

Descriptive Analysis of Japanese Writers' L2 English Compositions

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A piece of writing may be considered unified when it contains nothing superfluous and it omits nothing essential to the achievement of its purpose . . . A work is considered coherent when the sequence of its parts . . . is controlled by some principle which is meaningful to the reader. Unity is the quality attributed to writing which has all its necessary and sufficient parts. Coherence is the quality attributed to the presentation of material in a sequence which is intelligible to its reader.

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RHETORIC: Principle and Usage

Introduction and Background

What happens to the language student when she is writing a composition in a language other than her native language? As Kaplan has stated there is “. . . a fallacy of some repute and some duration . . . which assumes that because a student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate essay in a second language (Kaplan, 1984, pg. 44). The reason for the difficulty, Kaplan (1966, 1984), Kobayashi (1984), Hinds (1984, 1990), Taniguchi (1987) *et al.* say is that the foreign student is making use of a rhetoric and thought sequence which differs from that of a native reader. A non-native writer and a native English reader will have different expectations of what to expect in a given piece of writing. “. . . it has long been known among sociologists and anthropologists that logic per se is a cultural phenomenon . . .” (Kaplan, 1984, pg. 43). Logic which is the basis for rhetoric then differs from culture to culture.

This has important implications for teachers of writing, for it then becomes their domain to instruct their students about rhetorical differences. "It is not enough for teachers to develop their (students') linguistic knowledge. Instructors must also concern themselves with developing their students' discourse and cultural knowledge as well" (Scarcella, 1984, pg. 684). Similar injunctions to those working with Japanese students have been given, asking that teachers stop worrying so much about students producing error-free writing, but to empower students" . . . to create writing with rich content and proper logical organization" (Yanatori, 1985, pg. 117). Students are asked to learn the rhetoric of the language they are studying. Oi and Sato state this simply, ". . . teach the rhetorical differences between Japanese and English" (Oi & Sato, 1990, pg. 134). This means that English culture will also be taught.

English rhetoric as noted by Kaplan is ". . . a sequence that is dominantly linear in its development" (Kaplan, 1984, pg. 45). In contrast, Oriental writing (Korean and Chinese were studied) were found to be a style marked by indirection. "The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. Things are developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are" (Kaplan, 1984, pg. 49).

Hinds in a more recent study modified this view when he compared four Oriental language groups, including Japanese, and found them all to be similar in that they were quasi-inductive. Writers from all of the four cultures studied expected their readers to think in similar ways as the writer (Hinds, 1990, pg. 98) This shared contextualization in Oriental rhetoric differs from the expectations of native English writers and readers. As Hardison, writing about English rhetoric, says ". . . you can't count on the minds of others working the same way your mind works. You must guide your readers from one idea, from one sentence, to another. To make a coherent presentation you have to arrange your ideas so that others can understand them" (Hardison, 1966, pg. 393). English writers and Oriental writers thus seem to have very different ideas about rhetoric and coherence in writing. Understanding these differences becomes the task of those teaching. Learning such differences becomes the task of language students over and above the linguistic knowledge they must also acquire. Learning to write with the appropriate rhetorical style is part of the task of writing students, whether they be Japanese students writing in their native language or Japanese students writing in English. The rhetorics differ. The expectations regarding those compositions will also differ depending upon the cultural backgrounds of their readers.

The questions raised in this particular study, based upon the above ideas, are descriptive in nature. What are Japanese student compositions like as college students begin their first composition course with a native English teacher? How does one go about describing such compositions? What is the rhetorical style of such students? What have students learned in their courses prior to college which can be ascertained by analysis of their compositions? Will Kaplan's circular

rhetoric be in evidence as students write in English? Will Hinds' quasi-inductive style be in evidence? Do all students follow one rhetorical style or will these be a variety of styles or even a mixture? What are criteria for discovering which rhetoric is being used by a writer?

Method

This study was conducted in order to determine what can be expected from Japanese students at college level in composition classes. Kaplan (1966, 1984) has described Oriental rhetoric as being circular, whereas Hinds finds oriental rhetoric to be quasi-inductive. Would a close, descriptive analysis of a sample population find one or the other or both to be an accurate generalization? An assigned composition was used as data for the sample population. Holistic evaluation was done on the sample population, and then further analysis upon different groupings within the data. Each subsequent analysis was done in order to find out more about the written products in order that teachers might better know how to go about the teaching of English composition writing to Japanese students.

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 213 second year women junior college students. All have had one year of composition taught by a Japanese instructor. From their second year, students were to have a native-speaker instructor for English composition. A generalization cannot be made about the actual proficiency level of students at Bunkyo University Women's College, for no standardized test has been given to them.

As most college students, their high school preparation in English has been rigorous in the area of grammar. Most high school textbooks for English composition ask that students translate sentences from English to Japanese and vice versa. Students are exposed to many idiomatic expressions in these texts and are expected to use these in sentences similar to those in the textbooks in their assigned class work. Therefore the word "composition" has almost a different meaning for Japanese students and teachers than the usual meaning for a native speaker teacher of English. Textbooks, used in Japanese high schools, do not mention differences in rhetoric.

Procedures

All 213 subjects were given a composition assignment due the next week during their orientation session in April, before actual classes began. The compositions were to be presented to their English Workshop teacher. Students had a choice between two topics: "My Spring Vacation" and "What To Do When I Graduate." Instructions were given to all subjects at the same time, asking that they write a composition on one of the above topics. They were encouraged to write at least one page.

Once the compositions were collected, all were read by the author, who is an EWS teacher and an English composition teacher as well. Holistic marking was used in order to determine the overall evaluation of the compositions. Holistic marking means that each composition was seen as a whole, while considering various criteria including form, rhetoric, contents as referring to overall meaning and grammar. Analysis was done by a series of re-reading of the data looking at specific criteria at each re-reading of the text. The procedures followed went from simple to complex: 1. counting the number of sentences; 2. noting the form, whether written using paragraph form or no paragraphs; 3. searching for topic sentences; 4. counting simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences in each composition 5. reading for meaning of the text as a whole; 6. noting coherence or lack of it.

Basically, three groups emerged from the data. One group was labelled the “Yes” group, meaning that in overall evaluation, the compositions were more native-like in rhetorical style than not; 64 compositions were in this group. In contrast, the “No” group did not read like an English composition, with 89 compositions falling into this group. A middle “Yes/No” group remained with 60 compositions in this group. The middle group, holistically evaluated, showed evidence of mixed elements; for example, no use of paragraph form and yet sometimes containing topic sentences. Such a mixture made such compositions difficult to evaluate by a native English reader.

Table One – Results of Holistic Marking

N = 213

	Number	Percentage
“Yes” group	64	.30
“Yes/No” group	60	.28
“No” group	<u>89</u>	<u>.42</u>
Total	213	1.00

Analysis and Results

Basic Categories

In order to give as broad an analytic description as possible, the 213 compositions were examined in several ways. The number of sentences written by this population varied in range from 14 sentences to 39 sentences, with the mean of 26 sentences. Most had complied with the one page suggested length, but as the number of sentences suggests, there was ample variation.

One of the major criteria from a native-reader evaluation was whether or not the composition was written using an English format. In other words, were discernible paragraphs used throughout

the composition? Paragraphs are part of English rhetoric. Most all composition textbooks for native users include the following information: Most paragraphs consists of three main parts, an introduction, often the topic sentence; a body with supporting sentences adding information and detail to the main topic; and a conclusion. Topic sentences, although usually occurring at the beginning of a paragraph can occur at the end. An essay likewise has a similar organization based on three basic parts with paragraphs providing an introduction, body and conclusion. One main thesis statement would be the main point of the essay. As this is the usual expected organizational pattern, looking for paragraphing and topic sentences was seen as a necessary part of holistic evaluation.

Those in the “Yes” group all used paragraphs, and all contained a topic sentence within each paragraph. Thus all 64 were native-like in appearance as well as in organizational structure with topic sentences, which is consistent with an English rhetorical style. In contrast, those in the “No” group did not use paragraph form and often did not contain a discernible topic sentence as well. The appearance was often much like that of a Japanese composition with each new sentence beginning at the margin. Those in the “Yes/No” group sometimes used paragraph form, but not consistently and did not consistently make use of a topic sentence either, but often in meaning there was some element of cohesion to the overall composition.

A randomly picked sample from the “Yes” group of the first portion of the composition and one from the “No” group will give a better idea of what the compositions were like in English proficiency as well as in rhetorical style. Sample one from the “Yes” group: (The composition is reproduced as written by the student author with all errors uncorrected.)

Sample One

“In my spring vacation I remember that accident. The accident is meeting a foreigner by chance. When I lined in front of Green Ticket Window a stout, middle aged black man had trouble with his ticket. As I was watching him what was happening, he noticed me and talked to me . . .”

This sample is not without errors; however, from a native-reader’s point of view, the overall meaning is easy to follow throughout the text. The form throughout the composition made use of paragraphing. As this composition told a story, each switch in scene or speaker marked the beginning of a new paragraph. The story line was told in a direct, linear style with a clear beginning, middle and ending. Cohesion was evident as a result. The detail provided by this student author made the scene come alive.

Sample two is representative of the “No” group again reproduced as written by the student:

Sample Two

“My Spring Vacation of this year!!

I decided to study English, but this plan broke.

Everyday I was engaged in my job.
 Only, if I can say. I went skiing only a day . . .”

The form is like that of a Japanese composition with each line beginning anew at the margin. Although the overall theme is that of happenings during spring vacation, there is not one clear topic developed, but rather sentences seem to jump from one thing to another. In fact, if the whole composition were to be presented, a reader would see that the author talks about a variety of things—including last Christmas and her birthday and the many things she likes such as rice crackers and Japanese tea. The rhetorical style cannot really be discerned, as evaluated by a native reader.

Such samples present a clearer picture of what is meant by the basic categories of compositions. Those in the “Yes” group and “No group” displayed clear differences. Further analysis of the compositions in these groups will show more results that hopefully can be useful when teaching composition to such students.

A detailed analysis of samples

In the “Yes” group 29 student compositions were chosen as a representative sample. An analysis was made of the sentence types that students used. The logic for such an analysis was made on the premise that perhaps a more direct rhetorical style might be the result of the usage of more simple sentences rather than compound or complex ones. Analysis of the sample of 29 students shows a greater tendency for those in the “Yes” group to use more simple sentences.

Table Two – Analysis of “Yes” group sentences

N = 29

	Total	Percentage
Simple sentences	423	.70
Compound sentences	56	.09
Complex sentences	<u>128</u>	<u>.21</u>
Totals	607	1.00

Students in this “Yes” group used simple sentences 70% of the time within their compositions. Perhaps this is no more than a strategy of lower proficiency students to write “correctly” in English. It does not necessarily mean that the students have deliberately chosen to use this type of sentence structure in order to write in more native-like English. It does not necessarily mean

that students have awareness of differences in rhetorical style. It does show that those which were holistically evaluated to be more native-like in their compositions were written by using many simple sentences.

There were grammatical errors in all the compositions. There were less in those compositions more highly evaluated, for meaning was not obscured by errors. This will become apparent when a similar analysis is made of the "No" group compositions. There are 36 compositions studied in detail in this group, with differing categories from the "Yes" group, in that many students wrote sentence fragments and run-on sentences within this group. This analysis makes for interesting results as shown below:

Table Three — Analysis of "No" group sentences

N = 36

	Total	Percentage
Simple sentences	410	.495
Compound sentences	40	.05
Complex sentences	140	.17
Sentence fragments	159	.19
Run-on sentences	<u>79</u>	<u>.095</u>
Totals	828	1.00

Comparison of the two tables shows some differences between the two groups of writers. Those who were holistically evaluated to be in the "No" group had more errors as evidenced by the number of sentence fragments, for one thing. 19% of all sentences written were incomplete in that either a subject or verb or both were missing. Such errors will obscure meaning. As meaning becomes unclear, it is difficult to talk about the rhetorical organization of a piece of writing. Therefore, the "No" group does not necessarily mean that a more Oriental type of rhetorical organization was to be found. It may in fact mean nothing more than lower English proficiency, or poor writing regardless of rhetorical background.

The difference in percentages between those in both groups, "Yes" group, 70% of all sentences are simple sentences, while those in the "No" group are 49.5%, is great enough to wonder if some kind of awareness of rhetorical organization styles is known to the more successful writers, but this can only be hypothesized at this time. More research might shed light upon what students actually know at the time they sit down to write their first compositions in English.

At the same time, those in the “No” group might have been using native language transfer or some unknown strategies to account for their attempts at using more complex sentence types. A combination of compound, complex fragments (often an error in a complex sentence), and run-on sentences shows that the “No” group used these types 50.5% of all sentences in their compositions. The Japanese language is known for its lengthy sentences in written form. Thus, L1 transfer is one possible reason for such complicated sentence structures among this group of writers.

A closer inspection of the “No” group compositions shows a variety of writers, which means it is difficult and not appropriate to really make generalizations about these writers as a group. One such writer had 19 simple sentences, unlike most all others in the “No” group, but this piece also had 7 fragments and 2 run-on sentences. This piece was also written without regard to form. There were no paragraphs or any topic sentences. The sentence fragments gave this piece a conversational quality, more like thoughts being revealed rather than a piece of logical writing with an introduction, body and conclusion that is the usual organizational style of an English composition. And yet the impressionistic feel of the whole was rather like that of an appeal to the reader to share the same frame of reference, as suggested by Hinds (1990). Or, another possible interpretation of this composition, and others like it, is simply that the student was trying to fill the page as required by the given instructions.

In contrast, another writer from the “No” group, used a variety of sentence types: simple 7, compound 1, complex 4, fragments 5, and run-on sentences 2. Form, no paragraphs, was a problem, but there was one topic throughout the piece—the writer’s feelings about not being able to go on the planned school trip to the U.S. The writer seemed to assume that a reader would know all about this proposed trip and share the same mind frame. This sharing of the same mind frame between writer and reader might be one indication of a use of Japanese rhetorical style as suggested by research by Hinds (1990). All of the feelings together might explain the first statement of the composition: “I don’t like U.S. and Iraq.” No direct reasoning was given to explain this statement which most likely would have been done if the topic were developed by a native speaker of English.

Implications for teaching

Although generalizations cannot be made with any degree of confidence, the means of analysis used in this research, and the idea that students need to be taught differences in rhetorical patterns between cultures are useful for those teaching English composition. Diagnosing student compositions at the outset is of importance to teachers, for then they know what their students need for them to teach so as to become successful writers of English. The first steps used in analysis in this research were relatively simple—looking at form and hunting for topic sentences. Teachers

can use an early assigned composition and try some holistic evaluating on their own in order to diagnose their students' needs.

The descriptive results of this research show that within a population as small as 213 students, there are those, 30%, who are evaluated more native-like in their compositions. Such students need to be taught awareness of rhetorical differences which they have perhaps picked up from reading, from their studies for college entrance examinations, or by some other means. The use of paragraph markers and topic sentences presupposes a certain kind of logical sequence of ideas. A paragraph by definition is to contain one main topic sentence with all other sentences within that paragraph related to the topic and in support of it. Teaching students about paragraphing is one way to begin their awareness of rhetorical differences. Teaching students to write in complete sentences rather than fragments would also help many to become better writers. Fragments found in this study, sometimes seemed to indicate an attempt towards complexity. Students making such mistakes were trying to connect two related, but complicated ideas, often forgetting to do this in complete subject/verb clauses. An example from one such composition might make this more clear: "I knew my host family. After this trip was decided to cancel." This student was trying to use a complex structure: After the decision was made to cancel our proposed trip, I learned the names of my host family. The student's dependent clause became a fragment in the sample given. Perhaps a more useful strategy might be to teach this student to use simple complete sentences: Our trip was cancelled. After this, I learned about my host family. This might have been another alternative.

Another way to deal with fragments might be to ask students to mark all subjects and verbs within their compositions to help them find such sentence fragments themselves. Recognizing their own errors is one step towards mastery.

There are of course a variety of problems within any one composition class, but an examination of the results of this study shows that there are also many problems in common. Teaching those problems held in common by many becomes a priority—paragraph form, the meaning of paragraph organization, or writing in complete sentences. Working on these three areas alone would help most students become better writers of English.

As Kaplan suggests a normal paragraph ". . . may be arbitrarily scrambled, the sentences numbered, and the students asked to rearrange the sentences in what appears to them to be a normal order . . . The students must then be presented with the original version of the paragraph, and the instructor must be able to explain and justify the order of the original." (Kaplan, 1984, pg. 53). This will help students learn about paragraph organization and English rhetoric.

Writing teachers for native students offer many suggestions which can also be useful for students writing in a second language. A checklist can help student writers to be reminded of ways to read a text as a coherent whole in order to know what else they might do to their compositions

to improve those themselves. The following list provided by Donald Murray (1987) is one way of helping students to realize they are writing for a reader, and they want readers to understand their intentions:

- *Read the text the way the reader will.
- *What does the piece of writing mean?
- *Does the reader need more information?
- *Does the form contain the meaning and carry it to the reader?
- *Does the writing go off on tangents that can be cut out?
- *Is there convincing evidence for each point?
- *Are reader's key questions answered?
- *Does the piece of writing have an imbedded narrative or thread that runs through the entire text and keeps the reader reading?

Murray, 1987, pg. 213-214.

These questions/statements lead a writer to think more about the cohesion and organization of his own writing. These questions are ones aimed at achieving a focused style typical of English rhetoric.

Analyzing the differences in rhetoric is essential. Labeling and defining what those differences mean is another way teachers can empower their students to become better writers in English. One task that Ann Raimes suggests in her textbook FOCUS ON COMPOSITION is the following: "When you describe a scene your reader should be able to 'see' it clearly from your words. Your reader will see, hear, smell, feel, and taste only what you can tell him." (Raimes, 1978, pg. 14). This leads to cohesion in writing. Each word, each sentence, each paragraph will become related in a meaningful way to each other. That is what is demanded in English rhetoric. This is one more way teachers can lead their students to improved writing in English compositions.

Conclusion

A study using a descriptive analysis of compositions at a junior women's college shows many things: 1. Diagnosis of students' writing is a priority for teachers in order that they will know exactly what their students need to be taught. Even using simple criteria such as form and use of topic sentences will tell a teacher a great deal. 2. Japanese student writers in this study demonstrated that about 30% of them at the diagnostic stage, write using a recognizable English rhetoric. This result is in contrast to what theorists such as Kaplan or Hinds have suggested. 3. Theorists and practitioners alike suggest strongly that differences between rhetoric be taught to students in composition classes. Linguistic knowledge is not enough. Rhetorical differences alone can make

a piece of writing inappropriate. Those in this study who were in the “Yes/no” and “No” groups especially have need of this type of knowledge, 4. There are many possibilities of what teachers can try in their classes to make their students more aware of their pieces as a whole text and as a text following a particular rhetoric. Such awareness of text can lead to improved writing.

Generalizations about rhetorical style cannot be made from this small a population study or from this specialized a sample, junior college women, but a descriptive analysis does find that not all L2 Japanese writers, even untrained in English L2 composition, are alike in their rhetorical styles.

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