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journal or publication title	Language and Culture : The Journal of the Institute for Language and Culture
volume	6
number	[2]
page range	33-47
year	2002
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.14990/00000373">http://doi.org/10.14990/00000373</a>

# L1 Influences on Japanese Students' L2 Writing: *Kansōbun* (感想文)

Paul ROSS

## Introduction

This paper examines the rhetorical features found in a genre of writing commonly taught in the Japanese school system, the *kansōbun* (感想文). It begins with a brief explanation of the rationale for examining this particular genre and then presents the defining rhetorical features of the *kansōbun*. The argument that these features are being transferred from the L1 to the L2 is then made by making reference to samples of work written in English by university-level EFL students in Japan. The paper concludes with a discussion of several unresolved issues raised in this study and in contrastive rhetoric research in general.

## 1. Background: English-Japanese contrastive rhetoric research

Studies on English-Japanese contrastive rhetoric for close to thirty years now have centered primarily on the work of Hinds (see especially 1983, 1987, and 1990). Hinds (1983) is best known for his claim that Japanese expository writing is defined by sudden shifts in topic, a feature that derives from classical Chinese rhetoric and which is known in Japanese as the *ki-shō-ten-ketsu* (起承転結) pattern. Another well-known claim appears in Hinds' (1987) later work, in which he calls Japanese writing "reader responsible," meaning that the connections between the themes, ideas, or arguments in a text are often not explicitly stated, but left up to the reader to infer instead.<sup>1)</sup>

Debate — much of it severely critical — on the merits of the work of Hinds and other contrastive rhetoric researchers continues to appear regularly in the literature.<sup>2)</sup> One criticism is that contrastive rhetoric research is fundamentally flawed because it is typically based on a very limited number of text types (often only one) which are claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be representative of the entire written repertoire of the language being investigated. Hinds' claim about the influence of the *ki-shō-ten-ketsu* pattern on Japanese writing, for example, is based on an analysis of the *Tensei Jingo* (天声人語) columns of the Asahi newspaper, which is, to say the least, a rather specific (and not terribly widespread) genre of writing.

In this paper, I address such criticism by making a start on improving our understanding of the large variety of text types found in Japanese written discourse. My main purpose is to focus on those L1 genres that our EFL students have been exposed to, and I investigate an area that has been curiously absent from contrastive rhetoric studies so far: composition as it is taught in the Japanese school system.<sup>3)</sup> Specifically, I examine the *kansōbun*, a common genre of writing that is part of Japanese composition classrooms from elementary school onward. First, an explanation of the reasons for choosing this particular genre.

## 2. Why *kansōbun*?

A major guidebook for teachers of writing at the elementary and junior high school levels in Japan discusses the following 12 genres:

1. 日記文 (Diaries)
2. 手紙文 (Letters)
3. 生活文 (Essays on daily life)
4. 意見文 (Opinions)
5. 感想文 (Impressions)
6. 記録文 (Keeping records)
7. 報告文 (Announcements)
8. 説明文 (Expository writing)
9. 通知 (Notices)
10. PR文 (Public Relations Announcements)
11. 報道文 (News Reports)
12. 対談・インタビュー (Conversations/Interviews)

(from *Sakubun Gijutsu Jiten* 作文技術指導辞典 1997)

Improving our understanding of the potential influences on our students' L2 writing involves familiarizing ourselves with all of these genres. *Kansōbun*, as one of the genres that centers on the expression of opinions, ideas, and feelings offers a good place to start. Not only is it a genre that is stressed early and often in the Japanese school system, but it is similar to the kind of writing that students are often asked to do in the ESL/EFL classroom, where expressing opinions, ideas, and feelings remains at the core of many writing classrooms.<sup>4)</sup>

## 3. Defining features of *kansōbun*

The word *kansōbun* is defined simply in the fourth edition of Kenkyusha's *New*

*Japanese-English Dictionary* as “a (written) description of one’s impressions” (726). We’ll need a finer-grained definition, and Kudoh (1996), in a self-help book for junior and senior high school students who want to improve their writing skills, explains that a *kansōbun* includes these four basic components:

1. Summary/outline of the story
2. Reasons for choosing the (book);<sup>5)</sup> explanation of your connection with/interest in it
3. Description of what moved you about the work; explanation of any questions it raised in your mind
4. Description of anything you felt or thought during/after (reading) the work

(Translated and adapted from Kudoh, 1996: 132)

After presenting this brief outline of the defining features of a *kansōbun*, Kudoh comments on a sample *kansōbun*, focusing his attention especially on points 3 and 4 above. The comments make it clear that these features are especially valued and are essential to the writing of a good *kansōbun*. These essential features can be summarized as follows:

- A. Describe what moved you about the work
- B. Empathize
- C. Reflect on what the work has taught you
- D. Resolve to take action
- E. Show how the work has enriched your life

(Translated and adapted from Kudoh 1996, Chapter 5)

#### **4. On the presence of *kansōbun* features in students’ L2 writing**

I first noticed that Japanese EFL learners may be transferring some of these features (see A-E above) in their L2 written work after reading an assignment given to third-year university students in a course called 20<sup>th</sup> Century American History and Culture. As the final activity in a unit on immigration, students were asked to summarize and write their reactions to a video called “The Long, Long Journey,” a docu-drama that depicts the experiences of Yanick, a Polish boy who immigrated to New York with his family around the turn of the century. The assignment was intended to reinforce the major theme in the unit: life in the United States was a harsh one for most immigrants, filled with problems such as poverty, prejudice, and societal indifference or hostility. In short, the purpose of the assignment was, to borrow Kudoh’s terms, to have students ‘reflect on what the work taught them’ (see Point C above). A number of students did just that, as the following excerpts from their writing show:<sup>6)</sup>

1. I thought U.S. is a cheerful country as country of multi-racism but I noticed the fact there were many dark history behind them.
2. I think it was not good that Americans insisted people from another countries should be Americans. They do have their own cultures and their styles to life. And Americans just can't break these things.
3. I thought that the life in the U.S. was very hard because of language.
4. I knew there were trouble after they imigrated, and they were demanded understanding of the native language.
5. I was surprised that Americans (especially his classmates in this story) didn't seem to welcome him.
6. I understand that it's so hard for immigrants to lived in America.

Overall, however, the students' work was marked by the tendency to emphasize the other four categories mentioned by Kudoh, and the features that especially stood out in their writing were their explanations of what moved them, demonstrations of empathy, the making of resolutions, and showing how the work had enriched their lives.

At this point, I say only that these features 'stood out'; my observations are not based on frequency counts of the features mentioned, but on my initial impressions and observations that the students were producing remarkably similar pieces of writing that exhibited the features just mentioned. A closer look at several other samples of their reactions to the video may help clarify:

1. I thought that sad. Because They can't speak English. So They are very hard to live in America. hanting job. speak English. school life. . . very very hard to everything. Immigrant is very hard to People. And they are great!! They work only dirty. Poor area dangerous condition. It's too hard. I think it's a society problem.
2. I think that this story is very sad story. I think Yanick have a hard time more than his family. He is wonderful because he made an effort for protecting his family.

3. I knew immigrants were bullied, so I was shocked. I think that young children feel anxious to go to other countries, while Yanick was brave and studied hard, so I admired him. In Japan, there are a lot of bullying, and transfers were often bullied today. I think we must make friends with all people. Of course, other countries.
4. Yanick was a strong boy, I think. Maybe he was lonely because he was bullied by his fellows. His way of speaking English was cute! Like Yanick, Japanese are often confused by the pronunciation of "th". He became a rich person now. I think Yanick is not a special person. There should be many immigrants like Yanick in America. I didn't know immigrants became rich. I want to know more information about immigrant in America.
5. After I watched this movie, I was very sad. Because even school kids had to have a hard time. I think it is very difficult to study second language and be a bilingual even they've already have their mother tongue. I think he is a very strong spirit. Because even though other students made fun of him, he still keep studying English with his teacher and he tried to speak English at home with his family. When he decided to work instead of his dad, I think he still wanted to go to school. But he is so nice and kind that he chose working. Because of his all effort, he could be a real American at last.
6. My major opinion, it was great, because Yanick was strong. There were many difficulties, but he never gave up to get better life.
7. I admired he worked hard to study English and help his family. Now, in America, the large number of immigrant try hard to richer. Perhaps there are racial and language problems but they will get over the wall. Because I think they want to get success for their life.
8. At first, my image of the immigrants was not so bad like the video. I'd thought they could get a good job easily. Yanick's family, I think, had to try their best as him. And American culture had to receive them more better condition at first. We must think about people more and more.

## 5. Discussion: On proving the presence of L1 rhetorical features in L2 writing

The question of whether or not these features are being transferred from the L1 genre of the *kansōbun* is not easy to answer. Researchers (e.g. Berman 1994; Matsuda 1997; Kubota 1997) have remarked on how hard it is to trace the influences on students' L2 writing. For one thing, features that strike us as non-target like may simply be a result of the student being a novice writer. Mohan and Lo (1985), for example, argue that deviations from L2 rhetorical norms are analogous to the developmental errors all language learners produce when acquiring a second language and are not the influence of previous exposure to L1 genres of writing.<sup>7)</sup> Other researchers stress that we can never pinpoint the influences on our students' writing because we can never be sure what genres they have been exposed to in the first place. The mere existence of a genre in a given language or mention of that genre in a composition guidebook doesn't mean our students are familiar with it. Indeed, some researchers have claimed that composition is rarely, if ever, taught in many countries around the world. In the case we are most concerned with, Japan, it has been claimed that composition is not taught past the sixth grade (Hinds 1987).

Another difficulty in firmly establishing the influence of L1 genres on L2 writing is that even across languages similar genres will inevitably share some features, differing only in the degree to which those features are more or less prominent.<sup>8)</sup> This is precisely the difficulty presented by the work of my own students cited above. As already mentioned, many students' work did reflect on what the video 'taught' them (a feature that I had expected and one that is also a valued feature of a *kansōbun*), but this feature seems to be backgrounded in favor of other features (i.e. features that I wasn't expecting but which are valued features of a *kansōbun*).

All of this suggests that establishing airtight proof of the L1 influences on L2 writing may just not be possible.<sup>9)</sup> This limitation is important to keep in mind, and should help us keep contrastive rhetoric studies in the proper perspective so we don't expect too much from them, especially when it comes to considering their pedagogical implications. Even given its limitations, however, contrastive rhetoric can be of real use in the L2 writing classroom. The next section addresses this issue in more detail.

## 6. Implications for the classroom

Most researchers (e.g. Connor, 1999; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan, 1966 and 1988, and Leki, 1991) have stressed the connection between contrastive rhetoric and ESL/EFL pedagogy. Simply put, the main purpose of contrastive rhetoric research is to

offer a tool to help learners improve their L2 writing. However, producing texts that are close to L2 norms is anything but a simple matter for language learners. The first step is to identify the defining features of L2 texts and examine how those features differ from the features of similar texts in the L1. Unfortunately, as Kaplan (1988) and others have pointed out, awareness of differences in L1 and L2 rhetorical patterns does not lead to immediate or obvious gains in writing competence.<sup>10</sup> Producing more target-like texts is an enormously difficult task that requires that students have ample opportunity to practice producing the texts themselves.

The question that writing teachers must ask themselves is whether it is appropriate or necessary to devote the large amounts of time needed to reach a high level of productive competence. The answer depends, of course, on student needs. Students who are expected, or will be expected, to produce texts (e.g. those planning to enroll in universities abroad) will benefit from such practice. However, students who have no need to produce texts in the L2 (and this includes the vast majority of students in EFL classrooms in Japan) will benefit from a more descriptive approach in which raising awareness of the similarities and differences in L1 and L2 texts types is the main classroom focus. At the very least, this can provide them with the tools needed for a more mature and critically informed understanding of both the content and structure of L1 and L2 texts.

In addition, contrastive rhetoric research can help promote the fairer evaluation of students' written work. Typically, the expectations that teachers have about what constitutes 'acceptable' writing determine how students' writing will be evaluated, and students are penalized for not living up to those expectations. Teachers who are more aware of the writing conventions in their students' L1, however, are less likely to judge those students unfairly or dismiss their work as sub-standard or unsatisfactory. Until teachers have a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, where the L2 texts of our students may be coming from, the likelihood that those texts are criticized or negatively evaluated remains high. Matsuda (1997) makes a similar point by saying that it is not only students who are responsible for becoming enculturated into the L2 discourse community, but that teachers gain a new perspective that allows them to reevaluate and transform perceptions about their students' writing by learning about a student's L1.

## 7. Final Comments

As an initial attempt at uncovering the L1 features that may be influencing our Japanese students' L2 writing, this paper has been able to deal only briefly with some of the major issues that all work in contrastive rhetoric needs to address (see Section



4). To conclude, I would like to bring up one of these issues that was mentioned in passing above.

As Grabe and Kaplan (1996) and especially Kubota (1997) emphasize, a great deal of research in the contrastive rhetoric tradition sets up excessively strict dichotomies between different writing traditions. Looking to find differences, researchers often do, which means that important points of similarity are downplayed or missed entirely. To guard against that possibility, we must not only broaden our understanding of the various genres that our students consume and produce in their L1, but we must also make sure that the knowledge of each genre is as ‘deep’ as possible. One of the major contributions that contrastive rhetoric research has to make to ESL/EFL pedagogy lies in its underlying belief that the more teachers know about the learners’ language system, the better they can go about the job of teaching.<sup>11)</sup> This paper has been an attempt to achieve a more thorough understanding of one genre that is part of that system, the *kansōbun*. In the final section, I close with a revised, and I hope refined, version of the features of that genre.

### 7.1 Refining our understanding of *kansōbun*

In the spirit of ‘deepening’ our understanding of the various text types our students have been exposed to, the paper closes with a revised and expanded version of the defining features of the *kansōbun*. This version is far from final, but I hope it at least begins to flesh out the explanation given earlier. First, a few words of explanation.

The key words in bold are adapted and translated from Kudoh (1996); sub-categories A, B (and C) are from my own observations of my students’ written work in English and other *kansōbun* written in Japanese; the additional three categories (vi/vii/viii) are from observations of the L2 written work of my own students as well as from *kansōbun* written in Japanese and found on Internet websites and the book *Asa no dokusho wa kiseki wo yonda* (see References). See the Appendix for short examples from the L2 written work of my own university-level students illustrating each of the categories:

- i. Described what **moved** you about
  - a. the story
  - b. a character
  - c. a particular scene
  
- ii. **Empathize** with
  - a. the ‘writer’
  - b. one or more characters

- iii. **Reflect** on your
  - a. ignorance
  - b. mistaken knowledge
  
- iv. **Resolve** to
  - a. apply lessons learned to your own life
  - b. improve your knowledge
  
- v. Show how the work has **enriched**
  - a. your knowledge ('What I learned')
  - b. your character
  
- vi. Mention a **hope** or **desire** that the work has given you for
  - a. yourself
  - b. the world
  
- vii. **Give thanks** for having encountered
  - a. the work
  - b. a character in it
  
- viii. Express your comments in **emotionally involved language**

### Notes

- 1) Another claim, that Japanese expository writing follows a "quasi-inductive" organizational pattern (Hinds 1990), is less widely discussed.
- 2) For overviews of contrastive rhetoric studies in general, see Connor (1996; 1999), Grabe and Kaplan (1996, pp. 180-201), Hinkel (1994), Leki (1991), and Matsuda (1997). For critical comments on Hinds' work and other research, see especially Kubota (1997).
- 3) Although Leki (1991) stresses that students learn how to write at school, contrastive rhetoric research has been slow to examine how writing is taught in cultures outside the Anglo-American tradition.
- 4) It should also be noted that the genre is found not only in composition classes. *Kansōbun* competitions are regularly sponsored by newspapers and local governments, and there a number of websites that use the genre to discuss recent movies and books (for examples, see References).
- 5) Although most commonly written about books, *kansōbun* can be about a large variety of experiences (e.g. movies watched, places visited, etc.).
- 6) All excerpts from students' writing in this paper are presented without correction. Also, each example is from a different student.
- 7) This argument would seem to make more sense on the morpho-syntactic level, but the fact that so many of the texts I examined (well over 200 movie summaries written by students and perhaps half

as many *kansōbun* written in Japanese (especially in *Asa no dokusho wa kiseki wo yonda*) share a large number of similar features or rhetorical moves is harder to dismiss as ‘developmental’ errors by ‘novice’ writers.

- 8) For an interesting consideration of how ‘good’ writing is seen to share similar features in English and Japanese, see Matsumoto (1995); see also Kubota (1998).
- 9) Recall that this is a lesson about SLA in general that studies in error analysis taught us long ago.
- 10) The same is of course said about language acquisition in general. As language teachers are well aware, knowledge about an aspect of the language system does not necessarily translate into improved performance.
- 11) This may partially explain why more work in English-Japanese contrastive rhetoric has not been carried out to date: Mainstream communicative language teaching has traditionally played down the need for knowledge about the learners’ L1, largely because of its belief that too much attention has been paid to the formal properties of language systems instead of their communicative properties. Recent calls for more attention to a focus on form, however, may mean that this unfortunate bias is finally starting to lose its grip on teaching methodology and research.

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### Appendix: Revised Version of the Essential Characteristics of the *kansōbun*.

Examples taken from the L2 writing of students. The title of the movie from which the excerpts are taken is included in parentheses.

- i. Described what **moved** you about
  - a. the story
  - b. a character
  - c. a particular scene

#### Examples:

Omar's father said to him should study much more and learn what is the problem. This scene is strongly impressed me. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I was impressed the scene the hero tried to obstruct the American army which was about to blast the bridge; this is British prisoners' work, big and wonderful. (*Bridge Over the River Kwai*)

Finally, after Lime's true funeral, she ignored and passed before Martins' eyes, it was impressive very much. (*The Third Man*)

I was drawn into the story because of Ness's character while I was watching the movie. (*The Untouchables*)

It was a very impressive scene that Jim who like airplanes very much embraced Japanese fighter tightly, after that he saluted Japanese soldiers. I couldn't forget that scene. (*Empire of the Sun*)

I was moved when he said he couldn't remember his Mammy and Daddy. (*Empire of the Sun*)

I can't forget her face when she saw that woman. (*Brief Encounter*)

ii. **Empathize with**

- a. The 'writer'
- b. One or more characters

Examples:

I feel a pity for Holly, and I don't forgive Harry! (*The Third Man*)

I watched this movie for the first time about five or six years ago, I could understand the processes of his mental growth, or changes his mind, and I was moved very much. (*Empire of the Sun*)

Mr. Chips is a serious person but his deep affection for his students finds expression in his face and words. That is my first impression of Mr. Chips. I felt sorry for him because students didn't understand his love for them at first. (*Goodbye Mr. Chips*)

When I watched this movie, I felt the same emotion with Lucy. Because I can't also bear to tell some lies to myself. (*A Room With a View*)

Secondly, I was interested in an Italian man (a son). His name is Geroge. He is very pure and innocent. I like him. (*A Room With a View*)

I became sad because Lawrence was nothing but a horse which used by the nation. (*Lawrence of Arabia*)

iii. **Reflect on your**

- a. ignorance
- b. mistaken knowledge

Examples:

My image of England is all rich: for example people enjoy afternoon tea or riding horses. But I aware that actually England has also a serious racial problem. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

So I thought that we correctly recognized actual fear of war and we never must make war. (*Hope and Glory*)

My image of Britain is very peaceful, but I think in this movie, there was a real Britain probably.

(*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

Mahatma Gandhi is a very famous historical person. So, I know his name and his greatness. But when I finished this movie, I realized that I had only a vague knowledge of him. (*Gandhi*)

I could learn Vienna right after the end of World War II from the movie. (*The Third Man*)

This movie taught me about education problem, racial prejudice, family problem, friendship and compromise and so on. (*To Sir With Love*)

I haven't had few chances to know single fathers. Because of this, I don't think it usual that there are a lot of single fathers in the world. I think that more movies and dramas about a single father like Ted should be shown in Japan. I want to recognize more that there are a lot of families who have various reasons in the world. (*Kramer vs. Kramer*)

iv. **Resolve to**

- a. apply lessons learned to your own life
- b. improve your knowledge

Examples:

I have to learn many things not the studies but the wisdom to solve the problems . . . It is important for us to know these problems at first, and make an effort to become more better with a view of the other's point. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I want to know more information about immigrant in America (*The Long, Long Journey*)

Last, I thought that human beings are influenced by money easily. Certainly we can't do anything if we can't have money. But don't we forget about the most important thing? It's important thing is a pure heart as a human being. I think we must grow up our heart if our society is modernized. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I learned two things; to be alive my life with all my might (with strength and love, to know an another's pain). I want to keep these two things through one wonderful movie in my mind and walk my life.

So I thought that we correctly recognized actual fear of war and we never must make war. (*Hope and Glory*)

In Japan, many problems have become a serious problem. I think I learned the way to solving these problems in this movie. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

Finally, I think that this movie tells us not to make war against any nations. (*The Third Man*)

Crying and Laughing with students are wonderful thing. It is important to communicate between teachers and students. (*Goodbye Mr. Chips*)

We must ask for happiness life style for only myself, for even all the people. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I learned it is important that what we should be as an adult. (*To Sir With Love*)

- v. Show how the work has **enriched**
- a. your knowledge ('What I learned')
  - b. your character

Examples:

This movie made me think a lot of thing. That's all. Thank you. (*Bridge on the River Kwai*)

I think I learned the way to solving these problems in this movie (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

The important thing is a heart, not skills, this movie taught me (*To Sir with Love*)

On this movie "Empire of the Sun" show me a lot of things. (*Empire of the Sun*)

I learned it is important that what we should be as an adult. (*To Sir With Love*)

After I finished watching this move, I thought what the family was and what women were carefully. (*Kramer vs. Kramer*)

I can realize the real life in England on this movie. And it makes me think of how the EmGLISHmen should be. I could touch English people through this movie. (*To Sir With Love*)

At first, I learned that Britain was depression and difficult to get job at that time. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

And also, a great person who taught me the importance of peace is great teacher of each one of us in the world. He will be in my mind always. (*Gandhi*)

- vi. Mention a **hope** or **desire** that the work has given you for
- a. yourself
  - b. the world

Examples:

I hope those problems will be resolved as soon as possible. (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I hope those problems will be resolved as soon as possible (*My Beautiful Laundrette*)

I felt I wanted to go back to my childhood. (*Hope and Glory*)

I think that more movies and dramas about a single father like Ted should be shown in Japan. I want to recognize more that there are a lot of families who have various reasons in the world.

(*Kramer vs. Kramer*)

I feel I don't want the war to come again to watch this movie. (*The Third Man*)

Even now, there is the problem of race in the world. It is very sad for me. Still, it is important for humankind to get along with every races and admit our existence each other. (*Do the Right Thing*)

I wish to meet a teacher like Mark. (*To Sir With Love*)

So I wish I'll go to India and I want to contact the culture of India! (*Gandhi*)

I hope the gap between rich and poor will disappear. (*Heat and Dust*)

vii. **Give thanks** for having encountered

- a. the work
- b. a character in it

Examples:

This movie gave me very good chance. (*Kramer vs. Kramer*)

I wanna thank to people who support my life. (*The Long, Long Journey*)

I feel we owe what we are good condition today to many great person as Norma Rae. We take it for granted for our happiness. I think we always have to feel our gratitude to them. (*Norma Rae*)

I didn't know such a great director in Britain until today. Therefore, I want to watch his another works. I was very happy to watch it. (*The Third Man*)

If I didn't have this opportunity, I would see movie like that never. I thank you. (*The Dead*)

viii. Express your comments in **emotionally involved language**

Examples:

While I was watching the movie, I was excited all the time. I did not know what happened next scene. (*Bridge Over the River Kwai*)

When Harry appeared in the darkness, I was very amazed. Harry's white face made my blood run cold. (*The Third Man*)

I was moved very much. It's one of my favorite movie. (*Empire of the Sun*)

Harry Line that was shot by Martins looks very miserable and pitiable. . . It was very forceful scene. (*The Third Man*)

My heart ached at the thought of it. (*Norma Rae*)