

Displaying Critical Thinking in EFL Academic Writing: A Discussion of Japanese to English Contrastive Rhetoric

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Abstract

This article provides an examination of the literature on issues surrounding the problems Japanese university students face in learning critical argument in their English academic writing courses. Japanese students' critical thinking skills are criticized as not fostered in their university education, perhaps due to Confucian education ideals, Japanese 'reader-responsible' rhetorical structures, or misinterpretations by Western instructors. The article is presented in four sections providing first, an examination of English L2 in the Japanese context, second, an analysis of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric, and third, a discussion of the debate on Japanese university students' critical thinking in EFL writing. The article finishes with several suggestions to provide ways of dealing with the key challenges and fostering more positive development of critical thinking in Japanese students' EFL academic writing.

Keywords

Critical thinking, EFL writing, Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric, expanding circle

Introduction

The debate on Japanese students' critical thinking skills involves claims by Western and Japanese researchers and academics ranging from scathing to heroic. In order to get a clear idea of the issues Japanese university students face regarding the need to display critical thinking in their EFL writing, which I argue is crucial for students to successfully develop as academic English writers, I draw on literature from three areas. First, I offer three main issues as they pertain to English L2 in the Japanese context, including what it means for Japan to be an 'expanding circle' country, how Japan's English education does not fit in to the BANA and TESEP contexts but rather the TiDC (Teaching in Difficult

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Circumstances) context, and finally Turner's (2011) argument against using Confucianism as an excuse for faulting EFL in Japan. Next, I discuss two areas of issues in Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric with particular focus on first, some criticisms of Japanese writing made several decades ago viewed later as over-generalized and second, influences of socio-cultural theory on our understanding of Japanese EFL writing. The final section provides a discussion of Japanese students' critical thinking skills in three parts: first, I highlight negative stereotypes; next I take a cultural perspective on defining critical thinking, return to the discussion on the impact of Confucian ideals on Japanese students' thinking, and highlight some successful Japanese EFL writing cases; and finally I return to the issues regarding Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric that may prevent students from successfully displaying critical thinking in their EFL writing, closing the section with a suggestion that gender should also be considered in this debate. The conclusion closes with some proposals for dealing with these issues and providing Japanese EFL students with better opportunities to successfully display critical thinking in their academic writing.

English L2 in the Japanese Context

In presenting the article in these particular sections, my intention in this first section is to show that the 'inner circle' developments in English L2 writing education have not been considered carefully in Japan due to the rhetorical differences between Japanese and English, and that this may be the cause of the inconsistency of approaches currently taken in EFL writing education in Japan. To clarify, Japan is a country located in what Kachru (1992) described as the 'expanding circle'. This is the outermost of three concentric circles of English: the inner circle is comprised of the countries where English is the native language spoken, and where ESL is taught (US, UK, etc.); the outer circle includes countries where English is not the native language, yet it holds important historical value and has official status in certain arenas (India, The Philippines, Kenya, etc.); and the expanding circle, which includes most of the rest of the world where English has no official status but is still used widely, and where EFL is taught (most of Europe, East Asia, Egypt, etc.).

Another significant distinction made in terms of the variety of practice of English education was made by Holliday (1994), using the acronyms BANA and TESEP to differentiate between the mainstream English language teaching discourse in native-English settings in Britain, Australasia, and North America (BANA) and the English language teaching discourse in educational settings at the Tertiary, Secondary and Primary (TESEP) levels throughout the world. Holliday raised the issue that there were considerable differences in the discourse and the often-difficult circumstances found in classrooms. An important discussion regarding this issue is the misapplication of such methodologies first described by West (1960) with his distinction of Teaching in Difficult Circumstances (TiDC). These distinctions made by West and Holliday emphasized the fact that the mainstream English language teaching methodologies were based on ESL taught in multilingual, intensive settings with a small number of students and trained, native-speaking teachers. Outside this context, ESL and EFL practices were used in very different circumstances. EFL was often taught in monolingual settings under the pressure

of passing examinations, with less frequent class meetings, larger classes and uncertain teacher training or proficiency. The distinctions were made to encourage skepticism about monolithic Western methods and to urge researchers and teachers to consider alternatives to the belief that BANA products and ideas were the only options in English language teaching regardless of the context (Smith, 2010).

One final clarification to be made regarding the issue of contrasting varieties of practice in different cultures is that of the impact of Confucianism on English language education in East Asia. Turner discusses the dangers of Western hegemony in interpreting the impact as detrimental to East Asian students ability to learn English, and encourages researchers and teachers to take a more ‘globally neutral’ approach (2011:109). She refers to Ballard and Clanchy (1991) who described Western academic cultures as ‘extending knowledge’ and Confucian cultures (including Japanese) as ‘conserving knowledge’. What this distinction implies is that Western cultures are inherently forward thinking, leaving Confucian cultures behind. Turner refers to Kubota’s (1999) criticism of this distinction, labeling it ‘orientalist’. The problem with this criticism, Turner points out, is that it suggests that the perspective is somehow universally accepted. Even in doing so, there is no reason to assume that a ‘conserving knowledge’ approach should be seen as negative. Turner encourages those involved in this discussion to remember the importance of understanding the differences between the Confucian thinking in eastern educational approaches and the embedded critical thinking in Western critical approaches and not to place higher value of one over the other. This is particularly important with the increase of globalization in higher education. The issue of the Confucian influence on Japanese learners will be discussed further in the section on Japanese students’ critical thinking.

Japanese to English Contrastive Rhetoric

The focus of this section is on the first of the five major reasons raised by Aspinall (2003) as to why EFL education has been unsuccessful in Japan – that there is a great linguistic disparity between Indo-European languages, such as English, and Japanese, which is, according to Aspinall (2003), an Altaic language.¹ An examination is done through an analysis of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric, which will further highlight the challenges faced by Japanese students, particularly in displaying critical thinking when writing in English in a foreign language context. This section is organized in two parts. The first looks at some early over-generalized criticisms of Japanese writing describing it as ‘indirect’ (with some explanation of the persistence of the grammar-translation method in language teaching in Japan) and ‘inductive’ through use of the rhetorical pattern *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* (which arguably has practically disappeared from literature on Japanese writing). The second part discusses the influences of socio-cultural theory on more recent understanding of strongly maintained Japanese principles, reader versus writer responsibility, and genre-based EFL writing instruction.

In the findings of a self-initiated 1966 study, researcher Robert Kaplan initiated contrastive rhetoric research (Connor, 2008). Kaplan established the idea that students whose L1 grammatical and organizational structures differ greatly from those of their chosen L2 would find language acquisition more challenging. While reflecting on Asian

learners of English, he remarked that, 'Some Oriental writing ... is marked by what may be called an approach by indirection' and portrayed the 'Oriental' writing style as a spiral (Kaplan, 1966: 17). However, despite his having shed light on a major problem inherent in East Asian grammar-translation methodology, researchers of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric, such as Noor (2001) and Stapleton (2001), criticize Kaplan's 1966 findings for over-generalizing. Due to similar early criticism and further research into writing styles in Asian languages, in 1987 Kaplan revised his assessment of 'Oriental' writing style to take a less critical stance of its structure.

Connor (2008) noted that some researchers have misinterpreted and fixated on Kaplan's article, maintaining contrastive rhetoric as 'static', ignoring developments. Connor cites Kaplan's own 2000 and 2005 publications as examples of how contrastive rhetoric has continued to develop. In the following paragraphs I will highlight some of the issues long considered static aspects of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric that have remained unchallenged.

Kaplan noted in his oft-criticized 1966 study about second language acquisition that the grammatical structures of many East Asian languages, including Japanese, differ greatly from those generally used in English. This reasoning lends itself to supporting the persistence of grammar-translation methodologies in Japanese L2 writing instruction, one of Aspinall's (2003) five reasons why English education is unsuccessful in Japan.

Some Japanese researchers of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric have claimed that Japanese writing is characterized by its inductive style, i.e. not directly stating the thesis in the introduction, but rather hinting at it. The inductive style has been described as manifesting itself in the classical form of *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* (Hirose, 1998; Kubota, 1997; 1998), which forces readers to draw their own conclusions based on the information given, a characteristic known as 'reader responsibility' (Kubota, 1997). Though most researchers agree on the quasi-inductive (Hinds, 1990) nature of *ki-shou-ten-ketsu*, no researcher has come up with an unchallengeable definition of the style (Kubota, 1997; Hirose, 2005).

The *ten* of the essay, sometimes referred to as a 'topic shift,' is what sets the Japanese writing style apart from the generally accepted English language essay format (Hinds, 1983), in which it may be recognized as opposing argument. In a Japanese essay, as proposed by Takemata (1976, cited by Hinds in 1983), a writer begins his or her argument in the *ki* portion of their composition, just as writers of essays in English would present their thesis statement at the beginning of an essay. When writing in English, the *shou*, or topical development phase, is represented through the presentation of commentary and evidence – generally known as body paragraphs – and occurs in alternation with *ten* – the transitional phase (Kubota, 1997). Both English and Japanese essays end with conclusions – the *ketsu* (Hinds, 1983). Hinds explained that in this type of Japanese writing 'the main ideas do not appear until the end and that the paragraphs before the main ideas do not constitute the reasons or evidence for the main ideas' (Kubota, 1998:70). The type of inductive writing style described here goes against the generally preferred deductive writing style for native English speakers, which is characterized by providing the thesis in the introduction of a broad topic that is then supported or defended using evidence (Noor, 2001), but this is not the preference of only native English speakers. Kubota (1992) described one study that showed Japanese professors preferred expository and

persuasive essays to be deductive, and that good Japanese essays share a similar writing structure to well written English essays (Kubota, 1997: 461).

According to researchers of socio-cultural theory (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), Japanese writers are influenced by strongly maintained principles (Atkinson, 2003; Casanave, 2002) such as *aimai* (ambiguity) and *haragei*, literally translated as ‘force of personality,’ as defined by Davies and Ikeno (2002). These ideas have played a large role in defining the way that many Japanese people act, speak and write. Similar to *aimai*, *haragei* is often used to avoid direct confrontation either verbal or written because it does not force the speaker to voice explicit, potentially offensive opinions and allows – if not forces – the target party to inductively draw its own conclusions based on the context of the situation. Hinds (1985) suggests that while writing in English often assigns the task of effectively conveying one’s meaning to the writer, Japanese writers employ ‘reader-responsible rhetoric’, which instead puts the task of finding meaning on the reader (Noor, 2001) – further evidence of *aimai* and *haragei* in Japanese writing. According to Kubota (1997; 1998), McCagg criticized this idea in 1996; after re-analyzing the content used in Hinds’ 1987 study, he concluded, ‘Japanese texts do not generally require greater cognitive effort from readers for comprehension than English texts do, as long as the reader and the writer share the same cultural and linguistic knowledge’ (Kubota, 1998: 70).

Though consideration of socio-cultural theory in EFL and ESL teaching is relatively recent, this concept, introduced in the late 1990s, has helped academic theorists understand the intimate bond between L2 writers and their environment (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 2001; Casanave, 2003). Due to the fact that many writers receive no formal writing instruction during their schooling (Casanave, 2002; Hirose, 2005), it becomes even more important to acknowledge this inherent connection, especially in a genre-based writing curriculum because with no formal instruction on writing forms, there is little or no basis on which to build students’ understanding of the various writing genres. Hirose, in her 2005 study, concluded that students who are not educated in the guidelines of academic writing will, when asked to pen a composition, merely transcribe spoken, colloquial dialogue created either initially in Japanese and directly translated into English, strictly adhering to the grammar-translation method, or written conversationally in English. L2 students will often draw from their past experiences or the sample sentences provided to them while preparing for essay exams (Casanave, 2003). They will sometimes attempt to make their writing sound native by mimicking features from their sources (Masao, 1976) or copying the text directly (Casanave, 2002) – tendencies that often result in the inhibition or complete loss of writer voice and identity. Ivanič (1998) raises the questions:

What can be attributed to the author, what to the reader, and what to the community? Is copying from another writer a positive act, a way of showing agreement and allegiance? A way of taking to yourself the values, ideas and discourses of your discipline? Or is it a sin comparable to forgery, known as plagiarism? (1998: 4).

Such copying is noted when students use quotes instead of paraphrasing or summarizing, and have difficulty integrating those quotes. Students who successfully integrate source information may have done so by mimicking their sources.

Japanese Students' Critical Thinking

In this final section, I offer a discussion of the ongoing debate on Japanese students' critical thinking. As the *universal* value of critical thinking is too difficult to ascertain, a specific context is significant. For students in Japan, I argue that the negative stereotypes of Japanese learners are often misinterpretations by Western instructors and researchers, but that the Western understanding of critical thinking is still beneficial to the learning process and should be strongly encouraged in ways that allow Japanese students to challenge ideas. Even if these students do not go on to study in Western universities overseas, having an understanding of both Eastern and Western perspectives of critical thinking will be a great advantage.

This section is organized as follows: first, some significant negative stereotypes are raised. I then provide a working definition of *critical thinking* in order to move into a discussion of possible misinterpretation of the impact of Confucian ideals on Japanese EFL writing, and I note some cases in which Japanese students successfully displayed critical thinking in their EFL writing. This is followed by a return to some of the issues raised in Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric such as non-linear progression, personal voice, and inductive style as potential hindrances to Japanese students' ability to display critical thinking in EFL writing; and finally, I offer the suggestion that gender may play a role in the debate.

Some researchers argue that Japanese students may not be able to write critically, citing traditions of collectivist and hierarchical traditions that inherently discourage students from developing a distinct identity or voice in their writing (Atkinson, 1997). Some academics such as Jane Barnes Mack-Cozzo, who taught English at universities in Japan for 12 years, go even further, emphasizing the idea that students are not only discouraged from writing explicitly but also are steered away from 'creative original thinking ... for it goes against the *wa* (harmony)' (Mack-Cozzo, 2002: 47). However, other researchers (e.g. Stapleton, 2002; Kubota, 1999) vehemently argue against this stereotype, insisting that Japanese students take distinctly Japanese approaches to critical writing, and are therefore no less critical.

Bruce Davidson, a long-time academic in Japanese universities and researcher of Japanese students' critical thinking asserts, 'Japan paradoxically offers both an encouraging and an inhibiting environment for the development of critical thinking skills' (Davidson, 1995: 41). According to an American student enrolled at the University of Tokyo, 'Students were afraid to ask questions. They were afraid someone might ridicule them for not knowing the answer' (Taylor, 1983 in Davidson, 1995: 43). A Japanese graduate student of Davidson's studying in the UK reflected this sentiment and stated, 'even Japanese educational system doesn't encourage us to have our own ideas' (Davidson, 1995: 44). Davidson takes this argument a step further and states that based on his own in-class studies, 'Many people in Japan seem to have some difficulty discussing ideas or even in explaining them' (1995: 42). He argues that many Japanese students find the act of discussing or critiquing ideas difficult because 'they do not have any opinions; and if they have opinions, they often cannot explain or justify them' (Davidson, 1995: 43), thus further promoting the idea that Japanese students have an inability to think critically.

The arguments of both Atkinson (2003) and Davidson (1995) directly contradict Stapleton's (2001) study in which he took writing samples (of responses to provocative essays he wrote) from 45 undergraduate students in courses with the title 'English Writing' in order to propose a model of assessment for critical thinking. In this study Stapleton concludes that, 'participants demonstrated a fundamental understanding that all opinions require support' (Stapleton 2001: 526) and wrote with 'individualized voices, which are closely related to critical thinking ability' (2001: 534). Furthermore, students who lack background knowledge about or some level of familiarity with their assigned topic are less likely to demonstrate the ability to think critically due to 'a lack of shared assumptions between the non-Asian researchers and their Japanese students' (Stapleton, 2001: 530).

It is important in reference to the argument about Japanese students' critical thinking to provide a working definition of *critical thinking*. I refer to Ennis's (1998) definition from his article *Is Critical Thinking Culturally Biased?* In the article he explains 'critical thinking is thinking that is reasonable and reflective, and is focused on what to believe or do' (1998: 16). Ennis goes on to explain that critical thinking is not limited to individuals, and suggests that as long as 'group thinking' exists, it can be done critically. With this understanding, the goal of critical thinking, either individual or collective, then is to make reasonable decisions by seeking reasons and alternatives. The importance of critical thinking is stressed differently in East Asian cultures where social practices focus on collective concordance and compliance (Atkinson, 2003). It has been suggested that this interpretation of an inability to think critically may be due to the structure of the Japanese education system (Lee-Cunin, 2005), which has maintained somewhat Confucian ideals that dictated the importance of the relationship between master and pupil and decreed that a student was never to question his or her master (Stapleton, 1995).

However, it may be that the impact of Confucian ideals has been misinterpreted by the West. Turner (2011) points out that as the number of students from East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan has increased in the UK, their behavior has served as a point of difference between Eastern and Western students. She argues that this difference has become entrenched, but that Western interpretations, maintaining the negative stereotypes of 'passive' or 'silent' or 'uncritical' East Asian students, are no longer appropriate (Turner, 2011: 97). Turner explains that Western instructors see the passive nature or silence of East Asian students in classrooms as resistance to speaking in class, but she argues that there are culturally weighted differences regarding both silence and listening, which are seen as proactive. While Western approaches may emphasize 'learning through speaking,' this is an activity traditionally frowned upon by East Asian students who would prefer to follow the tutor who should serve as an exemplar or model demonstrating what should be done. It is a different way of learning (opposite to the Western approach of *tutor as facilitator*), reflecting Confucian tradition in which students follow their tutor's lead on 'their own individual journey of self-perfection' (Turner, 2011:161). Turner emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding both the conflict between, and transformative effects of these two approaches as intercultural interaction plays an increasingly significant role in the global cultural construction of international universities.

Turner (2011) goes on to explain how the ‘contrasting educational ideologies’ of East and West place different value on critical thinking. Because ‘being critical is historically embedded in Western educational culture as a positive value,’ it requires an understanding of the ‘rhetoricity of being critical’ (2011: 185). As East Asian students have not grown up with such rhetoricity, they may be seen in Western contexts as ‘uncritical’. Traditionally it is important for a Japanese student in Japan to display an ability to listen and read without criticizing or evaluating, and rather than reinforcing opposition, to find harmony in a comparison of two opposing views. However, these actions are not in line with the goals of Western educational approaches. For such Japanese students, Turner explains that providing critique is more than ‘being critical’, which may be understood as simply disagreeing (2011:189). She emphasizes that being critical has ‘gone global as an educational issue’ (2011: 192) and an understanding of ‘rhetorical exchange value’ is of crucial importance, considering the strengths of both Eastern and Western interpretations of it, in order to avoid East Asian students seeing the Western understanding of *being critical* as superior.

Despite past claims that cultural tendencies keep students from developing distinct critical voices in their writing, evidence of students’ critical thinking abilities is becoming increasingly visible (Stapleton, 2002; Kubota, 1999). These findings mirror those of Casanave’s in her 2002 study. Here she reported that although the students of one particular ESL teacher sometimes encountered problems while attempting to complete the exercises they had been assigned, they also ‘wrote that they were learning to think critically’ (Casanave, 2002: 60). It would seem necessary that in order to write in a way that is acceptable to raters of English ability, one must first develop his or her critical thinking skills (Stapleton, 2002; Casanave, 2002) and a good understanding of the strategies required to meet raters’ expectations. Yuko, another one of Casanave’s test subjects, admitted that she had little background in her chosen topic of International Relations, and consequently had a hard time processing and understanding the materials she had been provided with for her final paper (Casanave, 2002).

The main issues in the debate on Japanese students’ critical thinking are often based on particular characteristics inherent in the Japanese language. As explained in the previous section, Kaplan (1966) provided graphic depictions of various types of L1 writing styles and portrayed Japanese writing as a circular spiral of logic that spends the entirety of the essay alluding to a point but perhaps never explicitly stating it even by the end – a tendency that reflects the influence of *aimai* and *haragei* (Davies and Ikeno, 2002) – what Hinds (1990) referred to as a ‘delayed introduction of purpose’ (Dyer and Friederich, 2002: 278. Historically, instruction in Japanese L1 writing concentrated on personal expression, requiring students to write about their feelings and personal experiences. Along this line, students also practiced *kansobun*, in which writers describe their impressions of assigned readings (Hirose and Sasaki, 1994). In Dyer and Friederich’s 2002 study on teaching autobiography in Japan, they cite Arai (2000), a Japanese professor of English in Tokyo, who in a criticism of the L1 writing process stated that ‘in Japanese writing instruction, the emphasis is placed on two elements, *jiyu* (freedom) and *jibun no iken* (one’s own opinion): “Students are encouraged to write down their ideas spontaneously, without worrying about such irrelevancies as organization, clarity, or logic”’ (p. 6, cited in Dyer and Friederich, 2002: 278). This understanding of non-linear logic or

random quality in Japanese essay writing is based on the history of essay writing. Indeed, the Japanese word for essay, *zuihitsu*, is translated as, 'writing at random' (Dyer and Friederich, 2002).

The idea that Japanese writing uses non-linear logic has prevailed in related publications over the decades. In Fox's (1994) book *Listening to the World*, she quoted a student in Japan on the vagueness of Japanese writing compared to English: "Japanese is more vague than English," she [a Japanese student] tells me. "It's supposed to be that way. You don't say what you mean right away. You don't criticize directly" (Fox, 1994: 8). However, this debate on non-linear logic in Japanese essay writing is concerned more with personal writing rather than expository writing. According to Dyer and Friederich (2002), Japanese personal writing is not all that different from English personal writing. Although university English composition instructors may believe that this aspect of Japanese writing is a handicap for Japanese students learning to write English academic essays, both Doi (2001) and Matsuda (2001) insist that this tendency should be viewed as a concept that enables Western theorists to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Japanese individual and cultural psyche.

The issue of impersonal writing needs to be raised at this stage as a style Japanese student writers struggle with in expressing their thinking in their academic writing. In his article 'Opinions of identity in academic writing', Hyland (2002) raises the issue about the 'myth of impersonality' in academic writing. He explains that teachers requiring students to remove personal writing, deleting phrases such as *I think* or *I believe*, is an oversimplification of the issue. He explains that the differences between disciplines affect the ways people in those disciplines argue and express themselves. As learning to write at university often means taking on new identities, he suggests students need to learn how subject-specific writing differs, in order to provide them with 'an awareness of the options that academic writing offers' (Hyland, 2002: 352).

The Japanese 'habit' of writing inductively (Kubota, 1997) can also be attributed to the principle of *kenkyo*, which is literally defined as 'modesty' (Davies and Ikeno, 2002). Davies and Ikeno explain that *kenkyo* is important in Japanese culture because 'Self assertiveness is more or less discouraged, while consideration for others is encouraged' (2002: 143). This idea manifests itself in Japanese speech as well. While addressing an individual of a higher rank or social status than themselves, native Japanese speakers will add softeners to their speech or let their sentences trail off in order to avoid being perceived as overly assertive. This tendency may show itself in the writing of a Japanese student of English, particularly if he or she has not received formal instruction in writing academically (Hirose, 2005). Furthermore, Japanese mothers often emphasize to their children the importance of empathy and conformity, two characteristics that directly contradict the nature of critical thinking (Stapleton, 2001), and this tendency manifests itself in both the classroom and in students' writing. Davidson (1995) notes that his Japanese students were 'often quick to drop a point they make in the face of disagreement. They will often immediately grant the validity of the opinion of the other party without challenging her reasoning' (Davidson, 1995: 43). Thus, the notion of conformity, which is emphasized in Japanese society from a young age (see Yoshino's 1992 critique of the phenomenon of *nihonjinron* as cultural nationalism), may also impact on the level of argumentation and critical thinking in Japanese students' writing.

While socio-cultural tendencies and pre-formulated schemata often play a large role in the molding of an individual's writing style (Xiao, 2008), it is also important to consider the implications of gender when studying the development of a particular writing style or tendency (Kubota, 2003). This importance is especially emphasized in the Japanese language where male and female speaking styles are clearly differentiated. Japanese speakers universally accept and employ humble tones and softeners as a way to show their respect for elders and higher-ranking individuals – for women, this often includes their husband and other men in their lives. This demarcation of status is not only verbal but also written – the *kanji* for husband is comprised of *shu* (master) and *jin* (person), while the *kanji* for wife is sometimes written as *ka* (home) and *nai* (inside). Since the Tokugawa Shogunate and subsequent rise of the very paternally focused Confucianism, women have been both demoted and subordinated (Davies and Ikeno, 2002) despite the passing of equal rights laws and the introduction of co-educational higher institutions (McVeigh, 2002). This cultural subjugation, although rapidly changing, is reflected in the words of the Japanese language itself; by nurture and socialization, Japanese spoken by females uses more softeners and is consequently more indirect than Japanese spoken by males, which is often very concise (Davies and Ikeno, 2002). Though briefly mentioned by Kubota (2003), whether gender actively plays a role in the ability of Japanese students of English to communicate both concisely and effectively should be investigated further, due to the fact that many of the studies cited in this article were performed on test groups consisting primarily of female subjects.

The debate on Japanese students' critical thinking is difficult to conclude. If Japanese students' critical thinking skills are not fostered in their university education, whether due to Confucian education ideals, Japanese 'reader-responsible' rhetorical structures, or misinterpretations by Western instructors, this has serious implications regarding their ability to meet writing requirements in English-medium university studies overseas.

Implications for Language Teachers

Having considered a number of significant issues affecting Japanese students' ability to display critical thinking in their English academic writing, I now offer the following four suggestions:

1. Students would benefit from being taught the difference between personal, narrative writing, and objective, academic writing. Students should be encouraged to use 'I' to make the claim (*I argue*) and should be allowed to choose or be provided with familiar topics.
2. Through training to understand that the starting point for Japanese students as writers may be a desire to use non-linear organization and to place emphasis on 'freedom' and personal opinion, instructors can avoid unhelpful assessments of students' writing. With this understanding, instructors can provide students with some highly structured formulas that require students to assemble a strong claim and balanced, concisely stated and supported argument. Having students learn these constructs should allow them to more easily display linear logic and avoid

an inductive development and the ‘reader-responsible’ dilemma. This also helps to avoid the gender-related issue of any obligation female Japanese students may feel to be indirect.

3. Instructors should understand the importance of not fixating on a need to ‘disagree’ in order to display critical thinking. This can help to avoid the misunderstanding that a student who seems to take a neutral stance is not automatically agreeing with an idea. Students need to be encouraged to find a way to frame an argument so they can make a natural claim about it. Instructors should avoid topics that require students to make ethical ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ choices.
4. Topic choices that encourage students to argue either in favor or against a particular aspect of the topic are very important, but writing tasks should be constructed in a way that requires students to frame their argument. With experience in framing arguments to suit their needs, these students will later more easily navigate ‘agree or disagree’ writing prompts. For example, rather than ‘English is now being taught at the elementary school level in Japan. Do you agree or disagree with this?’ a better prompt would be, ‘English is now being taught at the elementary school level in Japan. Consider the following: Can elementary school English teachers in Japan deliver appropriate lessons? Could this present issues in Japanese language – particularly kanji – development? What advantages are there to learning a foreign language at a young age? Choose one of these questions and develop your response.’

Conclusion

It can be argued that Japanese university students studying EFL must learn to demonstrate and use their critical thinking abilities in order to write coherently and cohesively. However, effecting a drastic change to the EFL curriculum in Japan could take years (Poole, 2005) due to the structure and corporate nature of the Japanese university system. Furthermore, these changes not only have structural implications but also cultural ones. The Japanese principle of *kenkyo* may lead Western teachers and researchers to interpret Japanese students as having inhibited ability to develop an individual sense of voice and personality in their writing (see Matsuda, 2001, for discussion). While the teaching methodologies in many Japanese EFL classrooms have changed over the most recent decades, it is still necessary for both native and non-native instructors at the university level to have a basic understanding of the fundamentals that fuel Japanese culture (Stapleton, 2001) in order to teach their students more effectively.

Regardless of developments in globalization, the cultural issues described in this article remain strong in Japan. Although writing constructs such as *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* have practically disappeared from the discussions on Japanese academic writing, the quasi-inductive style persists, leading Japanese EFL writers – even those with years of domestic and overseas exposure to English – to write vague thesis statements in the introduction, holding off until the conclusion to make any kind of real claim. When these students head overseas to English medium universities for exchange or postgraduate study, they suffer. Developments in EFL academic writing in Japan do not need to ‘Westernize’, but I argue these students would benefit greatly – and more obviously display Western ideas

of critical thinking – from writing on carefully selected and dissected topics and learning the fundamental strategies of typical academic English essays including a strong thesis, topic sentences that match the content statement, and attributing sources to develop the thesis.

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Note

1. Although Aspinall claims Japanese to be an Altaic language, the official language family for Japanese has not been universally agreed upon; ‘macro-Altaic’ may be a better description.

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