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Who is responsible? Kishoutenketsu and the 5-Paragraph Essay

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Several years ago while teaching a presentation class I discovered that my students had never heard of the 5-paragraph essay (or its variants). After further discussion with them I also discovered that I knew nothing of the Japanese essay form *kishoutenketsu*. In this short paper I will define these two essay forms, examine the different roles responsibility plays in communication and why this role is important. Finally, I will look at some of the implications for the classroom.

Before I begin I want to clarify my purpose of this paper. First, there has been another approach to this topic. M. Yoshikawa compared Japanese and American English communication through *tatemae* and *honne* (Yoshikawa: 1978). I chose *kishoutenketsu* because, as a native English teacher, the 5-paragraph essay is its near equivalent in the sense that both forms are very familiar in their respective languages. The second clarification is that I am examining the comparative differences of Japanese and English when set side by side rather than examining each language separately.

Essay Forms

Briefly, the 5-paragraph essay¹ consists of an Introduction, Body (3 paragraphs), and Conclusion. Of course there is no special reason for there being 5 paragraphs beyond its efficacy as an educational model. The Introduction contains a thesis sentence, 3 main points, and a concluding sentence. Each paragraph of the Body follows the same pattern of assertion, proof (or example), and a concluding statement. The Conclusion summarizes the thesis and the main point supporting it. There are many variants of this form but the logical flow is generally the same. Regardless of the variants, what is common is that the reader expects and requires signposting and transition statements to help follow

the logic threading through the essay (Hinds 1987: 146)

The Japanese model of *kishoutenketsu* takes a different approach. It begins with the introduction (kiku 起句) of the topic and other key information. Next is the development (shōku 承句) which continues from the introduction. This is followed by the twist or climax (tenku 転句) which contains the thesis and finally, the conclusion (kekku 結句) which brings everything together (Maynard 1997). In contrast with English, it is the reader who is responsible to make the transitions and thread the narrative into a cohesive whole (Hinds 1987: 151).

While there are many differences between English and Japanese, the significant difference focused on in this paper is the expectation of responsibility between the writer/speaker and reader/listener (Hinds 1987: 143). Knowing what a text “is likely and not likely to provide” helps in comprehending the text (Maynard 1997: 39; also see Hinds’ discussion of *wa* は Hinds 1987: 151). Maynard was only referring to Japanese, but it applies also to English. The difference between Japanese and English is the contrast of what is expected and the level of responsibility.

Responsibility

In English, responsibility for effective communication rests primarily with the writer. In the English 5-paragraph essay model outlined above, the thesis is mentioned twice (Introduction and Conclusion) and the main points three times (Introduction, Body, Conclusion). This repetition is evidence that the writer has primary responsibility to ensure that the message is delivered in a clear and logical fashion. Further, the reader expects clarity and logic in what is written. This harmony between writer and reader is the standard for effective writing.

Conversely, in Japanese the expectation is that the reader has the main responsibility to follow the narrative and make the connections that the writer intended. Effective writing is one that presents a narrative that the reader can unpack and discover the meaning. If the reader does not understand the text, the responsibility is his/hers and not the writer’s.

In this regard the contrast between English and Japanese written communication is one of responsibility: in English responsibility rests **mostly** with the writer and in Japanese with the reader (Hinds 1987: 143). This contrast is not absolute but it highlights a significant difference when comparing English and

Japanese communication.

While both the 5-paragraph essay and *kishoutenketsu* are text based, the difference of responsibility affects both speaking and reading.

The importance of “responsibility”

Even though native English teachers in Japan apply the dictum of teaching from the known to the unknown they generally do not know about *kishoutenketsu*. In my opinion, *kishoutenketsu* defines the known ground on which Japanese people base their communication. Not all Japanese communication adheres closely to the *kishoutenketsu* model, but generally speaking the responsibility for comprehension rests more on the receiver and this has an effect on all Japanese communication whether it is written or spoken. The reader and the listener must make the effort to understand, and not the writer or speaker to be understood. Most native English teachers do not know this and it is not part of the majority of teacher training programs.

Conversely, most English language learners in Japan have not heard of the 5-paragraph essay (or its variants). This means that Japanese English learners are taught “communicative” English from native English teachers who do not understand the basis of their L1 communication. So the students are asked to learn English without understanding or knowing about this gap between their native Japanese and English.

This gap between the Japanese language learner and the native English language teacher presents a problem. Both the teacher and the learner lack a basic understanding of the organizational structure and usage of each other’s language. Consequently, this lack of understanding of how ideas are organized impedes both teaching and learning.

Implications for language teaching

This observation of responsibility raises many implications for language teaching. Here I will highlight some for the classroom area only.

First, teachers need to draw the learners’ attention to how responsibility functions differently in English and Japanese. Japanese learners need to be aware of this fundamental difference as it would help to clarify what they are expected to learn and why.

Second, responsibility is transferable to both writing and speaking classes. Learner awareness of responsibility could provide a key to better communication since meaningful communication is judged by the success of the message and not simply the words.

Third, being aware of this difference would aid learners to better understand how “active listening” and “meaningful responses” play key roles in English communication. While “active listening” and “meaningful responses” have been core parts of many English lessons, they are usually taught as separate and discrete skills. What is usually missing is the connection these skills have to “responsibility” as realized in English communication. Giving some attention to both Japanese and English language structures would unite these two communicative skills.

Conclusion

If native English teachers are to take their students from the known to the unknown, then it is imperative that they understand the linguistic foundation on which their learners stand. Similarly, the Japanese learners of English need to understand how responsibility affects their communicative role. The implications of this brief discussion are broad, but first, native English teachers need to start understanding how *kishoutenketsu* affects both the learning and the teaching of English.

Notes

1. The 5-paragraph essay model is a catchall term used in this short paper to define a range of English essay forms taught in the high schools of English speaking countries such as Canada where I grew up.

References

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