

## Teaching Writing in Japan

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### *Abstract*

Based on the author's experiences teaching composition to Japanese university students in 1977-78, "Teaching Writing in Japan" identifies some of the cultural assumptions which Western teachers are likely to bring with them into the classroom and traces the author's attempts to recognize and to overcome those assumptions. The most important principle which the article illustrates is that the patterns for composition which Japanese students unconsciously imitate, even when writing in English, are patterns shaped by their own cultures; likewise, the patterns for English composition have been shaped by a long rhetorical tradition. The article outlines a pedagogy for teaching English composition to Japanese students, one based on the student's and the teacher's mutual respect and understanding of each other's culturally shaped expectations.

Teachers of English as a second language are armed with a variety of methods, techniques and practices. However, in some situations, especially when the cultural differences between student and teacher are very great, that methodology is not enough to insure good results because both the students and the teachers carry with them a vast body of cultural assumptions. Both have difficulty recognizing the parts of human experience which are universal and those which are shaped by their own cultural training. They are, as Edward Hall described in *Beyond Culture*, in the "grip of unconscious culture" (1977, p. 240). Effective teachers must free themselves from that grip and must lead their students to do the same. In doing so, they do not become *cultureless*--but more aware of the universal and the culture-specific aspects of their behavior. They come to understand what those hidden, unconscious sets of expectations are which have been instilled into them by their own cultures. The students in this situation were Japanese university students, all English majors, all between 19 and 23 years old. Still, the underlying principles expressed here, the need for teachers and students to free themselves from the "grip of unconscious culture," apply in a wide variety of cross-cultural teaching situations.

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Not all teachers of English, and especially teachers of English composition, face such serious problems. The students who have been raised in Western cultures, students who have, albeit unconsciously, modeled their thinking and their methods of argumentation on the examples of Plato, Aristotle and other Western thinkers, do not have the same trouble learning the rhetoric and style of English composition that students from Eastern or other non-Western cultures may have. Even the "natural act of thinking," Edward Hall argues, "is greatly modified by culture" (1977, p. 9). But teachers of English as a second language who fail to understand those modifications often expect students to write compositions that reflect the teachers' own Western patterns of thinking.

When I began teaching English composition to Japanese students, I started with checks on grammar, sentence structure, use of articles and other details which I thought would reveal keys to writing problems. But the students were quite proficient. Confidently, I moved on to a study of the paragraph. The students dutifully wrote paragraphs, tried to follow my instructions, worked hard; but the results were disappointing. The paragraphs lacked details, they usually ended with vaguely emotional or sentimental statements, they never included strong arguments or clear evidence to support an issue. The students simply couldn't conceive of the style and form which I was asking them to produce; I couldn't believe that they didn't understand such (to me) basic points. After a period of considerable frustration, a story from a colleague, combined with my own reading, began to break this stalemate.

My colleague had been asked to translate from Japanese into English an article by a well-established Japanese critic. He remembered the article as solid, useful criticism. During the course of the translation, however, he came to another conclusion. In English the article was poorly organized, vague, confusing, trivial and uninteresting. At this point, he could not decide whether to submit the English translation without comment, mention that he was not responsible for the quality of the original, or simply refuse to submit the translation at all. His dilemma was serious; he was a Japanese scholar who had lived and studied in the United States, and he was able to see the differences between the original and the translation, yet he found no readily apparent way to resolve those differences. Indeed, perhaps there is none.

Soon after, in a sociolinguistic study of Japanese which I was reading, I found a similar comment by Roy Andrew Miller, who concludes that translation into English is virtually impossible.

Translation from Japanese for any end--literary, cultural, scientific, political--cannot provide effective communication in isolation from the sociolinguistic approach of the society toward its own language. In Japanese life and culture, translation alone will never provide full communication between Japan and the rest of the world ... Translation without the assistance of commentary can be worse than no translation at all, because it can be the source of positive misunderstanding. (1977, p. 99)

Westerners who have learned French, German, Italian, even Greek, know that translation is a difficult--often unsatisfactory--process. But the differences between Japanese and English create an even wider gap.

An important study of this matter, Robert Kaplan's "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" (1966), gives the teacher some help. But Kaplan sees the English paragraph as the norm, as the straight line, and he draws visual models of paragraphs in other cultures which are circular, digressive or otherwise variants from the straight line. The crucial point which Kaplan makes in his article is that "the teacher must be himself aware of these differences, and he must make these differences overtly apparent to his students. In short, contrastive rhetoric must be taught in the same sense that contrastive grammar is presently taught" (1966, p. 256). On the other hand, making those rhetorical matters "overtly apparent" to students is not an easy task.

Since I could not investigate the differences between Japanese and English rhetoric on my own, I tried to make the students become aware of different patterns by having them do the investigating. First, I worked with some students to find English and Japanese newspaper articles that had the same topic and would reflect the same structure; but we were unsuccessful. Next, I asked some students to translate a paragraph from a newspaper editorial into English. The students were dismayed. They said the paragraph was not a "good" one. They were reluctant to finish or to show their translations to me. The editorial had none of the elements I had been naming in composition class--no topic sentence, no clear details, no direct statements, no

conclusion. The vocabulary I had given them for analysis was useless when applied to the writing of another culture.

Our cultural assumptions--both mine and the students'--were becoming evident. I learned how they valued personal statements, discussion of feelings, more delicate and vague phrasing and the use of emotive terms. They had absorbed these values through years of reading and imitating Japanese writing. They did not judge a sentence as bad because it was vague; on the contrary, they found vague sentences often good ones which gave the reader a pleasant feeling. Yet, articulating these assumptions is difficult; it takes conscious efforts not to reject other cultural modes. And even when Japanese students learn to imitate Western argumentative style, they will feel uncomfortable attacking other positions, giving evidence, and making points of view explicit.

Roy Andrew Miller, in his study of Japanese attitudes toward their own language, discusses their attitudes concerning prose style. Miller concludes that Japanese prose,

particularly scholarly prose ... is so dense that in many cases even specialists in the field in question are hard put to answer direct inquiries about just what the text is trying to say about what. It is writing that, since it does not communicate to the reader anything at all about what the author is trying to say, violates the most elementary functional definition of language as a medium of social inter-relationship. Yet, writing of this variety is not only prized by many Japanese scholars

and intellectuals but the techniques for its generation are carefully cultivated. (1977, p. 38)

These students whose language prizes the mysterious and the vague don't shift immediately into a Western teacher's pattern of rhetorically argued expository prose. Indeed, to do so is to become rude and vulgar, to become un-Japanese. But once the teacher recognizes the problem, he or she may help the students to see that Japanese and English writing styles are only two ways of writing, ones which can be learned and imitated, ones which are shaped by culture and not by universal law.

In another attempt to make the differences in style more overtly apparent, I constructed a set of three paragraphs, all on the same topic. The first was as close as I could come to a rather Japanese style. It included several generalizations, avoided precise details, concluded with a rather personal, emotional observation. The other two paragraphs were increasingly argumentative with more clearly defined topic sentences, stronger adjectives and very obvious organizational devices (Field, 1978). This exercise did make the different patterns more clear.

As the year progressed, I devised a number of other techniques which helped students understand the basic cultural differences which were causing them problems with writing in English. At one point, I collected the final sentences from a set of student argumentative paragraphs and duplicated them all on one long page. Students had to guess the topic of the paragraph from those last sentences, a difficult feat when the sentences were in the more typically Japanese pattern of delicate or vague personal feelings. Then, as a class exercise, they revised those

sentences to make them more forceful, conclusive and argumentative. The students completed this exercise by working in groups of two or three, and as I went from group to group, they would talk about the difference between Japanese and English writing styles with me.

Group work, in fact, proved to be a useful technique with these students. Small groups would study sample paragraphs to learn to recognize topic sentences, enumerate details and illustrations and distinguish between comparison, descriptive, analytical, process and persuasion paragraphs. They would argue and discuss freely in their groups, and they would call me over to ask questions; however, they still hesitated to discuss their findings or opinions with the whole class at the end of the period.

Individual conferences were also helpful, despite the students' initial shyness in meeting me personally. My verbal critiques of their paragraphs and papers were much more meaningful than my written comments, and they were eager to rewrite and correct their errors. Students were encouraged to write everything in English, because to write first in Japanese led to the same problems in translation that I described above. In addition, students enjoyed reading and criticizing other students' paragraphs that had been retyped and duplicated without the authors' names. The vocabulary and syntax of student papers were within the reading ability of all the students, and they could immediately devote themselves to the writing's organization rather than exhausting themselves in the translation of it.

Perhaps the most helpful exercise which the composition students practiced was journal writing. They were assigned the task of writing a minimum of four sentences per day for five days



each week. These sentences were to be recorded in notebooks which I collected and returned weekly. They could write about any topic; the assignment was a rigid requirement for the course but received no letter grade. That journal provided an excellent opportunity for students to comment on cultural differences, and I frequently responded to their journals by making explicit some differences which would help them understand the cross-cultural process which we were going through.

Through the journal, the individual conferences and the group work in class--all attempts to make overt the cultural patterns which inhibit communication--student and teacher gained trust for each other and developed some cross-cultural awareness.

A final consideration in developing teaching strategies is that teachers of English as a second language must recognize the impact of what they are teaching. Teaching English composition so thoroughly that students learn to use the forms with ease will change the students. There is some resistance to learning English really well among the Japanese. Edwin O. Reischauer has remarked on that hesitance, and he comments that there is a "fear--largely unspoken--that, if many Japanese learned a foreign language too well, this might impair their command of the Japanese language or at least some of their identity as Japanese" (1977, p. 398). To work through this resistance takes flexibility and ample time for students to adjust.

Teachers of English as a second language must always watch for ways in which they may still be held in the "grip of unconscious culture." In my own experience, there was an unconscious or unexamined assumption which held me back from

understanding the situation for many months. I could objectively state cultural differences and could explain to my students some of the obvious cultural expectations which we were struggling against. But I could not recognize my own deep-seated belief that once they learned more "logical" or Western ways of presenting material in their papers, they would be convinced that the Western way was better, clearer, more useful to them. Only during my second semester of teaching composition in Japan did I realize my own prejudice, and it was difficult for me to acknowledge that the Western way was not necessarily better. Students need to learn to use Western patterns in order to be able to master the complexities of the language and syntax and composition, but those patterns are not better, just different. Thus, effective teaching strategies for teaching Japanese students must begin with a recognition of our culturally shaped assumptions about English writing. Teaching English composition is, ultimately, a kind of "brainwashing," a process of acculturation to Western ways for Japanese students. The results of that process, for all who are involved, may last forever.

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