
English Paragraphs and Japanese *Danraku*

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Introduction

Japanese students study English for many years and put a great deal of effort into acquiring the language. However, in spite of their dedication, most of them have difficulty writing English effectively although they know grammatical rules well. Previous studies of contrastive rhetoric research have claimed that native language patterns of rhetorical organization are negatively transferred to English writing. (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Hinds, 1987, 1990; Kaplan, 1966, 1988). Japanese learners are one of the examples for which the writing conventions of their first language negatively affect writing in English. Hinds (1990) defines inductive writing as having the thesis statement in the final position whereas deductive writing uses in the initial position. He also characterizes Japanese writing organization as quasi-inductive and claims that this technique aims to make readers draw their own conclusions. Based on these contrastive rhetoric studies, English teachers of Japanese students have tried to encourage them to write in a deductive way. The students have also become familiar with the difference of the positions of a thesis statement and have tried to put the main idea in the initial position. However, their products tend to still be out of focus and

not logical. The problem might come from failures in more fundamental things rather than rhetorical differences. When I examined writings by Japanese students, one noticeable thing is that many of their paragraphs are not well organized. For example, many of their paragraphs do not consist of a good combination of one topic sentence and supporting sentences. Some of the paragraphs even contain more than two main ideas. The reason why Japanese students fail to write a good paragraph is that they consider English paragraphs to be the same as Japanese *danraku*. This study examines the paragraph as not the same as Japanese *danraku* through several references about these terms. It also investigates differences between English rhetoric and Japanese *syuujigaku*. Finally this study demonstrates the results of analyzing the numbers of paragraphs and *danraku* students use for an essay written in English and Japanese. It also shows one Japanese student's writing as an example of an English essay where the conventions of Japanese *danraku* are transferred to his English paragraphs.

Literature Review

1. English rhetoric and Japanese *syuujigaku*.

Rhetoric is translated to *syuujigaku* in most of the dictionaries (The New Anchor, 1991; Genius, 1994; Lightouse, 1984; Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary, 1974; Kodansha Japanese-English Dictionary, 1976), however, it is dubious that English and Japanese share in common the concepts of what is rhetoric. According to Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook (1990), which is a reputable reference book on writing for college students, rhetoric is defined as following.

The art of using language effectively. Rhetoric involves the writer's purpose, the consideration of audience, the discovery and exploration of a subject, its arrangement and organization, the style and tone in which it is expressed, and the form in which it is delivered. (p.572)

Thus, rhetoric is a means of written communication to effectively convey writer's message to readers.

On the other hand, *syuuji-gaku* which is supposed to be a correspondent word to rhetoric, is defined as "a methodology which studies how to effectively express an idea in order to impress readers" in *Koojien*, the most reliable and well-known Japanese dictionary. This notion differs widely from the definition of rhetoric. It demonstrates that Japanese writer's interest is in impressing the audience rather than that of clearly giving a message or information. This difference further indicates that the purpose of writing is different between the two languages. Japanese writers aim to impress their readers and they are not concerned how they can clearly convey information as English writers do. Such fundamental differences in purposes of writing affect the way in which a paragraph is organized. For English writers, being logical and united is the most important while for Japanese it is being impressive. The difference of the purpose of each term naturally brings about differences in paragraphs and *danraku*, which are the units of an essay or passages.

2. Paragraph and *Danraku*

When I examined essays written by Japanese students, one noticeable thing is that many of their paragraphs are not well organized. For example, many of their paragraphs do not consist of a good combination of one topic

sentence and supporting sentences. Some of the paragraphs even contain more than two topic sentences without supporting sentences. Other paragraphs seem to have only supporting sentences. The reason why Japanese students fail to write a good paragraph is that they consider English paragraphs to be the same as Japanese *danraku*. It is necessary to throw light on the differences between paragraphs and *danraku*.

What is a good paragraph? A paragraph usually consists of a series of sentences, but a good paragraph requires more than just a series of sentences. "Writing Academic English", a popular textbook for ESL learners, defines a paragraph as follows:

A paragraph is a group of related sentences that develops one main idea, which is the topic of the paragraph. (Oshima & Hogue, 1997, p.16)

Moreover, the same authors emphasize unity as an important element of a good paragraph in a more advanced textbook.

Another important element of a good paragraph is unity. Every good paragraph has unity, which means that only one main idea is discussed. (Oshima & Hogue, 1991, p.30)

Hodges et al. (1990) also illustrate how good paragraphs are organized.

Good paragraphs are unified, coherent, and well developed. In paragraphs 1 and 2, observe how the sentences of each paragraph relate to a single main idea... (Hodges et al., 1990, p.322)

As shown above, one main idea for one paragraph is the principle of English writing.

As for the components, a paragraph is made up of three kinds of sentences: the topic sentence, supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. According to Oshima & Hogue (1991), "the topic sentence is the most general statement of the paragraph". It contains the topic and the idea about the topic that is explained in the rest of the paragraph. Supporting sentences "develop the topic sentence by giving specific details about the topic." The concluding sentence, the last part of the paragraph "tells the reader the paragraph is finished and it completes the development of the subject of the paragraph. Hacker (1999) also defines a topic sentence as "a one-sentence summary that tells readers what to expect as they read on." Thus, the definitions and the rules of a paragraph are emphasized in every textbook and reference book.

On the other hand, the definition and functions of *danraku* are vague and its requirement is not clearly stated in most of composition textbooks. According to *Kojien*, *danraku* is defined as "a major division in a long passage." *Sanseido's Daijirin's* definition is "a part of a long passage and a division group of the same content." In other dictionaries, more clear definitions for *danraku* are not found, either. Moreover, no book suggests rules or requirements for *danraku*. It is found that the concepts of a topic sentence and supporting sentences do not exist in Japanese writing. Although *Daijirin* describes *danraku* as a group of the same content, it means that any sentence can be included in a paragraph as far as it is related to the topic. Hence, Japanese writers do not have to follow specific rules and can flexibly make *danraku* while English writers are supposed to keep principles for a paragraph.

Nagano (1986) interestingly claims that “there are two types of *danraku*; *keishiki danraku* and *imi danraku*., the former is a section which covers from an indent to an indent. The latter is a group of sentences which is united or divided depending on the reader’s perspective.” The concept of *keishiki danraku* which allows plural main ideas in a paragraph may violate the rule for English paragraphs that one paragraph contains only one main idea. A more surprising remark on *danraku* is found in Usami’s comment (1998) for Japanese composition instructions. “*Danraku* is not an indispensable element for writing.” Thus, *danraku* is made light by most Japanese writers in contrast to the paragraph which is taken seriously by English writers. This is supported by Kinoshita (1981)’s observation that “most Japanese writers may end a paragraph because they think they have written a lot in a paragraph.” Judging from the comments above, the reason why each sentence exists in the specific paragraph is vague and most Japanese writers conclude *danraku* arbitrarily. In *danraku*, a writer can put more than two main ideas in one *danraku* because the strict organization of a topic sentence and a supporting sentence is not required.

It is clear that paragraph and *danraku* do not share common functions, although in all the English-Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries paragraph and *danraku* respectively appear as equivalents. The critical differences between the paragraph and *danraku* make Japanese students produce unclear and out-of focus paragraphs when they write English. They organize a paragraph as they do for a *danraku*, without a logical combination of a topic sentence and supporting sentences. They also put more than two main ideas in one paragraph because such a thing can be allowed in *danraku*. Japanese writers do not pay attention to stating a topic sentence followed by appropriate supporting sentences. Therefore Japanese students should

realize a *danraku* and a paragraph are not identical and they should not write English in the style of *danraku*.

Essay Analysis

I examined English and Japanese essays on the same topic written by Japanese college students to compare the ways of organizing a paragraph and *danraku*. I compared the number of paragraphs to the number of *danraku* used. I will also show one student's essay as an example of negative transfer of *danraku* to English paragraphs.

1. Methodology

Subjects

Subjects for the study were 23 freshmen students who were enrolled in a required English listening course at a college in Tokyo. Their English proficiency is comparatively high because they are required to write an English essay for the entrance examination. Most of the students were motivated to improve their English, but they had not had a chance to be instructed in how to write an essay in English.

Writing Task

Each student wrote one essay in English and another in Japanese. In order to avoid translation from one language to another, participants were not informed in the beginning that they would be writing on the same topic in both languages. The students were asked to write their opinion on whether Japan should make English its second official language in English, within approximately 200 words. One month after they wrote on the topic in

English, they wrote on the same topic in Japanese, within approximately 600 letters. They were told they do not have to write completely the same thing as they wrote previously in English to avoid translation again. For this study, how they organize their writing is more important than the actual content. Therefore, it is acceptable even if a student expresses a different point of view from one language to another, although it is desirable that the student's opinions be consistent.

2. Results

TABLE1 The Numbers of Danraku and Paragraphs

<u>Japanese</u>	23	<u>English</u>	23
one <i>danraku</i>	9	one paragraph	9
		more than two paragraphs	0
more than two <i>danraku</i>	14	one paragraph	2
		more than two paragraphs	12

Among the 23 students, 11 students wrote a Japanese essay of about 600 letters in only one *danraku* from beginning to end. The English essays written by these 11 students are written in only one paragraph as well although they contain more than two main ideas. This indicates that these students transfer their conventions of *danraku* to English paragraphs. Twelve students divide their essays into more than two paragraphs, however, the way to divide is arbitrary and several paragraphs are without a topic sentence or with more than two main ideas. Next I will show an example of a paragraph where a topic sentence does not appear in the beginning of a paragraph and plural main ideas are expressed.

①In my opinion, I think that English as the second official language is easier than the other languages because of its easiness of grammar. ②For example, now I learn Polish which is difficult to master. ③If you learn other languages, you will find how easy to study English.

④Next, when you go shopping on the street, you meet a foreigner and he (or she) asks you teach him(or her) the way to the post office in English, can you answer it early and correctly? ⑤Maybe you don't have confidence. ⑥So, if you can speak English, you communicate with foreigners, and you can make friends all over the world. ⑦I think this is so-called "globalization." ⑧From them, you can learn foreign cultures. ⑨If you cannot speak English, maybe you stay in Japan from birth to death. ⑩Some of those who can't speak English say, "English is too difficult for me to study!" ⑪But I want to ask you why baby can speak. ⑫English languages is not difficult. ⑬Until you overcome the "Language complex", never you speak English. ⑭You don't have to speak English perfectly. ⑮Try to speak English doing body action and have confidence and you can make communication with them. ⑯To learn English is very interesting.

⑰So, I agree with the opinion of making English the second official language in Japan. (This is unedited, with no teacher correction.)

This essay is written in three paragraphs and there are four things which make it unclear and out of focus. First, he writes in an inductive way and states his main opinion in the last sentence of the essay(⑰). Therefore, readers cannot make sure what this essay is about until they get to the last sentence. Next, it is not easy for readers to clearly comprehend the writer's main point in the second paragraph. In the first paragraph, he states that English is not difficult compared to other languages. He starts this paragraph with a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences. Readers

do not have difficulty understanding his opinion in this paragraph. In the second paragraph, the first sentence is not a topic sentence but a supporting sentence. Readers usually expect a topic sentence which states something related to English for a second official language or ease of using English. However, he suddenly starts with an example of “going shopping and meet a foreigner”. Readers are just confused and do not understand what he wants to say in this paragraph. Later, in sentence ⑥, his possible main point in this paragraph appears. If this sentence 6 appears as a topic sentence in the beginning of the paragraph, readers will easily follow the writer’s point although this sentence is a little vague as a topic sentence. Another thing which makes this paragraph unclear is that the supporting sentences for the first paragraph are included in the second paragraph. Sentence ⑩, ⑪ & ⑫ should not be in this paragraph. These are supporting sentences for the first paragraph. In addition, with sentence ⑬, he presents a new main idea which is, ‘Until you overcome the ‘Language complex’. This appearance of two main ideas in one paragraph violates the essential principle of the paragraph. It is also detrimental for clearly conveying the writer’s key idea to readers.

Thus this essay is not clear because the writer fails to keep fundamental rules of organizing a paragraph in English. The four problems above are not considered problematic in Japanese *danraku*. Writers can keep writing as ideas come to mind because *danraku* does not require a logical organization with a topic sentence and supporting sentences.

Conclusion

English paragraphs and Japanese *danraku* are not identical although Japanese learners tend to write an English essay from the point of view of

Japanese *danraku*. This is caused from the common understanding that *danraku* is an equivalent word for paragraph. Moreover the objectives for writing are different between English and Japanese. English writers mainly write in order to clearly convey information or an opinion and rhetoric is the art of effective written communication. Japanese writers mainly write in order to impress readers and rhetoric is the art for creating effective impression. Japanese students should realize English paragraphs are clearly organized for expressing one idea with an effective combination of a topic sentence and supporting sentences. The crucial differences between paragraph and *danraku* should be emphasized by the instructors to improve the writing of Japanese students.

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