

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Transferability of L1/L2 writing competence

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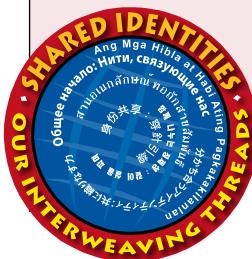
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This study analyzed Japanese and English argument essays written by Japanese participants and examined transferability of writing competence across languages. A total of 26 participants comprised 3 groups: university students without overseas experience ($N=10$), university students with 1 year of overseas instruction ($N=10$), and graduate students and teachers with 3 or more years of overseas experience ($N=6$). Analysis of L1 and L2 essays, questionnaires, and interview data yielded the following findings: (1) common characteristics of argumentation in English and Japanese included overall structure, components of introductions and conclusions, and use of counterarguments (with refutation); (2) structure, content, and language use all contributed to overall evaluation, but no difference among the 3 groups regarding organization meant that group differences in essay evaluation came from content and language use; and (3) writing competence transferred across languages involved text features, meta-knowledge about writing (e.g., audience awareness), and disciplinary knowledge/training.

本研究では、日本人被験者が作成した日英語による議論文を分析し、言語間のライティング能力の双向性について検証した。被験者は合計26名で、海外留学経験のない大学生($N=10$)、1年間の海外留経験をもつ学生($N=10$)、3年以上の長期間留学経験をもつ大学院生／大学教師($N=6$)の3グループである。収集したL1とL2の作文、アンケート、インタビュー、データを分析した結果、以下のことが判明した。(1) 日英語の議論文で共通に見られる特徴は、全体の構成、反論(反駁を含む)、序論／結論の構成要素に関するものであった。(2)構成、内容、言語使用はそれぞれ作文評価に貢献しているが、構成に関しては3グループ間に統計的な有意差は見られなかった。つまり、グループ間の作文評価の違いは内容と言語使用の違いから生じるものであった。(3) 言語間で転移可能なライティング能力にはテキストの特徴、読み手意識などのメタ知識、そして専門分野特有の知識／訓練(disciplinary knowledge)等が含まれることが明らかになった。



Two overlapping theoretical issues underlie this study: the interrelation of L1 and L2 writing competence; and the transfer of text features across languages. Concerning the first issue, most studies have found a positive relation between L1 and L2 writing competence (e.g., Cumming, 1989; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996); that is, proficient writers in L1 tend to be proficient writers in L2. Regarding the second issue, a number of studies have found transfer of text features learned from L1 writing training/experience to L2 texts (e.g., Hirose, 2003) and also the opposite direction, from L2 argumentation writing training to L1 essays (e.g., Berman, 1994). Furthermore, a few recent studies have posited bi-directionality of transfer of such text features as inclusion of a counterargument across L1 and L2 writing by the same writers (e.g., Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008). However, to date, little research has investigated the complex relation between text features and transfer of writing competence, a gap that this study attempts to redress.

The overall goal of this study is to examine the relation between text features and writing quality in order to elucidate the nature of transferability of writing competence across languages. The following three research questions were addressed:

- (1) What text features appear in L1 and L2 argumentation essays by 3 groups of experienced Japanese EFL writers?
- (2) What writing features contribute to essay quality?
- (3) What aspects of writing competence transfer across languages?

Method

Participants

Three groups of Japanese EFL writers in Japan participated:

Group 1: Upper division (third- or fourth-year) undergraduate university students (7 females, 3 males) in their early 20s, majoring in humanities or social sciences, with no overseas experience;

Group 2: Upper division university students (all females) in their early to mid 20s, mainly language majors, who experienced two semesters of university level instruction in English-speaking countries: N. America (5), Australia (2), UK (2), New Zealand (1);

Group 3: Advanced graduate students and teachers (all females) in their 30s to early 40s, with a variety of humanities and social sciences majors and three or more years of postgraduate instruction and experience in English-speaking countries: UK (3), N. America (2), Ireland (1).

Table 1 shows the English proficiency levels of Groups 1 and 2, according to a computerized language test (CASEC: Computerized Assessment Systems for English Communication, developed by the Eiken), on which Group 2 significantly outscored Group 1 ($p < .05$ on an independent t -test). As shown in Table 2, Group 1 actually comprised two subgroups: four (subgroup 2) with basically the same English proficiency as Group 2, and six (subgroup 1) with significantly lower scores. Group 3 members were not asked to take the CASEC test, as it was assumed that they all had advanced English proficiency.

Table 1. English proficiency scores (SDs) by group and subgroup

	CASEC score mean (SD)	TOEFL equivalent mean (SD)
Group 1 (N = 10)	708 (84)	507 (33)
Subgroup 1 (N = 6)	656 (61)	486 (24)
Subgroup 2 (N = 4)	787 (35)	538 (14)
Group 2 (N = 10)	785 (50)	537 (20)

The three groups reportedly differed in terms of their L1 and L2 writing backgrounds. While all had received L1 literacy training in elementary through secondary school, Groups 1 and 2 received more L1 training in high school and wrote more L1 reports in Japanese universities. In contrast, Group 3 exceeded the other two groups in L2 training and experience. In overseas settings, they wrote many more papers than Group 2, the lengths of their papers were much longer (up to 15,000 words), and all but one had written Master's and/or doctoral theses in English. Groups 1 and 2 reportedly received much more English writing instruction in Japanese universities than Group 3, although no members of Group 1, as opposed to a majority of those in Group 2 and half of those in Group 3, had written a graduation thesis in English.

Data sources

The sources of data for the study included background questionnaires reporting participants' writing experience in Japan and overseas, one L1 and one L2 essay, and in-depth follow-up interviews.

The essay task was based on two argumentation topics:

Topic 1: Should foreign language education begin in elementary school?

Topic 2: Should elderly people live with family?

The essay prompts, written in Japanese, specified a particular audience, an educational Japanese/Canadian publisher soliciting contributions for publication, and explicitly asked writers to take a position for or against the issue.

The topics were alternated, with everyone writing in Japanese first, because we considered they would feel more comfortable writing initially in their L1. There was no time limit, and dictionaries were allowed. The writing sessions were videotaped, and the interviews audio-taped. The semi-structured interviews, lasting 1.5 to 2 hours and conducted mainly in Japanese, asked about the construction of the texts and decisions made during the writing process, as well as the writers' perceptions of L1 and L2 writing and possible background influences.

Results

Most of the writers spent almost an hour on each essay; the average writing times (ranging between 53 and 62 minutes) did not differ significantly across groups or languages.

Table 2 shows the number (mean and standard deviation) of total English words and Japanese characters in the L1 and L2 essays by the three groups. In both languages, Group 3 wrote significantly longer essays ($p < .05$ according to post-ANOVA Scheffé tests).

Table 2. Essay length by group, means (SDs)

	English words	Japanese characters
Group 1	337.7 (124.3)	1136.9 (119.8)
Group 2	358.9 (57.8)	1137.3 (112.7)
Group 3	495.8 (64.6)	1397.5 (324.7)

All 26 participants wrote argumentation texts in L1, and most (23/26) also did in L2. Three writers wrote expository essays in English, which were excluded from the argumentation text analysis (since all three were on Topic 2, we assume that the topic may in part have affected these writers' approach to the task).

Argumentation text features

The overall structure of the argumentation texts was found to be the same in L1 and L2 essays: a statement of the writer's position in the introduction, followed by pro-reasons/support in the body, and the position restated in the conclusion. A counterargument (CA: positive points of the opposite position or a negative point of the chosen position), usually including a refutation, was placed as a separate component of many essays, most often before the conclusion. The following analysis of specific text features focuses on introductions, counterarguments/refutations and conclusions.

Introductions

The most salient introduction pattern consisted of *background* and *position*, found in almost all L1 and L2 essays. Table 3 presents the distribution of other frequently occurring elements.

Table 3. Distribution of introduction components by group

	Preview		Issue	Clarification
	General	Specific		
Group 1	L1: 50%	20%	L1: 20%	L1: 10%
	L2: 10%	20%	L2: 20%	L2: 0%
Group 2	L1: 60%	10%	L1: 20%	L1: 20%
	L2: 33%	22%	L2: 11%	L2: 0%
Group 3	L1: 40%	20%	L1: 67%	L1: 67%
	L2: 0%	0%	L2: 100%	L2: 50%

What distinguished the three groups was the use of *issue* (setting up contrasting sides of an argument, general controversy) and *clarification* (limiting focus/topic, defining terms). Nearly all writers of Group 3 used *issue* to show contrasting sides of a topic before taking a position, and many of them also employed *clarification* to define particular terms in their essays, for example, "old people," or to narrow their focus. The following excerpt provides an example of *issue* (underlined) and *clarification* (underlined italics) in an introduction by a Group 3 member.

Group 3 Introduction (3-1)

To begin with, it sounds awkward to discuss whether or not old people SHOULD live with their family members, for it somewhat lacks crucial point: old people's right and freedom to choose. Therefore, I would rather say old people should take an active role in choosing to live with

their family members. Furthermore, it is a quite personal, complex issue that has to take lots of things into consideration. A should-or-shouldn't debate is, thus unrealistic. Based on this point of view, I will discuss some major possible pros and cons for old people to live with their family members. In this essay, "old people" refers to single old people and "family member(s)" to sons or daughter's family member(s).

In contrast, Groups 1 and 2 employed *issue* and *clarification* much less frequently in their introductions, and instead used *general preview*, which broadly indicates what is to come in the body in terms of content and structure. Thus, while including basic elements such as *background* and *position*, the introductions by Group 1 and 2 writers tended to be less specific than those of Group 3 in terms of contextualizing for a given topic and using well-defined key words. The preference of Groups 1 and 2 for general introductions, particularly in Japanese, appears to come from their perceptions of Japanese introductions, as reflected in comments like "it does not need preview [of specific content] because it gets redundant or tedious (*kudoi*)."

Counterarguments/refutations

Table 4 shows the frequency of counterargument with refutation components by group and language. Overall the Japanese essays contained counterargument components more often than the English essays (46% and 35%, respectively). What stands out across the two languages is that writers in Group 2 employed counterargument with

Table 4. Frequency of counterargument components by group

	L1 writing	L2 writing
Group 1	3/10 (30%)	3/10 (30%)
Group 2	6/10 (60%)	3/9 (33%)
Group 3	3/6 (50%)	2/4 (50%)

refutation almost twice as often in L1 as in L2 (60% in L1, 33% in L2), whereas Groups 1 and 3 used it with the same frequency in both languages (Group 1: 30% and Group 3: 50%).

Reported sources of knowledge about counterarguments included both L1 and L2 training/experience. For Group 1, the knowledge came mainly from L1 essay training; half of Group 2 learned it from L2 writing classes in Japan and overseas, and half from both L1 and L2 writing instruction (but more saliently from English); and Group 3 acquired the knowledge from L1 and L2 training/experience in Japan and overseas, but more from L2. However, not all students had received instruction in argumentation essay writing, and for those who had, the instruction did not always include reference to counterargument/refutation, which can be considered an optional, rather than a necessary, component of argumentation. The motivations for including counterarguments were apparently the same for both English and Japanese essays. The main reasons reported were to make essays logical; to present a strong, persuasive argument; and to show objectivity (i.e., not to appear one-sided).

The interview data suggest that difficulty of formulation, lack of confidence, and risk avoidance account for the less frequent occurrence of counterarguments in the L2 essays by Group 2. For example, in one student's words (quotations translated from the original Japanese, here and throughout the paper): "It's difficult to formulate counterargument and refutation. If I wrote this essay in Japanese, I would have included it because I could write it in a couple of sentences." Another student reported being afraid that inclusion of a counterargument "would break the balance," and another stated, "I wondered whether I should put it or not, but I didn't do it because I didn't have confidence."

It appears that instruction and repeated practice play significant roles in developing the ability to present an opposing view and then argue against it. From these findings it can be inferred that producing a counterargument and refutation component is a cognitively challenging task that many of these students had not yet internalized in L2, due to insufficient practice incorporating these components. It is also possible that the burden of composing in L2 leads learners to take as many shortcuts as possible, and that as writing fluency improves, along with general L2 proficiency, there is less motivation to avoid complex argument structures.

Conclusions

All the L1 and L2 argumentation essay conclusions contained *position* (restated or implied) and *summary* (condensing main points of the essay). Table 5 shows the distribution of salient elements of the conclusions.

Table 5. Conclusion components by groups

	Summary		Extension/Future
	General	Specific	
Group 1 L1	80%	0%	90%
	L2	50% 20%	20%
Group 2 L1	70%	10%	20%
	L2	33% 56%	22%
Group 3 L1	67%	0%	33%
	L2	25% 50%	83%

As seen in the table, whereas Groups 1 and 2 similarly employed *general summary*, they differed markedly in the use of *specific summary* (content of particular points discussed), *extension* (analyzing/interpreting content more deeply) and *future concerns* (giving future perspective or afterthought). In their L2 essays, Group 2 employed *specific summary* more often than Group 1, whereas in L1 they did not use *extension/future concerns* as often, which constituted a striking difference between the two groups (Group 2: 20%; Group 1: 90%). The following (translated) L1 conclusion by a Group 1 member illustrates *extension/future concern*, shown in underlined italics.

Group 1 Conclusion (1-4)

As seen above, the implementation of early foreign language education has many advantages and it is expected to help improve the English ability of Japanese. As the world goes more global, chances of Japanese taking an active role in the world

must be increasing. In such cases, the need for speaking foreign languages will be remarkably high. Regrettably, Japan now has only a handful of people with good command of English. In order to change this situation and turn Japan into a new and open country, we should move ahead with early foreign language education.

The interview data suggest that the frequent use of *specific summary* and the infrequent use of *extension/future concerns* in the conclusions by Group 2 were due to their perceptions of L1 and L2 conclusions. When asked in the interview what aspects of conclusions they paid most attention to, many of them answered “summarizing,” repeatedly using such phrases as “putting ideas into one sentence,” “rephrasing,” and “with no new ideas.” Whereas six Group 2 students reportedly saw L1 and L2 conclusions as being the same, four explicitly stated that Japanese conclusions should go beyond what is stated in the essay, e.g., “referring to future perspectives, better to add something more” (S2-2); “not interesting to just restate ideas, so include extended ideas a little” (S2-8). Nevertheless, only two of the ten actually included future or extended perspectives in their L1 conclusions, which implies possible influence from L2 writing on the L1 conclusions of 80% of Group 2 essays.

Essay evaluation

Evaluation criteria

For both English and Japanese, the rating scales comprised four main categories: *Content*, *Structure*, *Language* and *Overall quality*. Content contained three subcategories:

amount of explanation, strength of evidence and consideration for the reader. Structure had two: *essay organization* and *paragraph unity/coherence*. Language, with no subcategories, comprised richness of vocabulary and clarity of expression. Overall quality was a holistic rating of the entire essay in relation to the other essays in the set. Each of the criteria was judged on a 7-point scale. Two native English university teachers rated the English essays, and two native Japanese *kokugo* teachers evaluated the Japanese essays. The ratings showed acceptable agreement between both pairs of raters on all 7 scales, with Pearson correlations ranging from .61 to .96 (all statistically significant). For the analysis, the category and item scores by the two raters were averaged.

Group differences: Main categories

Table 6 reports the mean scores by group for the English essays. While there were no differences among the three groups in organization scores, Group 3 significantly outscored the other two groups in content ($p < .05$), language ($p < .01$), and overall quality ($p < .01$). Groups 1 and 2 did not differ very much from each other except in language, in which Group 2 tended to outscore Group 1 ($p = .078$). Overall Group 2 was slightly closer to Group 3.

Table 6. L2 Essay scores by group, means (SDs)

	Content (/21)	Organization (/14)	Language (/7)	Overall (/7)
Group 1	12.30 (4.24)	9.43 (2.69)	3.18 (0.83)	3.98 (1.26)
Group 2	13.50 (1.44)	10.15 (2.11)	3.98 (0.76)	4.48 (0.82)
Group 3	17.54 (2.71)	11.08 (2.63)	6.13 (0.54)	5.83 (0.88)

Table 7. L1 Essay scores by group, means (SDs)

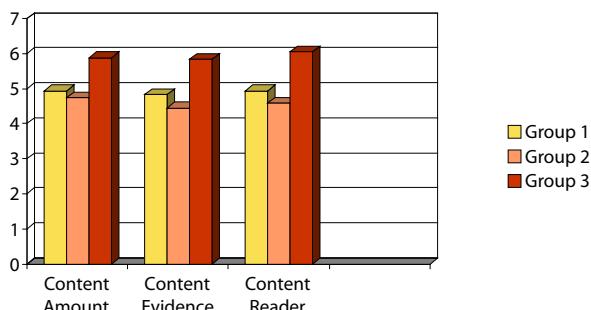
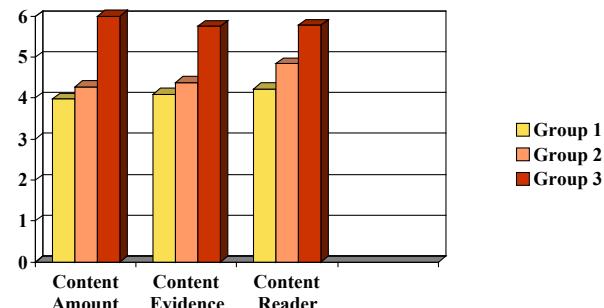
	Content (/21)	Organization (/14)	Language (/7)	Overall (/7)
Group 1	14.68 (2.36)	9.95 (1.44)	4.83 (0.54)	5.03 (0.70)
Group 2	13.75 (1.84)	9.68 (1.58)	4.78 (0.66)	4.78 (0.68)
Group 3	17.75 (2.98)	10.63 (2.08)	6.04 (0.68)	6.08 (0.88)

[For each category, (/number) indicates the full score.]

Table 7 presents the mean scores by group for the Japanese essays. The results are similar to those of the English evaluation. Again Group 3 significantly outperformed the other two groups, except in organization. One small difference is that Group 1 was a bit closer to Group 3 in Japanese essay evaluation.

Group differences: Content subcategories

Figures 1 and 2 show the mean scores by content subcategory in Japanese and English, respectively.

**Figure 1. L1 Content subcategory scores by group****Figure 2. L2 Content subcategory scores by group**

In both languages, Group 3 outperformed Groups 1 and 2 in all 3 content subcategories. In English, the differences were significant between Groups 1 and 3 in all subcategories, and between Groups 2 and 3 in reader concern. In L1, Group 3 outscored Group 2 in strength of evidence and reader concern and outscored Group 1 only in reader concern.

Regarding amount, the Group 3 writers explained points and subtopics in much more detail. With respect to strength of evidence, there appeared to be a difference in the kind of evidence. Group 1 often used personal experience to support a point. In Excerpt 1, the student writer explains an advantage of old people living with their family by describing an incident in his own family:

Excerpt 1 (S1-5):

For example, my family live with my grandmother now, and the other day my grandmother fell down suddenly...

In addition to personal evidence, Group 2 students tended to add more impersonal, factual evidence. For example, in Excerpt 2, the writer makes use of a piece of scientific knowledge, gained from a class she had taken, to support early foreign language education:

Excerpt 2 (S2-1):

Generally, it is said that the critical point of language acquisition is about the age of 12.

Finally, Group 3's evidence contained very specific information. For example, the writer of Excerpt 3, arguing against foreign language education, uses detailed information to explain that Japanese children have many things to learn, and that adding something extra is not good for children.

Excerpt 3 (S3-3):

In particular, for Japanese children, it is already very challenging to memorize thousands of kanji, or Chinese characters, and to learn to express themselves in the form of sakubun (short essay).

Language complexity measures

As reported above, Group 3 language use was judged to be far better than that by the other two groups. In order to gain some insight into how language use differed among the groups, we applied several objective measures of language complexity, shown in Table 8. Somewhat surprisingly, considering the gap in language evaluation scores, Group 2

Table 8. English language complexity measures

	Passive sentences (%)	Reading ease (higher = easier)	Grade level (Flesch-Kincaid)
Group 1	6.50 (7.11)	62.97 (9.25)	8.25 (1.72)
Group 2	11.10 (8.84)	53.54 (9.74)	10.19 (1.27)
Group 3	12.83 (8.42)	48.98 (7.91)	10.93 (1.30)

students approached Group 3 in terms of reading ease level and grade reading level. Since seven out of the ten Group 2 students had written a graduation thesis in English, it appears likely that their use of vocabulary and sentences was affected by their academic training.

Correlations across languages

Finally, looking at the relation between L1 and L2 scores, we found significantly high correlations across all four main categories, as shown in Table 9 (eliminating 5 outliers who had relatively different backgrounds).

We interpret this significantly positive correlation as meaning that, given sufficient writing practice in both languages, competent writers in L1 are generally competent writers in L2, regardless of how they acquired their writing competence (e.g., from L1 or L2 training, or both).

Table 9. Correlations between L1 and L2 essay scores

	Content	Organization	Language	Overall
N = 21	.519*	.448*	.638**	.564**

*p < .05, **p < .01

Discussion

Text features across languages

In this study, we found that the overall argumentation structure in L1 and L2 essays by all groups consisted of position, support, an optional counterargument, and position, which accords with previous findings regarding similarities in English and Japanese argumentation essays (Kubota, 1998; Hirose, 2003). The introductions in this study usually contained background, position, and preview in both L1 and L2, but Groups 1 and 2 included more general previews in their Japanese essays, while Group 3 often included issue and clarification in both languages. In their conclusions, all three groups generally presented a summary; however, the summary tended to be more general in their L1 essays. Moreover, Group 1 often included an extension/future concern in their Japanese conclusions, while Group 3 frequently employed them in English. These results suggest that all three groups used similar text features in their essays, but there were differences among them according to the language they used. These differences in text features apparently relate to the writers' perceptions of characteristics of Japanese and English writing, such as future perspective, which was identified by Group 1 and 2 writers as typical of Japanese but not English conclusions. However, further investigation is needed to discover why the most experienced (Group 3) writers tended to employ this reportedly Japanese feature much more frequently in their English essays (83%) than in Japanese (33%).

Text features contributing to writing quality

Although content, structure, and language all contributed

to L2 writing quality in this study, the development of content and language use made striking contributions to higher quality. For content, this entailed elaborating the support with more words and explanation, providing persuasive evidence, and showing concern for the reader by clarifying the issues and terms. For language, it involved the use of clear expression, rich vocabulary, and complex sentence structure. These writing features distinguished the essays of very experienced writers from the essays of less experienced writers. Exactly the same results were found with L1 writing. The finding that organizational structure did not distinguish among essay quality scores contrasts with findings from studies of novice and returnee writers (e.g., Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2008). This implies that, while the ability to organize ideas coherently is central to writing quality, acquisition of that basic ability may constitute a threshold level of writing competence that had been acquired by virtually all the participants in this study, who can be characterized as moderately to highly experienced writers.

Transfer of writing competence

All these findings suggest that transfer of learning took place in the two directions, from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1, as had previously been found among novice writers (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008). The transferred aspects were not limited to text features, such as argumentation structure with a counterargument. They also included meta-knowledge about writing, for example, reader awareness. That is, to help the reader understand, the writer tried to provide background information, clarify issues, and show opposing ideas or views. At the same time, disciplinary knowledge was

apparently easily transferred across languages by Group 3 writers, who applied the academic writing skills they had acquired through training in their specialized fields to clarify the issues and define the technical terms in their essays.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to provide insight into Japanese and English argumentation text features, their relation to essay quality, and the transfer of knowledge across L1 and L2 writing. Because of the small number of participants, the results cannot be generalized beyond the particular context. Nevertheless, they suggest a number of directions for future research. These include confirming the findings with a larger number of participants and extending the investigation to other groups of writers, such as Japanese as a foreign language learners in North America.

In terms of pedagogical implications, we can suggest that once students have acquired the ability to organize their ideas in a coherent essay structure, the next step for writing teachers and learners is to focus on developing the content of the essays. In particular, writers need to learn to include a large amount of support, convincing evidence (not only personal examples, but also more objective information), and also reference to opposing views and assertions. Finally, it is important to focus on refinement of language, including clarity of expression, rich vocabulary, and more complex sentences, in order to raise the level of sophistication of the writing.

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