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Introduction

In the 1980's, with an economy that was globalizing, with education also internationalizing steadily in the form of increasing numbers of foreign students in Japan as well as Japanese students overseas, with new forms of communication becoming more widespread, and the demand for new kinds of highly specialized personnel also rising, came the realization that Japan's education system would be unable to meet the needs of the new era appropriately and flexibly. This realization, together with a wide variety of educational problems (school violence, truancy, dropping out) rapidly becoming apparent, as well as the continued criticism of Japanese education ("examination hell," overemphasis on educational credentials, education devoted to cramming factual information, excessive standardization) led to a full-scale revaluation of the realities of Japanese education and its basic structure, mainly through the creation of the Ad Hoc Council on Education set up by the administration of Prime Minister Nakasone in 1984.

One of the subsequent results of this revaluation was the publication in 1989 of the new Monbusho guidelines for teaching English in public senior high schools¹ to be implemented from April of 1994. Under these guidelines, one of the most significant additions would be the replacement of

English IIA (under the previous guidelines) by three "Oral Communication" courses. The inclusion of the Oral Communication courses in the new guidelines clearly illustrated the perceived need to get away from the much criticized "English as a subject to be memorized for passing college entrance exams," and towards "English as a tool to be used for communication." Indeed, the stated aim of Oral Communication A, one of the three Oral Communication courses laid out in the guidelines, and the course closest to what most native–speakers of English would describe as "English Conversation," is stated by Goold, et al.(1993a:4) as "…learning to use the skills of listening to and speaking English in personal, everyday situations at home, in school, and in society, and to express oneself simply and promptly." Even Oral Communication courses B and C, which center around aural comprehension and formal speaking abilities respectively, stress the ability to "use" the language.

While the aims themselves are admirable, it is after this, on substance, that the guidelines fall short. Goold, et al. (1993a) point out that, like the term "English Conversation," the Guidelines do not inform us in any detail of what is to be taught and obviously cover a wide range of possibilities. What hints are given—the words "situation" and "purpose" recur frequently in tandem throughout the guidelines and would seem to indicate that the approach envisaged in Oral Communication A is the "situational" one—are questionable. Doubts have been raised about the soundness of the pedagogical foundations of the "situational" approach to teaching English communicatively. It is debatable whether a dynamic activity like human communication can be entirely broken down into situations that can be practiced in the classroom, and the usefulness of much situational language presented in textbooks can be questioned. In any case, the Guidelines offer no practical advice on how to teach "situational" English, as well.

So it is hardly surprising that many teachers in the Japanese secondary school system are quite interested, if not downright anxious, as to how oral communication can be taught.³ "Communicative" teaching is an area

relatively few Japanese teachers of English have had training in and/or experience with. Indeed, Goold, et.al. (1994a:5), in their observations of their Japanese colleagues teaching English, observed little ability to use "communicative" teaching methods/techniques. Pair work was almost never used, and audio tapes were perfunctorily played. And this in classes that, according to existing guidelines, supposedly contained some listening and speaking objectives.

Though textbooks specifically aimed at use with these Oral Communication courses are becoming increasingly available, can any teacher justify simply picking up and using one of these in one of his or her courses without really considering the nature of the course and what can and should be done? And while a class can be taught by selecting a text and using it from front to back cover, will not doing so take away much of the iniative for a teacher to really understand the course and the best way in which to teach it? It must be kept in mind that there is no such thing as an ideal textbook—one that can meet and satisfy the requirements and learning possibilities of any or all specific teaching situations. After all, textbook publishers print textbooks that will sell to as wide an audience as possible, so it is naive to think that any one textbook can satisfy all the learning needs of all classes. Rather, the teachers themselves are their own best resource. Materials are but a place to start. Teachers are the ones who make materials work; they make them work for their students and for themselves in the situations in which they teach.

Equally, there can be no one "best way" to generically teach an "oral communication" class. The teaching circumstances differ, based on the variables of the teacher, such as his/her knowledge, beliefs, abilities, and aims; the institution, including rules, regulations, and aims of the school or the overseeing administrative governmental body; and the students/ classroom environment, such as the students' numbers, goals, and motivations, the physical arrangement of the classroom, and what teaching aids and facilities are available. A teacher must first take into account his or her specific teaching circumstances before the aspect of "how" or "what"

to teach (the approach, methodology, techniques and materials) can be considered.

Based on these aims, and keeping in mind the reality that teaching circumstances do differ, this will not be a paper on how an Oral Communication class should be taught. Instead, I feel it would be far more effective to simply give an example of what can be and has been done. Thus this will be a "practical" paper in that I will be taking a "case –study" approach—in other words I will be presenting the steps involved in the consideration, execution, and assessment of an oral communication class that I have recently taught, and will give and support my reasoning for each act, technique, or choice.

Considering One's Teaching Circumstances

In teaching a course, while it can be done, it is not recommended that the teacher simply walk into the new class and start teaching. A certain amount of planning and consideration is required in the teaching of a course. The first step should be to consider your individual "teaching circumstances." Your teaching circumstances consists of three general variables:

- 1) Your knowledge of yourself as a teacher (what skills/abilities and pedagogical beliefs or learning/background you may have, especially as concerns the class at hand).
- 2) The needs, levels, abilities, characters, numbers, etc. of the students in the class you will teach.
- 3) The rules (written and unwritten), requirements, facilities, etc. of the institution (including those outside who have an influence on said institution) your class will take place at.

Other items that must also be considered in the planning of your course before actual instruction can take place are, in order of consideration:

1) Based on your teaching circumstances, what will be the goal(s) of your course? In other words, at the end of one year or whatever

- A Consideration of Approach and Method in Oral Communication
 - the timespan, what should you and your students have accomplished?
- 2) With your goals in place, what means of assessment will you use to discern whether you and your students have accomplished these goals? Most institutions require some form of assessment determination or final grade for each student. But note that the teacher should also assess him or herself, as well as the success of the course. For if many students perform poorly in the final assessment, I would consider it more a condemnation of the teacher and his or her course planning then of the students' performance.
- 3) Consideration of method, techniques and materials, as well as actually laying out of the syllabus in detail.

Approach

My "approach" to language teaching/learning/acquisition in general, and oral communication (or speaking or conversation as it may be called) in particular, can be said to consist of a number of beliefs, or tenets:

- 1) "Communication involves the transfer of information."
 This embodies not just relevant exercises and activities, given the goal of the course relates to oral communication, but also the development of interactive/social skills, being able to work with others. Communication is not a solitary activity.
- "Language communication does not usually occur naturally as individually discrete skills, but as a composite skill, and its teaching should reflect this."
 - Consider such everyday situations as an informal conversation (listening & speaking), notetaking in a class lecture (listening & writing), reading a book to your daughter (reading & speaking), or rewriting an assignment (reading & writing).
- 3) "The culture of an L2 is essential to learning the language itself." This is even more true in the learning of oral communication, if

communicative competence is one of the goals. The culture is a part of the language. The meaning of any sentence, word, or phrase can be dependent on the context of the situation, including cultural context. Thus it is important for teachers to know the culture they are teaching, not just the language, and to introduce this in their teaching as well.

- 4) "There is no one "best way" to teach all classes."

 As pointed out earlier, a teacher must take a look a
 - As pointed out earlier, a teacher must take a look at his/her own teaching circumstances, for teaching circumstances do differ. Institutions differ in what they expect and require from their teachers and classes. Some set classroom texts and policy. Others give their teachers more leeway. Student motivations differ from school to school, major to major, year level to year level, class to class, and even student to student.4 Are you aware of your students' wants and needs? And what a teacher is willing and able to do also plays a part in his or her teaching situation. The larger a teacher's repertoire of teaching techniques, the more there is for him or her to choose from when putting together a syllabus for his or her class situation. A teacher of limited means is limited in what he or she can do in the class as well. And it is just as important for a teacher to have a good grounding in approaches and methods. Techniques are based on the reasoning of the approach. Too many teachers "teach" certain "fun" or "interesting" activities or exercises just because "they are there," and not for any pedagogically sound reasoning. And those without a clear idea of their own teaching approach quite easily jump on the "bandwagon" (Clarke, 1982; Savignon, 1983). The pronounced "swinging of the pendulum" (Celce-Murcia,1991) from favored approach to favored approach during the 20th century (and including the numerous approaches/ methods that had/have gained favor with smaller populations of educators) can be viewed as a clear indication of this.
- 5) "Be aware of what your students have done/learned in the past,

and build on it."

Students coming into college have had at least 6 years of English. Rather than repeating or disregarding this learning, it should be used.

6) "Output is needed to improve speaking ability (one acquires by doing)."

While this is not the only requisite to achieving oral fluency, I do believe it is a requirement. Similar to most other acquired skills –tennis, golf, driving a car, etc.—proficiency requires practice, the actual act of doing.

7) "Material should be presented to the students in a number of varying ways."

Just as variety is called "the spice of life," so it is with the classroom. Use of variation will make learning (and teaching) more
rewarding, and not simply for the reason that variety does make
for more interest and attention. Variety in the sense that the more
ways something is explained to someone, the better the chance of
his/her understanding it. This can be as simple as rephasing a
question or request that the student didn't understand on the first
try, or more complex as in doing a number of different activities
that teach the same point (whether topical, linguistic, or affective).
Related to this is the next tenet.

8) "A course syllabus should be systematic, yet not static."

Variety is good, but not chaos. Some classes (and textbooks) I have observed tend to be a hodgepodge of well-meaning activities, with no clear organization. What inevitably ends up happening is that the instructor spends more time explaining how to do the new activity (of which there are many), than on the activities themselves. And after all this is done, the students are confused as to what they had actually accomplished. With this in mind, a syllabus should have variety, but variety in that the procedure is fairly standardized (systematic), though not static (meaning doing the

same thing every class). Refer to the following chapter for a clear example of this.

9) "The goal of education is to give students the opportunities and practical abilities to continue their education."

By this I mean that, in addition to their regular studies, students should learn study skills, learn to take responsibility for their own study (in and out of class), and be given a chance to develop academic interests and motivations. The teacher should try to foster interest in the lessons and materials, and encourage and help the students to develop these new interests, and the means to pursue these interests, for what occurs after graduation is just as important if not more so than what happens in class. For when your students finish the course or graduate, do they immediately forget everything, or continue on their own? If it is the former, it

makes no difference what they learned or how they performed in the class. You, the teacher, have failed. But if they continue their

own education, then you have succeeded.

One of the most difficult problems facing a course such as oral communication concerns the system of assessment (testing and grading). In any kind of class, as a rule, the final assessment should reflect the students' performance in class and/or based on the students' mastery of the material covered in class. But in a course such as oral communication, where most of the classwork probably centered around conversational and communicative skills and practice, we encounter a problem-how to fairly assess such work in a test. A grade based on a student's linguistic ability through a written test would be unfeasible, as most of the class work was probably oral in nature. Orally testing a class of 30 students or more would also be unfeasible, not only due to the amount of time involved, but also to the ridiculousness of a 5-minute oral test carrying any substantial grade weighting rela-

tive to the tens of hours of oral production in class. Besides, with either written or oral testing, an initially more proficient student would unfairly receive a better grade, and if grades were then based on improvement, the better student would have had less chance to improve relative to the poorer student, especially if the level at which the class was taught was low. Since a test should merely reflect a student's performance in class, why not just assess said student on said performance? For if a student does well in class, but poorly on the final test (or vice-versa), then this would indicate that something is wrong on the teaching end, and not on the student end.

An Oral Communication Class

Initially, I considered my teaching situation: I would be teaching a 90-minute English oral communication class in a private university. The class would be made up of approximately 30 second-year nonEnglish major students. Previous experience with a similar situation told me that the English ability level would range from low-intermediate to intermediate and student motivation to study English would be only fair. The classroom offered movable desk-chair units. The school had no strict criteria for teaching this class or any rigid aims. It was informally assumed that the teacher of such a course would provide an environment in which the students would gain some familiarity with spoken English.

With this situation in mind I set out some guidelines of my own I would follow:

- Seeing as how these students have studied English for the past seven years, I wished to make use of this learning, and build their oral communication skills on this.
- 2) Taking into account their level, a year-end goal of students being able to express themselves in English in a number of limited situations would be reasonable. But the main goal was simply that

they learn not be afraid or hesitant to express themselves, in fact, to have the confidence to feel like they could express themselves in English if they wished. Maximizing oral production chances would be significant.

- 3) An important complement to this was going to be to improve their attitude towards English, seeing as how motivation was only fair.⁵
- 4) English (and the class) was going to have to be interesting, if not enjoyable. One key to doing this was going to have to be the introduction of a variety of exercises and activities.
- 5) Try to develop a sense of accomplishment, to gain the confidence and interests and skills to be able to continue studies on their own.
- 6) As classroom time was limited (90 minutes x 24 weeks), and the class size about 30, group and pair work would have to be used to maximize individual oral production time. (The classroom desk arrangement would allow this quite nicely.) It should also reduce student anxiety about speaking English somewhat. After all, interaction with a classmate is definitely less threatening than interaction with to the teacher.⁶

Methods & Syllabus

The program I decided on would be as follows:

- 1) We would work around tri-weekly themes, looking at these themes from a number of different angles. The themes would be ones with which the students had some familiarity, so as to be able to discuss. A tri-weekly schedule would give us the time to work through each theme at a fair pace. I don't want to rush, but neither would I like to spend so long on one theme as to bore the students. Such a tri-weekly schedule would be systematic.
- 2) I would attempt to keep the syllabus flexible. If the students on working well on or are especially interested in a particular exercise or theme, I would expand it.

3) Around each selected theme, we would work with the "text, topic, activity" format. The "text, topic, activity" format has been the basic makeup of any oral communication class of mine. It forms the basic outline for the use of variety in the classroom and a composite-skill syllabus. "Text" refers to the primary teaching materials, be it textbook, video, or some other source of input for the students. A tangible item such as a textbook does have its advantages in that students do feel more comfortable with something to "hold." "Topic" refers to a regular (weekly, monthly, each chapter) pre-lesson (homework) writing exercise related to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the lesson. Emphasizes the building of communication skills (speaking & listening), as well as cultural and affective (getting to know your classmates better and taking into account others' opinions), more than writing skills, though these too can be worked on depending on the technique used. Students usually work in pairs and groups. "Activity" refers to a complementary exercise or activity relating to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the text or other major teaching material.

The textbook *Super Talk*⁷ was selected as it would fit the bill quite nicely. It was simple, yet ordered in its layout. The level of English used, and the exercises (such as topic introductory exercises, or pairwork questions) were of low-intermediate to intermediate level and dealt with the theme at hand. The themes offered (each chapter being based upon a single theme) were ones that students would know something about and so could talk about. I selected six of the chapters/themes to work through during the school year: Weddings, Planning for cheap food, Planning how to spend your money, Advertising this school, An advertising campaign, and Helping people to travel in Japan. But the heart of the chapters, and the reason I selected this text, was because it offered "group discussion"—task-based group discussion exercises such as "plan a wedding for a friend" or "design a menu for your school cafeteria." These

step-by-step discussion exercises are interesting and doable for even students of low-intermediate level. Samples from the first chapter (Weddings) of the pairwork questions and group discussion follow:⁸

Interview Your Partner

Interview your partner and find out the answers to the following questions.

- 1. How old do you want to be when you get married?
- 2. Where would you like to go on your honeymoon?
- 3. How much money do you expect to spend on your wedding?
- 7. Would you prefer a "love marriage" or an arranged marriage?

Let's Discuss

Read the following situations and discuss them in your group. Remember to discuss AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE before you make any decisions. Keep your discussions going as long as possible.

You have been working for three years and are going to get married next year. Both of you have saved 5,000,000 Yen. This is all the money you can spend. No one else can give you any more money to help pay the expenses. You may spend only 5,000,000.

How are you going to spend th	he money?	How r	nuch '	will you	spend	for
• the hall and ceremony?						
the food and drinks?						
• gifts for the guests?						
• the honeymoon?						
What would you like to serve food you want your guests to		ding?	Write	down si	x kind	ls o

	A Con	siderati	on of	App	roach	and	Met	hod i	n Ora	al Coi	nmur	icatio	n
								2					
How	many	guests	will	vou	invite	to 1	the v	vedd	ling?				

Of course both exercises continue on. The pairwork questions made for interesting expansion and discussion during class, and got the students interested in and thinking about the theme before beginning work on the group discussion. Naturally, students would usually work in pairs for the pairwork. For the group discussion, I randomly divided the class into six groups of $5\sim6$ students. I considered this a workable size. The simpleness and flexibility of this text allowed me to fill out my syllabus with complementary activities (topics, activities) based around the given themes.

For the topic, the students would be given the homework the previous class on writing at least 100 words (or more, if they wanted to) on a specific task assignment given by the instructor based on the theme being worked on at that time. In class, the students would share these ideas, experiences and/or opinions of theirs with others, working in groups or pairs. The teacher would then collect the assignments. Scoring would be pass/fail, depending only on if the student had 100 words or more in their assignment, the reason being, this was not primarily a writing assignment, but preparation for an oral assignment. Late papers would not be accepted for the same reason, the oral exercise was missed. In this way, this assignment would be the chance for the students to say what they want to say in *their* English. Because it is their opinions and ideas, this is a very low-threatening exercise, both in the writing and in the sharing, which is the true point of the exercise, also low-threatening because they share with a partner or with the group, not directly with the teacher. Samples of topics assigned were:

Recommend a restaurant (Theme: Planning for cheap food)

The grade I deserve (Theme: Advertising this school)
My favorite commercial/advertisement (Theme: An advertising campaign)

Activities consisted of:

- a) group presentation-Each group is responsible for carrying out a class presentation on one of the six assigned themes we will be covering during the school year. Six groups-six themes. The groups must work together outside of class in researching and preparing for this presentation. My guidelines for their presentations are five: it can deal with anything related to the theme, that we (the class) learn something new, it's interesting, clear and understandable, and 15~30 minutes long.
- b) lecture-I present interesting cultural information based on the theme, usually of a comparative Japan-U.S. type.
- c) other-Such as putting together a class guide to recommended restaurants, based on the topic exercise, or having students plan, produce and videotape their own commercial.

The resultant syllabus was as follows:

- Week 1: Course description and explanation
- Week 2: Theme #1 (Weddings): introduction, interview your partner, lecture
- Week 3: Theme #1: topic, group discussion
- Week 4: Theme #1: group presentation, final report
- Week 5: Theme #2 (Planning for cheap food): introduction, interview your partner, lecture
- Week 6: Theme #2: topic, group discussion
- Week 7: Theme #2: group presentation, final report
- Week 8: Theme #3 (Planning how to spend your money): intro., interv.your partner, lect.
- Week 9: Theme #3: topic, group discussion

- Week 10: Theme #3: group presentation, final report
- Week 11: Review and make-up
- Week 12: First term examination
- Week 13: Scored exams passed back, review of first term's material
- Week 14: Theme #4 (Advertising this school): introduction, interview your partner, lecture
- Week 15: Theme #4: topic, group discussion
- Week 16: Theme #4: group presentation, final report
- Week 17: Theme #5 (An advertising campaign): intro., interview your partner, lecture
- Week 18: Theme #5: topic, group discussion
- Week 19: Theme #5: group presentation, final report
- Week 20: Theme #6 (Helping people to travel in Japan): intro., interv. your partner, lecture
- Week 21: Theme #6: topic, group discussion
- Week 22: Theme #6: group presentation, final report
- Week 23: Review and make-up
- Week 24: Second term examination

Assessment

Grading would be based on a system of continuous assessment. Students would be informed of this in the first class (when informed of the class syllabus), as well as the components and the relative weighting of each.

The students' grade would be based on:

a) attendance & participation (40%)—This course stresses in-class participation and performance. If you're absent, you of course cannot participate. Participation means taking part in the class, especially group presentation work and actively taking part (use of

English) in group discussion.

Groupwork plays an important part in the students' grade. As pointed out earlier, and this I point out to the students, is that communication is something done with others, to be able to work with others. Therefore, it is important in this class. Part of the students' grade depends on the performance of their group, not just in preparation and presentation of the group presentation, but in everyday situations such as group discussion. I give a grade for each group's performance during group discussion. This not only includes doing the work, but doing it in English. I explain that it' s up to the members of the group to make sure everyone in the group uses English. I'm not going to walk around finding and punishing those using Japanese. Instead I put this responsibility on the members of the group to police the group. If someone uses Japanese, remind him or her to use English. As far as I'm concerned if one person is speaking Japanese in a group, that means all the members are listening to that Japanese, and so I give all the members similar scores for that day's work. There is no reason why English cannot be used. The material is not that difficult and I stress to them that they don't have to be perfect speakers. Just try and use the English they've learned up to now (in jr. high and high school and in the activities & exercises previous to this group discussion), even if it's only "Yes, yes, yes" or "One," "Oh," or "O. K."

- b) Topics and other written assignments (20%)—topics are simply graded, as explained earlier, on a pass/fail basis. Pass if they've written 100 or more words, fail if less.
- c) Exams, first term & second term (40%)—the first term and second term tests consisted of about 20 questions each. The questions

were evenly divided between lecture, group discussion, and group presentations. Students were informed of the point weighting for each question. The answers were to be written directly on the test form in the spaces provided between each question. The answer format was short answer. The was no need for complete sentences, as this was purely a comprehension test, to verify that the students did the work asked of them (paid attention during the lectures and group presentations, and took part in the group discussions). They either knew the answers or didn't. It wasn't the kind of test that one could study up for, and it wasn't meant to be. The questions were fairly simple and straightforward for those who participated in class. The results of the tests correlated with individual student performance, assessed through attendance, participation, and assignments.

Sample test questions:

From lecture (Themes: weddings, planning for cheap food):

- (6pts.) Give three examples of a household item that can be given as a wedding gift.
- (3pts.) What food is traditionally American?

From group discussion (Themes: weddings, planning for cheap food):

- (3pts.) In Chapter 1 group discussion, where did your group decide to go for the honeymoon?
- (6pts.) In Chapter 2 group discussion, what three drinks did your group decide on?

From group presentations (Themes: planning how to spend your money, planning for cheap food):

(6pts.) According to Group B, who printed the first paper money and when did this happen?

(3pts.) According to Group C, name one kind of food associated with Easter.

Something I point out is that they (the students) don't start out with 100%, and lose points during the year. I view this as a negative form of assessment. Rather, I inform the students that they all start out with 0% and must earn a passing grade. Because now they know what their grade is based on, they are to take responsibility for their own grades. They decide if they want to attend a class, do and turn in a topic on time, or use English in their groups. They are the ones who determine their own grades. I merely punch in their numbers into my calculator. 60% of the students' grade is based directly on their in-class performance. If they come to class, participate, and do their assignments, all students should be able to pick up the full 60%. So even if their performance on the exams is poor (which it shouldn' t be if they did well in the in-class work), all students should pass. But in reality, some fail, but not because they had a bad day on the exam day, but rather, because they did not put forth the effort in class. A teacher should have no hesitation about assigning a poor or failing grade to such students in such a program as this.

Final Comments

The way in which the Guidelines to Oral Communication are implemented will depend not only on the sense of directions the guidelines can give teachers but also on what Japanese teachers and students feel comfortable with. As the guidelines offer little practical advice, it is a very real possibility that, given the lack of proper knowledge and training in the teaching of oral communication, the reading aloud and repeating methodology employed in many classrooms in the past will survive the transition to the "communicative" classroom in Japanese schools.

And while it is hoped that this paper has presented teachers with some

teaching ideas and techniques for their communicative classrooms, the more important intention was for teachers to realize the necessity of the following points:

- 1) Be aware of the purposes and needs of *your* teaching circumstances.
- 2) You are your most important resource. Be creative, adapt.
- 3) Look at what your doing and why. You should have sound reasons for what you do.

Variations of this approach has been used successfully with different teaching circumstances, including variations in student motivation, class size, level of English ability, etc.

Footnotes

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- Goold, R., C. Madeley, and N. Carter. (1993a). The new Monbusho guidelines. The Language Teacher, XVII (6), p.4.
- An observation reinforced by feedback received from Japanese secondary school instructors in both formal (lectures given on the theme of oral communication) and informal (short talks and conversations) situations.
- ⁴ For data pertaining to motivational differences see Duggan, J.J. (1991). Are our students unmotivated?: Assessing initial student attitudes in the EFL classroom. *Dokkyo University Studies in English*, 38, 35∼61.
- A determination based on the results of a survey as laid out in Duggan (1991), given to similar classes at said institution in previous years and later verified with said class in an initial lesson.
- ⁶ See Duggan, J.J. (1990). Inducing feedback in the EFL classroom: Exploring the causes of student hesitation. *Dokkyo University Studies*

- in English, 36, $41\sim68$.
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- 8 Ibid., pp.2∼3.

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