

英文ビジネス・ライティングにおける日本人大学生が 直面する問題とその克服

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A Study on the Barrier Japanese Students Face with English Business Writing and Ways of Improvement

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要 旨 インターネットやメディアの発展にともない大学生の英文ビジネス・ライティング能力が要求される中、必ずしも日本の大学のビジネス・ライティングの授業は期待されるだけの成果をもたらしていない。そこで本稿は、1) 日本語と英語でのビジネス・コミュニケーションの違い、2) 英文のビジネス・ライティングの本質、3) ビジネス・ライティングにおけるコンピュータの重要性に焦点を当て、大学生がビジネス・ライティングを学ぶ上で障壁となりうる問題点を分析した。さらに、アメリカの大学のビジネス・ライティングの授業の内容を紹介し、大学生の効果的なビジネス・ライティングについて考察した。

ライティングは、リーディング、リスニング、スピーキングといった総合的能力を要する以上、ライティングの授業を受けたということだけで急速な上達は望めない。しかし、コンピュータのビジネス・ライティング用のテンプレートや編集機能に習熟することで英語固有の論理展開を身に付けることが可能であろう。

Ronald V. White in *Methodology in TESOL*, a study on “approaches to writing,” notes: “Writing is not a natural activity. All physically and mentally normal people learn to speak a language. Yet all people have to be taught how to write. This is a crucial difference between the spoken and written form of language.”¹

White also describes writing as difficult because there is a physical separation of writer and reader, which puts the writing in a very different position than that of face-to-face communication. In speaking, messages can be received and understood by listeners with verbal responses or facial and body gestures. Verbal communication can add more meaning with stress, intonation and tone of voice; however, those features are lacking in written communication. Writing normally takes more time to have feedback, and writers need to carefully organize their final product.

Unlike reading or listening, writing can not be self-educated, and feedback is very necessary to improve writing skills. Like most Japanese, Americans learn correct English sentences by the way they sound, not by grammatical knowledge.

In *Breaking the Language Barrier*, H. Douglas Brown states that adults and children take different

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steps when learning a second language. Children use language as a way of communication and by using it they establish social relations. In this way it really does not matter to them whether communication is verbal or non-verbal. Children develop communication channels in order to express their feelings, demands, needs, thoughts and opinions. In this process children learn to send messages and then start focusing on communication. After acquiring all the communication skills, adults attempt to establish verbal communication. That is, adults need to be competent in communication skills before they will initiate verbal communication.

This finding helps us understand a major challenge Japanese face in writing in English. Most Japanese adults do not speak well in English. They, therefore, also find it hard to write in English. Lacking a sense of how to express themselves naturally in English-by speaking their ideas- they also find it hard to express themselves well by writing in English. Japanese adults tend to translate their Japanese into English when it comes to business writing.² But English and Japanese are two different languages and it is impossible to write a sentence by merely replacing words in the original sentence. When it comes to writing in English, Japanese are handicapped by native tongue interference.

Due to internationalization of business and communication, English writing skills are becoming increasingly important, and people are learning to write in English for occupational or academic purposes. Globalization of business with new communication means, such as fax and electronic mail, certainly enables us to have quicker transactions using the international language, English. Under the circumstances it is indispensable for Japanese business major students to prepare for their future careers by learning English business writing skills during their education. It is also one of the most difficult and time-consuming subjects to learn. The students are required to take several courses; nevertheless, the efforts do not always bring the students fruitful results. Writing is considered an integration of other language skills such as reading, speaking and listening. The students need a great deal of knowledge of these skills in order to become proficient in English business writing.

Moreover, English business writing skills correspond to the amount of exposure the student has had to the English language. Understanding the dynamics of English business writing and focusing on American business writing classes at the college level will greatly help Japanese students gain more knowledge of the English language.

This paper discusses: 1) The differences in business communication between Japanese and English; 2) American Business Writing classes; and 3) The importance of computers for English business letter writing.

Differences in Business Communication Between Japanese and English

English and Japanese are two different languages and it is impossible to write a sentence by merely replacing words in the original sentence. When Japanese college students work on technical writing they have a tendency to first write in Japanese and then translate into English. This study advo-

cates that the above approach is insufficient to produce good results, because Japanese and English differ in their grammar and structures.³

In addition, business writing in English is required to be more direct, articulate, and more brief than its counterpart. Therefore, it is desirable for students to think in English while writing business letters instead of translating from Japanese into English. For thinking and writing in English, however, students must have a high level of multiple English communication skills.

Moreover, English writing patterns by students are largely based on their writing patterns in their native languages. In 1964 an American scholar, Robert Kaplan, conducted research on about 700 English writing samples by foreign students at American colleges and analyzed their writing patterns. He learned how their native language groups can affect their English writing. In other words, each writing sample showed their native language writing characteristics. He categorized their native languages into three groups-Semitic (Arabic and Hebrew), Oriental (Japanese, Korean, Chinese etc.) and Romance (Spanish, French etc.)-and the results were put into the form of diagrams.

According to his diagrams, English speakers place the topic sentence in the opening and supporting sentences follow. This indicates that the writing of an English speaker is straight and develops logically. He calls this "Straight line." In contrast, English writing done by Semitic students comprised the "Zigzag line," which means they use a lot of "ands" and "buts" in their writing. This pattern indicated that they get their writing "straight" by partly correcting the original thought with words such as "and" and "but." Oriental English writing patterns, including Japanese, avoid, in comparison, straight expressions. Japanese write in a roundabout way, and the most important statement comes at the very end. This writing pattern is called "Spiraling." The characteristic of English writing by Romance language groups is basically "Straight line" like English speakers, although they tend to derail. However, this derailment does not mean that they include unrelated content. They add interesting relevant matters as details for effect, even though such details are unnecessary to support the topics. This pattern has rhetorical play so to speak, and is called "Broken line pattern."⁴

The following will exemplify the differences in business communication between Japanese and English. It is quite customary for Japanese business letters to start with seasonal greetings even though they are not the main purpose of the letter. Seasonal greetings such as weather, holidays and special events are all irrelevant to the main purpose of the letter. These unnecessary greetings only confuse English native speakers. To most Japanese, English business letters without such greetings may sound cold or dry. They do not, however, irritate English readers or affect communication itself. But the biggest problem is that opening sentences represent the main topic of business letters in the English speaking world. Using such greetings would cause the letters to lose their impact. Standard greetings show where the main content of the letters begins. For example, "Dear Sir" prepares the reader for the main message of the letter. Therefore, if the first line was not the main idea or message of the letter, the letter's impact would be lessened. This can also be said

about the closing statement of any business letter. The closing statement is the second most important statement of English business letters. Japanese students should not bring Japanese customs about closing statements into English business letters. It is extremely important for Japanese students to remember that in English business writing Japanese business practices do not work.

The following are examples of cultural differences in expressions between Japanese and English. In the Japanese culture a person is hesitant to confront a person with different opinions. Instead of telling opposite opinions he/she tends to use expressions such as “I’ll think about it” or “I’ll check on it.” These expressions do not mean that this person will come up with an answer. In English, however, these expressions are often taken literally and might often cause confusion.

In addition, Japanese business negotiations are done in a roundabout and unclear way. It is only possible to function in this matter among Japanese business people. In contrast, English negotiations do not work in such Japanese ways of business practices. For example, during negotiations the Japanese often use the expression “I must consult my boss on this” or “I’ll consult my boss in Japan as soon as possible.” In the English-speaking world, people would think this person is not given full authority and would raise serious doubts about the person and the company. Also, the above expression “as soon as possible” can be very vague to English speakers, because there is no specific time or date. Therefore, when Japanese people deal in business with foreigners, the following factors are normally required: self-assertiveness with logical and strong thinking, detail-oriented and quick decision making.⁵

Analyzing American Business Writing Classes

The main objective of a business writing class is arguably that students learn how to write effective business letters. Since the sensational appearance of electronic mail on the Internet, quick responses to business letters are even more important in today’s business world. Even for native English speakers writing effective business letters is not an easy task. Therefore, business letter writing courses are a part of the curriculum for business major students in American colleges.

Accordingly, business writing classes cover rather simple writing techniques, because this particular course is an entry-level requirement. It is important to note that class writing assignments most likely need to be typewritten to prepare for the real business world. In this sense, working on business letters with a computer is very useful. This paper will discuss how to utilize software in business writing in later sections. During the semester, students are normally required to turn in assignments in business letter form. Most of the writing work is done outside of the classroom. For each submitted assignment, instructors carefully review writing formats, context, and correct the assignment with a letter grade. In this way, each student is able to have feedback and corrections useful for his/her next writing assignment.

Although most American college students do not have a lot of business experience, the course simulates various types of business transactions. From this point of view, analyzing how business writing classes are taught in American colleges may help with teaching Japanese college students

the same subject. This paper demonstrates the basic approach of American college business writing and the following are examples of what is taught. To demonstrate the above objectives this paper focuses on the teaching of business writing at one community college in southern California, Southwestern College.

In the beginning of the course the students are taught that the readers' education and knowledge differ widely. Accordingly, the writing needs to be adjusted at or below the knowledge level of the readers. From this standpoint complex words and structures need to be avoided. Familiar and everyday words with sharp and clear meanings serve more effectively in business. *Lesikar's Basic Business Communication* suggests the following:

Words to use	Words to avoid
try	endeavor
end	terminate
use	utilize
do	perform
begin	initiate
find out	ascertain
stop	discontinue
show	demonstrate

Any communication serves well when its message can reach out to more people. Although using more complex words sounds refined and elegant in reaching out in this fashion to specialized, educated audiences, the writing certainly loses its significance to others. The above-suggested list of words are high school level in Japan. Thus, with this high school vocabulary, the Japanese college student can manage to write an English business letter. If Japanese college students translate Japanese written letters into English, they will have difficulties in choosing the right words. Their level of understanding hinders the students from using simple English words.

Students are taught to keep messages short and simple, which is the basic principle of business writing. By using simple words, sentences, and paragraphs, messages are more concise, easy to understand and straightforward.⁶ When writing to a person in a particular profession or field, technical words are understandable but for those not familiar with the field it is better for writers to use non-technical words.

The following are examples from *Business Communication*, the textbook used by Southwestern Community College, exemplifying appropriate sentences for a typical high school graduate who has no particular technical knowledge.⁷

Less understandable: She should be on the qui vive.

More understandable: She should be alert.

Less understandable: Benito formulated the manifesto.

More understandable: Benito prepared the statement.

Less understandable: An optometrist provided examinations predicated on the premise that their environmental circumstances required monitoring.

More understandable: An eye doctor regularly examined the employees' eyes because of workplace conditions.

Less understandable: Altercation between Hilda and Marta originated following dissension.

More understandable: The fight between Hilda and Marta began after a quarrel.

Less understandable: Midori demanded the prerogative to establish her own docket.

More understandable: Midori demanded the right to set her own schedule.

Less understandable: The economic condition prognosticator speculated that recession was imminent.

More understandable: The economist predicated that soon there would be a downturn in business.

Less understandable: The orator's rhetoric engrossed the audience.

More understandable: The speaker's talk fascinated the audience.

In the business writing course students are taught that to "be specific and precise" is very important when writing business letters. Japanese are modest in nature and reluctant to be straightforward. Therefore, Japanese college students must aim at more specific and precise expressions in their business writing. In short, they have to avoid abstract words that are common in the Japanese language and utilize more concrete words. For example, instead of using the word "holiday," they should use "Independence Day." The word "man" should be "John Smith." "Hot" can be replaced with "38 centigrade." The ability to use language determines the selection of the right word. In terms of context, writing slightly below the readers' level of understanding gives a better result of communication.⁸

Moreover, the students learn to form their sentences into paragraphs. They are taught that in English, a paragraph shows where topics begin and end. Organizing information in paragraphs is essential to send clear messages to readers. One has to include the same topic or idea, which means each paragraph has to be developed under a single topic or idea. Shorter sentences communicate better; thus, shorter paragraphs communicate better as well. Generally readers prefer to have shorter paragraphs, which help identify details better.

A good paragraph runs an average of eight lines and should have a topic sentence which introduces the main idea. Although not every paragraph has to have a topic sentence, using topic sentences can be a useful tool for writers to identify the central idea of each paragraph. To write a clear paragraph, unnecessary information should be left out. In the paragraph, sentences must steadily move forward, so that each sentence in a paragraph leads readers in logical and definite steps to the goal of the message.⁹

Thus, Kaplan's straight-line approach works in English business writing. It is clear that the

Japanese way of writing, which includes unnecessary details, can confuse English speaking readers. In reviewing Kaplan's theory it is important to understand how paragraphs are developed in English business writing.

Utilizing a topic sentence for each paragraph enables readers to focus on the main objective of business letters. Also, in typical English writing writers often place a topic sentence such as, "first of all," "then," "next," "finally," "in conclusion" and these words help clarify the movement of the paragraphs in the letters.¹⁰

Business writing students learn it is crucial not only to write flowing paragraphs, but also to write clear messages. The choice of words makes a difference in the clarity in any business letter. In order to make clear messages the following factors should be considered:

- 1) Using stronger words such as verbs and nouns makes business letters clearer. It is better to avoid adjectives and adverbs, which tend to distract the receivers from the main points of the messages.¹¹ Writers need to know the strength and vigor of words.
- 2) Concrete words are specific words that send clear and sharp messages.¹² Even similar words have subtle differences in meaning and writers use each word precisely.
- 3) Familiar words used in everyday life communicate better than stiff and difficult words. In general, shorter words, which are more familiar, serve better than longer words, because longer words leave the readers with an impression of difficulty. "A good suggestion is to use the simplest words that carry the meaning without offending the reader's intelligence."¹³
- 4) Technical words and acronyms must be carefully used, because people outside the field sometimes find difficulty in understanding such words. Although technical words and acronyms can economize your words, they must be used carefully for the people outside of the fields.¹⁴
- 5) Business letters should be written with positive words, which convey confidence and optimism. In contrast, negative words possibly instill a distrust of the sender. For example, words such as "no," "bad," "late," "never," "regret," "impossible" and "problem" give readers negative impressions, and those words should be avoided.¹⁵
- 6) Overused words and phrases in daily life such as "really," "great," "okay," "you know what I mean" and "is that right" should be avoided, because such overused words lose effectiveness in business writing.¹⁶
- 7) An obsolete word, which is not used in our everyday conversation cannot communicate very well and should be avoided in business communication.¹⁷
- 8) When it comes to English writing in the United States discriminatory words must be avoided. Such words are associated with pejorative stereotypes in relation to gender, race or nationality, age, and disabilities.¹⁸ Politically correct forms must be taken into account.

Furthermore, students must remember, whether writing a business letter via the Internet or regular mail, that business writing is most effective when written at or below the knowledge level of the reader. Words, sentences and paragraphs are concise and flow from one topic to another topic; and most importantly, the message of the letter is clear.

Utilizing Computers In Business Letter Writing

The Japanese and English languages differ in their grammar and structures. The opening of this paper addressed the idea that writing in which students translate from Japanese into English is not sufficient. Students writing English business letters must think and write in English. To overcome these difficulties it is helpful for Japanese college students to be introduced to business writing software.

Part of the reason direct translation is insufficient can be explained by Japanese-English translation software. The widespread popularity of the Internet has increased demand and availability of Japanese translation software. Software critics in Japan share the same opinion about the translation software. They say that English-Japanese translation software is useful to some extent. For example, top of the line software generally gives quick reference to an English business letter. The main problem is users need to shorten Japanese sentences as much as possible to have better results. The software is used more efficiently on personal letters, which normally have shorter sentences. With more complicated and longer sentences, such as technical writing, the software does not generate good results.

Today in our business world a personal computer is an indispensable tool. Laptop computers give mobility to anyone conducting business affairs. As long as electronic mail is a means of business communication, personal computers are a significant part of business writing classes. Not only in our everyday lives but also in the business world “What’s your e-mail address?” has become commonly asked. Electronic mail gives us a great deal of benefits due to its speed and cost. Unlike postal mail, an e-mail message can be delivered in a matter of minutes. Mistakes on e-mail messages may cause catastrophic results for organizations and business careers. For the above reasons utilizing personal computers correctly is extremely important when writing business letters. It is probable that receivers will judge organizations by messages sent. Therefore, e-mail business messages must be carefully written.

Additionally, with access to the Internet, business students can obtain a vast amount of information. Not only neighboring libraries but also libraries around the world can be searched through the Internet, and the information gathered is highly useful to produce business reports. This fact shows that without a computer today’s business would not be efficient. College business classes prepare for future business careers by improving business communication with the use of computer operating skills.

Information gathered through the Internet must be presentable in any report, and software such as spreadsheets, databases and desktop publishing can be organized and stored to complete the task. Both computers and the Internet are indispensable for today’s business and make our everyday business activities easier, more profitable, and more efficient, too.

It is generally recognized that software’s analytical abilities and organizing of functions are helpful for business. Nothing gives better performance, however, than word processing software for

business writing. Word processing software on personal computers, which is used most often, enables us to work easily on letters, memos, reports and other documents because of such functions as drafting, editing, formatting and drawing. In word processing application there are several key functions used to write better business letters.¹⁹ They are the following:

- 1) A thesaurus gives users choices of words, which can keep writers from repeating the same word and is useful to select proper words.
- 2) A spell checker automatically corrects misspelled words.
- 3) A style checker analyzes a writer's document and alerts the writer to improper length of sentences, level of vocabularies, choice of words and grammar. Spell checkers are only effective at identifying words in their dictionary, which means if the writer misused any words not listed in the regular dictionary, style checkers would not detect those errors. In short, style checkers only suggest potential problems for revision. One cannot rely entirely on their functions. Judgment is up to the writer. Therefore, the writer must know basic grammar.
- 4) An editing function enables users to insert, delete, move, and copy text with ease.^{20, 21}

For Japanese college students the above functions are useful. In particular, to make good use of the thesaurus the students must have abilities to choose correct or proper expressions or words.

The spell checker is a useful tool for Japanese college students. In general, it takes a long time for the students to look up a word in their dictionaries, but with this spell checker function they can save time. One of the reasons a lot of Japanese students do not like studying English is that they do not like to look up words in the dictionary. A style checker with the grammar correcting function is useful; however, it can only work when each sentence is well organized. A Japanese-English translation grammar checker cannot correct complicated writing, which means its reliability is low. Also, Japanese students would need a good grammatical judgement to detect words using the software. Japanese students are already familiar with the editing functions of word-processing software. With this, writers can create messages with ease.

Most importantly, among the various types of software, business-writing templates are the most beneficial for business writing students. Instead of translating from Japanese to English, the students learn to use computers with this type of software by familiarizing themselves with and becoming accustomed to patterned expressions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the differences in business communication between Japanese and English, the introduction of English business communication to Japanese students, and the importance of computers in business letter writing. Furthermore, students need to practice the overall components of language. Writing is the integration of reading, listening and speaking. Of these components, reading is essential to improve writing skills. Practicing to read helps eliminate the hassle of translating word for word. When one writes one needs to understand the cultural differences between native English speakers and the Japanese. Many expressions in English

and Japanese do not correspond to one another. Therefore, merely placing words in sentences is not enough—translating word for word would not suffice in giving the proper translation of the sentence. In order for Japanese students to improve their business writing skills, they need to familiarize themselves with business software. Functions and tools, such as style checker, spell checker, and the edit function, come in handy. However, business-letter templates are the most useful tools in business correspondence. The business student will benefit with a basic knowledge of the differences in communication between Japanese and English, understanding how business communication is taught, and the assistance of computers in regards to letter writing.

Notes

- 1 Michael H. Long and Jack C. Richards, *Methodology in TESOL* (Hawaii: Newbury House Publishers, 1987), 260.
- 2 H. Douglas Brown, *Amerika fuu gaikokugo gakushuu hou* [Reading the language barrier] (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1995), 34–35. H. Douglas Brown, *Reading the Language Barrier* (Intercultural Press, 1991).
- 3 Tomoyoshi Saeki, *Kagakuteki gaikokugo no benkyou hou* (Tokyo: Koudansha, 1992), 117–20.
- 4 H. Douglas Brown, *Teaching By Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1994), 322–23.
- 5 Takashi Shimaoka and Mieko Muramatsu, *Nichibei Ibunka Mondou* (Tokyo: Youhan Shuppan, 1998), 114–19.
- 6 A. C. “Buddy” Krizan, Patricia Merrier, Carol Larson-Jones and Jules Harcourt, *Business Communication*, 4th ed. (Ohio: South-Western College Publishing, 1996), 87.
- 7 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 90.
- 8 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 89.
- 9 Raymond V. Lesikar, John D. Pettit, Jr and Marie E. Flatley, *Lesikar’s Basic Business Communication*, 8th ed. (Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1999), 52.
- 10 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 50–51.
- 11 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 91–92.
- 12 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 25–26.
- 13 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 22.
- 14 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 24–25.
- 15 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 92.
- 16 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 93–94.
- 17 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 94.
- 18 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 32–33.
- 19 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 61.
- 20 Krizan, Merrier, Larson-Jones and Harcourt, 61–64.
- 21 Lesikar, Pettit, Jr and Flatley, 480–87.