....? Who is.....?

UNDERSTAND—*show understanding*

- What is the main idea of.....?
- Can you find an example of....?

APPLY—*use existing information to solve a problem*

- What would happen if.....?
- How would you use this method?

ANALYZE—*examine information to determine relationships*

- Why do you think.....?
- Can you compare...? contrast.....?

EVALUATE—*judge and give opinion*

- Which is more important....?
- What are (good/bad points; advantages/disadvantages)
- Do you agree/disagree.....? Why?

CREATE—*make something new/create new idea*

- What could you design to.....?
- If you were to make a new way to.....how would you do it?

Appendix B

TOEIC Score Descriptors

Total minimum score	CEFR levels		CEFR general description
945 points	Proficient user—Effective operational proficiency	**C1**	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/ herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Total minimum score	CEFR levels		CEFR general description
785 points	Independent user—Vantage	**B2**	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
550 points	Independent user—Threshold	**B1**	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
225 points	Basic user—Waystage	**A2**	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
120 points	Basic user—Breakthrough	**A1**	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Note. Reprinted [adapted] from *ETS Global, Correlation Table TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test Scores and the CEFR levels*, 2016.

Appendix C
Practice Sheets to Make WH Questions

On the topic of ***school*** please make some WH questions.

Who:	Question: Answer:		When:	Question: Answer:
What:	Question: Answer:		Why:	Question: Answer:
Where:	Question: Answer:		How:	Question: Answer:

Appendix D
Sample Discussion Phrases

To ask for an opinion:

English	Japanese
What do you think?	
What's your opinion?	
How do you feel about. . .?	

To give an opinion:

English	Japanese
I think that	
I feel that	
Well, it seems to me that	
In my opinion	

To agree:

English	Japanese
I agree with you.	
You're right.	
I see your point.	
That's an interesting point.	

To disagree:

English	Japanese
I disagree.	
I'm not sure I agree.	
I don't think that	

Appendix E
Worksheet for World Religion Group Work

Please describe the religion: **Where**, **when** and **how** did it start? **Who** started it? **Who** believes in it? How many people believe in it in the world? What % is that of the WORLD population?

Symbols	**What** is its meaning? Origin?

Important beliefs or practices	Explain **what** this practice or belief is (give details). **Why** they believe or do this practice?

Similarity to Japanese practices or beliefs	
Practice or belief that is **similar** 類似to what is done or believed in Japan.	Explain **what** this practice or belief is (give details). **How** is it **similar** to what is practiced or believed in Japan? What is different?

Discussion Questions

(Apply, Analyze, or Evaluate Questions)

1. Your Answer

_____

2. Your Answer

_____

3. Your Answer

_____