A University E.S.S. Speech Contest

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Abstract

English speech contests help students to improve their English ability as well as mastering the skills of public speaking. Holding a speech contest however, has challenges and difficulties for all involved. The teachers, participants and judges must be aware of such challenges in order to address them in the most educationally sound way as possible. What follows is an examination of some of the problems inherent in holding speech contests, how these problems relate to my personal experience as advisor to an English Speaking Society speech contest, and ways in which these challenges can be resolved.

Introduction

English speech contests are a traditional and popular part of the foreign language teaching approach in Japan. Junior high school, high school and university speech contests are held at institutional, prefectural and national levels and some, such as The Prince Takamado Trophy running since 1949, have become institutions unto themselves, with the prizes highly acclaimed accolades.

Although popular and in many cases prestigious, speech contests hide a plethora of challenges for the teachers, participants and judges involved. As advisor for a university English Speaking Society, I was called upon to oversee the organization and implementation of an annual E.S.S. speech contest and it was in this context that I first became aware of some of these obstacles.

What follows is an examination of some of the difficulties inherent in an English speech contest, a discussion on how they impact my personal teaching situation and the practices and ways in which they can be addressed. Ultimately, I was seeking to educate myself so that I may offer better advice and guidance to my charges as well as ensuring that the speech contest itself is as educationally beneficial and valid as it can be.

What are speech contests?

In Japan, English speech contests fall into two categories: an original speech

contest, where the participant writes his or her own speech, and a recitation contest where a passage or text is chosen and learned by heart. Although they share many similar aspects such as the various elements of public speaking, original speech contest participants must also be prepared for an evaluation of the content of the speech, thereby making the judging criteria different. While both formats have many challenges and educational benefits in common, the present study will focus on original speech contests.

Speech contests allow participants to showcase their public speaking skills; with the use of voice control, body language and gestures they convey their message to the watching audience. Speakers may be given a theme on which to base their speech, for example 'An Unforgettable Experience' or 'A Personal Challenge', or the topic may be one of their choosing. With either a speaking time limit or a word limit, participants set about writing their winning speeches, before perfecting their delivery to impress the audience.

The event may take place in a classroom, hall or public theater and involves each participant giving their speech to the audience and a panel of judges. The judges watch and evaluate the speeches and reach agreement in awarding first, second and third prizes.

What are the benefits of speech contests?

The benefits of speech contests for participants cannot be overstated. Not only are they a real-world application of the foreign language being studied, but they offer an arena where students can share views and express their personal ideas to others. While some find the topics of English conversation classes and textbooks trivial and boring, speech contests provide an opportunity to talk in English about something that is of personal importance, literally giving the students a voice (Bradley, 2006). This is a novel experience for most students as they have little chance of voicing their genuine views in ordinary classes.

Learning how to speak naturally and fluently and developing public speaking skills increases students' self-confidence and so fuels their motivation to speak and continue studying English. Furthermore, taking part in a speech contest involves a chance to improve a range of language skills as speeches must be composed, learned and delivered effectively. Better grammatical understanding and a widening of vocabulary, the improved pronunciation of phonemes, natural stress and intonation and use of pauses and vocal expression as well as non-verbal communication skills are all developed through speech contest participation. Students may also benefit from finding effective methods of memorization and

drama and acting skills may be cultivated and integrated for dramatic effect as they master a smooth delivery.

Critical thinking skills are also developed as students negotiate the logic of their argument or narrative and find effective ways in which to express themselves. Bradley (2006) claims that speech contests are the ideal way to develop learner autonomy and critical thinking and calls them, "a holistic tool for empowerment, entailing the four English skills and the ability to apply them." (p. 256).

The genre of a speech contest differs from everyday English and that of conversation classes, so participants learn to recognize and use the more formal registers of speech. In seeking to convey their message, speakers must consider their audience and language-use in a way they may never have had to before. Additionally, in most cases student output is read by only the teacher, whereas the forum of a speech contest expands their audience to many more.

During the composition stage, students are exposed to different patterns of rhetoric and logic many of which are rooted in Western ways of thinking and this can open their minds to different cultural norms and ideals. Being able to talk confidently and with an element of pride about one's accomplishments for example, may not come naturally to many Asian students, but is a common feature of Western interactions.

Aside from the personal challenge of delivering a speech in a second language, many participants are motivated to take part with an eye on their future. Not only is a win prestigious, but it is an impressive inclusion on a college application and may give students an edge when applying for a job, overseas program or scholarship. In addition, public speaking skills are a valuable addition to any professional skill-set.

A smooth running speech contest is a pleasure to behold as participants each take their place in the spotlight for their chance to move the audience and impress the judges. There are however, difficulties and challenges inherent at each stage of the speech contest process: From the initial undertaking of the speech writing itself, to the decisions concerning the evaluation criteria and fairness of judging, each element must be carefully considered to ensure that the contest is not only fair and valid, but also as educationally sound as possible.

What are the challenges of speech contests?

The first challenge a speech contest organizer may face is that of recruiting participants. The time and effort involved in preparing to perform a speech in a second language, as well as the courage it takes to get up on stage and talk to an

audience is no small task for busy students to take on. Application deadlines may have to be extended in order to ensure that there are enough participants willing to join and make the contest viable. Valuable time can be taken for this stage of the process resulting in lost practice time, and those students who join late may require extra help to catch up. This is a small stumbling block, however compared to the difficulties most students face in writing their speeches. This problem raises the question of how much support a teacher or coach should give. Ideally, the student decides on a topic and writes a speech within the constraints of the contest guidelines. Then, under advisement from a teacher the speech is honed and perfected, the grammar and vocabulary choices are corrected and refined until the student is left with a finished product. Extensive student involvement in the writing of the manuscript not only ensures full comprehension of the speech but also fosters and develops self-awareness and self-editing skills. Full comprehension of the speech is vital for students to understand the finer points of delivery; which words to stress and how to make use of gestures, changes in volume and pauses for dramatic effect. Self-editing contributes greatly to writing skills as well as overall English ability as self-corrected errors are found to be some of the least likely to be repeated. In a study that compared the ideal versus the reality of writing speeches however, teachers reported that rarely was this ideal realized (Head, 2017). Rather than being in a facilitative role with the student writing the bulk of the content, oftentimes the speech was heavily rewritten or even wholly written by a teacher. The reasons cited for this address some of the problems inherent in writing a speech in a foreign language: Students have a limited range of vocabulary and knowledge of grammatical structures through which to express their ideas; they have little or no experience of a more formal register of English; they lack training in how to structure an argument in either their L1 or the L2; they lack life-experiences from which to draw ideas and often have limited background knowledge of issues outside their personal lives. As well as these factors associated with being young and living sheltered lives, students also organize their ideas in a way dissimilar to the norms of English, and this occurs independently of their language ability. This problem has long been recognized in the field of contrastive rhetoric; as far back as the 1960's research found that students' writing in a second language reflects their cultural thought patterns in a way much more pervasive than first to second language transfer (Kaplan, 1966). In fact, Kaplan went as far as to say that the inbuilt expectations native readers have about good writing are violated by the sequence of thought and patterns of rhetoric employed by non-native writers. An example of this is how speakers from Japan tend to present the background information before the

main point of an argument, whereas English speakers are more inclined to introduce the main point first, and then support it with reasons and arguments afterwards. These different approaches can be represented thus:

Speakers of Japanese	Because of Y (background or reason)...
	So X (main point)
Speakers of English	X (main point)...
	Because of Y (background and reasons)

(Kuntjara, 2004)

Such rhetorical patterns reflect deeper cultural differences, such as those related to the role of the individual within the society and the degree of shared knowledge between the members. Writers in most English speaking countries are encouraged to develop their original views and opinions and then to take a stand in supporting and defending them with passion and persuasion. Writers whose first language is Japanese are more likely to be concerned with achieving harmony with their audience than in developing their own ideas by coming to original conclusions. The critical attitudes and values of self-expression held in such high esteem in the West are not valued highly in Japanese culture. Consequently, compositions written by Japanese students are often judged by English readers to be boring, lacking in logic and depth of critical thought.

Not only does culture shape literary skills in such a way, but it also molds the writer's approach to the audience reflecting the writer-reader relationship, or in the case of a speech contest, the speaker-listener relationship. Contrastive literature holds that Japanese texts are more likely to implement 'reader-responsible rhetoric', meaning that the language is indirect and includes much use of nuance and subtlety allowing more room and space for the audience to interpret for themselves. In contrast, English speakers generally have much less shared cultural knowledge and so directness, clarity and rational argument is highly regarded in their 'writer-responsible' rhetorical style.

Aside from these cultural differences in styles of rhetoric and approach to the audience, students experience difficulties composing speeches due to factors that stem from Japanese instructional methods and the system of education. As has already been stated, originality of thinking is not highly valued nor developed in Japanese schools. Most English writing classes are comprised of translations, study of grammar and word usage, reading aloud and memorization; sentence combining is practiced and paraphrasing skills are learned, but the student is rarely required to work with anything larger than a paragraph or to develop an authentic

voice through writing. Consequently, writing a speech may be the first time they have been required to have original ideas or to work actively and independently to produce something that is genuinely their own.

To guide a student through this minefield of cultural differences and expectations is surely a time-consuming undertaking taking many hours of discussion and negotiation. The reality is that few teachers have the time or the inclination for such a collaboration, and research shows that in actuality, it rarely happens (Head, 2016). Despite the fact that the content of the speech is also under evaluation, it is not uncommon for a Japanese teacher of English to write the script with the student, before passing it on to an ALT to craft into something with a chance of winning. Often due to time constraints or scheduling conflicts the student is taken out of the writing equation early on in the process, and the script is revised based on what the teachers feel will impress the judges. Not only does this sad reality cheat the student out of a myriad of learning opportunities, but it is incongruous with the fact that the content of the speech is also being evaluated. Furthermore, to be removed from the writing process reinforces the belief that learners are incapable of completing the task on their own and that they should defer to the expertise of a teacher or native speaker, thereby becoming less self-directed and more dependent.

Challenges occur too during the coaching and training part of the speech contest process. If there are many students taking part then time and scheduling problems are bound to arise. Additionally, a teacher or coach must strive to be fair in his or her allocation of time spent with each student. This is not easy when some students need more support than others; participants may be from the lowest level English classes or they may have overseas experience or be visiting foreign students.

Learning the script is an important step in preparing to give a speech, yet many students don't effectively do this until a couple of days before the contest. This inhibits their self-confidence and makes it difficult to assimilate the non-verbal communication skills vital for public speaking. Skills such as maintaining eye contact with the audience and the use of gestures lie below the level of conscious awareness and are mostly culturally rooted. Consequently, these don't come naturally for Japanese speakers and must be practiced repeatedly to integrate them naturally into their speech. Pronunciation training including the natural pitch patterns and pauses of the English language can also prove a challenge for many Japanese speakers and thus, be a difficult and time consuming project. Skills such as voice projection and increasing the range of tone and pitch can be a challenge for many female students as these features may be contrary to the culturally

desirable way for women to talk.

Overcoming anxiety is another major challenge for many participants. It is of utmost importance however, as performance deteriorates markedly due to nervousness and anxiety. Nerves may be particularly difficult for Japanese students to overcome as giving a speech is a potential face-threatening activity. Whether the speaker forgets the script or goes into 'survival mode' and speaks rapidly neglecting all the skills learned, nerves can completely ruin a speaker's chance of a successful delivery.

The judging stage of a speech contest includes some of the most difficult, though commonly glossed over problems. As with any kind of testing, issues of reliability and validity must be resolved. The reliability of a test represents the extent to which the measuring procedure yields consistent results, and validity ensures that the interpretations of scores are appropriate and meaningful. Speech contests also must have 'face validity', meaning that they must appear to assess what they purport to assess and that the results must seem fair to both the participants and the audience. This is especially important, as speech contests are often public events with parents, teachers and local officials in attendance.

To address test reliability, evaluation and judging criteria are usually provided in a scoring rubric, most often in the form of rating scales. This serves not only to standardize the scoring, but also to reduce the cognitive load on the judges as they watch and evaluate each speaker. The formation of the rating scales may be the first challenge of the evaluation process, such as deciding how to weight the content versus the delivery for example, or how many items to include on the list. Too few, and many aspects of the speech won't be subject to evaluation, whereas too many will overwhelm the judges, forcing them to be selective in what they attend to. Other problems with rating scales include the extent to which they fairly evaluate a series of speeches and how much the judges agree on the interpretations of such scales. To judge a wide variety of speeches each containing different elements with a necessarily limited set of numbers is difficult to say the least. And judges bring with them different levels of experience and ideas as to what constitutes a good speech. Venema (2013) points out that a complex relationship between three factors affects the reliability of speech contest scoring; the specific performances, the rating scales and the judges interpretations of both (Venema, p. 26). Furthermore, across-judge validity is often problematic as native-speaking and non-native speaking judges tend to have different ideas of a well-executed speech. Judges who are westerners for example, rate highly a natural, likeable delivery, whereas Japanese judges tend to value rote memorization, gestures and accent (Carrigan, 2017).

Aside from the challenges of developing reliable and valid rating scales, the judging process itself is riddled with difficulties and rarely are guidelines provided: Questions such as how to differentiate between delivery and pronunciation? How to calibrate the range of scores before having heard a range of speakers? How to compare and evaluate deviations of English pronunciation across different speakers? Are systematic /l/ - /r/ errors worse than a wider variety of mistakes spread throughout the speech? What is the role of foreign students' 'World-English' accents? And how is the appropriacy of gestures to be evaluated? Shannon (2014) raises the question, should a boring but grammatically correct speech be rated higher than one that is compelling but poorly formatted? And he only half-jokingly asks if points can be deducted from the many speeches entitled 'My Dream' for not considering the audience? Oftentimes, judges are overly generous in giving points creating a large cluster of scores at the top which, when averaged out between the number of judges, can skew results due to an insufficient variation of scores. Additionally, research studying the effect of speaking order in speech contests shows that participants who speak later on in the contest tend to be placed higher than those who speak before, perhaps reflecting judges' reluctance to score highly early on in the contest (Becker in Venema, 2013).

Along with the difficulties of scoring speeches, rating scales can fail participants too; if their speech amounts to more than just the sum of its parts, then it will not be recognized as having the value it deserves. It is due to these many problems that Shannon recommends a move away from judging speech contests in such a way, instead developing a merit-based award system more akin to how scouts earn their badges. This change would allow recognition to be given for the many hours of practice that every participant puts in rather than only the lucky three speakers who make first, second and third prizes.

Ultimately, a speech will win if the judges "like it" and Venema sums up the difficulties of judging speech contests by saying: "The attempt to influence a heterogeneous audience with words will always be more of an art than a science and, consequently, judging speeches will also be so." (Venema, p. 30).

Discussion.

The challenges and problems revealed in the research are substantiated by my personal experience with speech contests. The difficulties start for most students before they even start writing with few of the participants having a clear idea of a good topic for a speech. To address this and other problems a series of workshops are provided for them. The first workshop uses mind-mapping to get them started

and with guidance from a partner and from myself, their topics are decided. The mind-mapping worksheet can be found in the Appendix. Once their scripts are written, they email them to me and make an appointment to meet for a consultation. In almost every case the errors in the scripts are in alignment with those found in the studies of comparative rhetoric: Students don't know how to structure an argument or logically order a text. They are vague and provide few factual details to add interest or meaning and no evidence to support their claims; strong connections between cause and effect are rarely shown and there often occurs a feeling of being left hanging for the purpose or meaning of a point. The higher-level speakers and foreign students most often have difficulties associated with not knowing the more formal genre of a speech, writing their texts in conversational style, riddled with questions and inappropriate colloquialisms and slang. With between ten and fifteen contest participants to support consultations are a hugely time consuming project. Time and scheduling difficulties aside, the greatest challenge for me to reconcile has been, how much help should I give them with rewriting their transcripts? As content is also part of the evaluation, it is a difficult professional decision to make. This question is compounded by the fact that the English capability levels of participants varies greatly; from the lowest-level of English classes to visiting foreign students, the speech contest is open to all. To level the playing field, so to speak, I proofread for errors in vocabulary and grammar and advise and help students to work on their compositional style, guiding them to use transition words as landmarks to lead the listener through their main points. In collaboration with them I encourage a deeper probing of their topic, adding more factual and relevant details. After the first consultation, I send them away to answer such questions as: 'Why is this point important?' 'How did that make you feel?' 'How high is that bridge you're talking about, and when was it built?' 'Why is that place popular?' 'Where is that place in relation to somewhere we know?' 'What are the facts and figures to support that statement?' They then work the answers of these questions into the second drafts of their speech before meeting with me again. In considering how much rewriting to do, I asked myself what the goals of this speech contest are? If its main purpose is to offer a forum where students can convey their thoughts and ideas to an audience and not just a measure of their writing skills, then I can feel justified in helping them to do this. I am careful not to introduce my ideas although I may prompt them to add more specific details, use supporting statements and make comparisons and connections. I rarely add vocabulary words that they are unfamiliar with, though I try to include those that they have chosen from their dictionaries. Many students, especially those of lower English ability, write their

scripts in Japanese first and then translate them with computer software. Consequently, their speeches are peppered with difficult vocabulary and contain many odd sentence structures and passive formations. If I can teach them the correct use of such words and how to structure their sentences to include them, then I feel educationally justified in doing so. Additionally, this level of support gives the lower ability participants a fighting chance against those who already have a good command of English.

The training and coaching challenges are best tackled through a variety of approaches. Not only are workshops held for members to practice and develop their skills in pairs and in groups, but students are expected to make appointments for one-on-one coaching with me. Scheduling problems are common when holding the workshops as students have different timetables and many have part-time jobs, so although time-consuming the one-on-one sessions are vital to the process of preparing them for the contest. Participants are given an opportunity to practice their pronunciation and delivery skills in the three or four, hour-long workshops offered. Here, they practice tongue-twisters, use mouth diagrams and do speaking tasks. Such exercises include being divided into small groups to practice speaking while maintaining eye contact with the other members; playing the 'Interview Game' where each student answers a simple question such as "What's your favorite - - -?" with a timed 30 second answer; and tasks that practice voice control focusing on projection and tonal changes to add emotional expressiveness to their words. Standing with the correct posture and the use of simple gestures are also practiced in the workshop sessions, as well as in the one-on-one meetings. An example of a workshop worksheet can be found in the Appendix.

To help students memorize their scripts not only are they used in the workshops, but they are each given a recording of my voice reading their speech. They are encouraged to listen and shadow the recording before every mealtime and before they go to bed. Speakers also record their own voices throughout the learning process and compare it to my recorded model; this supports their improved pronunciation of phonemes and stress, intonation and skills of vocal expression. Some simple methods drawn from cognitive science and neuro-linguistic-programming are also introduced to aid memorization. Techniques such as writing their transcripts in different colors, for example the first paragraph in red, the next in yellow, the next in green etc. assist retention. Adding gestures early on in the learning process also helps as physical movements act as an anchor and a reminder of the order of the speech.

Nervousness and performance anxiety is also addressed in the workshops.

Speaking to an audience of any size is surely a daunting task, so students first practice speaking in pairs as this is much lower on the anxiety scale. After pair-work they speak in small groups, after this in a larger group thereby increasing their confidence in degrees. Performance anxiety can also be eased using NLP techniques such as visualization and anchoring a calm feeling by the use of a physical cue. Encouragement and positive comments and feedback are an important way of building speaking confidence and care must be taken to couch any pointers or criticisms in a positive way.

The judging and rating challenges were addressed by the scoring rubric being developed in collaboration with the judges themselves. A list of possible rating items was sent to each judge, and in consideration of the feedback the scales were developed. The scoring rubrics and copies of the speech transcripts are emailed to the judges in advance so that they have a chance to preview them, thus easing their cognitive load during the performances and judging process. Half way through the contest the judges break for lunch, during which time they discuss and compare their scoring with the purpose of standardizing the use of the rating scales. After the contest too, the judges convene to discuss the scores and impressions of the performances before deciding on the final placement of prizes. The discussion process addresses the concern that all rating scales have limitations and it provides judges with an opportunity to give opinions on the speeches outside the numerical values. After the announcement of prizes, each student receives a brief feedback from the judges. In two or three minutes, the judges tell each speaker their strong points, what they enjoyed the most about their speech, and give one or two pointers of advice for future reference. The scoring rubric can be found in the Appendix together with an alternative I propose to trial in the future (thanks to Lyndon Small, of Fukuoka University for permission).

Conclusion.

English speech contests contribute to students' mastery of the language in many ways. Not only are they a bridge between language study and language use, but they help to develop the competence and disposition of active and autonomous learners, empowering students with a voice of their own and the confidence to speak out.

There are many challenges for teachers, participants and judges in the undertaking of a speech contest. For teachers it is a time consuming project that demands balance between lending expertise and maintaining the students' own originality of expression. Members will need extensive support to reach the

standard of fluency necessary for public speaking and their confidence and faith in their own abilities must be fostered and maintained. The contest itself, as well as the process of preparation, must be as valid, beneficial and as educationally sound as possible. For participants, learning new, culturally-laden ways of using English and developing the skills and composure to speak in front of an audience may be the most demanding task they have undertaken thus far in their education; a frightening and potentially face-threatening task that they must meet with self-assuredness and conviction. For judges, decisions must be made which three of the many performances they recognize and award acclaim. The others, which may have their own merits, must be discarded, often leaving speakers in tears of disappointment and regret. As the evaluation process is far from perfect, judges must keep in mind the limitations of rating scales as measures of speaking and resist the temptation of rating every speech at the top of the scale. Perhaps as Shannon suggests, public speaking skills could be better assessed in other ways. While this may be true, speech contests are a popular part of foreign language study in Japan and contribute to learners' English abilities, self-confidence and mastery of public speaking, skills that will stand them in good stead their whole lives through.
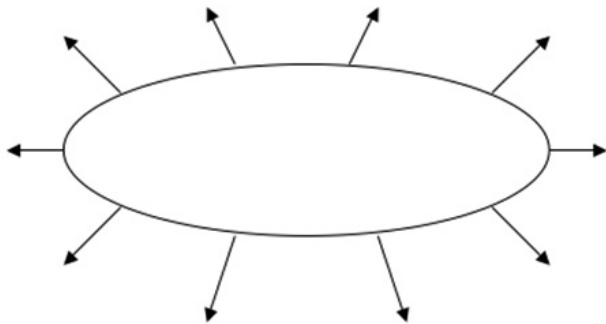
APPENDIX

Name: _____ Student Number: _____

SPEECH CONTEST MIND-MAP.

If you are not sure what to speak about, use this paper to help you to plan your speech. It's easiest to speak about something that you are interested in, something that you feel a *PASSION* for!

1. Write your topic on the center of the idea-web, and words that are connected to it, around the edge.

2. Read your ideas to your partner. Partner, suggest more ideas for around the edge.

3. Write 5 questions you could ask about this topic:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

4. Write 5 sentences (of 7 words or more) that you could say about this topic:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

If you finish, add more items to the idea-web.

Scoring Rubrics

Rubric 1

ESS Speech Contest

Name of speaker: _____   Title of speech: _____

(Comments ⇓)

	No	Yes very	
Speech was interesting:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes very	
Smooth speech delivery:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	Too fast/slow	Good	
Speaking speed:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes	
Eye-contact with audience:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes many	
Used natural gestures:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes very	
Confident & enthusiastic:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes very	
Natural pronunciation:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

	No	Yes very	
Natural stress & intonation:	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - - - 6		_____

General Feedback: _____
_____

Rubric 2

FULERC 2012 Speech Contest Evaluation Form   No.1

	Speech number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Contestant's name										
	Score: 1 ~ 5 poor very good										
Performance	Pronunciation										
	Stress, intonation, pace										
	Engagement, Non-verbal communication.										
	① **Performance** Score X 2 = /30										
Syntax	Sentence complexity										
	Grammar										
	Quality of expression										
	② **Syntax** Score X 2 = /30										
Content	Informative										
	Relevance to theme										
	Originality										
	Overall coherence and flow										
	③ **Content** Score X 2 = /40										
	Total 1+2+3 /100										

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