

Toward Defining *Education* in an EFL Composition Class

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Definitions composed by students of a foreign language are likely to differ in some ways from those of users of English as a first language. Examples of student efforts to explain the meaning of *education* are presented, along with some discussion of semantics. It is concluded that translation may influence understanding of the assignment, and consequently affect the results, in ways that teachers need to be aware of.

0. Introduction

Talking about language is generally difficult because language is “transparent”; normally we see through it to concentrate on topics under discussion. Metalinguistic activity is particularly obvious when it comes to defining words. It may be hard to be sure about how much effort to expend providing information in order to make matters clear in a particular situation. Written language normally requires greater clarity than conversation. Academic writing skills are culturally influenced, like language and education generally. There may be as many detailed patterns of ideas as there are writers; however, it is necessary to teach acceptable patterns of composition in order to get writing that is readily understandable to readers of standard English.

Because many basic ideas are commonly shared, the core of a definition ought to be conventionally acceptable in order to be easily understood.

Some of the factors involved in understanding academic writing authored by a student whose first language is not English are discussed in detail in Easton 1982. One of the major differences between Japanese and English writing patterns seems to be whether a main point is set out clearly at the beginning of a composition. In writing definitions, it is particularly important for an author to present a clear statement from which a reader can proceed in order to follow the basic idea of an essay.

English Department students at Kwassui College encounter definitions in the lectures or readings of various classes, especially grammar or linguistics where technical terms abound. As long as the emphasis is primarily on translation, however, most students seem to pay little attention to the nature of definitions that they encounter. In fact, they tend to ignore the kinds of cues that writers offer readers to make meanings clearer (e.g. *linguistics*, or the systematic study of language). In Langan's *College Writing Skills*, various types of essay development are presented with models. Definition is one of these types. The introduction to this section tells the students that, in comparison with conversational techniques:

In a written definition, we make clear in a more complete and formal way *our own personal understanding of a term*. Such a definition typically starts with *one* meaning of a term. The meaning is then illustrated with a series of details. (p. 157, emphasis added)

The students who were using this textbook in Composition II were asked to define the abstract term *education*. One reason this particular word was selected was that an abstract term seemed most appropriate for practice in relation to future academic writing assignments such as the graduation thesis that the students must submit written in English. A second reason was that it was thought that reflecting on this word would be personally meaningful for the students.

To help generate details, two class groups were first asked to practice certain prewriting techniques: brainstorming, freewriting, listing, and making a scratch outline (as described by Langan, pp. 93–96). These techniques are discussed in section 1, along with examples from prewriting by students and their instructors. Later the students were asked to present their ideas in formal essays of about 500 words each. The results are discussed in section 2. The students' grammar has not been altered in any of the data presented, although spelling has sometimes been standardized in order not to interfere with comprehension. In section 3, in relation to these data sources, there is a discussion of applied semantics based on Aitchison (1987), Brown and Yule (1983), Leech (1974), and Lyons (1981). The conclusion suggests the importance of thinking further about translation as it affects a writing class assignment.

Now let us consider how the students defined *education*.

1. Prewriting

Investigation of the prewriting results from the two advanced writing groups considered the work of 35 students.

1.1. Brainstorming

The first of the prewriting techniques that was tried was brainstorming. Langan's textbook says: "In *brainstorming* you generate ideas and details by asking as many questions as you can think of about your subject. Such questions include *What? When? Why? How? Where?* and *Who?*" (p. 93). Although the questions may be simple, answering them can produce details to support a personal definition.

In one group, 18 students wrote an average of 4 questions in about 8 minutes of effort; in the other, 17 students wrote answers to an average of 5 questions of their own in about 10 minutes. Almost everyone included WHAT, WHY, and HOW as elements of brainstorming. On the other hand, while fewer than half of the questioners dealt with WHO, WHEN, and WHERE, most of the answers given by the second group included these elements.

With reference to WHAT, some answers were very general: e.g., *It is what everyone must learn to live a life.* Another was quite specific: *I study English conversation at private school twice a week. It's very fun.* Some were less clearly focused as definitions: *It is important for me not to be leisy [lazy] because it makes me busy.; Who founded the school for education for the first time?* Some WHAT questions did not necessarily define education: *What is the problem to recieve a good education? What do you think of the Japanese educational system? What subjects do you think worthless?* Others were well-focused: *What is the meaning of education?* This last was the most commonly occurring question in the essays.

Considering WHY, there were various answers: *I needed it for*

examination and I could use it in society in future.; or to know various things and to understand other people and various things. The questions also varied: Why should we learn for 9 years by the law? Why do you think American educational system better than Japanese? Why do I get a education? Why should we learn various things?

For HOW, there were more questions than answers: *How is the best way for us for education? How do they study for entrance examination? How do I feel to have education at school? How many years did you get education? How do I get education?* One of the more detailed answers given for HOW said: *We have education, not only in school but also in our homes. For example, the manner of behavior, how to communicate with other people, and so on.*

Regarding WHEN, on the other hand, there were more answers than questions: *from born to death; I go to school on Thursday and Saturday every week; from elementary school to high school; Though people continue studying in various way all the time, they are given education mainly in their youth. Questions included the following: When did you major the lecture of Mr. Taylor? and When do we finish education?*

WHERE was the focus of several questions: *Where did the origin of education come? Where is the most popular to study in Japan? Where do we get education?* There were various answers concerning place: *everyplace; I study English conversation near Hamanomachi; In my daily life, including my school, home and society.*

Finally, WHO questions focused on both educators and people being educated: *Who is the best thinker of Education? Who take care of the children if both of parents are at work? Who should get education?*

Meanwhile, answers involving WHO centered on the latter group of people: *everyone (from the old to the baby); the most educated people; friends; not only students but also all the people should receive various education.*

1.2. Freewriting

A second prewriting technique is freewriting, which involves writing as fast as possible for about ten minutes, without worrying about accuracy of form or precision of meaning. One group wrote an average of 52 words, while the other group wrote an average of 90 words. This technique encourages fluency of thought in writing after the brain has been activated in the preceding question/answer exercise. Besides thinking of the specific details of schooling, more attention was paid to human relationships outside of school: *parents, elder worker, aunt.* There was particular emphasis on feelings: *angry, busy, facinative, interested, moved, sad.* Attention was also given to how education has changed: *pupils not listening; system is going crazy.* In addition, there was more interest in the world beyond classrooms: recognition of the effects of *poverty*, and of the need to *act in society.* One wrote that without education, *we don't live in nomal atomosphere.* Some of the brainstorming elements can be built into definitions of education, but that requires intentionality on the part of the writer. One student began: *The world of Education is abstruck [abstract] for me.* While this is probably true, it makes composing a formal definition more difficult than for something concrete. The class that wrote fewer words tended to be more issue-oriented than the other class:

talking about problems of entrance examinations; contrasting Japanese and American education; considering the physically handicapped; even looking at the history of education; as well as writing about the importance of education for life.

1.3. Listing

The third prewriting technique consists of making a list without attempting to separate items in terms of their importance. This facilitates selection of key words from the thoughts generated in freewriting. Each class group listed about eight items per person. Although there were few exact duplicates among the lists, the most common items were the following (with percentages of writers listing them): *teachers* (43%) and *professors* (14%) (=57%); *schools* (50%); *students, study* (31% each); *college, high school, elementary school* (23% each); *junior high school, (text)books* (20% each); *home (education), parents* (17% each); *kindergarden* (14%); *classes, university* (11% each). The focus seems to be strongly on items related to compulsory education or on subjects of immediate importance in the writers' circumstances. Other items ranged through almost the whole alphabet from A (*assignments*) to W (*word processor*). A sampling of items not already suggested includes: *communication between teacher and student; it's expensive; geography; going to juku; lunch; manner; NHK TV program of study; pen and pencil; punctual; religion; our right; spoiling children / too strict education.*

1.4. Outlining

The final stage of prewriting involves arranging items carefully in order to make a main point clearly: in this case, a definition of *education*. This arrangement constitutes a scratch outline. These early outlines vary widely in detail. In discussing outlining, Langan's textbook instructs: "The goal of planning is to produce an essay with a thesis idea that is fully and logically supported by the three body paragraphs" (p. 100). Some writers were able to organize three supporting points in the ten minutes allotted, but others did not get that far. Points focused on the location of education, particularly school, home, and society; and on the agents of education: teachers, friends, family, work, and so on. The subject matter (=WHAT) of school education was said to include *study*, *manner (moral)*, and *club activity*, while *another education* centered on *living alone*, *friends*, and *people at my work*. In addition, *Self-study* may be based on *TV educational program* and *book*. Some education occurs *After school (work)* and involves *world events*, *common sence*, and *how to work*. There are various purposes of education such as *to become a nice adult* or *forming personality*. They may vary with *the time of education*, which extends from childhood, and learning rules, through all life, *completing his professional* and *finding pleasures for living*. Education may be *to get the power which way I take*, including thinking. It may even *become entertainment when men are old*. In contrast, one student asserted that *Japanese education produces many problems: no question against various things; no consider; no progressive, no activity; no individuality*. Others focused on how hard the entrance examination system is; another on

not enough education for physically handicapped person. Still others pointed out how Japanese educational system is different from Americans.

1.5. Instructors' prewriting

When the class instructors, who are not Japanese, did the prewriting exercises with their students, their brainstorming led to more questions about purposes and methods of education: for example *Why do people want an education? Why do teachers teach? Why does a government insist on education? How do governments decide what to require in schools?*

In freewriting, one instructor wrote: *Education is the drawing out e-ducare of the innate performance skills and social skills of that person – it means learning to do for yourself.*

The instructors' lists included such items as *attendance, extra-curricular activities—clubs, student government, paper(s), and resources*, besides items that the students listed.

When it came to outlining, one instructor began with the following thesis statement: *Education is the development of the potential of the individual in the areas of mental skills, life (or survival) skills, and social skills and awareness.*

Clearly there is a difference in focus between instructors and students. Whether this is the result of their different perspectives in the educational framework or of their national and cultural backgrounds is a matter for further study.

2. Analysis of student essays

After the passage of some time, the students were asked to write a five-paragraph essay defining “the meaning of *education*.” In discussion of the results, focus will be on only one of the class groups. About two-thirds of the essays began with a question in the introduction; in about three-fourths of such cases, the question was the opening sentence.

Let us first examine an introduction that seems conversational rather than formal:

What do you associate with the word “education”? I associate a lot of things as follows . . . “compulsory education”, “home education”, “education minded mother”, “educational television” (NHK), “P.T.A.” “the department of education” “student teaching” etc. I especially picked out three things, “compulsory education ” “home education” “education minded mother”, and I’ll describe about them.

This student has in effect continued her prewriting at the beginning of her paper. Then in her conclusion she wrote:

I described about three things which I associated with the word “education” at random. It was good chance to think about “education”, for I wasn’t ordinarily conscious of it. . . .

This writing represents the student’s own impressions and may be personally useful, but it does not constitute a formal definition.

Another student chose to write about how “Education period

mainly classifies three stages such as from an unborn child to a six-year-old child, our school days and after graduation.” Although this composition is clearly about education, it is not exactly a definition. However, she concluded: “Education brings out our talent and special quality. Education have ourself grow up.” This is closer to a definition, but not where it is first expected.

There were various other difficulties in focusing personal definitions. One attempt was rather general and vague initially:

General “Education” which we see and hear concerns us very much, now. But what is the “Education” on earth? I can feel it is very close to me, at the same time, it is not.

Another attempt was too narrowly specific: “What’s education? I study English literature, sociology, and economics etc. . . . So, studying makes me patient.” Still another began by asking, “What is the meaning of education?” and then telling what it is not: “It isn’t to enjoy great prestige but teach love.” One more student gave examples to develop a topic which *she* related to education, although a reader might not initially consider it a definition: “Now, in Japan, everyone gets good educations, and they do only studying in the school or home, But how is their moralities?” She concluded: “If a man doesn’t have the morality, he is not a good educated one, even if he studies hard. So the meaning of education is to grow the people who have the moralities.”

The next type of essay depends on dictionary definitions or etymologies. For example:

Education has some means. I'm going to write about one mean of their. The Education 's mean is the systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life. (OED)

Her conclusion was more personal: "...I think education's real mean is not system for just study but process of 'bring up'." Another student began by contrasting Japanese and English.

"Kyoiku" is in Japanese education. This word consists of two chinese character one means teach and the other training, educating. English "education" is originated from Latin 'means 'to extract" Then what is the 'education,' teaching, training.

Her conclusion seems to have shifted focus: "Thinking process is most important to study. Educator has to let children know the way to think."

At last we come to a group of focused compositions treating several elements of education. One of the thesis sentences here says: "I regard the qualities of education as equality, selection, and compulsory education." The corresponding conclusion reads: "It is not too much to say the country situation depends on the fullness of an educational system. A state should spend money and support for propulsion of an educational system." Another well-rounded thesis sentence states: "Education is the combination of learners and teachers and needs the life of society"; however, the development becomes somewhat repetitive. One of the clearest definitions begins unfortunate-

ly by taking a dictionary definition without attribution. This is then followed by a fully outlined thesis sentence.

What is the meaning of education? The word *education* is training and instruction (especially of children and young people in school, colleges) designated to give knowledge and develop skills. Adults, especially teacher, educate children and young people and lead them to well-mannered person, adaptable person and aimful person.

This touches on most of the various brainstorming questions: WHAT, WHO, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW. After three paragraphs of developing these points, the conclusion states: "For this reason, education is very useful in our life. Though taking education isn't a matter of life and death, taking it makes much of our life."

In general the supporting paragraphs of each composition take up the points of the thesis sentence. However, one student went through a circular structuring:

What is the meaning of education? I think its' a very difficult question. I looked us a word, 'education' in a dictionary. . . .

Where do we get education? . . .

When do we begin to get education? . . .

What is the education? In generally, education at school is learned education. . . . And I think education at home is home training. . . .

What is the meaning of education? . . . I think the meaning of education is a way that we live human life, and it is very important.

Although there is some progression of ideas here, the initial question is only answered minimally in a direct fashion (i.e. *a way that we live human life*) after some repetitiveness.

A well-written conclusion summarizes the main points of another essay: "We take lessons in school every day, but it is not enough. We have to learn by imitation, training, experience to live suitable and richly." Finishing up with one last paper, we have:

I think, the word *education* has broad range of meaning. *Education* means not only study for scholarship and knowledge but also study for being good person in true sense. So that we must go on being given education all our life.

3. Applied Semantics

Let us turn now to a discussion of some points from semantic theory as they may relate to our data. A writer, even more than a speaker, is likely to want to use clearly defined terms to communicate ideas because a reader has less opportunity than a listener to seek clarifications. A dictionary cannot directly answer questions concerning personal meanings. Aitchison comments in *Words in the Mind* (p. 14) that "a book dictionary gives us a spuriously neat, static, and incomplete view of the mental lexicon." The meanings of some terms, however, need to be defined at the time of use because it may not be clear otherwise what a writer intends to convey with an abstract term.

Writing definitions is basically an academic activity. If it were

not so, one might wonder if the characteristics of school life associated with the word *education* might be less prominent. Would oral definitions of this word result in less academic associations? This cannot be answered here but might be pursued further in a subsequent investigation.

In beginning to discuss meanings of meaning, Leech (p. 1) presents a list of some definitions taken from C. K Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923: 186–87); they focus on intrinsic properties, dictionary definitions, connotations, systemic relationships, “the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience,” and various objects of reference. Let us consider such definitions in relation to the student writing. Mostly the students do not seem to discuss intrinsic properties as such, perhaps because they may not be able to think of many, besides +TEACHER and +STUDY. Although features such as +DEVELOPMENT and +PERSONAL are implied in the definitions, they are not discussed explicitly. However, the student compositions show some explicit reference to dictionary meanings. They also put heavy emphasis on connotations of *education*, and on various collocative elements that are typically associated with it. Some of these elements form systematic relationships: e.g. the various divisions of the school system. Students tend to focus on consequences of education, since those are the reasons for their intellectual struggles. However, as an abstraction, education does not constitute any concrete object of reference to be described.

Leech himself classifies meaning into seven categories (p. 10), starting with conceptual (denotative) meaning as most central; the

other types are connotative, stylistic, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic meanings. Let us examine these categories in connection with our data. Conceptual meaning, which is related to intrinsic properties, and connotations have already been mentioned. Some of the categories do not seem particularly relevant. It seems doubtful that stylistic meaning is explicitly used in the student essays, because the writers generally cannot command many registers in English. Most of the writing is from the perspective of highly schooled writers. Non-college educated people might present a view that reflected their different patterns of experience. Leech's next category, affective meaning, which is addressed to the emotions, is closely related to style and may not be well controlled in a foreign language.

On the other hand, some of the categories seem more applicable to our data. Reflected meaning "arises in cases of multiple conceptual meaning, when one sense of a word forms part of our response to another sense" (Leech, p. 19). It may occur, for example, when we think about whether a person who has been 'educated' (i.e. who has received an education by attending a school) is truly 'educated' (i.e. cultured). Some of the conclusions of student essays previously cited represent this category: e.g. "education at school is learned education. . . . And I think education at home is home training" and "*Education* means not only study for scholarship and knowledge but also study for being good person in true sense." Finally, thematic meaning depends on syntactic arrangements as they effect sentence focus, for example by regularly putting known information at the beginning of a sentence and new information at the end: e.g. *We have education, not only in school but also in our homes.* Generally the essays seem to

follow this pattern in sentences.

It is often assumed that words have fixed meanings, based on intrinsic properties of whatever is being defined, but this is only true to some limited extent. Without some degree of fixed meanings, of course, words would not facilitate communication, but some of what is considered 'fixed' is knowledge of the world which is associated with a particular word. For example, *education* commonly brings schools or classes to mind. Word meanings tend to be used to serve practical purposes without regard to their historical etymologies. Aitchison comments that "even if there is somewhere a 'true' meaning for each particular word, this meaning is fairly irrelevant in relation to the mental lexicon." That is, people generally use a word in ways they have learned socially without necessarily stopping to consider what the fundamental features of its meaning might be. For an abstract term such as *education*, it is difficult to form a clear mental image of the core meaning because there are innumerable forms of education. Consulting a thesaurus (Chambers 1988), one finds semantic fuzziness around some core of meaning as the alternatives suggested as similar words include a range from *civilization*, through *development*, *enlightenment*, *indoctrination*, *scholarship*, and *training*, to *tutoring*. An abstraction such as 'education' may have such a range of typical characteristics that it is difficult to determine which of them are most central to a definition. We can see this in looking at the various thesis sentences cited above from student essays. Moreover, there may be inconsistencies in the way any one person uses a particular word.

Particularly in an essay that is not especially focused on

linguistics, a writer who tries to define a word is not expected to resort to componential feature symbols such as +LEARNING, +TEACHING, +SUBJECT MATTER A. Such indications might not be enlightening to the ordinary reader. Synonyms or longer paraphrases are used instead. In this way, a writer gives not "the sense" of the word being defined but rather gives another word or words with "the same sense" (Leech, p. 205). As the sense of a word undergoes development in time, it may lose or add additional features. Originally, *education* suggested leading someone without some particular skill or knowledge into competency, or drawing forth latent abilities. Gradually, the sense seems to have shifted so that some people see 'education' as pouring information into a learner.

Aitchison states that "in real life we operate by assuming that for the most part, people have beliefs similar to our own about what words mean" (p. 50). This may not be true, however, especially in interethnic communication. The concept of 'education' varies cross-culturally, and even within cultures. For students writing in a foreign language, there is likely to be a compounding of concepts from more than one language. For example, the emphasis on 'morality' in relation to *education* probably seems somewhat more contrived to an American reader than to a Japanese. Although the thesaurus lists *discipline* as a closely associated word, it does not list *morality*. The latter is a matter of virtue or duty, which seems more fundamental in Japanese education than in American education.

A study of individual words or even sentential meanings is not sufficient for understanding discourse, and definition is a type of

discourse. Various similar approaches to “staging” of ideas in language use are discussed by Brown and Yule (pp. 236–250). These include “frames,” “scripts,” “scenarios,” and “schemata.” Of these, “schemata can be seen as the organised background knowledge which leads us to *expect* or predict aspects in our interpretation of discourse” (Brown and Yule, p. 248). They seem most appropriate for our purposes because they are less rigid than the other approaches. In order to compose a definition that is both adequate and efficient, a writer must activate her own schema and also knowledge of what schemata her readers might employ. Her own schema will provide details about ‘education’, in our case. Reasonable guesses about what her readers already know will allow her to try to furnish all and only the information that they need in order to understand her meaning clearly. Brown and Yule conclude:

In whatever way they are represented, schemata seem to present the discourse analyst with one way of accounting for discourse production and interpretation which does not take place *ab initio* on each occasion. (p. 250)

That is, there is a theoretical basis for saying that people do not necessarily start from the most basic stages when they wish to construct or understand a communication.

Considering word associations again, Aitchison reports that with regard to experimental evidence, “adults are likely to respond with a word of the same word class: a noun tends to elicit a noun”

(p. 73): e.g. *education*, *Self-study* in our data. Sets of responses at the same grammatical level may be called “coordinates.” She adds that this kind of “classification by coordinates . . . may be more efficient for fast retrieval of a word” from memory (p. 96). On the other hand, the students tend to work relatively slowly in writing English as a foreign language so that collocational links of words commonly found together may be developed first (e.g. *university* + *education*).

Thinking about some difficulties involving translation in the discussion of meaning, Lyons points out that “talking about words . . . brings us up sharply against the possibility that the English word ‘meaning’ may not have the same range of application as any single word in other languages” (p. 138). The student who contrasted the derivations of *kyoiku* and *education* shows some awareness of this. In asking Japanese students to “define” and explain the “meaning” of the word *education* in English, as opposed to *kyoiku* in Japanese, what kinds of complications slip into the assignment without anyone’s being particularly conscious of them? Which of the two words are the students actually defining? Are the lexical fields that are associated with these words equivalent to those for their common translations? These are questions with pedagogical implications, but they remain to be investigated in more detail.

4. Conclusion

This investigation of definitions of *education* that were composed by Japanese students in an EFL course has led to questions about the role of translation in understanding the assignment and in its results.

The results of both prewriting (brainstorming, freewriting, listing, and outlining) and essays were examined in section 2. Then discussion based on semantic theory was applied to some examples in section 3. We have seen that definitions are frequently complex, because personalized meanings depend largely on knowledge of the world rather than intrinsic properties of a referent. This means that a definitional essay may be constructed largely on the basis of connotations. However, the associations are likely to vary cross-culturally. Understanding the effect of translation on the associations calls for further study.

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