

Recategorizing ETS's *Criterion*[®] Topics for More Effective Topic Analyses

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英語ライティング指導ツール、クライテリオン[®]のトピックの再分類：
より効果的なトピック分析のために

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Summary

This paper analyzes more than four hundred topics in the *Criterion*[®] service, an online writing tool developed by Educational Testing Service, in an attempt to identify what kinds of writing skills are required at what grades in the U.S. language education. The problem is that ETS's categorization of topic contents, based on different modes of writing such as persuasive and expository, is not effective for comparative analyses of topics in different grades due to ambiguities in its methods. Thus, this paper recategorizes the topics with categorization problems as a first step toward effective analyses of the topics. The modification is conducted mainly by integrating expository essays and informative essays into other categories with the omission of the two categories and another, which reduces nine categories of ETS's categorization to six categories.

Keywords: *Criterion*[®], writing skills, essay topic, modes of writing

要 旨

この論文では、English Testing Service により開発された英語ライティング指導ツール、クライテリオンで提供されている全400以上のトピックを分析する。最終的には米国の言語教育で学年ごとに求められている能力を特定する目的であるが、ETS による異なるライティング様式（主張文、説明文など）に基づいたトピック分類は、一部その分類の曖昧さのために、異なる学年に渡ってのより効果的な分析を難しくしている。それゆえ、本論文では、最初の段階として、カテゴリー分けに問題があるトピックを再分類し、より合理的な分類にする。主に説明文、情報文を別のカテゴリーに分類し直すことで、ETS の9種類の分類を6種類にまとめる。

キーワード: クライテリオン、ライティング能力、小論文トピック、文章の種類

1. Introduction

Japanese English learners often find it difficult to write effective essays in English because of various factors other than such language skills as vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Those factors include lack of critical/logical thinking, and unfamiliarity with topics. When college students or adult learners of English are given essay writing assignments or take standardized English tests such as *TOEFL iBT*[®], *IELTS*[™], and *TOEIC S/W*[®], they often have great difficulty coming up with ideas to write. It is partly because the topics given are beyond the scope of their knowledge and experience, and partly because the topics require learners to think and write in a way that they have seldom been trained to, even in their native language. Either way, exam-takers often end up failing to write coherent English essays due to lack of “idea fluency” and critical thinking abilities.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology put forward the new educational policy of developing four English communication skills in an attempt to cultivate human resources who can become successful in the ever-increasing global community. Especially essential to this endeavor is to develop students’ writing skills effectively. It is obvious that English writing ability is an active skill that requires them to think, and organize and express their ideas with an effective use of language, but at the core of these skills are communication skills in general in whatever language. However, Japanese language education fails to develop those communication skills effectively because of their cultural biases. It focuses on the development of abilities to read between the lines rather than critical thinking and writing abilities.

This paper serves as an initial step toward identifying the focus of essay writing reflected in the first language educational policy and curriculum in the United States by examining more than 400 essay topics in *Criterion*[®] (version 13) by English Testing Service (ETS). The overall analyses will illuminate what cognitive abilities and language skills that American education aims to assess and develop among students. This research will also contribute to the creation of effective independent topic lists for Japanese learners of English to improve their critical thinking and writing abilities in English. In order to achieve this objective, it is essential to analyze the topics in *Criterion*[®] both closely and effectively. However, there are problems with ETS’s categorization of its topics, which are the focus of this paper that deals with them by modifying the problematical classifications.

2. *Criterion*[®]

2.1. What is *Criterion*[®]

Developed by ETS (Educational Testing Service), a non-profit organization which was founded more than 60 years ago, the *Criterion*[®] service is designed to help students to improve their writing skills through automated instant detailed feedback on grammar, spelling, mechanics, usage, and organization and development, while reducing the workload of essay instructors by saving time and energy to check on the contents and styles of students' essays. This service has been used in educational settings in the U.S. and other countries for native and non-native teachers to promote students' self-learning and evaluate their progress in writing.

This paper deals with *Criterion*[®] topics for two reasons. First, ETS is a prestigious and established international institution. Second, *Criterion*[®] topics are aligned with Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which provide clear and consistent federal-level learning goals in addition to the standards set by each state in the U.S.

There are more than four hundred topics in the *Criterion*[®] service for instructors to choose from. It covers topics ranging from ones for grades 4 to 12 in K-12 Education to those for college students including those who wish to pursue their study at a graduate level. Essay topics come in various modes that include persuasive, expository, descriptive and narrative, which are made suitable to students' interest.

There is a PDF version (English Testing Service, 2015) that lists *Criterion*[®] topics in order of students' grade, along with a mode of writing it represents. The 4th-5th Grade categories are for elementary school children, the 6th-9th Grade categories for junior high school (middle school) students, the 10th to 12th Grade categories for senior high school students, and College Preparatory, 1st year, and 2nd year are for college students in the U.S. *TOEFL*[®] is for non-native students wishing to study at college level, while *GRE*[®] is for those who seek education in the graduate level. Here is an example from the 4th Grade. The topic aims to have students write a persuasive essay:

Example Topic 1:

Choose a Pet (Persuasive)

Many people have a pet such as a dog, bird, or snake. If you could have any pet, what would you choose? Describe the pet you would want and give three reasons for your choice.

2.2. ETS's Categorization

The following table shows the numbers of topics in each writing mode in each level of education in the *Criterion*[®] topics of the PDF file of version 13:

Table 1: ETS's Categorization of *Criterion*[®] Topics

grades (right) / modes of writing (below)	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	C Pre	C I G	C I BF	C II G	C II BF	TFL	Giss	Gar
cause and effect	4 12%	5 17%	3 12%	3 12%	2 7%												
compare and contrast	4 12%	4 13%	4 15%	3 12%	2 7%												
descriptive	5 15%	6 20%	4 15%	5 19%	5 17%	6 23%	6 23%	6 23%	5 16%								
narrative	6 18%	5 17%	5 19%	5 19%	5 17%	5 19%	6 23%	6 23%	7 23%								
persuasive	7 21%	6 20%	6 23%	6 23%	8 28%	7 27%	7 27%	7 27%	9 29%		41 100%	20 100%	44 100%	20 100%	16 46%		
process	6 18%	4 13%	4 15%	4 15%	2 7%												
informative	1 3%	0	0	0	1 3%				1 3%								
expository					4 14%	8 31%	7 27%	7 27%	9 29%	10 100%					19 54%		
issue																8 100%	
argument																	6 100%
total	33 100%	30 100%	26 100%	26 100%	29 100%	26 100%	26 100%	26 100%	31 100%	10 100%	41 100%	20 100%	44 100%	20 100%	35 100%	8 100%	6 100%

C Pre-College Preparatory

C I G--College I General

C I BF-College I Business-focused

C II G--College II General

C II BF-College II Business-focused

TFL-TOEFL

Giss-GRE issue

Gar-GRE argument

As is shown above, ETS's categorization of writing modes varies according to the grades of the target students. Writing topics for elementary school children (4th and 5th graders) and middle school students of the 6th and the 7th grades consist of six different modes: (1) cause-and-effect essays that explain how a thing influences another, why things happen, or what would happen as a result, (2) compare-and-contrast essays that describe similarities and differences between two things, (3) descriptive essays that explain what something is like and looks like, or what purpose it serves, (4) narrative essays that tell fantasy stories or describe one's own life experiences, (5) process essays that explain a procedure, or instruct readers in how to do something, and (6) informative essays that supposedly give some information to readers. Added to these six categories is a category for the 8th graders (middle school): expository. Expository essays, by general definition, refer to the type of writing that presents the writer's objective analyses of something based on facts without any expression of his/her opinions. Topics for the 9th graders (middle school) to the 12th graders

(high school) consist mainly of four categories, descriptive, narrative, persuasive, and expository. Essay modes for college students and TOEFL takers are divided into two categories: expository and persuasive. While persuasive writing normally means writing to persuade others to embrace a certain idea, or to act in a certain way, persuasive writing in *Criterion*[®] includes a wider range of argumentative essays that discuss the value/importance of something, should-or-should-not-do or good-or-bad arguments.

Although ETS makes no definition of any of the modes mentioned, in-depth analyses of the topic contents reveal that cause-and-effect topics, compare-and-contrast topics, and process topics seen in lower grade students are integrated into the expository type in upper-middle school and high school levels. Furthermore, at the college level, there are only two essay types: fact-based (expository) and opinion-based (persuasive). This is probably because this simple dichotomous categorization is more practical than that consisting of many different types, since the persuasive and expository types encompass the descriptive and narrative elements.

One major problem with ETS's categorization is an unclear distinction between each mode of writing, which inevitably leads to two difficulties in categorical interpretations. One is that two essay topics that possibly belong to the same category are categorized into two different ones, whereas the other is that two essay topics that belong to different categories are grouped together. Let us examine the two examples of the first case from the list of topics for 8th graders.

Example Topic 2: Teenager (Expository)

Think about what it is like being a teenager. How is being a teenager different from being a young child? Write an essay comparing and contrasting life as a teenager and life as a young child. Make sure you include several ways that the two stages in life are similar and several ways that they are different. Give examples from your own experiences to support your points.

Example Topic 3: TV Characters (Compare-Contrast)

Think about your favorite television shows that feature teenage characters. How realistic are these characters? Write an essay comparing and contrasting television portrayals of teenagers with real life. Make sure you include several ways they are similar and several ways they are different. Give examples from specific shows to support your points.

Based on the phrase “comparing and contrasting” in Example Topics 2 and 3, it is logical to think that they both belong to the compare-and-contrast essay category, which provides no reasons for categorizing one as expository and the other as compare-and-contrast. Thus, Example Topic 2 should be a compare-and-contrast essay.

Next, let us examine the two examples of the second case from the list of topics for the 8th

graders.

Example Topic 4: School Club (Expository)

You are a member of a school club, and the members want to take a field trip. The problem is that the club does not have sufficient funds. What can you and the other members do to raise money for the trip? Write an essay detailing several suggestions for fund-raising. Give specifics to show how these suggestions would work.

Example Topic 5: Conserving Resources (Process)

What can kids do to help conserve natural resources, such as trees, clean air, and energy? Write a how-to essay with several suggestions for conserving resources. Give detailed instructions and examples to support your ideas.

It seems more suitable to categorize Example 4 and Example 2 separately and categorize Example 4 into the process category, that of Example 5 because both Examples 4 and 5 have students give several suggestions with a certain goal in mind. To sum up, these four examples illustrate ambiguities in ETS's categorization methods that hamper comparative analyses of topic contents in different grades.

3. Recategorizing the *Criterion*[®] topics

3.1. Expository essays

In order to facilitate the comparative analysis between different grades of *Criterion*[®] topics, the paper sorts out topics with some categorization problems into more appropriate ones. These modifications are achieved in the following three ways. First, it is necessary to put essay topics in the expository category into the cause-effect, the compare-and-contrast, the descriptive, or sometimes the persuasive categories, while eliminating the expository category. Example 2 is categorized into the compare-and-contrast, while Example 4 is categorized into the process. The other two expository essay topics for 8th graders are categorized into the cause-effect types because both ask how things will be different from reality under hypothetical situations. In this paper, the eight expository topics for 9th graders are recategorized as three process essays, one cause-effect essay, one compare-and-contrast, two descriptive essays, and one narrative essay. The same procedure of changing the writing mode of expository topics is taken, based on the general definitions of essays in section 2.2.

Some of the expository essays should be better treated as persuasive essays as follows:

Example 6: High-School Jobs (Expository)

...Discuss some arguments for and against high-school students working and explain

your position. . . .

Example Topic 7: Holidays (Expository).

...Think about a holiday or official celebration that you would like to see changed in some way or even eliminated altogether. Write an essay in which you propose that this holiday be either changed or eliminated. Give convincing reasons to support your argument.

There are other expository essays that are better categorized as persuasive ones. Some guidelines are:

1. When a topic is about the value/importance of something, it is persuasive.
2. When a topic has the writer choose/discuss something that he/she thinks is important, it is persuasive.
3. When a topic has the writer give convincing reasons, it is persuasive.

These guidelines actually apply to the characteristics of other persuasive essays in ETS's categorization.

3.2. Informative essays

The second way to rationalize the categorization is to eliminate the informative category. Three essays referred to as "informative" in ETS's categorization are not so different from essays categorized as the other types (the process type, descriptive type, or persuasive type). Thus it is more effective in overall analyses to classify them into the respective types rather than lump them together into the informative type. The following are examples. The first two should be categorized as descriptive, while the other as process:

Example Topic 8: Favorite Object (Informative)

...Write about your favorite object. Be sure to describe the object and explain why it is valuable or important to you.

Example Topic 9: Designing a TV show (Informative)

A public television network is seeking ideas for a new series of shows that would be educational for teenagers. The series will include ten one-hour episodes and will be shown once a week. Some of the titles under consideration are: "Great Cities of the World" "Women in History" "Nature Walks" "American Legends." Choose one of these titles. Write a letter to the network president describing your ideas for a new educational

series. In your letter, describe what one episode might be like. Use specific examples of what information you would include in the episode so the network president will be able to imagine what the series would be like.

Example Topic 10: Writing Mentor (Informative)

...Write a letter to your tenth grader explaining what kind of writing is expected in high school classes and what the student can do to be a successful writer in high school. ...

Examples 8 and 9 require students to describe something, whereas Example 10 requires students to provide some practical advice, which is not contradictory to the fact that some how-to-do essays are classified into the process type. To sum up, whether something is informative or not depends on the level of knowledge required for essay writing. This level of knowledge can be evaluated by another criterion, for example, a degree of descriptiveness.

3.3. *GRE*[®] topics

The third way to reorganize ETS's categorization into a more effective one is to deal with *GRE*[®] topics. There are two kinds of *GRE*[®] topics: those that require students to present their perspective on a certain issue (issue) and those that require them to analyze a certain argument (argument). The former assesses students' ability to think critically about a topic of general interest. According to ETS (2014), each topic makes a statement that students can discuss from various perspectives and apply to many different situations. This issue-type task is designed "to assess the persuasive writing skills" that students have developed throughout their education. Therefore, it is reasonable to categorize this type into the persuasive one. Six out of the eight tasks in *Criterion*[®] on the *GRE*[®] Issue topic are general statements (e.g. "The best ideas arise from a passionate interest in commonplace things.") and the rest are those with value judgment (e.g. "It is important for higher education to challenge established traditions and values.")

The other type of task is Argument task, the purpose of which is to see "how well equipped students are to insightfully evaluate an argument written by someone else and to effectively communicate your evaluation in writing to an academic audience." Students are required to employ critical thinking abilities in order to evaluate the logical soundness of the author's case in the task. In other words, this task is to assess students' abilities to detect flaws in the author's argument, which is unique to this *GRE*[®] task and quite different from the other categories mentioned above. Thus, this category of *GRE*[®] writing is not covered by the modified categorization.

3.4. Modified Categorization

The following table is a modified version of Table 1, which is created by recategorizing the essay topics with problematical categorizations discussed above.

Table 2: Modified Categorization of *Criterion*[®] Topics

grades (right) / modes of writing (below)	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	C Pre	C I G	C I BF	C II G	C II BF	TFL	Giss
cause and effect	4 12%	5 17%	3 12%	3 12%	3 10%	1 4%	2 8%	2 8%	1 3%	2 20%					6 17%	
compare and contrast	4 12%	4 13%	4 15%	3 12%	4 14%	1 4%	1 4%	1 4%	1 3%	2 20%					1 3%	
descriptive	6 18%	6 20%	4 15%	5 19%	6 21%	8 31%	8 31%	8 31%	8 26%	2 20%					7 20%	
narrative	6 18%	5 17%	5 17%	5 19%	5 17%	6 23%	8 31%	6 23%	8 26%	2 20%						
persuasive	7 21%	6 20%	6 23%	6 23%	8 28%	7 27%	7 27%	7 27%	9 29%	2 10%	41 100%	20 100%	44 100%	20 100%	21 60%	8 100%
process	6 18%	4 13%	4 15%	4 15%	3 10%	3 12%	0	2 8%	4 13%							
total	33 100%	30 100%	26 100%	26 100%	29 100%	26 100%	26 100%	26 100%	31 100%	10 100%	41 100%	20 100%	44 100%	20 100%	35 100%	8 100%

C Pre-College Preparatory

C I G-College I General

C I BF-College I Business-focused

C II G-College II General

C II BF-College II Business-focused

TFL-TOEFL

Giss-GRE issue

This modified categorization will facilitate further analyses of *Criterion*[®] topics with only six major categories instead of nine, based on the given instructions of each task. This new table reveals several facts about the modes of essays that the *Criterion*[®] service requires students to write. First, the persuasive essay mode appears at all levels of education. This fact shows an emphasis placed on expressing one's own opinions with logical and convincing explanations for the purpose of persuading others as early as the 4th grade. At college levels, writing persuasive-type essays are even more prioritized, as almost all of the topics belong to the persuasive-type. Second, there are fewer topics of the cause-effect type and the compare-and-contrast type after the 9th grade (indicated by the low percentage). Thirdly, there are no essays of the process type at the college level including the preparatory.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzed more than 400 topics in *Criterion*[®] and categorized some of the essay topics differently from the original ETS categorizations to facilitate topic analyses, reducing the nine categories to six categories, based on the task requirement for essay writers. This rationalization was conducted by integrating expository essays, and informative essays into the other categories with the omission of the two categories. *GRE*[®] issue topics were classified as

persuasive essays since they require students to give their perspective on a certain statement. However, *GRE*[®] argumentative topics were excluded from the analysis in this paper because it requires totally different aspects of critical thinking: abilities to find logical flaws in others' argument.

What has been conducted to rationalize the ETS's categorization in this paper is quite a simple but essential step toward future in-depth analyses of *Criterion*[®] topics that attempt to identify what kinds of skills are required at what grades. The next step is to further divide the main six categories into subcategories, and identify what kinds of abilities are required by each subcategory with the advancement of students' grades. This research will identify the focus of U.S. education in developing students' communication skills from the elementary level through the higher education level, and will contribute to improving students' critical thinking and writing abilities in English.

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