

Meaning of Interrogative Sentences in L2 English Compositions

HAYASAKA Keiko

INTRODUCTION

Among the studies of contrastive rhetoric and L2 writing, Kaplan represented the notion that the rhetorical structure of language differs (Kaplan : 1966). Unique logic patterns were found in English composition written by Japanese college students (Hayasaka, Iwasaki : 1984, 1985). One of the most remarkable structural uniquenesses found in Japanese L2 students' writing is that Japanese students tend to put their opinions and the main idea at the end of the composition. It seems that Japanese L2 students apply the norm of *ki sho ten ketsu* to their English composition.

According to the Kaplan's graphic form, Orientals' development of the paragraph is "turning in a widening gyre." The subject is never looked at directly but is looked from a variety of tangential views. Their discussion is indirect and digressive. For those L2 students, however, indirect and digressive general statements are necessary to start their compositions. Under the rhetoric of their native language, vagueness has often been appreciated. That is why they are likely to start their compositions with hesitation or neutral statement to avoid disagreement.

Unique logic patterns of L2 writing appear not only in the paragraph structures but also appear in the type of sentences. The usage of interrogative sentences by L2 students are different from

that of L1 students. All the interrogative sentences appeared in the compositions written by Japanese college students were carefully examined and analyzed to find some unique patterns, if there were any. If the usage of interrogative sentences by L2 students are unique and also the uniqueness is systematic, it can be said that there are some factors which should be attributed to the writers' background: cultural background, interference of the writers' native language and their rhetoric.

PROCEDURE AND RESULTS

Among the compositions written by the Japanese college students for the study of the unique logic patterns of L2 writing, the following factors were extracted: 1) The type of questions, 2) where the questions are located, 3) where the answers could be found if there were any, and 4) where those questions were moved by American students after the rearrangement.¹⁾ The results were examined to discuss the following assumptions:

- A) Japanese L2 students' use of interrogative sentences are systematic. The question is whether their systematic use of the interrogative sentences reflects the L1 writer's intent of asking the question to the reader. If not, there must be some factors which make the L2 students' interrogative sentences unique. Rearrangement by L1 students may be of help to find the factors.
- B) If the factors found above imply some rhetorical features, the result of the present study could shed some lights on the making of better organized structures in L2 English compositions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the numerical data of the interrogative sentences and the type of the interrogative sentences.

Table 1

No. of Comp	No. of I. S.*	Types of I. S. ²⁾		
		Wh-	Yes/No	Alternative
72	102	82	17	3

* Interrogative Sentence

Among the 102 questions, 82 sentences (80.4%) are Wh-questions. Other two types of interrogative sentences are much less frequently used by the Japanese L2 students.

1) Wh-Questions

Two most frequently used interrogative words are what and why. These two words are found in 74% of the interrogative sentences representing all of the questions.

(1) PARENT-CHILD RELATIONS³⁾

2nd Paragraph

Yet there appears to be something that sets contemporary father-child problems distinctively apart from their predecessors. What precisely is that element? At this point, it appears we are still faced with a blank wall. And this is the source of the anguish and mental suffering of many of today's Japanese families. It is difficult to say

which method should be applied in “bringing up” the child—the method of strict “Spartan discipline” or “Laissez-faire.” Style of “upbringing” should be allowed to differ according to the tastes of each family, and allowances should be made for differences depending on the varying personality of parent-child combinations.

The writer of this composition supposes there is “something” that parts contemporary father-child problems from their predecessors. “What precisely is that element?” is a good question to tell what that “something” is. The sentences following the Wh-question, however, don’t answer the question directly but this L2 writer offers some alternatives and expresses how difficult it is to decide. Wh-questions are sometimes followed by “It’s difficult to answer” in Japanese L2 writing.

(2) SHAFUN

1st & 2nd Paragraphs

Our city, Sapporo is a northern city. The winter is coming and it began to snow again. We love snow very much. But the snow which lies on the edge of walkways begins to lose its beautiful whiteness.
Why is that?

Recently “Shafun” is becoming one of the most serious public pollution in Hokkaido

This writer starts the composition with the general description of the city and expresses how beautiful it is. But the city is losing its beauty. “Why is that?”, which comes at the end of the first paragraph is an effective sentence to detect the devil in the following paragraphs. The introduction of the devil, however, is rather vague. Instead of answering her own question, she gives a general description of “Shafun”, one of the most serious pollution problems. A similar vague description is also found in other types of questions.

2) **YES-NO Question/Alternative Question**

(3) **THE HANDICAPPED AND THE NO HANDICAPPED**

Last Paragraph

Is there the handicapped around you? Please have interest in such people a little more. The society in which the handicapped and the no handicapped can understand each other must be wonderful.

(4) **LET'S HAVE A CHALLENGE SPIRIT**

2nd Paragraph

First, we should do what we want to do. Life is once and for all.
Do you want to have a good time or to spend time drearily?

In (3), the sentence following the question shows that the writer of the composition expects no answer from the readers. She already knows the answer or she expects the answer would be "Yes, there is one" (4) looks like an alternative question but the writer already knows which one the readers are more likely to choose.

Three different types of interrogative sentences have their own expectations for reply—Wh-questions expect a reply from an open range of replies. Yes-No questions expect affirmation or negation. And alternative questions expect as the reply one of two or more options presented in the question.(Quirk, et al. 1985) It seems, however, that Japanese L2 writings have some digressions. The writers use interrogative sentences but the answers are not always shown either directly or indirectly, or not even implied. Then, what do the writers intend to express by using interrogative sentences?

3) **RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**

Here is another type of question, the rhetorical questions. "The rhetorical question is interrogative in structure but has the force of a strong assertion. It generally does not expect answer." (Quirk, et al.

1985) Although this type of question is introduced as one of the minor types of questions, it is not true as far as the Japanese L2 writings for the present study are concerned.

Fifty-five sentences out of 102 questions found in the compositions are put into this type of question. Since this type of question occupies the majority of the interrogative sentences, it is assumed that Japanese L2 students have their own unique way of the use of rhetorical questions. The following two questions will give us a key to find the meaning of the rhetorical questions by Japanese L2 students in their English compositions: In what part of the paragraph or the composition do those rhetorical sentences appear in the original compositions? Where are those sentences moved after the rearrangement?.

(5) JAPANESE PEOPLE'S FOREIGN TRAVEL

a. 4th Paragraph

This happens not only in places close to Japan, but also in places as far as London. Then, most of the visitors will be found in places like this, speaking to people from Japan and eating Japanese food. Why don't they try to stay in strange surroundings?

b. (American's rearrangement)

... Why don't they try to stay in strange surroundings?
Because they feel homesick from their long stay in foreign country.

The original writing has a Wh-question at the end of the paragraph meaning "accusation" rather than question. The writer believes that Japanese tourists should "do as Romans do in Rome," and accuses those who do not. As a result, a reply to the Wh-question is not necessary from the writer's point of view. On the contrary, for an L1 student it is more logical that Wh-question is

followed by “because” sentence. In the original composition, “Because they feel homesick from their long stay in foreign country.” is a supporting sentence of “Japanese people who have been sent by their companies to work abroad for a year or so will sometimes want to speak to people from Japan in Japanese and to eat Japanese food.”

(6) STRICT SEGREGATION

a. Last Paragraph

... They must speak English and Africans which white people of Holland descent are use. Why must they segregated by different color of skin? I am firmly oppose to segregation.

b. (American's rearrangement)

Why must they segregated by different color of skin?

.
.

I am firmly oppose to segregation.

(6) a. does not intend to explain why they must be segregated because of their skin color. What the writer expresses is the segregation and her strong opposition to it. After the rearrangement, the Wh-question was moved to the very first sentence of the composition. Again, the L1 student tries to find the answers to the Wh-question in the rest of the composition. For this student, Wh-question is not a mere rhetorical question but a good means to start the discussion.

(7) THE PROBLEM

a. Last Paragraph

There is a few countries which practice the birth control. It may be effectual in these countries, but it has no effect all over the world. So, thinking and practicing about the population are a task to be completed for our posterity. The area of this earth has the

limit. If we don't have enough food and enough space to cultivate, what should we do?

b. (American's Rearrangement)

1st Paragraph

We have a lot of things to do for the poorer countries what we call the underdeveloped countries. If we don't have enough food and enough space to cultivate, what should we do?

The writer of (7) devotes more than 90% of the space to describe how rapidly world population is increasing. The real problem is not the increase of the population. It is a fact. The problem is how to deal with it with limited food and space. There is no answer or a key to the answer. The last two sentences indicate that it's an open question. The readers, not the writer, are responsible for searching the answer to this question. This type of question is also unique to the Japanese L2 writing. Once again, the L1 American student develops the paragraphs by moving this Wh-question to the earlier part of the composition followed by supporting sentences.

Most of the interrogative sentences written by Japanese L2 students are rhetorical questions. The writers assert their opinions in the form of questions. As a matter of fact, they neither try to answer the questions they made, nor do they expect replies from the readers. On the other hand, L1 students apply questions to the development of the paragraph. L2 students' paragraph development is more general than specific so that it is the reader's responsibility to understand what the writer intends to say (Hinds: 1987).

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that Japanese L2 students use interrogative

sentences systematically in different ways from L1 students in English compositions. Among the three types of questions (Wh-question, Yes-No question, and Alternative question), Wh-questions are most preferably used by the Japanese students. The way they use Wh-questions is unique: the structure of the sentences is interrogative but answers are not given or even implied. Japanese students use this type of rhetorical questions very often to assert their opinions. Since this type of question has little to do with the paragraph development, rhetorical questions appear at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle of the paragraph and at the end of the paragraph of the composition. On the other hand, L1 students tend to apply questions to develop the paragraphs. Rearrangement shows that questions are normally answered or tried to be answered.

Another fact that many interrogative sentences are left unanswered can be attributed to the fact that Japanese is a reader-responsible language. The question is open, so the reader tries to find the answer to the question. In L1 writing, a writer tries to persuade the reader more.

The meaning of interrogative sentences by Japanese L2 students was proved to be unique and it is closely related to their own unique paragraph development style. It means that the uniqueness is cultural bound, and has some factors in common with the L2 writers' logic patterns. To know the unique pattern of interrogative sentences in English composition will help L2 Japanese students to write stronger paragraphs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Harder, D. B & Harder, H. K. 1982. "Cultural Interface and Teaching English Composition in Japan". *The English Teachers' Magazine*. Taishuukan. pp.19-23.
- Hayasaka, K. & Iwasaki, M. 1984. "Unique Logic Patterns Found in

- English Compositions Written by Japanese Students—Reconsideration of 'Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education' by Robert Kaplan". *Speech Education*. Vol. XI.
- , 1985. "Unique Logic Patterns Found in English Compositions Written by Japanese Students II". *Speech Education*. Vol. XII.
- Hinds, John. 1982. "Linguistics and Written Discourse in English and Japanese: A Contrastive Study (1978-1982)". *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*.
- , 1987. "Reader versus Writer Responsibility: A New Typology." *Writing Across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. eds. Connor, U. & Kaplan, R.
- Hudson, Richard. 1975. "The Meaning of Questions". *Language*. Vol. 51. No. 1. pp. 1-31.
- Imai, K. & Nakajima, H. 1978. "Bun(Sentences) II", *Gendai no Eibunpo*. Vol. 5. Kenkyusha.
- Kaplan, R. B. 1966. "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education". *Language Learning*. Vol. XVI. No. 3.
- , 1987. "Cultural Thought Patterns Revisited". *Writing Across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. eds. Connor, U. & Kaplan, R.
- Kuno, S. & Robinson, J. F. 1972. "Multiple Wh Questions". *Linguistic Inquiry*. 3. pp. 463-486.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S. & Svartvik, J. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London.

NOTES

- 1) All the compositions were typed sentence by sentence and were cut into strips of one sentence each. Then L1 students were asked to rearrange the composition.
- 2) Quirk, et al., (1985). pp. 806-826.
- 3) Students' compositions are quoted with titles capital lettered. Grammatical or typographical errors were not corrected.