

# Teaching English Composition to Non-Natives : Cross-cultural Problems and One Solution

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One block to writing expository English for English as a Second Language (ESL) students is that the rhetorical patterns of their own languages and cultures might be different from the rhetorical pattern of English. This paper takes up this problem, touching on how it relates to Japanese, and proposes the use of one exercise to alleviate this block. The exercise is based on a universal journalistic form commonly called the "reversed pyramid." This form, which can be found in the reportage of virtually every newspaper in the world, closely resembles the essentially linear form of English rhetoric. The exercise also employs the use projected photographic slides. While being only one exercise, though it is not a cure-all, it might be a useful base for ESL students beginning a course in English composition.

### I. The Problem

After problems of vocabulary, grammar and idiom have been accounted for, there remain two possibilities for why a non-native student of English might do poorly in English composition<sup>1</sup>. The first possibility is that the student may have intellectual deficiencies : inability to organize ideas, fallacious reasoning, using clichés in place of original thoughts, etc. This is also a problem many people to whom English is a first language have. The second possibility is that the ESL student may be utilizing the rhetorical patterns of his/her native language when writing English, unaware that the two are perhaps incompatible. Thus, ironically, the ESL student might be incompetent in English composition because s/he has mastered his/her own language all too well.

Robert B. Kaplan (1970) gives the following graphic examples of paragraph development in several cultures<sup>2</sup> :



Kaplan explains the above in detail and through examples of ESL students' compositions shows the ill consequences of applying foreign rhetorical patterns on to English. We need not do so here. Suffice to say that between English linearity, Semitic parallelism, Oriental circuitousness, and the discursiveness of the Romance languages and Russian a great diversity exists. The reader can imagine what the difficulties of

imposing any one form on any other would be.

English is perhaps more procrustean than the other forms because of its inexorable (at least in theory) linearity. According to the rules of English style and Rhetoric, the writer should begin with either a series of examples and tie them together in the conclusion, or with a general statement and follow it through with supporting particular examples to the conclusion, at no time digressing or lingering on any point more than it is necessary to support the general statement and/or conclusion. Since many cultures do allow—and require—the writer to be discursive (a natural human tendency) the linear English form must be particularly difficult for certain non-natives (like the Japanese) to assimilate. And that this rule of inexorable linearity is often successfully broken by native writers is of little comfort. To break rules, one must first have a thorough grounding in them.

The above "Oriental" form, Kaplan says, does not include Japanese, which he does not discuss. As this article is for the journal of a Japanese university and its primary purpose is to help instructors teaching English expository writing to Japanese students, it might be to the greater good to break form and digress to briefly discuss the ramifications of Japanese rhetoric. Condon and Yousef (1975) attempt to define this form. A lecturer in Japan, they write, might follow these patterns :

- I. Abstraction or Generalization
- II. Abstraction or Generalization
- III. Abstraction or Generalization

or

- I. Specific point
- II. Specific point
- III. Specific point

The authors continue :

If the speaker is accepted by the audience as an authority, there is no need for him to give specific proofs. And if not everybody understands what he is talking about, maybe so much the better——it makes him even more of an authority. If he moved from specifics to generalization which relate those points he may be insulting his audience : Their job is to make the connection. . . .<sup>3</sup>

I do not completely agree with the last statement. (The reasons are not important enough to go into here.) However, I believe they have defined a general tendency in Japanese rhetoric which makes it diametrically opposite in regard to expectations placed upon author and audience. The Japanese audience (meaning also, I believe, readers) must "make the connection." Among the first things native users of English learn in school is that the burden of making connections is the writer's. This affects rhetorical form. If English rhetoric can be likened to an arrow pointing downward, Japanese rhetoric might be likened to a fishnet dragged in from the sea——from which the reader or listener takes what s/he wants and throws away the rest. The foregoing would explain many of the difficulties Japanese have in writing English.

The above should demonstrate the importance of the teacher's ——and the student's——attitude toward the student's native language and the target language. If instructor and instructed are unaware of the differences between their respective language's rhetorical patterns, the instructor can, by virtue of his/her position of authority, generate the false impression that the target language is superior to the student's, which is likely to make the student defensive and either rebellious or inhibited. This in turn gives credence to assumptions that a different "logic" (meaning a different truth) exists for every culture or that the target language is more rational than the student's. (Both, of course, are fallacious : truth is not determined by nationality or geography——it's absurd to argue that there is French truth, as opposed to a Belgian truth, as opposed to a Leichtensteinian truth——and a language is only as logical as its individual user.) The instructor must, therefore, assure the student that his/her cultural's world views not being assaulted and s/he is not being told, indirectly, to give it up, but only that s/he must learn a form different from the one s/he has been used to in order to write English.

Along with this it would be good if the ESL student beginning the study of English composition were given a model which resembled English rhetorical form and could at the same time be familiar.

## II. The Reversed Pyramid

The descriptive newspaper article is familiar to all literate cultures. Its style, called the "reversed pyramid" is the universal form of reportage. It is also close to English rhetorical form. A typical newspaper article begins with a general statement (clarifying the headline) which is supported by particular descriptive details. Though usually there is no concluding general statement (as described above) the writer cannot wander from the main point nor be vague. The burden of making "connections" is the journalist's. Its form is essentially linear. This being the case, the reversed pyramid can be a good foundation for learning English composition.

I have devised an exercise for ESL students relatively advanced in conversational English but with little writing experience. I begin by projecting a slide. I then ask the students to call out the things they see. I write the items on the blackboard as they are named. After the students have named all the items they could, I ask which item is the most important and put a Roman numeral one (I) by it. Next, I go down the list on the board and ask the students to grade the items as follows : 1 : very important, 2 : secondary, 3 : least or not important. I mark 1, 2, or 3 by each item. (If there is disagreement, I'll write the different evaluations : "3/2" for example.) Then I draw a reversed pyramid (▽) on the board and tell the students that they must write a paragraph describing the slide and to imagine that paragraph as fitting into the reversed pyramid. I tell them to mention the most important item (I) first and then the very important items (1), then the secondary items (2) and to put the tertiary items (3) last or leave them out. Finally I say that if they want to give the items a status different from the ones given on the board they are free to do so. I give them around fifteen minutes to write a paragraph and then ask for volunteers to read theirs.

## III. Application

When I taught English for a chemical company in Kyushu I gave the above exercise to many of my students, the majority of whom were chemical engineers. Often these men were required to write reports and operation manuals and give technical lectures in English. They would come to me for assistance. The material they brought me was often hastily translated and therefore difficult to make sense of in spots. To make matters worse, I did not know much Japanese and knew virtually nothing about chemical engineering. Try explaining something in a foreign language to someone who doesn't know what you are talking about and you can imagine how difficult it was to revise that material. In a case where an engineer couldn't explain the meaning of a text, it was useful to refer back to the

above exercise. "Imagine a reversed pyramid, "I'd say, "and arrange the information for me as we did when we were describing the slide in class." This saved much time and spared us much frustration.

The above exercise would be especially good, I think, for students engaged in technical education. It's not pedagogical elixir. It might be a vitamin.

#### Notes

1. By "English composition" is meant expository

prose only, not creative writing.

2. Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education, " *Language Learning* 16 (1970) : nos 1 and 2 p.15.
3. John C. Condon, Fathi Yousef, "An Introduction to Intercultural Communication," *Bobbs-Merrill Series in Speech Communication*, Russell R. Windes, editor, Queens College (1975) pps.241-242. (Recieved January 16, 1983)