A Concept of *Play English*
and its Format

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Introduction

English education instructors have tried to train their students to develop their speaking, writing, listening and reading abilities. These four areas of English uses are called the four skills of the English language. With the advent of a new communication system based on electronic devices, especially computer networking, a new skill of English language use has become available to English users.

This paper names this new skill *play English* and tries to clarify its concept in Part I and to present in Part II a sample format of how this new skill can be developed.

1. A Concept of *play English*

1. The object nouns of *play*

   The first step in clarifying the concept of *play English* examines the verb-object lexical relation of *play*. The verb *play* takes as object nouns mainly ones in the following three categories: (1) sports, (2) musical instruments, and (3) games.

   1) *Play* baseball, basketball, football, chess, etc.
   2) *Play* the piano, the violin, the saxophone, etc.
   3) *Play* cards, mahjong, etc.

   We can also 'play a trick,' 'play a role,' or 'play ( the part of ) Othello ( for example )' in other cases.

   In all of these verb-object lexical relations, those who play are in the position of performers. If there are performers on one hand, there is expected to be an audience on the other hand. In the case of sports, the audience is those who watch the performance of the players. In the case of a musical instrument, the audience is those who listen to the performance by the players.
To *play English*, therefore, indicates above all some performance regarding English language use. It never indicates the passive roles of the audience, i.e., listening to or reading English spoken or written by others.

2. A new kind of communication method—Computer Networking

The verb-noun combination of *Play English* is a new lexical relation, which has never been used in English so far. When a new concept or formula of doing something is invented or has come into being, a new word or phrase is coined. *Play English* is a new lexical relation to indicate a new kind of performative English use.

Until now the performative parts of English use have been limited to speaking and/or writing English, but now there is a new kind of performative English use, labeled *Play English*. There is a good reason for this label.

When a musical composer tries to *compose* a musical piece, the composer usually uses the piano. On this occasion, the composer strikes the *keyboard* of the piano to *compose* the piece. This *composing* act is expressed by the existing lexical relation ‘play the piano.’

With the development of global computer networking services such as Compuserve, GENie, or Delphi, a new way of global communication has been developed. This trend is well indicated by the logo of NEC, C & C, which means computers & communications. In the world of computer networking, the members of these information and communication services can communicate with each other by sending messages through computer networks. These international networking services provide Forum Conference, CB Simulators, or Electronic Mail, by which the members communicate electronically through computers. In most of these services, the working language is English. We Japanese can participate in this global communication network, if we use English as a working language.

To do this, English language education, whose prime objective is to cultivate communicative capability with people around the world, needs to utilize this new method of communication to prepare English learners to be active participants in this new kind of global communication.

3. A concept of *play English*

In the world of computer networking, communication is conducted on the display screen of a computer. On the screen are displayed English alphabetical letters. Those letters are, however, not hand-written. They are encoded by striking the *keyboard* of the computer. In the field of computer networking, the act of encoding is called ‘compose.’

Furthermore, especially when we are engaged in *conferences* in the Forums or *chatting* on a CB Simulator, we are prompted to enter our *utterances* or *chats* at the talking speed, not at the speed of handwriting or slow typewriting. Otherwise, while we are typing slowly, other members cut in, and we lose the timing to take part in a *conference* or *conversation.*
The result of this encoding act by striking the keyboard of the computer is visually displayed in the form of alphabetical letters on the computer display, but the objective of this encoding act is not a written composition. What is aimed at is talking, chatting, conversation, discussion, or debate by means of visual representation. The results of encoding are visually displayed by the alphabetical letters, but the objectives of the encoding are audio-oriented communication activities. If we want to name this encoding act, neither writing nor speaking is a proper name. It is at this point that an analogy comes between the act of playing the piano and the encoding act of composition by striking the computer keyboard.

A musical composer composes a musical piece by striking the keyboard of the piano. If one composes English messages by striking the keyboard of the computer, this act can properly be named Play English. As we have discussed in Section I, Part I, the act of playing never implies any audience roles; but it always indicates the performer's role. In this regard, Play English always means the encoding role of the communication, never the decoding role.

Recently in the world of English education in Japan, the transition from recognition-oriented instruction to production-oriented instruction has been discussed very loudly. And many learners of English, including those who have finished six or eight years of formal school English education, are eager to express themselves in English, i.e., to be performers in communicating in English, rather than playing the passive roles of the audience. In the age of advancing electrocommunication, in order to be a performer in global communication, it is essential to be able to play English and be a player in the game, not one of the audience.

There is one big reward for Japanese people who play English. Japanese often encounter the difficulty of not being well understood by native speakers of English. In many cases it is because their English is heavily accented by their native Japanese sound system and is not correctly articulated in English pronunciation. In the communication mode of playing English, which is done electronically through a computer network, one can be engaged in talking, chatting, discussion, conversation, or conference, but one does not have to actually utter the speech sounds. Then Japanese 'speakers' of English engaged in those communicative activities defined above do not have to be troubled with their Japanese accents. If they are good players of English, they can talk, chat, discuss, converse, or confer fluently in English.

If the act of playing English extends the possibilities of global communication for Japanese learners of English, then the Japanese English educational systems, both official school education and private sectors engaged in businesses related to English language instruction, should employ this new English communication mode and develop an instruction system that can cultivate the ability to play English.

In Part II of this paper, we will discuss a trial instructional format.
II. A Format for *Play English*

1. The First Stage

   When piano students start to play the piano, they usually start with an instruction manual called *Beyer*, which is so popular that it has almost become the standard manual for the beginning piano student. The objective of *Beyer* for these beginning students is to train their fingers to play the piano without looking at the *keyboard*.

   **Need for a Beyer-like Manual:** Just as piano players need instruction manuals to train themselves to be able to play the piano, so *players of English* on computers need a kind of Beyer-like manual for them to be able to *play English* without looking at the *keyboard* and without watching the movement of their fingers striking the *keyboard*. In the field of typewriter typing, typing without looking at the *keyboard is called touch-type*.

   The first stage of a format to develop the skill to *play English* for prospective *players of English*, therefore, is to develop their skill of *touch-type* on the computer *keyboard*. It may be argued at this point that there are many good instruction manuals for prospective typists to train their *touch-type* skills on the typewriter *keyboard* and/or on the computer *keyboard*. That is true, but there is a big difference between *touch-type* training for prospective typists and *touch-type* training for prospective *players of English*.

   The job required for professional and/or non-professional typists is to type sentences of documents, in many cases hand-written documents, and to make clean, neat copies of them. For this purpose, *touch-type* training for the typist is learning to type certain combinations of alphabetical letters, words, phrases, and sentences. Students are required to look at the letters, words, and sentences in the manual and type them without looking at the *keyboard*. They are trained, in a sense, to be conditioned to respond to the stimuli, which are the letters, words, and sentences without reflection.

   **Special Need for Players of English:** As the job of musical composers is not to play a piece *composed* by other composers, but to *compose* original pieces, the job of *players of English* is to *compose* original sentences, not to copy sentences *composed* by others. For this purpose, *touch-type* training for the typist, which requires students to respond mechanically to written letters, words, and sentences, does not work effectively.

   For prospective *players of English* to be able to *compose* without looking at the *keyboard*, they need to be provided with situations which require the students to *compose* English sentences. These kinds of situations can be given by any visual presentation media. The most inexpensive and simplest means utilizes pictures printed on pieces of paper in the form of a chart. **Charts 1-3** are examples of charts developed by the writers of this paper.

   When developing these kinds of charts, two things should be incorporated.

   1) The sentences the students are required to *compose*, based on these charts, should be so arranged that the basic sentence structures are acquired by *composing* exercises.
2) Like typing instruction manuals, the *composing* exercises should be so arranged that the touch-typing skill is acquired at the same time.

**Example 1** In Chart 1, sentences students are required to **compose** are as follows:

1. This is big. This cat is big. This is a big cat.
2. This is big. This wave is big. This is a big wave.
3. This is big. This waterfall is big. This is a big waterfall.
4. This is small. This hat is small. This is a small hat.
5. This is small. This ball is small. This is a small ball.
6. This is small. This fan is small. This is a small fan.
7. This is big. This cake is big. This is a big cake.
   That is small. That cake is small. That is a small cake.
8. This is big. This fin is big. This is a big fin.
   That is small. That fin is small. That is a small fin.
9. This is big. This hand is big. This is a big hand.
   That is small. That hand is small. That is a small hand.

While typing these 36 sentences, the students type *This* 27 times, *is* 36 times, *That* 9 times, *big* 18 times, and *small* also 18 times. The nouns used in this typing practice contain the alphabet ‘a’ very intensively. It is used in *cat, wave, waterfall, hat, ball, fan, cake, hand,* in the adjective *small,* in the demonstrative pronoun *That,* and independently as an article *a,* a total of 61 times. An ‘i’ is also used very frequently. It is used 27 times in *This,* 36 times in *is,* 18 times in *big,* and 4 times in *fin,* altogether 85 times.

**Example 2** In Chart 2, examples of sentences students are required to **compose** are as follows 

( In this case, if the students actually like the fruit in the chart, they type in the affirmative, and if they don’t like it, they type in the negative.):

1. I like oranges. / I don’t like oranges.
2. I like strawberries. / I don’t like strawberries.
3. I like grapes. / I don’t like grapes.

Or they are asked to **compose** sentences about their family members or friends such as,

1. My father likes oranges. / My father doesn’t like oranges.
2. He likes strawberries. / He doesn’t like strawberries.
3. He likes grapes. / He doesn’t like grapes.

Or they are asked to **compose** sentences asking questions about their friends, such as,

1. Do you like oranges? / Does your mother like oranges?
2. Do you like strawberries? / Does she like strawberries?
3. Do you like grapes? / Does she like grapes?
By composing these sentences as illustrated above, students can acquire touch-typing of the most frequently used personal pronouns.

**Example 3** In Chart 3, examples of sentences are as follows:

1. Which ruler is the widest?
   - The ruler on the desk is the widest.
2. Which basket is the deepest?
   - The basket in front of the desk is the deepest.
3. Which floor lamp is the tallest?
   - The lamp in the corner of the room is the tallest.

In this case, students type which intensively, and also many kinds of prepositions. The alphabetical combination of 'wh' is very frequently used in interrogative pronouns such as *which, when, where, why, who, whose, whom*.

**Communicative Aspects of the Exercise:** As illustrated above, these series of charts for typing exercises are so arranged that students can acquire touch-typing skill. In this respect, the exercises are basically the same as traditional typing lessons. What drastically distinguishes the typing exercise for *Play English* from conventional typing lessons is that students do not merely copy alphabetical combinations, words, phrases or sentences. What they type always has communicative implications. As in Chart 2, they are required to type only the statements telling the facts about their preference of fruit. In Chart 1, they are required to type the sentences describing the pictures in the chart.

**Importance of Screen Display:** Another thing about the *Play English* typing exercise, which is different from traditional typing lessons, is that students are encouraged to watch the display screen to check the output of their communicative typing activities, which are actually parts of *playing English*. This is exactly the same as when we check the vocal output of our oral communication activities by our ears. Suppose we cannot check our vocal output either due to physical deficiencies in our hearing organs or to other physical outside interferences. We cannot hear what we are talking about and will be very unsure whether our listeners can understand us.

**Special Features of the First Stage:** The Beyer-like typing exercises in the first stage of the *Play English* format are developed and designed not only for students to acquire touch-typing skill, but also for them to acquire skill in Play English by focusing the exercises on the following three points:

1) The typing exercises are arranged for the student to acquire basic sentence structures.
2) The students are always required to compose sentences which tell only facts.
3) The exercises themselves are developed and designed to be communicative activities.
2. The Second Stage

The first stage of the format of play English is, as indicated above, comparable to Beyer-like lessons for the piano, which train touch-typing skills on the keyboard. In piano lessons, after Beyer, piano students start playing Étude, which are designed to develop piano playing technique in each specified area so that the students will learn to master the skills to play any kind of musical compositions. Just as in piano playing, would-be English players also need a second stage where they can develop English playing techniques so that they will learn to compose fluently in English on the computer keyboard. The format introduced in the following is the one developed by the authors for this purpose.

(1) Textbook Format

Each lesson is divided into four parts and develops along topics familiar to the students, such as 'Self Introduction,' 'My Hobby,' 'My School,' 'My Town,' etc. The topics evolve from students' personal interests to social interests and then to national and international interests. Basically four main characters the same age as the students are involved in each topic: one Japanese girl (JG), one Japanese boy (JB), one girl from any of the English-speaking countries (EG), and one boy from any of the English-speaking countries (EB), preferably different from the country of the girl student.

The architecture of each part is as follows.

PART I (Fig. 1) consists of two independent statements about the lesson topic by JG and JB. The statements are usually addressed to the readers in the first person.

PART II (Fig. 2) consists of two independent dialogues about the lesson topic between JG or JB and EG or EB. There are four combinations; 1) JG vs. EB, 2) JG vs. EG, 3) JB vs. EG, and 4) JB vs. EB. In these dialogues, only JG or JB ask questions to gather information about the topics from EG or EB.

PART III (Figs. 3&4) is titled 'Activities' and consists of seven activities from 1 to 7 (A1-A7 hereafter). All activities are related to the topics of the lessons.

A1 and A2 are respectively made up of questions about JG and JB.

A3 and A4 are respectively 'Fill-in the Blank' problems about EG and EB.

A5 is a 'Fill-in-the Blank' problem about the students.

A6 is made up of questions about the students.

A7 is made up of model questions students are expected to ask each other to get information about the lesson topic.

PART IV (Lower part of Fig. 4) is titled 'Performances,' consisting of four kinds of Performances. The first one requires the students to compose a statement about themselves on the lesson topic. The second one requires them to compose a statement about their classmates on the lesson topic. The third and fourth Performances require them to make speeches about themselves and their classmates on the lesson topic. They can refer to the statements they
composed in the first and second Performances.

(2) Allotment of Class Hours

As will be clarified in the following Lesson Format, the allotment of class hours in the Play English format is drastically different from the traditional ideas.

PART I and PART II are given only one hour together. That means half an hour for each PART. PART III is allotted one to one and half hours. PART IV is allotted two and half to three hours, depending on the time spent on PART III.

(3) Lesson Format

The actual lesson format, based on the previous text format and class hour allotment, proceeds as follows.

**Step 1:** On the video monitors or computer displays, depending on the classroom facilities, statements of PART I are presented in a recorded voice representing JG and JB, accompanied by still images, and if possible by animated images, depicting the scenes in the statements. The students watch the screen and listen to the talk. After they have listened, the statements are presented visually on the screen. The students read the text. The text scrolls up gradually, as fast as students’ reading speed can follow the scrolling text. About half of the class hour is allotted to this process.

**Step 2:** The same process is repeated in PART II, the dialogues between JG/JB and EG/EB.

The other half of the class hour is allotted to this process. These two processes, Step 1 and Step 2, conclude the first class hour.

**Step 3:** The second class hour starts with the Activities of each lesson. The students do all the activities with the use of their computers, a kind of Play English practice.

In A1 and A2, questions about JG and JB are presented as in Step 1. The students answer questions in complete sentences. In this way, they are engaged in the act of composing. Their answers are stored in the main computer and are used to check how much they have understood the statements of PART I.

In A3 and A4, the same processes as A1 and A2 are repeated regarding the dialogues between JG/JB and EG/EB in PART II.

In A5, a series of sentences with blanks to be filled in are displayed. The students complete
the sentences. When all the sentences are completed, they will eventually compose a paragraph telling about themselves related to the lesson topic.

In A6, a series of questions is displayed. These questions should be asked from a different viewpoint than in A5. The students answer them in complete sentences. As in A5, when all the questions are answered, the students have eventually composed a paragraph telling about themselves related to the topic.

The two paragraphs composed in A5 and A6, combined together, will form a basic architecture on which to compose a more comprehensive statement about the student related to the lesson topic.

In A7, the students ask each other questions to get information about the lesson topic. The questions listed in A7 are model questions. The students are encouraged to ask as many questions and get as much information as they can. The lesson format of Play English presupposes that the classroom is equipped with a LAN (Local Area Network) that enables the students to connect their computers to other students' computers so that they can do this activity electronically by composing questions and answering them by striking the keyboards, i.e., by playing English. If not, they can ask questions orally and record the answers by using their computers. The answers are recorded in complete sentences, and these answers make a basic statement telling about their classmates.

Step 4: As prescribed in the first Performance, the students compose a statement referring to paragraphs composed in A5 and A6. They are encouraged to extend the paragraph to a comprehensive statement on the lesson topic. The statement composed on the computer display is sent to other students' computers for them to read. Each student is encouraged to improve his or her statement by reading the statements composed by other students. The statement of every student is to be processed and stored in a main computer for later scrutiny by the instructor.

Step 5: As prescribed in the second Performance, the students compose a statement about their classmates based on the information they gathered in A7. The finished statements are to be processed as in Step 4.

Vocabulary and phrases used in PARTs 1 and II will help students compose the statements in Step 4 and Step 5.

Step 6: Experienced piano players play musical pieces from memory without musical scores. To be able to do this, the players read the scores many times until they have memorized them. For English players to be able to play English, they are expected to memorize the statements they have composed. In the third and fourth Performances, the students are required to demonstrate before the class that they have memorized the composed statements. At this time the students are encouraged to present improved versions of the statements.

Step 7: As home assignments, the students are required to type a final version of the composed statements until they can play it by touch-typing from memory without looking at the text. This
final version is counted as one of the *playing repertoire* of each student. As the lessons proceed, each student extends his or her repertoire, i.e., they can *play as many compositions* as the number of lessons.

**Step 8:** The final version is presented to the instructor. Then, as many copies as there are students are printed and delivered to all the students in the class. Each student gets as many copies as the number of the students in the class with each lesson. In this way, the students can read not only the model statements in the textbook, but also the variations of the statements on each lesson topic. When one semester or one school year ends, each student has a collection of not only his or her own compositions, but also of the other students’ compositions.

In the conventional English lesson format, the students learn English based on one textbook throughout one school year. They may have learned English by the textbook, but no concrete results are left after one year of instruction. However, in the lesson format of *Play English*, they have a collection of their compositions, which, if properly processed, can be bound in a booklet form. In addition, each student has come to have his or her own repertoire, which he or she can play from memory by touch-typing.

**Step 9:** In the lesson format so far, in classroom situations the students have been given an opportunity to practice *playing English* with their classmates. This is not really *playing English*, so to speak, on the stage, but only a practice session among friends. After the students have acquired a certain amount of repertoire, they are encouraged to join the Forum Conference, CB Simulators, or Electronic Mail services provided by the international networking services such as CompuServe, GEnie, or Delphi. By joining these services, they can accumulate real-life experiences to become proficient *English* *players*.

**Conclusion**

We hope that, as a result of practicing *Play English* based on the textbook and lesson formats presented in this paper, all Japanese learners of English will eventually be able to actively participate in the global network of communication. This is the prime objective of English language education. We hope the concept of *Play English* is well understood by many English instructors and that the formats presented in this paper are tried and improved to bring about more effective *Play English* training methods.

**Notes**

1. The textbook format introduced in this paper was originally developed for YAMAHA English Class for Children and widely used all over Japan in YAMAHA classes. However, the actual lessons do not follow the prototypical lesson format discussed in 2.3., due to the classroom limitations and the difficulty of equipping the students with computers.

2. As in the case of YAMAHA English Class, even though the ideal lesson format may not be available, the concept of *Play English* is realized to a certain degree if the lessons follow the textbook format and employ alternate methods suggested in the discussions of the lesson format.