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## The impact of Western criticisms of Japanese rhetorical approaches on learners of Japanese

**Abstract:** For learners of Japanese, a conundrum arises at university level as they are expected to be able to shift between direct and indirect language in various writing tasks. The apparent indirectness in inductive language is required of regular writing tasks such as response essays and e-mails, while the directness of deductive academic writing, a quality traditionally attributed to academic writing in the West, is now a universally accepted quality of academic writing in any language. This shift can cause confusion for students, perhaps in part due to the widespread misunderstanding of it by linguistics researchers from the West in the past. This is not to suggest that English speakers, for example, do not make similar shifts in language use from non-academic to academic registers, but for learners of Japanese as a second language, the shift is less understood. In this article, I draw on some original data to support the posited theories. While instructors may make a clear distinction between the direct and indirect genres of writing, students do not always make the same distinction. Students may display a clear understanding of the Western criticisms of Japanese rhetorical approaches, but experience confusion when trying to meet the writing expectations of their instructors. University instructors of Japanese need to address the Western criticisms when clarifying the specific genres and uses of particular rhetorical approaches in written Japanese, and put more emphasis on the differences between written and spoken Japanese.

**Keywords:** writer identity, voice, academic writing, Japanese as a foreign language, rhetorical approaches

DOI 10.1515/cercles-2014-0017

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- 10.1515/cercles-2014-0017

# 1 Introduction

In 1999, Ryuko Kubota's article in *TESOL Quarterly*, "Japanese culture constructed by discourses: Implications for applied linguistics research and ELT", highlighted distinctions being made by Western researchers of Japanese language in order to discuss the binary logic problem inevitably raised: "same versus different, diverse versus homogeneous, and unsystematic versus systematic, which underlies the cultural dichotomization of the West versus the East" (Kubota 1999: 15). Kubota did this in order to provide a "way of understanding cultural differences from a perspective of critical multiculturalism and present a perspective of critical literacy that supports both cultural pluralism and critical acquisition of the dominant language for social transformation" (Kubota 1999: 9), and ultimately use this understanding to better address issues Japanese students face when learning English. This understanding should also be taken into consideration as it regards English speakers learning Japanese – a context that is severely under-researched in comparison.

Due to the influence of globalization on education and the emergence of English as a universal academic language, written "academic style" has come to be associated with the style attributed to academic English, i.e. deductive and evidence-based. This includes the case even when writing academic papers in Japanese, even though Japanese writing has had a long period of criticism from Western researchers dating back to Kaplan's seminal 1966 article in which he described "Oriental" writing (including Japanese) as being indirect. While Kaplan revised his position in 1987, similar criticisms continue to be reported as significant features of Japanese writing (see e.g. Noor 2001). For learners of Japanese writing – particularly those who are encouraged to embrace the cultural aspects of language use – such criticisms may cause misunderstanding; that they are supposed to make their writing fit the features described by Western researchers as indirect, inductive, or occasionally off-topic.

The issue for learners of Japanese, it seems, is related to the genre of writing. The Japanese rhetorical approaches identified by Western researchers (and dismissed by some Japanese researchers; see e.g. Kubota 1997, 1998, 1999; Hirose 2005) may be better attributed to the more casual writing genres (e.g. e-mail), or creative or expressive genres of writing that occur in *sakubun* ('essay writing'), but they are not appropriately attributed to more advanced academic Japanese writing that reflects a more universal academic style.

This article first provides a discussion of some sensitizing theories of developing written critical argument, in particular the concept of *writer identity* and the sociocultural phenomenon of developing critical argument in L2 writing, with a suggested 7-stage process for that development. This is followed by an explora-

tion of the “preferred” rhetorical approaches applied in Japanese writing, and the Western criticisms of those approaches. The article culminates with a discussion of the implications for Japanese language education at university level, supported by the literature as well as original data collected from university students and instructors of Japanese.

## 2 Why focus on academic Japanese language learning?

The rationale for the focus of this article is based on the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s Global 30 project, designed to increase the number of international students studying in Japanese universities from 124,000 in 2008 to 300,000 by 2020 (MEXT 2009). While the programs developed at the 13 selected universities for the project are offered in English with a supposed focus on increasing the English skills of domestic students, one of the aims of the Global 30 project is “to increase the number of people who are engaged in Japanese language education in local communities and to improve their skills by conducting Japanese language teaching training courses for bilingual foreigners” (MEXT 2006, cited by Hashimoto 2013: 20). While this proposes an obvious need for attention to Japanese language education in Japanese universities, little research in this area has been published in English.

## 3 Sensitizing theories of developing critical argument

Learning to write in academic style is a challenge for both L1 and L2 students, but due to the distinction between “reflective” writing and academic writing in English, the distinction is fairly black and white for academic English, i.e. it is expected to always be deductive and evidence-based. When writing in Japanese academic settings, “essays” may take on the indirect rhetorical strategies with which JSL learners may have little familiarity.

The difference between rhetorical approaches when speaking and when writing are less clear in English, whereas in Japanese the difference is meant to be much clearer, at least as regards academic writing. This poses a challenge for English speakers learning Japanese to make that distinction. The directness English speakers learned to utilize when making their point or stating their opinion,

either spoken or written, must be softened dramatically when making that point in Japanese. Here, the issue of *voice* or writer identity is important. For example, the Japanese indirect writing style can be attributed to the principle of *kenkyo*, which is literally defined as “modesty” (Davies and Ikeno 2002). Davies and Ikeno explain that *kenkyo* is important in Japanese culture because “Self assertiveness is more or less discouraged, while consideration for others is encouraged” (Davies and Ikeno 2002: 143). This diminished self-assertiveness is demonstrated in Japanese speech as well. Native Japanese speakers normally add softeners to their speech when addressing those of a higher social status in order to avoid being perceived as overly assertive (McKinley, 2013). However, the effectiveness of the communication works in the visual, spoken form, but not necessarily in the written form. As Japanese has been described as more visual than verbal (see Rose 1996), academic writing is expected to be more direct.

Ravelli and Ellis state that by the early 2000s, academic writing research had come to highlight “some of the ways in which students negotiate identity, construct roles and develop argumentative positions, engage in technologically supported writing processes, and deal with the demands of specialized disciplines and of a language that may not be their own” (2005: 1). In the same volume, Hyland (2005: 5) explains that academic writing research moved beyond ideational analysis of students’ written texts in order to explore the interpersonal function of those texts. This movement promoted the idea that students’ written texts do not just “represent an external reality, but use language to acknowledge, construct, and negotiate social relations”. Success in academic writing came to be based on the writer’s ability to establish a clear voice in relation to the reader, and to evaluate alternative viewpoints.

## 4 The phenomenon of developing critical argument in L2 writing

When a student is given the task of presenting an argument in academic writing, a process is started. The argument goes through a series of stages, each one influenced by certain factors within the academic community. The process is shown in Figure 1, following the description of stage one below.

- The first stage is the internalization of the task from the perspective of the student’s cultural identity. This first stage allows the student to establish some semblance of a thesis that shows that the student has something to say about a particular topic – the more familiar the topic, the easier this is to establish (Stapleton 2001).

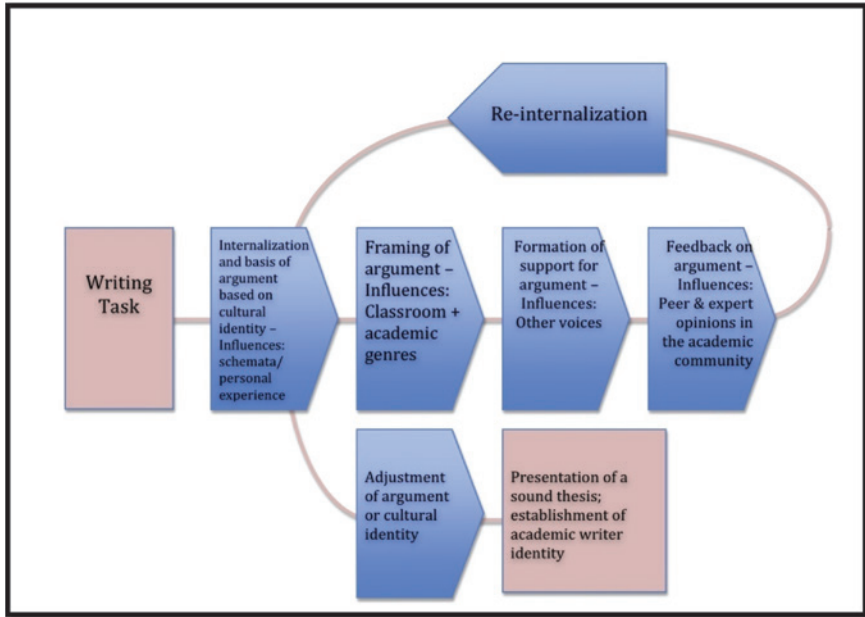


Fig. 1: 7-stage development of critical argument

- The second stage is the framing of the argument by the academic genre presented by the writing teacher. For the student, this is the point at which the thesis takes a particular shape according to the genre, and the student may begin externalizing the argument through drafting.
- The third stage, which may or may not occur depending on the parameters of the task, is when the student does some research. The student explores a range of voices and perspectives on the topic in order to see how her/his thesis fits into that range. If the student goes through this stage, the drafting may start here.
- The fourth stage is when the thesis gets tested through peer reader and teacher feedback. The response from the audience allows the student writer to see how successful she/he was in shaping and supporting the argument in the draft.
- The fifth stage is the re-internalizing of the thesis by considering how the audience reception of the argument fits in with the student writer's cultural identity.
- The sixth stage is the adjusting of the thesis in order to meet the expectations of the academic community. This is done through successful revision of the thesis, where necessary.

- The seventh and final stage is the point at which the student presents a sound thesis and in so doing, establishes an academic writer identity. It is at this final point that the student has established not only *what* to say, but *how* to communicate the argument successfully.

In the writing process, learners make attempts at persuading readers through different forms of argumentation by experimenting with ideas presented in English as a foreign language and culture. This is usually by command of a teacher in a classroom or for a writing task. The different forms of argumentation provide learners with various approaches used to persuade their readers. Clark and Ivanič (1997) suggest that as student writers negotiate the reader-writer relationship, they experiment with the language by taking on certain stylistic techniques in order to utilize the most effective identity or *self* to persuade their readers.

First, it is necessary to provide some general background on critical argument theory. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) take the position that argument is a social activity, essentially generating a discussion that serves to resolve some difference of opinion. From this perspective, critical argument serves as a design theory in which rationality is immersed in social and political contexts. It serves as a means of evaluating opposing positions with the aim of gaining insight from them – generating a shared construction of knowledge – and avoiding any logical or rhetorical fallacies (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992).

There are different “ways of arguing” that students may attempt, as defined by different disciplines and different writing tasks within those disciplines. Some disciplines or tasks may place more importance on synthesizing multiple sources than others that look more toward planning solutions. Hyland (2008) points out that this has pedagogical implications in that student writers need to be informed of the purposes, genres and readers that students aim to communicate with. Hyland emphasizes the importance of a reader-oriented approach that provides students with raised rhetorical awareness of the expectations of their writing within the genre of the specific task.

There are two approaches a student writer typically takes when presenting an argument, both of which have implications for the establishment of writer identity and the utilization of critical thinking skills. One is when the student writer “borrows” the argument from the relevant sources and uses that borrowed argument as the thesis that then gets developed. This way of arguing is fairly common as there is a general goal for EFL writers to make their writing appear “native” (Stapleton 2002). In this approach to developing critical argument in essay writing, L2 student writers will often mimic features from their sources, features of

both language and perspective. The problem with this practice is that it can lead to a loss of the writer's voice as well as a failure to display critical thinking skills (McKinley 2013). In contrast, the other way of arguing in which a writer essentially defends her/his own position on a topic requires the student writer to establish her/his own argument in the thesis that may or may not be based on ideas from outside sources (Stapleton 2001). This approach requires student writers to make important choices that involve more critical reasoning in the development of their argument.

## 5 Japanese rhetorical approaches and Western criticisms

Applied linguistics research on argumentation in East Asian culture including Japanese has traditionally been held in polar opposition to Western culture, particularly in the English language (see McKinley 2005, 2013). While the East is viewed as homogeneous, traditional, and group oriented, the West instead emphasizes individualism and critical thinking (Kubota 1999). This cultural dichotomization is manifested in studies in contrastive rhetoric. These studies characterize Japanese written rhetoric as “indirect, implicit, and inductive”, while English written rhetoric is described as “direct and deductive” (Kubota 1999: 12). This kind of cultural determinism has been reflected in descriptions of Japanese language education. Kubota (1999) points to Carson's (1992) exploratory work in order to note that “teaching methods in a Japanese language class in Japan emphasize traditional techniques such as memorization, repetition, and drilling rather than creativity and innovation” (Kubota 1999: 12).

The cultural determinism draws on common Japanese rhetorical strategies; the most commonly discussed include *reader responsibility*, *ki-shou-ten-ketsu*, and *delayed introduction of purpose*, proposed by Hinds (1983, 1987, 1990). First, *reader-responsible writing* is understood as a hindering quality of Japanese language for Japanese learners of academic English. The idea is that writing academic English requires a writer-responsible individualistic voice or writer identity (requiring writers to defend their own position) that is different from the more reader-responsible and collectivist voice (making a claim representative of many individuals speaking as one) used when writing in Japanese. Kubota (1999) cites Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) when they draw on points made by scholars such as Carson (1992) and Hinds (1987), who maintain that the reader is responsible for interpretation of Japanese texts. Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) posited that

“culturally preferred conventions of written discourse in the Japanese culture are incompatible with the assumptions underlying audience and voice” (Kubota 1999: 13).

Next, *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* is discussed for its significance in Japanese and Chinese writing. It was used initially to describe developmental stages in poetry and narrative essays and later applied to the development of written arguments. The stages function as follows (Maynard 1998): *ki*: topic (or character) introduction; *shou*: explanation/details of the topic; *ten*: the topic shift (or twist); and *ketsu*: ending/conclusion. The *ten* of the essay is what particularly sets the Japanese writing style apart from the generally accepted English language essay format (Hinds 1983). In an English language essay it may be recognized as opposing argument. In a Japanese essay, as proposed by Takemata (1976, cited by Hinds in 1983), the *ki* portion presents the argument of the composition, similar to the way a thesis statement is provided at the beginning of an essay in English. The *shou*, or topical development phase, is provided in an English essay via the presentation of commentary and evidence in the form of body paragraphs, and occurs in alternation with *ten* – the transitional phase (Kubota 1997). Conclusions mark the end of both English and Japanese essays. This is the *ketsu* (Hinds 1983). In this type of Japanese writing, “the main ideas do not appear until the end and that the paragraphs before the main ideas do not constitute the reasons or evidence for the main ideas” (Kubota 1998: 70). This is the style of inductive writing style that goes against the generally preferred deductive writing approach – providing the thesis in the introduction and using evidence to support or defend it (Noor 2001).

Third, in the *delayed introduction of purpose* or “quasi-inductive style” (Hinds 1990), the writer provides the topic and supporting ideas in the beginning, but no actual argument, thesis, or controlling idea. Development is not done in a supporting way, but rather similar to building a case – collecting evidence along the way. The actual argument is not stated until the end of the essay as a culminating point. This style of writing may seem “incoherent to the English-speaking reader” (Connor 2013: 147), but allows for particular narrative development inherent in Japanese non-academic writing.

These Japanese “preferred” rhetorical strategies highlighted several decades ago by Hinds (1980, 1983, 1984), and Takemata (1976) seem to have lost their preferential status not long after. As early as 1992, Ryuko Kubota described the preference of Japanese professors for expository and persuasive essays to be deductive, describing “good” Japanese essays as sharing a similar writing structure to well written English essays (Kubota 1997: 461). Reports from native English speaking graduate students and academics in Japan as well as university instructors of Japanese language indicate that Japanese language in-



struction is deductive and direct – in complete contrast to the *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* and quasi-inductive rhetorical approaches apparently preferred in Japanese academic writing decades ago.

However, criticisms of these Japanese rhetorical approaches continue. One in particular is the employment of the so-called “reader-responsible rhetoric”. While Hinds had reported on this concept in 1985 and 1987, the concept was criticized by McCagg (1996) who concluded, “Japanese texts do not generally require greater cognitive effort from readers for comprehension than English texts do, as long as the reader and the writer share the same cultural and linguistic knowledge” (cited in Kubota 1998, p. 70). Then, in 2001, Noor reported on placing the task of finding meaning on the reader as a basic quality of Japanese academic writing, and prominent L2 scholars such as Casanave (2002) and Atkinson (2003) reported that Japanese writers are influenced by strongly maintained principles. Such principles were reported at the same time by Davies and Ikeno (2002) who drew attention to *aimai* (‘ambiguity’) and *haragei*, literally translated as ‘force of personality’. Apparently, these ideas have played a large role in defining the way that many Japanese people act, speak and write. Similar to *aimai*, *haragei* is often used to avoid direct confrontation, either verbal or written, because it does not force the speaker to voice explicit, potentially offensive opinions and allows – if not forces – the target party to inductively draw its own conclusions based on the context of the situation (McKinley 2013). The Japanese tendency of writing inductively may be related to the desire in communication to maintain harmony, rather than forcing one’s own opinion on another. It can also be attributed to the principle of *nihonjinron* (‘theory of the Japanese’), which “emphasizes the uniqueness of the Japanese language in terms of its ambiguity, non-logicalness and indirectness” (Kubota 2014: 22).

## 6 Issues raised by learners and their instructors

Some original data were collected for this article to illustrate some of the potential confusion learners of Japanese may experience due to differences in perspectives on written versus spoken language and how culture is manifested in the different genres of the production of language. The data were collected from an American academic who wrote her doctoral thesis (on pre-modern Japanese literature) in Japanese, an American master’s-level graduate and an American undergraduate, both of whom had studied advanced levels of Japanese writing, and two Japanese instructors of Japanese who had taught at least one of the two students. Following are highlights from each written response. It is important to note the different understanding of Japanese academic writing in each context, which

is particularly notable when comparing the undergraduate student's comments with the Japanese instructors and the American academic. The American academic explained:

I was taught to write academic Japanese in a highly deductive style and arguments and positions are expressed with certainty and authority unless support is not sufficient in which case the writer would end their conclusion with *no dewa nai darou ka* ('it is possible it is not the case that') which allows for a small degree of uncertainty. A more commonly used expression to conclude an idea is *ni chigai nai* ('it can't be denied'). Academic writing is much more direct than speaking.

The definitiveness of the difference between spoken and academic written Japanese in the final statement is particularly notable, along with the distinction made here between arguments made with or without sufficient support – neither one more acceptable than the other, but simply concluded with appropriate language according to the degree of certainty. This kind of clarity is not found in the responses from the students.

On teaching writing in Japanese, the Japanese instructors are notably hesitant to suggest that their students need to make inherent adjustments to their writing styles in order to take on a more Japanese quality to their writing. They had similar responses as far as finding it unnecessary to get English-speaking students to adjust their rhetorical approaches in certain genres of written Japanese. However, the descriptions of what qualifies as the type of writing that fits this description are different (i.e. "opinion essay" versus "academic report"). One instructor explained:

I understand that the Japanese rhetorical approach you refer to means logical writing in particular. Among various genres in writings, it certainly differs in the ways of representation of ideas between English and Japanese, but in my opinion, it is not necessary for the English-speaking students to adjust their way of writing in English when composing an opinion essay, etc. in Japanese. Because we, Japanese teachers, evaluate the basic rhetorical approach in Western style (introduction, body and conclusion) as the appropriate composition style in any language. I myself think it is much easier and clearer to understand the writer's intentions and convey messages.

The other Japanese instructor commented, "It depends on the type of text, I guess. For texts that require more logic, such as 'academic' reports, I wouldn't ask students to change their way of making structure of the text, because I think it is to some extent universal regardless of language."

Both instructors followed up on their initial comments with some significant hedging in order to explain the conditions in which English-speaking students

would find it advantageous to adjust their writing style. The first instructor provided the following:

I have never asked students with English language backgrounds to change their expressions of ideas into less deductive, less direct, or more tangential but rather, recommended them to take the same approach of writing in English. However, I always advise them to be careful of linguistic differences in cohesion between English and Japanese so as to sound more Japanese. In other words, the students with English language background have already learned basic writing skills elsewhere before learning Japanese, so they should practice focusing on textual functions such as cohesion as well as ideational and interpersonal functions so as to improve their Japanese writing skills.

And from the second instructor:

On the other hand, when they write texts that involve more interactional aspects of communication, such as an email to make a request, I would provide them with information regarding the way of writing most Japanese may follow: it may be less direct, more abstract, and as a result may sound “illogical” to Western ears. (But I wouldn’t force them to obey the “Japanese” way. Instead I usually explain the reasons why Japanese prefer the way and the potential consequence of a violation of the norm, and let them choose one with their responsibility.)

These similar responses from the Japanese instructors are important as they both clarify that there are conditions under which Western learners of Japanese should identify linguistic variables in order to “sound more Japanese”, and that it may even “sound illogical to [their] Western ears.” While the first instructor describes the condition only as “cohesion”, the second instructor notes that a request e-mail would present such a condition – a distinctly different genre from academic writing. Depending on how the condition is explained to students, confusion may be reduced.

The two students both displayed some uncertainty about the adjustments they needed to make in their writing in order to convey their ideas successfully to a Japanese reader. However, while the master’s graduate agreed with the instructors’ ideas about maintaining at least some direct, deductive approach, the undergraduate does not – perhaps due to the level of writing expected. She does, however, suggest that while the ultimate description of what she provided in her writing was “direct” as far as her instructors understood it, her idea of directness in this usage was something different. The master’s graduate explains:

I think some of my Japanese teachers might have wanted me to write directly and deductively. The way I translated my thoughts was sometimes corrected for not sounding right in Japanese (and not because of weird grammar, but because of the words I was using to

describe what I thought). I got the impression, especially from the teachers I had in my second semester, that I wasn't sounding Japanese enough. I have always been a rather direct person, so I don't know if my Japanese writing would have changed if I actively kept studying Japanese. However, I don't doubt that it happens to some students who study Japanese for a long time.

The undergraduate's perspective was stated in an eloquent, lengthy narrative (see Appendix). She made a reference to the well-known Japanese proverb "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (meaning if a person stands out, that person will be subject to criticism), displaying an integral link between language and culture, one that suggests the individualistic "sticking out" of American culture does not fit into native Japanese language use, and is therefore undesirable or hindering the effectiveness of the message. She also reflected on the seeming necessity to make her writing unnaturally less direct in order to get her point across to a Japanese reader, making the wonderfully clear comparison to taking on an unnatural accent when speaking in another language in order to better match that of the language. In the follow-up interview, referring to her final comment, this student explained that she felt "directness" in Japanese is different from directness in English, and that this was the key point in successfully conveying an argument in written Japanese.

A significant issue raised by this student's narrative is the loss of voice. The first mention was, "I struggled to maintain a voice in Japanese that reflected my thoughts in English in a way that was actually digestible to Japanese speakers." Here the student displays her realization that there were certain elements (i.e. directness) of her natural voice that had to change for successful communication in Japanese. She later reflects on the struggle: "I won't lie here, it hurt." Toward the end of the narrative, she clarifies: "I changed my writing style and my voice in Japanese (this is still pretty clear when I speak) because I realized that to be effective in communication, one must conform to some degree." These reflections indicate similar issues raised by Stapleton (2002) and McKinley (2013), that students may feel the necessity to make their writing native-like, and will even mimic voices in the target language.

The first Japanese instructor had one final addendum of note: "Interestingly, unlike the students with English language backgrounds learning Japanese, Japanese students learning English academic writing take longer to master rhetorical skills. They have not been sufficiently trained in logical nor factual writing skills prior to university education." This instructor's perspective suggests a particular expectation that English speakers should better grasp the rhetoric required of them in Japanese since they would have had sufficient relevant training in their English.

## 7 Conclusion and implications for Japanese language teaching

Based on the examination of the literature and discussion of sensitizing theories, it is evident that the Western criticisms of Japanese rhetorical strategies maintain relevance when applying them to Japanese speakers learning to write in English as well as English speakers learning to write in Japanese. However, confusion is evident in differing ideas of students and instructors regarding the directness of Japanese writing. The oversimplification of describing English academic style-based writing in any language as universal is problematic. While Japanese professors may prefer academic writing that reflects the same directness of English academic writing, it is not the case for all genres of writing at the university level, especially the writing that happens in Japanese language courses. Exercises in *sakubun* or other types of writing such as e-mail maintain a certain indirectness that students may associate with the Western criticisms of Japanese rhetorical approaches.

While Kubota (1999) suggests that these Western criticisms of Japanese written discourse have been “debunked”, she goes on to explain, “criticism of the essentialization and exoticization of culture as well as determinism in cultural representations tends to emphasize the similarity between cultures, diversity within a culture, and the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of learning processes” (Kubota 1999: 15). Certain forms of academic written Japanese certainly seem to take on many of the same qualities of English academic writing – this is a point that Japanese instructors understand, but not necessarily what students believe.

The pedagogical implications of this article, therefore, are to increase genre awareness in Japanese writing education in the form of differences in position (i.e. superior or inferior) and interaction (i.e. direct or indirect) with the reader, depending on the writing form. There are different implications depending on whether the student is doing *sakubun* or academic writing. Students writing at the level of *sakubun* in the form of opinion or response essays for their Japanese language course need to grasp the differences in writing at this level and that of the more universally understood academic writing that may be required of them in their content courses in Japanese.

For *sakubun*, depending on the particular essay type, the style may be more similar to spoken Japanese. Assertions in the form of opinions or arguments should be made tentatively and inductively. Students with English language backgrounds may find the style of writing more relatable to narrative essay types. However, professors should be clear about the organizational and developmental

aspects expected from students. If an assigned essay is to follow an academic-style organization (e.g. introduction–body–conclusion), students need to be instructed as to where to place the thesis statement – in the introduction following a deductive style, or in the conclusion following an inductive style.

As for academic writing in Japanese, as the American academic made clear, “[Japanese] academic writing is much more direct than speaking.” Students need to be made aware of the similarities this style of writing has to academic writing in general. Assertions should be made directly and deductively. For assignments in courses other than Japanese language courses, students should understand that a universal academic style is generally the norm, but to always keep their audience and rhetorical situation on the whole in mind as expectations can vary.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire response in full from undergraduate student

I had a very strict set of Japanese teachers back in high school [in the US], before I even considered moving to Japan. These teachers were incredible in so many ways (looking back, I didn't love them then), the key one here being that they both possessed the mentality that to truly learn a language, you must learn the culture first. I still believe this.

I struggled a lot when I first started learning Japanese, because I thought that it was possible to understand Japanese without having to, in a sense, chase my metaphorical tail in circles with my words. I suffered through the point deductions in my written work, the point deductions in my oral exams “you're being too direct here, this is not *tadashii Nihongo*” (‘proper Japanese’) and the endless stream of criticism. But the nail that sticks out too much eventually gets hammered down, and that happened when I came to Tokyo to do a homestay, when I stayed with an actual Japanese family, and saw, much to my amazement at that time, that it actually was possible to beat around a bush yet accomplish something in the end.

I had two more years left of high school after that, and I went through a nice, long period where I struggled to maintain a voice in Japanese that reflected my thoughts in English in a way that was actually digestible to Japanese speakers. Writing and speaking are, and always will be intimately related, and if you're good at one, you're often good at the other by default. I learned very quickly that speaking directly quickly labeled me as a foreigner and that my ideas were dismissed rapidly, so in the interest of getting heard, in the interest of getting my ideas across, I worked to change that.



When I started at Sophia, I was placed into a pretty high-level Japanese class (at least for foreigners) wherein we were expected to write *sakubun* (Japanese essays) once a week. The prompts were easy – write about a place that you'd like to go, a memorable experience, your time in Tokyo, what you dislike about Japan – things that you could answer in a sentence, really. We had to write an entire page. With a character count.

So I found myself drafting things out. After receiving my first essay that looked like a pen had exploded all over it, I realized that my stubborn, bull-headed approach wasn't going to get me anywhere, because Japanese people will tune you out if you are too direct. This was later echoed by the fact that my Japanese students of English (mainly salarymen at this point) paid more attention when I inserted random *eetos* ('ums') and *anoos* ('ahs') into my speech, and "I think" or "I probably" even if they were completely random and uncalled for.

I've never struggled with writing in English, but for the first few essays that I wrote, I found myself typing Japanese in a Microsoft Word doc, and then editing the direct English in my head to be so much more . . . indirect. I won't lie here, it hurt. But then I started realizing that this was the way to make people listen.

So I guess, in a word, the answer to your question is yes.

I changed my writing style and my voice in Japanese (this is still pretty clear when I speak) because I realized that to be effective in communication, one must conform to some degree. It's not enough to know all of the words, or to present your ideas in a clear, concise way – here in Japan, this makes you come across as ignorant, and is so completely . . . not effective. I suppose the comparison point would be those who refuse to try to get rid of their accent when moving to another country – changing your speech patterns, your vernacular, these all reflect that you care about your audience to some degree, and that's how you get people to listen.

In some ways, that still means my writing is direct, but to be direct in Japanese – to get my meaning across – I must be indirect with the English in my head.

## Bionote

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