

RHETORICAL PATTERNS EXTANT IN THE ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS OF JAPANESE STUDENTS

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Abstract

According to Robert Kaplan (1972), the expository writing of native English speakers is characterized by a linear approach and a deductive development, while writing by Orientals is characterized by a circular (indirect) approach and an inductive development. Kaplan's term "oriental" specifically refers to Chinese and Korean but not to Japanese. It is the purpose of this paper to investigate whether or not there may be any rhetorical patterns unique to native speakers of Japanese. For this purpose, 130 English compositions written by Japanese students of English as a second language were examined. Analysis of the data shows that the Japanese rhetorical pattern has both linear and circular approaches. In addition, some other compositions are presented and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Kaplan says that "rhetorical and stylistic preferences are culturally conditioned and vary from language to language" (1972: 10). According to Kaplan, in the writing of native English speakers, the flow of ideas can be characterized by a deductive development, while Oriental writing is

characterized by a circular (indirect) approach and an inductive development. He states:

The thought pattern which speakers and readers of English appear to expect as an integral part of their communication is a sequence that is dominantly linear in its development. An English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement, and then by a series of subdivisions of that topic statement, each supported by examples and illustrations, proceeds to develop that central idea and relate that idea to all the other ideas in the whole essay, and to employ that idea in its proper relationship with other ideas, to prove something, or perhaps to argue something. (p.3)

[Oriental writing] may be said to be "turning and turning in a widening gyre." 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. (p.10)

He further states that in Oriental writing "the kind of logic considered so significant in Western analytic writing" is eliminated. (1971:53)

Although Kaplan has dealt with the Oriental rhetorical pattern, his study is limited to Chinese and Korean students; Japanese are not included, in spite of the long cultural influence on Japan by both China and Korea. Therefore, we have attempted here to explore the rhetorical patterns

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and the interference problems shown in English compositions by Japanese students.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The subjects of our study were adult intermediate and advanced Japanese students of English as a second language enrolled in the intensive English programs at the language schools of Southern Illinois University and Western Illinois University and Japanese undergraduates at Southern Illinois University. These students had received from six to ten years of formal English instruction in Japan, however, the main part of that instruction was focused on grammar, while English writing had been for the most part neglected.

First, 178 English compositions written by these subjects for their English classes were collected. Of these, 48 were not amenable to rhetorical pattern analysis as they contained too many syntactic problems. Those compositions written as personal introductions or letters were also discarded. Only those compositions which could be classified as expository prose were analyzed. Therefore, our study is based on the analysis and categorization of 130 compositions according to the five different rhetorical patterns discerned in those compositions. The five organizational patterns are defined as follows:

Category 1: Compositions showing characteristics of English expository writing; that is, linear development in which each subtopic is united to the main topic in a proper way. (Kaplan's category)

Category 2: Compositions showing a linear development in the beginning, but with weak endings; that is, topic sentences with very little substantiation.

Category 3: Compositions showing no explicit topic sentences; or, if there are any, they are preceded by superfluous introductory remarks.

Category 4: Compositions showing characteristics of Oriental writing; a circular (indirect) approach and inductive development. (Kaplan's category)

Category 5: Compositions which are tantamount to unrelated collections of sentences; the sentences may be grammatically correct, but the overall effect is one of confusion.

To avoid influencing each other's judgment, we first allocated the 130 compositions to one or other of the five categories independently and then compared our results. We found that in 120 cases we agreed; agreement was reached on the remaining ten after some discussion.

Table 1. Percentage for each category of rhetorical patterns found in the Japanese students' English composition.

Category 1	↓	34%
Category 2	⊂	19%
Category 3	∅	6%
Category 4	⊙	27%
Category 5	↪	14%

Table 1 indicates the percentage for each category of rhetorical patterns found in the 130 English compositions written by the Japanese students. Interestingly, the highest percentage is found for the linear approach (34%) and the second highest for the circular (or indirect) approach (27%), although there wasn't any significant difference between

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them. According to Kaplan, the linear approach characterizes English analytic writing, which is direct, logical and unified; while a circular approach marks Oriental writing, which is lacking in logic, unity and coherence.

Haruhiko Kindaichi states one of the characteristics of the Japanese language:

[The Japanese] dislikes the sentence that ends so distinctly, for it looks stiff, formal, and brusque – or, in modern terms, dry. (1978:212)

The Japanese language is said to be oblique, and it is hard for non-Japanese readers to grasp the main idea. Kindaichi states one of the reasons:

When one writes a long Japanese sentence, the predicate verb comes far behind the subject, which appears in the beginning. The many tiny clauses in between give listeners and readers a difficult time understanding the principal idea. (1978: 222)

From Kindaichi's perspective, Japanese students' compositions should show a high degree of the circular approach and a very small degree of the linear approach. However, the students' English compositions in the present study show that both linear and circular approaches are prominent. This suggests two possible explanations. First, it has to be taken into consideration that all of these students had had formal English instruction in Japan, and at the time of this study they were receiving intensive English instruction in the United States. Thus, in their compositions both Oriental and Western patterns are to be expected. But it is also possible that the Japanese rhetorical pattern has both linear and circular aspects.

Category 2, in which there is a topic sentence but very little substantiation, may be in evidence as a result of the Japanese tendency to avoid terse, perspicuous endings; that is, they expect the reader to infer the conclusion.

Category 5, which shows the second lowest percentage, has neither topic sentence, body, nor conclusion. Sentences are unrelated to each other. This could be due to a lack of English competence and/or writing ability.

The lowest percentage is represented by Category 3, in which there is no explicit topic sentence or, if there is one, it is preceded by an unnecessary introductory remark. This kind of essay always starts with something indirect. The following two paragraphs are the introductory part of a student's composition on "The National Character of the Japanese".

Japan is a homogeneous country compared with other countries. Japan is surrounded by sea, and she closed her door for a long time in the Edo period.

One of the Japanese strong national character is moderation and shyness

Here, the student states the topic in the second paragraph instead of in the first. In the first paragraph he gives background information. Although this rhetorical pattern shows the lowest percentage of occurrence in our sample, it is interesting in that this long indirect beginning reflects the influence of *Ki*, an opening part of the traditional Japanese organizational pattern called *Ki* (opening) – *Shoo* (development) – *Ten* (turn or twist) – *Ketsu* (conclusion). In the *Ki-Shoo-Ten-Ketsu* organization, the topic of the initial unit is not the author's main topic. It is simply a subtopic that will lead into the main topic of the essay. This unit is called *Ki*. The second unit called *Shoo* develops the initial topic, setting the stage for the third unit, where the main topic is finally introduced and developed. This third unit is called *Ten*. Then the fourth unit called *Ketsu* brings together all these three units. Older generations of Japanese learned this organizational pattern at school. The present generation

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no longer learns it, although the terms themselves are familiar since high school students encounter them in the course of their schooling.

In order to see if there are actually both the linear and circular approaches in the Japanese rhetorical pattern, as found in students' English compositions, we examined students' Japanese compositions. Our samples are limited to twenty-four compositions and only seven of the Japanese compositions were written by the same students who wrote the English compositions.

Table 2. Percentage for each rhetorical pattern found in students' Japanese compositions as contrasted with those of students' English composition.

		Japanese composition	English composition
Category 1	↓	29%	34%
Category 2	⊕	0%	19%
Category 3	⊗	8%	6%
Category 4	⊙	46%	27%
Category 5	↪	17%	14%

As shown in Table 2, the rhetorical pattern defined in category 2 is not extant in the students' Japanese compositions. Categories 3 and 5 in Japanese composition don't show a substantial percentage difference from categories 3 and 5 in English composition. Both categories 1 and 4 show relatively high percentages; the linear and circular approaches are the dominant ones, as is seen in the English compositions. This would confirm the possibility that the Japanese rhetorical pattern has both linear and circular approaches. However, in the English compositions a higher

percentage is found for the linear approach than for the circular approach, while this is reversed for the Japanese compositions. This may have to do with the reader to whom the student was writing. English compositions were going to be read, corrected and graded by a native English teacher who was not familiar with the Japanese way of thinking. Therefore, writing had to be explicit and to the point. On the other hand, Japanese compositions were going to be read by Japanese natives who had the same background. Thus, the writer expected the reader to "read between lines" and to infer what had not been stated. A Japanese girl would never write in a letter to her Japanese lover, "I love you". He would assume that she loves him from other things she says in the letter which don't have any direct connection to her love for him. However, it is very possible that the same girl would write "I love you" to an American lover. Thus, the same person could use both linear and circular approaches, depending on the audience.

There were only seven cases of English and Japanese compositions written by the same student. This small number makes generalization impossible, but it is to be noted that in every case the rhetorical pattern of the English and Japanese compositions by the same writer was the same.

Analysis of the students' twenty-four Japanese compositions shows that both linear and circular approaches and the same person may use both approaches depending on the audience; while it is also possible that a person uses only one approach all the time. However, due to the small sample of English compositions, this needs further study.

Our study shows that 15% of the 130 English compositions by Japanese students were, in Kaplan's term, inductive (see page 2). Although the percentage is not high, this seems to be a very interesting characteristic of Japanese rhetoric, considering the claims by Kaplan (1972) and also by Christensen (1965) that almost all the English expository

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writings are deductive.

The following example is entitled *Why I chose my field of study*.

It is not clear for me about when I met first animals. I think it maybe at the time when I was very small boy. I usually went outside with a elder boy. He almost knew everything about small animals around our town. So he was excellent teacher for me. I really don't remember how many times we went together and how many animals we got together. Our talking was about how to get a large shining beetle, where some boy found a nice looking snake. Unfortunately I was too small and young to remember everything, but I'm sure it was my first meeting with animals.

Then, second impressive meeting came to me. It was when I was eighteen years old right after I graduated high school. I met seals. It was one of great exciting moments in my life. Since it was first time I saw large wild mammals in nature, they looked like another organisms in that from outer space. They were beautiful lovely animals. Since this meeting, my life was orientated to my way that I'm taking now.

I'm taking zoology because of my love for them.

In the first paragraph, the student brings up his encounter with little animals and in the second paragraph, with large wild mammals; but he doesn't mention what his field is until the last paragraph. Thus the first paragraph introduces the topic to some extent inductively, and the second paragraph introduces it in a larger degree, again inductively; and, finally, in the last paragraph the main point is stated.

Our study also shows that 16% of the English compositions had some kind of didactic remark at the end. The following example concerns the purpose of education. After the student states in the first paragraph the difference be-

tween training and education, the second paragraph goes as follows:

Sometimes we need some special knowledge to get a job, such as physical, or psychological knowledge. But it depends on the job. If you want to lead to good positions, you should get good education and you shouldn't forget to make efforts towards jobs everyday. Train yourself everyday.

The underlined sentences are a kind of didactic remark. At the end of the English compositions by Japanese students, "should," "ought to" and imperatives as in the above example, are often seen.

Other characteristics seen in Japanese students' compositions are frequent use of "as you know" and "I think." "As you know" is commonly used at the beginning of the compositions. For example, a student's composition entitled *Japanese national character* starts with the sentence, "As you know, Japanese society is a homogeneous society which consists of only one race and this gives us an advantage." For the writer, it is not important whether or not the audience knows the Japanese society is homogeneous. He uses "as you know" just to avoid an abrupt beginning. In Japanese writings and speeches in front of an audience, this use of "as you know" is very common. This may be a problem of interference from the Japanese language.

Frequent use of "I think" in students' compositions may also be a problem of interference. The following example is a passage from a student's English composition on historical stories:

And after revolutions a lot of heirs often failed to govern. So they had a sad end. These stories are more interesting than novels, *I think*. And *I think* the most important point is that these stories are true.

In the above example, use of "I think" twice in a row sounds

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awkward; but when it is translated into Japanese it sounds natural.

Our final attempt to explore transfer from Japanese was to examine “because” and “although” as subordinated conjunctions and “when” as an indefinite relative adverb. We examined all 130 compositions to find whether adverbial clauses introduced by these words come before or after the main clause. We found that 76% of adverbial clauses introduced by “although,” 73% of those introduced by “when” and 35% of those introduced by “because” came before the main clause. The study demonstrated that Japanese students appear to employ adverbial clauses including “although” and “when” more frequently before the main clauses than after. The explanation of this is probably that in Japanese the subordinate clauses including these words seldom come after the main clauses. On the other hand, Japanese subordinate clauses including “because” can be placed either before or after the main clause. It is interesting to note, however, that 14% of the usage of “because” is in independent sentences as defined, often incorrectly, by the students:

If it is raining outside. I like to spend my free time reading comic books. *Because* reading makes me relax.

In the above example, the student uses a period instead of a comma and he starts an independent sentence with “because.” Although this isn’t correct in English, it is perfectly all right in Japanese. Again this may be as a result of interference from the Japanese language.

In this paper, we have discussed the rhetorical patterns found in compositions by Japanese students and also the problem of interference from the Japanese language. But how do the students themselves look at rhetoric? The following is a student’s frank remark on learning to write English compositions:

The Japanese way of writing and the American one differ very much. Struggling! Struggling! Struggling! I have constantly been struggling to break with the Japanese way of writing and to get used to the American style of writing. The Japanese tend to write with feeling; the American seems write with cool and logical head. It was just pain for me to have done with the Japanese style of writing for the first time. However after six weeks of studying at CESL, I am beginning to feel that style of writing is not strict rules that are imposed on us but very useful rules that help us a lot.

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