Using Rhetorical Structure Theory for contrastive analysis at the micro and macro levels of discourse: An investigation of Japanese EFL learners' and native-English speakers' writing

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

Introduction

> Everywhere on signs and hangings, and on the backs of people passing by, [I]
> . . . observe wonderful Chinese characters; and the wizardry of all these texts
> makes the dominant tone of the spectacle . . . As for the literary language, I need
> only observe that to make acquaintance with it requires very much more than a
> knowledge of several thousand Chinese characters.

> *-- Lafcadio Hearn*

Hearn's first impressions of Japan resonate strongly with my own. When I first set foot in Japan, everything was very different, so peculiar. The flashing neon signs, the scurrying crowds of bobbing black-haired heads, the blended smells of modern city and traditional cuisine, but, perhaps what I found most difficult to comprehend was the spoken and seemingly indecipherable written language that was all around me. As I began to formally study the language, I quickly realized I would need more than a repertoire of vocabulary and knowledge of Japanese grammar to become proficient. There was something else—something that made the Japanese language alien to me—, and I needed to make sense of it.

I quickly took notice of a predisposition among Japanese to use passive over direct verb forms, which often caused difficulties for me as I could not identify the subject; I saw a preference to identify oneself as part of a group or organization[1], which went against everything I learned growing up in the individualistic society of the United States; I noticed how Japanese often showed greater appreciation for beauty and tradition than practical function, which frustrated me to no end when I saw a much more practical way of accomplishing a particular task; and, even as I began to understand the words that were being spoken around me and to read the strange characters on billboards, pamphlets, and pre-packaged foods, I still found myself regularly misinterpreting the intended meaning. Things always felt vague and unclear to me. I was left wondering how anyone in this country ever had a

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1   Japanese tend to introduce themselves by their family name first, e.g., I am Brown Jonathan. They also identify the
       company, organization, or school to which they belong, such as, "I am Leiden University's Brown Jonathan.

successful communicative interaction with another. One experience in particular left a profound impression on me and awakened me to the intricacies and possible perils of language across cultures.

After graduating university, I took a position teaching English in Japan at local public elementary schools. In addition to my teaching duties, I also acted as a cultural liaison and translator and was often asked to translate short letters and documents from Japanese into English. It was in this capacity in which I learned how cultural values and conventions can be reflected differently across languages. I remember one case in particular in which the superintendent had written a letter to our city's sister city in the United States in order to cancel a student exchange that was to take place over the spring (there had been an outbreak of swine flu across the Midwestern regions of the United States, and the superintendent was being cautious).

In the letter, he opened with a very poetic and convoluted description of the arrival of spring in Japan. He described the cherry blossoms, the sweet, spring breeze coming off the surrounding mountains, the crystal blue skies, the aroma of blooming flowers, and the sound of buzzing bees and singing birds, after which he suddenly began expressing his concern about the swine flu pandemic and, seemingly out of nowhere apologized and requested that the scheduled visit for that year be cancelled. I immediately realized that such a letter would probably not be well received. Essentially, what the superintendent would appear to be saying was: "It is so beautiful here, but you won't get to see it." I felt this would come across as extremely tactless in English; however, I knew that in Japan such a salutation in letter writing is quite common. I had to sit down with the superintendent and explain to him how his letter might be misread should I translate it as he had written. After some time, he agreed to let me write a letter on my own that better conformed to the conventions and expectations of a member of an (USA) English language community. This was probably my first real-life experience where I saw how cultural expectations do not necessarily translate well and can, in fact, be misinterpreted. This opened my eyes to the differences of languages beyond language. I began to better understand that communication is a much more complicated phenomenon than memorizing a list of vocabulary or familiarizing one's self with grammatical structures.

I did not fully appreciate the implications of my observations until I entered a graduate school program, however. Through my studies and teaching at that time[2] I began to notice a stark contrast between the direct and individualistic styles and strategies in which I had been educated and the more indirect and collectivistic ones I observed in my Japanese students of English. It was from this point I began to try to explain these differences through my observations of the culture and language in an attempt to improve the quality of my instruction and thereby improve my students' language skills, specifically in writing. The following contrastive study will be my most substantial attempt thus far at doing just that.

Contrastive studies between the languages of English and Japanese make up a field of research that has offered substantial contributions to our understanding of L2 writing (see Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983; Hinds, 1983, 1990; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Kobayashi, 1984; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2001; Kubota, 1997; Miyake, 2007; Takagaki, 2001, 2003). Despite the insight they have provided, none thus far have been extensive enough to offer more than suggestive implications. These studies range from the objective, quantifiable measurements of sentence-level features, to the more interpretive observations of discourse analysis, yet few really provide empirical, quantifiable evidence that could be used to practically address the needs of Japanese EFL learners in the writing classroom. What needs to be done, therefore, is research that combines quantifiable measurements with interpretive observations. This contrastive study is a first step towards such an investigation. This introductory chapter will begin with the problem and its scope. Then the research question around which this study was designed and the rationale for the study will be put forward. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the purpose and significance of the study. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the dissertation.

The Problem & Its Scope

The difficulties English-language learners face in mastering the complex conventions of English writing have long been recognized by scholars, instructors, and students alike. Traditionally, L2 pedagogy focused on grammar and borrowed from L1 writing theory. The problem here was twofold. First, students were generally not given opportunity to apply the structure they were learning outside of translation exercises. This meant language learners were only reconstructing

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2   I had just begun an adjunct position at a local university where I was teaching English academic writing to Japanese undergraduate students.

texts rather than constructing originals. The other issue was the fact that very little L1 writing theory existed at the time. The general belief was that writing talent is innate—not something that can be taught. Over the years, however, research began to suggest it is not so much the grammar with which language learners struggle but the "hidden, unarticulated values" (Li, 2014, p. 105) that are all too often taken for granted in the writing classroom. With this postulation in hand, Robert B. Kaplan began to look beyond the level of grammar to the level of discourse in an effort to expose these "hidden, unarticulated values."

In his seminal 1966 study, Kaplan proposed that culture plays a significant role on how discourse is constructed and attributed cultural differences to why apparent divergences occur between non-native English speakers' writing, particularly speakers of languages with rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American, and native English speakers' writing. Though this might seem rather obvious today, Kaplan's observation was to have an immeasurable impact on L2 writing pedagogy (Hinkel, 2002). Furthermore, Kaplan fostered an awareness of and interest in rhetorical frameworks outside of Western cultures and languages, ushering in a new field of study in applied linguistics called contrastive rhetoric (CR).

Since Kaplan's work, studies in discourse and rhetoric across different cultures have looked at discourse paradigms and textual features employed in L2 writing of native speakers from a variety of backgrounds, such as Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, among others. Much insight about L2 writing has been gained as a result, and it is now clear that the quality of L2 writing differs compared to the writing of NESs in two distinct ways: structural and linguistic (Weigle, 2002). Unsurprisingly, then, the objective of most contrastive studies is to identify differences in linguistic features (micro-level) and/or rhetorical/organizational patterns (macro-level) that could account for differences between the writings of L2 learners and NESs. To this end, contrastive studies have employed a variety of analytical techniques, and studies comparing Japanese and English are no exception.

Many contrastive studies between Japanese and English have been more objective in nature, applying quantitative approaches, such as error analysis at the micro-level, i.e., linguistic features to identify phenomena that differ from that of NESs (see Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983; Bryant, 1984; Hinkel, 2001; Hirose, 2014; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Ito, 2004; Moriya, 1997). Other studies, however, have applied more subjective approaches that have focused on rhetorical and organizational patterns (see Easton, 1982; Haenouchi & Ichinose, 2010; Hirose, 2003; Miyake, 2007; Nishigaki & Leishman, 2001; Takagaki, 2003). Together these studies make up a field of research that has

offered substantial contributions to our understanding of Japanese and English discourse as well as L2 writing in general. Unfortunately, despite the insight these studies have provided, we are still left with many unanswered questions. Today, Japanese EFL learners (JEFLs) seem no closer to grasping the intricacies of English writing than they were at the inception of contrastive rhetoric. Disputes among scholars and discrepancies across the literature have negatively influenced the field's progress. Essentially, the only consensus that seems to have been achieved is that the English writing of Japanese L1 speakers is "illogical" and "ambiguous" or perhaps more accurately, incoherent, relative to that of native-English speakers' (NESs') writing (see Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983; Atkinson, 1997; Connor, 2005; Davies, 1998; Easton, 1982; Harder & Harder, 1982; Hinds, 1976, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1987, 1990; Kunihiro, 1976; Nishigaki & Leishman, 2001; Nishihara, 1990; Oi, 1986; Oi & Kamimura, 1998; O'Riordan, 1999).

Beyond this very immense and rather broad characterization of Japanese English writing, no study, as far as I am aware, has pinpointed exactly why Japanese struggle to create coherent texts in English. Thus, as is the case with most contrastive rhetorical studies, this project is firstly motivated by a pedagogical need. JEFLs need the conventions of English writing explicated so that they can successfully meet the rhetorical expectations of NESs, as there clearly remains "hidden" and "unarticulated" values with which these learners continue to struggle, which I believe is due to the fact that they are simply unaware of those expectations.

Likewise, it seems teachers themselves have not been able to successfully identify what exactly is causing JEFL writers' English writing to be incoherent. Attempts to explain this have resulted in concerns at the macro-level, with emphasis on organizational patterns of students' texts. It is almost a certainty that if one were to pick up any EFL/ESL textbook on English writing today, a large portion of that textbook would be focused on the basic organization of an essay, covering elements like thesis statement, supporting body, and conclusion. Many of these textbooks also add sections about syntax and grammatical structures for good measure. Most textbooks usually spend a significant amount of time on cohesive devices as well, but this emphasis on cohesive devices has also attributed to errors in JEFL writing (see Hinkel, 2001, for example). The result is textbooks and EFL writing courses that provide information about writing at the macro-level and at the micro-level, but rarely do they demonstrate how the two work together to create a cohesive and coherent whole. This, unfortunately, seems to be a reflection on the state of research in this area rather than on the instructors who are teaching from these books or the authors and publishers who are producing them.

It appears that scholars, teachers, and students alike still remain unsure about what needs to be done. Due to past contrastive studies, teachers tend to look to the student's L1 and/or culture and then, in response, push the one-size-fits-all, template-style essay organizational patterns. Still, students continue to struggle and although their texts may (on the surface at least) begin to appear to be more "native-like," something remains "awkward"—something that the teacher cannot quite ascertain. So, then there is a turn toward grammar and syntactic structure, yet still the "non-nativeness" in Japanese L2 writers' English texts lingers. It is thus not enough to simply identify differences and postulate origins of those differences. Rather, research should attempt to pinpoint the specific conventions JEFLs need explicated so that writing instructors can effectively help these learners overcome their weaknesses. In fact, it is vital that the fixation on the origin of errors that is so prevalent in contrastive rhetorical studies is sidestepped and the errors themselves become the focal point.

Research Questions

What needs to be done, therefore, is research that combines quantifiable measurements with interpretive observations of anomalies at both the micro- and macro-levels. These anomalies must be considered in tandem with one another, not as separate entities, in order to plausibly account for what is causing JEFL writing to be experienced as "illogical" and "ambiguous" by NESs beyond generalizations of Japanese rhetoric and errors in cohesion. Accordingly, this type of rhetorical analysis demands a different approach that can look at both local and global features and offer quantifiable data to substantiate its results. This study, therefore, adopts the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST; Mann & Thompson, 1988) framework for contrastive purposes (to be briefly discussed momentarily and in greater detail in Chapter 3) and applies it to a corpus of JEFL English texts and NESs' texts in an attempt to answer the following research question:

- Why does JEFL English writing often times not meet the rhetorical expectations of English and is regularly regarded as "illogical," "ambiguous," and "incoherent" by NESs beyond general organizational/rhetorical patterns, grammatical correctness, or even idiomaticity?

In addition, this study will also briefly attempt to address an auxiliary question:

- Are there any similarities between Japanese writing and Japanese English writing that differ from NESs' writing and point to a distinct predisposition among Japanese for certain rhetorical patterns that do not adhere to the rhetorical expectations of English?

Purpose & Significance of Study

Pedagogical

The chief purpose of this study is, of course, to shed some light on exactly what conventions JEFLs are missing that are causing their writing to be perceived as incoherent, and the timing for such a study is without a doubt ideal as the demand for improved instruction in the English writing classroom in Japan has never been so great.

From 2004, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) initialized comprehensive education reform. These changes have been felt in all areas of education, but, in particular, English has seen vast amendments. Japan now seeks to produce citizens who can perform on the global academic stage. As a result of this reformation, the country is experiencing an influx, particularly in higher education, of English programs and curriculum concerned with developing learners' academic skills to the global standard, with one of the more important skills being writing. Programs are developing with the goal of yielding graduates with highly competent English academic skills. Because of this, there is now a demand for research that reveals the best pedagogical approaches for bringing Japanese EFL learners to the necessary level of literacy competence to succeed academically in English. Consequently, there is a need to not only understand how to teach these students but what to teach them to get them to this level. I hope that this study will help to provide some insight to bring Japanese to the global standards and expectations with regard to English writing.

Methodological

In addition to the main purpose, i.e., pedagogical, this study has several underlying distinctions, the first of which is methodological.

As previously mentioned, the majority of contrastive studies between Japanese and English have been an either-or dichotomy—either they were concerned with errors at the macro-level or they were concerned with errors at the micro-level. One likely reason for that are the limited methods available for contrastive purposes. Quantitative studies have been forced to deal solely with local errors, while qualitative studies have been, arguably, overly subjective in nature. Those that were both quantitative and qualitative tended to consider the two mutually exclusive, that is, qualitative results and quantitative results were not generally considered in conjunction with one another (e.g., Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983; Haenouchi & Ichinose, 2010; Hinkel, 2001; Kamimura & Oi, 1998).

Furthermore, the vast majority of contrastive studies between Japanese English writing and NESs' writing are not exploratory—they had a set of predetermined features that they were investigating, such as Connor's (1984) or Narita, Sato, and Sugiura's (2004) investigations of the use of logical connectors in transitions, Achiba and Kuromiya's (1983) study that looked at hedging, as well as other features, in texts, and Oi (1986) who focused on the global organizational patterns of Japanese L2 writers' English texts. In other words, these studies entered the forest with a map of marked locations and sought the best way to get L2 learners to those locations. However, the investigated features in these studies were usually identified through previous literature and have long been recognized as problem areas for EFL/ ESL learners, so they really contributed little with regard to explicating hidden and unarticulated values of English writing or exposing conventions with which learners struggle.

While helping students get to where they need to be is, of course, the goal of all instructors, sometimes what is needed is to find out exactly where that destination is, and this is not always as simple as identifying routes. Sometimes it requires exploring and charting locations that have yet to be discovered. Therefore, what is needed is a study that can 1) investigate texts at both the micro- and macro-levels in conjunction with one another, 2) effectively combine quantifiable data with qualitative observations, and 3) reliably explore texts in search of anomalies that can plausibly explain coherence or lack thereof. This study will attempt to meet these needs through a quantitatively oriented rhetorical analysis that compares English expository texts written by JEFLs with those written by NESs within the framework of RST.

RST, first developed by Mann and Thompson (1988), is a descriptive linguistic approach that analyzes the organization of discourse. It offers a systematic way in which texts can be annotated. If the annotation involves an entire text, the analyst seeks an annotation that includes every part of that text in one connected whole (Taboada & Mann, 2006). The whole text is broken into smaller units and the way by which one unit is connected to another is by addition of a RST relation, which is defined in terms of four fields: 1) Constraints on the nucleus; 2) Constraints on the satellite; 3) Constraints on the combination of the nucleus and satellite; and 4) Effect (achieved on the text receiver) (Taboada & Mann, 2006).

One of the greatest advantages of RST is that it, as Taboada and Mann (2006) argue, ". . . points to a tight relation between relations and coherence in text, thus constituting a way of explaining coherence" (p. 6). In other words, RST offers a way

to articulate the unarticulated rules, to speak the unspoken values, and to reveal the hidden conventions with which learners of English struggle. Consequently, RST is exceedingly suited for the purposes and objectives of this study.

In recent years, a couple of scholars have applied RST in an effort to quantify observed anomalies in learners' texts for contrastive purposes with some success (see Skoufaki, 2009; Yamashita, 2015), but both of these investigations were preliminary and limited in their scope. I hope this study will expand upon Skoufaki's and Yamashita's works and provide future research with some guidance on how to effectively adopt RST for contrastive purposes and avoid any pitfalls of using RST that this current investigation may uncover.

Theoretical

In addition to pedagogical and methodological contributions, this study hopes to offer some theoretical advancement to the field.

Since its inception over half a century ago, contrastive rhetoric and its founder, Robert Kaplan (1966), have endured countless criticisms. The very mention of contrastive rhetoric today will most certainly guarantee vexation from skeptics ready with imputations of stereotyping, linguistic imperialism, and ethnocentric bias. Consequently, contrastive rhetoric has become somewhat of a dirty word in the fields of L2 writing, EFL/ESL, and second-language acquisition (SLA). This requires scholars who undertake contrastive work to tread cautiously in associating his/her research with what has been deemed by these critics as an ostracized theory. Yet even its most scornful opponents cannot ignore the fact that contrastive rhetoric has provided a great deal of insight into L2 writing and has contributed immensely to L2 writing pedagogy, as is evidenced by a more discipline-oriented approach that is most common in textbooks and classrooms today (Silva, 1990).

The majority of contrastive studies between Japanese and English have been quick to point to the L1 (i.e., Japanese) as the culprit for observed errors in rhetorical and organizational patterns (e.g., Connor, 2005; Doi, 1986; Hinds, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1987, 1990; Oi, 1986) as well as in grammatical and syntactic structures (e.g., Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983; Bryant, 1984; Hinkel, 2002). Others have specifically remarked on Japanese culture as a potential source for many of the issues identified in Japanese EFL writers' English writing, such as the Japanese preference to be "indirect" and "ambiguous" (see Davies, 1998; Harder, 1984; Rear, 2008) as well as culture-specific ideologies (e.g., Kamimura & Oi, 1998). All of these studies, however, have

one thing in common: they approach the data from the belief that the L1 and/or learner's culture is responsible for the errors and anomalies observed in his/her English writing.

This belief has long been criticized, as it is now generally accepted that writing is a social action performed within particular contexts (Fairclough, 1992). So while Kaplan's stance that there are conventions in English writing that are not overtly apparent to L2 writers seems reasonable, pointing the finger at culture is precarious territory. Culture is a complicated and even a problematic concept in research. For example, in her 1996 study, Li recognized she could not explain "good writing" on the basis of cultural differences because culture is simply too big. She explained that she had to "carve out a small slice from culture to be commensurate with the scope and focus of [her] project, narrowing it to a small culture" (p. 105). Like Li, there are numerous others who have taken into account culture in this way; however, it is also clear that culture is a difficult concept to precisely define, even when discussing "small cultures." Many critics attack studies that incorporate cultural elements, claiming they are weakened by stereotypes and bias and even redolent of English superiority over other languages and cultures (Pennycook, 2002). As a result numerous contrastive studies are seen as based on an erroneous theoretical assumption, which has made these studies' findings questionable at best.

So while it is difficult to ignore the contributions contrastive rhetoric has made to the field, many critics continue to disparage the notion for its apparent ideological and theoretical faults. This has resulted in the creation of several reimagined and/or redefined forms (see Connor, 1996; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Matsuda, 1997). Rather than unnecessarily complicating matters and attempting to redefine or reinvent contrastive rhetoric, this study hopes to demonstrate that by establishing contrastive rhetoric in something much more rudimentary it is possible to remain neutral and avoid the theoretical and ideological pitfalls of which traditional contrastive rhetoric has been accused. To this end, this study establishes contrastive rhetoric within the theoretical framework of Common Ground (CG) theory (Clark, 1985).

A concept proposed by Clark (1985), CG theory refers to the shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions that are believed to be essential for successful communicative interaction. Clark argues that without mutuality it is not possible for two individuals to understand one another or have a meaningful interaction. Though other theories have proposed similar concepts, such as Hall's (1976) high-context culture and the contrasting low-context culture, CG avoids stereotyping large cultures, and in fact avoids the notion of culture all together, which clearly

makes it more attuned to objective factors. More importantly, however, CG helps to establish contrastive rhetoric in a less controversial position, namely, in basic communication principles. In doing so, this study should be able to 1) take the conversation back from ideology and the intricacies of culture that have led scholars away from the original purpose of contrastive rhetoric and prevented many from seeing the benefits and contributions it has to offer students, teachers, and researchers alike, by bringing focus to the actual texts and the anomalies therein and 2) vindicate contrastive rhetoric and show how, indeed, the notion is capable of deculturalizing and thereby avoiding the hazards of stereotyping, overgeneralizations, and other such trespasses that sound research should never entertain, let alone contribute to.

Practical

Finally, studies between Japanese English and NESs' English writing have dwindled in recent years. As a result, the information currently available regarding Japanese English writing is dated, oftentimes not well established in current research methodology, and, culpable of many of the failings discussed above. This study will help to revitalize the research being done in this area. Based on the results of this study, more up-to-date and reliable research implications and pedagogical recommendations can be made.

To sum up, this study is significant for the following reasons:

1. I am not aware of any valid contrastive studies, particularly concerned with Japanese and English, which have combined quantified data with qualitative observations to investigate texts at both the micro- and macro-levels. Thus, there is a pressing need for such a study, especially with regard to its pedagogical value.
2. This study is also valuable for research methodology, as it points to research design flaws in past studies and applies an analytical framework in a comprehensive study grounded in a reliable theoretical basis; this in an effort to rectify those past design flaws. As a result, this study provides empirical examination of the reliability and validity of RST for contrastive purposes.
3. As far as its theoretical contributions are concerned, this investigation attempts to establish a more comprehensive and less controversial theory of contrastive rhetoric and build upon the field by exposing and elucidating values of English writing that have remained hidden and ambiguous.

4. Additionally, this study aspires to defend contrastive rhetoric by conceptualizing it within Common Ground theory and demonstrating that the field can effectively purge itself of many of the assumptions of culture and language that have negatively influenced and undermined the results of past studies.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the topic of this research project, addressed the problem and its scope, and discussed the research questions, purpose, and significance of the study. The subsequent chapter reviews related literature, first introducing an overview of contrastive rhetoric, criticisms the notion has faced over the years, and then the contributions it has made. Next, the application of Common Ground theory to contrastive rhetoric and its theoretical importance to the field and this study are discussed. This is followed by an in-depth investigation of contrastive studies directly relevant to this particular study, specifically, research that has been concerned with Japanese and English, with the goal of showing the gaps and shortcomings of these past studies and how they have brought about the need for this study and generated the research questions on which it is based. Chapter 3 then moves on to present the methods used in this project. Participants, data collection, the analytical framework, and statistical test used in this study are presented in detail in this chapter followed by the quantitative results. Chapter 4 discusses at length the quantitative findings presented in Chapter 3, juxtaposed with qualitative observations. Chapter 4 also presents the findings of RST analysis of a Japanese text as a point of reference and compares that with the RST analytical results of the English texts written by JEFLs and NESs. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a recapitulation of the main findings and their implications from a pedagogical and theoretical standpoint. Limitations of the study are then discussed, concluding with suggestions for future research.