

RULES vs. REALITY: On Subject-Verb Number Agreement

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1. Introduction

In teaching subject-verb agreement topics in class, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) often find their students puzzled by the sentence pattern in which English quantifiers, such as *every*, *each*, *either* and *neither*, are located in its subject position. According to the English grammar rules, these quantifiers are viewed as singular subject (e. g., *Every student in the class has a personal computer*). But sometimes students are confused when they find the *either A or B* and *neither A nor B* phrases are followed by a verb that agrees to a singular subject, even when the subject noun phrase notionally refers to more than one entity (e. g., *Neither my sisters nor my brother is going to do it*—which can be rephrased as “*both my sisters and my brother are not going to do it*”). Thus students often have questions, “Why is the singular verb used here, although the subject is semantically plural?” to which JTEs answer “Because that’s the RULE. You just have to memorize it.” However, there still remain questions: Do native English speakers (NSs) really prefer and obey this rule?; Do they feel strange or bothered when they hear expressions that are off-rule but notionally sound reasonable (e. g., *Neither my sisters nor my brother are going to do it*)?

According to Richards et al. (1992), the grammatical system of a language has two sub-categories: prescriptive and descriptive grammar. The former is a traditional grammar that prescribes linguistic rules governing what people should or shouldn’t say. The latter, in contrast, refers to the one which describes how a language is actually spoken and/or written. Although Japanese students learn English solely based on prescriptive grammar, past studies examining the descriptive use of the English language have suggested that there are some variations among NSs in subject-verb number agreement, and that *every*, *each*, *either* and *neither* as the subject of the sentence are of this kind (e. g., Celce-Murcia &

Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Then new questions arise: Which form is correct, “*Neither my sisters nor my brother ‘is’ or ‘are’?*”; Which form do NSs prefer?; Which form should we teach?

In this paper, the author presents a small-scale questionnaire survey he conducted to examine if and how much descriptive forms of the above-mentioned structures are actually used, and accepted, by NSs.¹ This study focused on two structures, in which *each* and *neither A nor B* are used as the subject of a sentence, since these structures seem to be one of the most problematic ‘marked’ English rules for Japanese students. The author then refers to NSs’ attitudes toward, and perceptions of, the prescriptive and descriptive grammar, and finally discusses the pedagogical application of the findings by drawing on sociolinguists’ view on these issues.

1.1 Brief review of earlier studies

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) referred to some special and difficult cases concerning subject-verb number agreement, including *each* and *neither A nor B* structures, and provided some sociolinguistic surveys that illustrate the NSs’ preference on each case.

With respect to the quantifier *each*, the traditional prescriptive rule seems to hold among NSs when the subject noun is singular:

- a. *Each student has a book.* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 65)

But when the quantified noun refers to a definite plural noun, their preference tends to be split between choosing singular and plural verb agreement:

- b. *Each of his examples was/were out of context.*
(*ibid.*)

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) reported

that, in their own study, NSs (40 graduate students and professors) regarded *each* as grammatically singular in sentence b and used was. In contrast, Peterson's (1990, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, pp. 65-66) study suggested that some NSs saw it as plural when a plural noun or pronoun is located before the verb.²

Concerning *neither A nor B* as the subject of a sentence, Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) referred to "the proximity principle": "For the correlatives *either ... or* and *neither ... nor ...*, subject-verb agreement should occur with the subject noun nearest to the verb" (p. 67). They drew on the studies of van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977), and said that NSs do not necessarily obey this principle in using these structures and such tendency is distinctive in *neither A nor B*, rather than *either A or B*. Van Shaik's (1976) findings illustrate that NSs' preference in the former structure is split between singular and plural verb agreement:

- c. *Neither the students nor the teacher* (likes: 49% / like: 51%) that textbook. (van Shaik, 1976, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 67)

When personal pronouns are used with full correlatives, problems seem to be more complicated.

- d. *Neither you nor I* (am: 12% / is: 15% / are: 73%) trained for that job. (*ibid.*)

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) ascribed NSs' preference of are in sentence d to its trait as "gap-filling substitute for am" (e. g., I'm going, too, aren't I?), and said "*Am* is apparently perceived by native speakers as too limited a form for use in those correlatives where I is the second noun phrase constituent" (p. 68).

On the basis of the results of these surveys, the author decided to investigate the *each of [plural noun]* and *neither A nor I* patterns in his investigation because it was assumed that NSs' judgements of subject-verb agreement in these structures would better illustrate their preference of prescriptive/descriptive grammar.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The data of the questionnaire survey was collected from 24 respondents (see Appendix A). Since this project targeted NSs of English, the data of three non-native speakers (#2, 5, and 6) were eliminated from the analysis. Also, as this project focuses on "everyday" people" (L. Goldstein, personal communication, November, 1, 2002), not sociolinguists, the data of seven ESL teachers (#18-24), who might have been trained on the prescriptive and descriptive issue, were eliminated as well but were used as the reference data. As a result, 14 "everyday" NSs were regarded as the subjects of this study and their data was analyzed.

The subjects consist of equal number of gender (7 each), and their age varies from 20s to 50s. The subjects of #1-7 (including eliminated non-native speakers: #2, 5, and 6) work at a computer software company, #8-14 and #17 work at middle schools, #15 has just finished the masters' degree and is now looking for a job, and #16 is an independent lawyer. Considering these job status as well as their education level (8 from graduate school, 5 from undergraduate, and 1 from secondary school), it was assumed that they had relatively high education, belonging to middle-class.

2.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained eight sentences, and each sentence was followed by four questions, which were designed to elicit NSs' attitudes toward the prescriptive and descriptive grammar (see Appendix B).

A set of prescriptive and descriptive forms were created for each topic structure:

Each of [plural noun] structure:

- e. Each of these cars is really ugly. (prescriptive form)
- f. Each of the children were happy to be treated like that. (descriptive form)

Neither A nor B structure:

- g. Neither the students nor the professor likes the textbook. (prescriptive form)
- h. Neither you nor I were responsible for the fact. (descriptive form)

A total of four other sentences were added as distractors, which are also described as problematic structures by Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999):

- i. He has more money than I.
- j. What people in that country wanted were revolutions.
- k. Every student had their own laptop computer.
- l. Ken is one of those students who have finished this course.³

All these sentences were presented in random order so that respondents do not focus on specific structures.

The four questions provided for each sentence were below:

- 1) Do you say this?
- 2) Do you hear others say this?
- 3) Does it bother you when you hear this?
- 4) Is this correct?

Each question had two choices: *Yes* or *No*. Respondents were instructed, in a written instruction, to read the sentences quickly and to circle *Yes* or *No* without deliberation.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The subjects' answers on four questions provided for each sentence were clustered into six categories (L. Goldstein, personal communication, November, 1, 2002) in order to analyze the data expediently. These categories represent the subjects' attitudes toward, and perceptions of, each sentence. Table 1 illustrates how their answers were transformed into categories A to F.

Although their choice on the first question "Do you say this?" is a valuable data, in order to find what structure is judged to be *acceptable* by "everyday" NSs, the author decided to focus on the subjects' receptive mode (listening), rather than productive one (speaking), and eliminated their answers on the first question. Also their choice on the third question "Does it bother you when you hear this?" was ignored when the identical subject chose *No* on the second question "Do you hear others say this?" because question 3 was aimed at those who actually hear it (i.e., subjects who responded *YES* to question 2).

Table 1 Transformation of the Subjects' Answers on Four Questions into Six Categories

Four questions				Six categories that represent the subjects' attitude toward the sentence	
Do you say this?	Do you hear others say this?	Does it bother you when you hear this?	Is this correct?		
*	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	→	A This sentence is correct, I hear people say it, and I am not bothered by it.
*	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	→	B This sentence is correct, I hear people say it, but I am bothered by it.
*	<i>No</i>	*	<i>Yes</i>	→	C This sentence is correct but I don't hear anyone say it.
*	<i>No</i>	*	<i>No</i>	→	D This sentence is incorrect and I don't hear anyone say it.
*	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	→	E This sentence is incorrect, but I hear people say it and I am not bothered by it.
*	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	→	F This sentence is incorrect, but I hear people say it and I am bothered by it.

* either *Yes* or *No*

3. Results

3.1 *Each of [plural noun] structure*

Table 2 shows a ratio of the subjects who judged the *each of [plural noun]* sentences to be correct and incorrect (in boldface type), as well as the ratio of each category.⁴

A total of 12 subjects (86%) judged the prescriptive form (sentence 4) to be correct. In contrast, the descriptive form (sentence 8) was judged to be incorrect by 10 of them (71%). These figures show the subjects' preference for the prescriptive rule, that is, they prefer singular agreement on the verb with *each of [plural noun]* as the subject. This result corresponds to the finding of Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) mentioned above, in which most of their respondents (graduate students and professors) preferred singular verbs in this structure. Reflecting on Peterson's study, his result showed that truck drivers, whom Peterson illustrated as representatives of the lower socio-educational class, strongly preferred plural verbs while graduate students rather resorted to the prescriptive rule. Provided the high educational level of the subjects of the current study, it might be possible to

induce that educated people regard the *each of [plural noun]* structure as grammatically singular as the prescriptive grammar indicates.

Acceptability was measured by the number of the subjects in categories A and E ("This sentence is correct/incorrect, [but] I hear people say it and I am not bothered by it"). The more the number of these categories is, the more acceptable the sentence is considered to be. In contrast, when the total number in categories B and F ("This sentence is correct/incorrect, [but] I hear people say it but/and I am bothered by it") is more, it is considered that the sentence is less acceptable, or rather avoided.

There was no big difference between the acceptability of the prescriptive form (A + E = 8) and the descriptive form (A + E = 6). However, as to avoidance, while only one subject answered 'bothered' by the prescriptive form (B + F = 1), 5 subjects showed the avoidance of the descriptive form (B + F = 5). Although this descriptive structure is actually used by some NSs, educated people seem to regard it as a 'stigmatized' form.

Table 3 shows the ratio of the ESL teachers' responses. Their positive and negative judgment on the

Table 2 *Each of [plural noun] Structure*

		CORRECT			INCORRECT		
4	Each of these cars is really ugly.	12/14 (86%)			2/14 (14%)		
	"Everyday" NSs (n=14)	A 8 (57%)	B 1 (7%)	C 3 (21%)	D 2 (14%)	E 0	F 0
8	Each of the children were happy to be treated like that.	4/14 (29%)			10/14 (71%)		
	"Everyday" NSs (n=14)	A 4 (29%)	B 0	C 0	D 3 (21%)	E 2 (14%)	F 5 (36%)

Table 3 *Each of [plural noun] Structure (ESL Teachers)*

		CORRECT			INCORRECT		
4	Each of these cars is really ugly.	7/7 (100%)			0/7 (0%)		
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	A 5 (71%)	B 0	C 2 (29%)	D 0	E 0	F 0
8	Each of the children were happy to be treated like that.	0/7 (0%)			7/7 (100%)		
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	A 0	B 0	C 0	D 2 (29%)	E 2 (29%)	F 3 (43%)

prescriptive and descriptive form, respectively, can be seen clearly in this table (100% of them judged sentence 4 to be correct, and sentence 8 incorrect). As to the acceptability, 5 teachers accepted the prescriptive form ($A + E = 5$) and 2 accepted the descriptive form ($A + E = 2$). It is interesting to see that 3 teachers showed avoidance to the descriptive form ($B + F = 3$), while no one reported 'bothered' by the prescriptive one ($B + F = 0$). It could be said that ESL teachers might also regard this descriptive form as 'stigmatized.'

3.2 *Neither A nor B* structure

The ratio of the subjects who judged the *neither A nor B* sentences to be correct and incorrect and the ratio of each category are presented in Table 4.

A total of 9 subjects (64%) judged the prescriptive form (sentence 6), which is also subject to 'the proximity principle,' to be incorrect, and only 5 of them (36%) viewed it as correct. Considering the finding of van Shaik (1976; sentence c), in which 49% of the subjects had the verb agree to the nearest subject noun and 51% of them used a plural verb, it is assumed that the 9 subjects who judged it as incorrect had thought the verb in sentence 6 should be plural (i. e., like).

Regardless of 'the proximity principle,' it is apparently normal for us to perceive the fixed expression *neither A nor B* as a negative correlative that refers to more than one entity. For example, in saying sentence 6, we mean "both the students and the professor do not like the textbook." That is, the subject semantically contains more than one person (i. e., the students and the professor). It is interpreted that subjects in this study had perceived the subject noun phrase of sentence 6 as notionally plural and judged the

lexical verb with third person singular *s*, which agrees to the nearest subject noun, to be incorrect.

As to the acceptability of the prescriptive form, there was no big difference between "I'm not bothered by it" ($A + E = 5$) and "I'm bothered by it" ($B + F = 4$). However, it should be noted that, although this is a prescriptive form, there were some people who are bothered by it.

Their judgment on the descriptive form (sentence 2; *neither A nor I* pattern) was split in half (50% and 50%). This result seemed strange because if the interpretation given for sentence 6 applies, that is, if NSs perceive this subject phrase as a plural set, more subjects must have judged it to be correct. Also if the previously mentioned explanation that Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) provided about 'are' being used as gap-filling substitute for 'am' holds here (although past tense copula 'were' was used in this survey),⁵ the subjects' preference must have been more inclined to the 'correct' side.

One of the possible reasons that accounts for this unexpected result might be the ambiguous part of sentence 2. One of the subjects reported that he was confused with the last part of the sentence, wondering what "the fact" meant. As a result, he judged this sentence to be incorrect because of its ambiguity. If there had not been such vagueness in the sentence, more subjects might have regarded it as correct.

With respect to the acceptability, there was only one subject who avoided the descriptive form ($B + F = 1$). On the contrary, the subjects who showed acceptance of it added up to 7 ($A + E = 7$). It can be interpreted that the descriptive form of this structure has been dominantly prevailed and established among

Table 4 *Neither A nor B* Structure

		CORRECT			INCORRECT		
6	Neither the students nor the professor likes the textbook.	5/14 (36%)			9/14 (64%)		
	"Everyday" NSs(n=14)	A 2 (14%)	B 1 (7%)	C 2 (14%)	D 3 (21%)	E 3 (21%)	F 3 (21%)
2	Neither you nor I were responsible for the fact.	7/14 (50%)			7/14 (50%)		
	"Everyday" NSs(n=14)	A 5 (36%)	B 0	C 2 (14%)	D 4 (29%)	E 2 (14%)	F 1 (7%)

NSs.

Table 5 illustrates the ratio of the ESL teachers' answers. Comparing with table 4, the similar tendency can be seen in terms of their judgments of the prescriptive form (43% judged it to be correct and 57% judged it incorrect), but, unlike "everyday" NSs, ESL teachers showed more acceptance toward it (A + E = 4, B + F = 1).

As to the descriptive form, ESL teachers showed positive judgment for it (86% of them saw it as correct). This result might support the author's interpretation (i.e., people's perception of the *neither A nor B* structure as a plural entity) as well as the explanation of Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman ('are' is used as a gap-filling substitute for 'am'). It also seems that the ambiguous part mentioned above was not a problem for ESL teachers. There is no distinctive pattern concerning the acceptability of this descriptive form (A + E = 2, B + F = 1).

3.3 Other structures

NSs' attitudes toward other distractor sentences were also collected in this survey, and the data is shown in a table in Appendix C. These data were not analyzed as it is beyond the scope of this paper, but not to mention, it is worth conducting the further study on these structures.

4. Discussion: Sociolinguist's view

Mesthrie et al. (2000), in their discussion about prescriptivism and descriptivism, referred to "weak prescriptive" position," which suggests "some form of prescriptivism is necessary, for example in teaching a language to foreigners in classrooms, where the standard variety is the target" (pp. 18-19). This

position seems to have been dominant in English education in Japan on the basis of some plausible reasons, such as:

- 1) For Japanese people, English is a foreign language, and they start to learn it as a new language in school, so what they need is the prescriptive rules, and presenting alternative forms is rather confusing to such beginners;
- 2) People need to know the prescriptive rules to be successful in standardized exams like university entrance exams, TOEFL, TOEIC, etc.;
- 3) Mastering the standard form of a language enhances learners to choose appropriate usage in formal contexts.

However, it is also true that such prescriptivism has caused several pedagogical problems. For example, in such circumstances, any off-prescriptive expressions are viewed as 'deviant' forms or 'errors' to be corrected, even though some of them are actually used in English speaking countries. Also such prescriptivism-biased-education has caused learners' over-cautiousness toward linguistic structures, which, Krashen (1982) hypothesized, deprives learners of fluency in unplanned speech. Mesthrie et al. (2000) wrote, "[i]f the aim is to interact with speakers of English informally, then certain prescriptive principles might prove counter-productive" (p. 19). They also cited Cameron (1995), "[t] here is nothing wrong in wanting standards of excellence in the use of language. Rather what is wrong is the narrow definition of excellence as mere superficial 'correctness'" (*ibid.*). Considering the current English education in Japan, where its primary goal has been shifted from "English for reading/writing" to "English for communication," the author suggests that it is time

Table 5 *Neither A nor B Structure (ESL Teachers)*

		CORRECT			INCORRECT		
6	Neither the students nor the professor likes the textbook.	3/7 (43%)			4/7 (57%)		
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	A 3 (43%)	B 0	C 0	D 2 (29%)	E 1 (14%)	F 1 (14%)
2	Neither you nor I were responsible for the fact.	6/7 (86%)			1/7 (14%)		
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	A 2 (29%)	B 0	C 4 (57%)	D 0	E 0	F 1 (14%)

JTEs should loosen the discipline of the prescriptivism, and start to provide our students with acceptable descriptive forms to the extent which they don't have the impression that anything can go in English.

It is also considered that this prescriptivism could lead up to the learners' mal-attitude, with which they don't approve other varieties of the language. This attitude is not preferable, or can be a hindrance in the current world, where "English has become the main vehicle for interaction among its non-native users, with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Kachru, 1989, p. 87). In this respect as well, the author believes we should find a way to incorporate the descriptivism into our English teaching.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed NSs' attitudes toward the prescriptive and descriptive grammar, with its focus on subject-verb number agreement. The author investigated and discussed their grammatical judgment (correct/incorrect) on, and the acceptability of, the *each of [plural noun]* and *neither A nor B* structures. With respect to the *each of [plural noun]* structure, traditional prescriptive grammar maintained among relatively highly-educated NSs, and the descriptive form was likely to be avoided by them. In using the *neither A nor B* subject, NSs tended to perceive the phrase as plural and use the plural verb.

Due to the small number of the subjects in this study, it is not possible to generalize these findings. However, given some earlier studies that supported them, it seems reasonable to bring the results of this study into English teaching in Japan. To teach these acceptable descriptive forms with plausible interpretation, such as the one made in this paper, will not only let Japanese learners of English know the current English usage but also raise their language awareness as well as enhance their understanding of, and respect toward, other English varieties and their users.

Notes

- 1) This survey was conducted in 2002, when the author was on sabbatical leave in the USA.
- 2) Peterson (1990) found that, in the *each of [plural noun]* structure, the graduate students preferred singular agreement on the verb (sing.: 58% / pl.: 39% / either: 3%), while the Pepsi-Cola truck drivers strongly

preferred plural agreement on the verb (sing.: 9% / pl.: 91%), and the office workers are fairly evenly split between singular and plural verb agreement (sing.: 47% / pl.: 53%).

- 3) For each sentence, the prescriptive grammar regulates i) "than me" or "than I do" rather than "than I," j) "was" rather than "were," k) "his," "her" or "his/her" rather than "their," l) "has" rather than "have."
- 4) In this study, each ratio was rounded off to the nearest whole number.
- 5) It might be that the results of sentence 2 would have been more on the "correct" side if the author had used the present tense (i.e., are).

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Appendix A Subjects' demographic information

	Gender	Age	L1	*Education	Occupation
1	F	30s	English	g	manager
2	F	20s	Farsi	g	product developer
3	M	50s	English	g	executive
4	M	30s	English	u	engineer
5	M	20s	Spanish	u	engineer
6	F	30s	Spanish	g	manager & educator
7	M	50s	English	u	custodian
8	F	50s	English	g	math teacher
9	F	40s	English	g	math teacher (chair)
10	F	50s	English	u	secretary
11	F	50s	English	s	school employee
12	F	50s	English	g	teacher & librarian
13	M	40s	English	g	mid-school principal
14	F	20s	English	u	math teacher
15	M	30s	English	g	unemployed
16	M	30s	English	g	lawyer
17	M	40s	English	u	teacher
18	F	50s	English	g	ESL teacher
19	F	30s	English	g	ESL teacher
20	M	50s	English	g	ESL teacher
21	F	50s	English	g	ESL teacher
22	M	50s	English	u	ESL teacher
23	M	50s	English	u	ESL teacher
24	F	40s	English	g	ESL teacher

*Education : g(graduate); u(undergraduate); s(secondary)

Appendix B Questionnaire

Questionnaire
About you(please circle the answer that applies to you or fill in the blank):
gender(male / female) **age**(20s / 30s / 40s / 50s / 60s / 70s)
native language(English / other: _____) **occupation**(_____)
graduated from(secondary school / undergraduate / graduate)

Directions: Please read the eight sentences below quickly. Read each one only one time, and then answer,without deliberation, the four questions for each sentence (please circle "Yes" or "No")

	Questions				
	Do you say this?	Do you hear others say this?	Does it bother you when you here this?	Is this correct ?	
1	He has more money than I.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
2	Neither you nor I were responsible for the fact.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
3	What people in that country wanted were revolutions.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
4	Each of these cars is really ugly.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
5	Every student had their own laptop computer.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
6	Neither the students nor the professor likes the textbook.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
7	Ken is one of those students who have finished this course.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
8	Each of the children were happy to be treated like that.	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Appendix C Other structures

		CORRECT			INCORRECT		
1	He has more money than I.	7/14 (50%)			7/14 (50%)		
	“Everyday” NSs (n=14)	A 5 (36%)	B 0	C 2 (14%)	D 2 (14%)	E 3	F 2 (14%)
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	3 (43%)	0	2 (29%)	2 (29%)	0	0
3	What people in that country wanted were revolutions.	5/14 (36%)			9/14 (64%)		
	“Everyday” NSs (n=14)	A 5 (36%)	B 0	C 0	D 6 (43%)	E 1 (7%)	F 2 (14%)
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	2 (29%)	0	2 (29%)	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	0
5	Every student had their own laptop computer.	7/14 (50%)			7/14 (50%)		
	“Everyday” NSs (n=14)	A 6 (43%)	B 0	C 1 (7%)	D 1 (7%)	E 2 (14%)	F 4 (29%)
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	0	0	0	0	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
7	Ken is one of those students who have finished this course.	5/14 (36%)			9/14 (64%)		
	“Everyday” NSs (n=14)	A 4 (29%)	B 1 (7%)	C 0	D 1 (7%)	E 0	F 8 (57%)
	NS ESL Teachers (n=7)	1 (14%)	0	0	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	3 (43%)