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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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Citation

Brown, J. D. (2019, March 12). *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*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/69810>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2019-03-12

Chapter 5 | Summary & Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter will begin by recapitulating the findings of this investigation. Some space will then be dedicated to considering the limitations of the study, which will be followed by a discussion of possible future research. This chapter will conclude with future perspectives of contrastive rhetoric and how this particular study will help to revitalize and promote studies in the field.

Summary of Findings

This study conducted a contrastive analysis of two corpora, one corpus of texts written by native-English speakers ($N = 22$) and one corpus of texts written by Japanese EFL learners ($N = 22$), in an effort to identify differences/anomalies in Japanese English writing that could plausibly account for why English texts written by Japanese often appear to be incoherent. Quantitative results of this study have unearthed some interesting findings, namely, the more prominent use of SM relations in the Japanese English texts.

The lower rate of SM relations among the texts in the JEFL corpus compared to those in the NES corpus ($p = 0.047$) appears to be a symptom of a cognitive struggle among the Japanese L2 writers. This assertion is furthered by other various phenomena observed in the data, such as a relatively frequent use of certain relations, weakening the coherence of the texts, and dangling units/cross dependencies. Qualitative observations made of the texts sheds further light on the issue, suggesting that the combination of the JEFLs' inexperience as writers and linguistic deficiencies is resulting in a cognitive overload that negatively impacts the overall coherence and quality of their texts.

Looking at the use of individual relations in the Japanese English texts in comparison to those used by native English speakers, it was discovered that not only the utilization of certain relations but also how they are utilized might negatively affect the coherence of a text. For example, with the antithesis statement, there were instances where the Japanese writer would employ this rhetorical relation to

the detriment of his/her own thesis. So, rather than creating a “positive regard” for the nucleus, the author seemed to unintentionally refute his/her own stance, as stated elsewhere in or inferable from the text, thus reducing coherence.

Another intriguing finding of this study was the discovery of the artificial nucleus, which is when a nucleus may appear to have a function in the structural design of the text but does not in fact hold its apparently intended function due to its content. Such an error creates the perception of a structured text because at the surface it is following the conventions and expectations of English writing. However, a native-English speaker reader may very likely experience such a text as incoherent, awkward, and/or illogical since the content cannot effectively maintain the structure it was assigned.

The findings of this study impact the field of contrastive rhetoric in methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical ways. First of all, it is apparent that relation frequencies alone cannot provide enough insight into writing. However, such quantitative data is effective at pinpointing anomalies that may otherwise be overlooked, which, in turn, can then be investigated more thoroughly through qualitative analysis. In doing so, this study demonstrates that RST can be used effectively for contrastive purposes to some extent but does require the researcher to also look at the context in which the structures are used. Though the quantitative data produced through an RST analysis in a contrastive study may lack the capacity to offer sufficient insights into differences between corpora when considered by itself, RST analysis can be an effective way to understand differences at both the micro and macro levels of texts when the data is not decontextualized but rather observed within its context.

Secondly, this study seems to suggest that claims that JEFL writers' L1 is influencing and even interfering with their English writing have been exaggerated, and frankly, misleading. It is clear that there is much more at work than cognitive factors, and thus, as numerous scholars have argued (e.g., Connor, 1996, 2005; Kubota, 1997; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Spack, 1997), explaining differences across texts of different writers, especially writers of different cultures and L1s, in terms of a writer's large culture is an oversimplification of a much more complex issue that involves numerous other variables, which are likely to be of even greater influence. Accordingly, this study rooted itself in CG theory (Clark, 1985), thereby returning to the basic principles of human communication, and, in doing so, demonstrating that it is possible to conduct contrastive rhetorical studies without falling prey to stereotyping, ethnocentrism, or linguistic imperialism. Based on this theoretical position, it was found that most of the anomalies observed in the JEFL corpus could

be considered as resembling that of errors found in novice writers' texts, suggesting that JEFL learners need more instruction in writing in the broader, general sense, not because they are L2 writers, but for the simple fact that they are beginners. That is not to suggest, however, that linguistic factors were not at play. In fact, they most certainly contributed to limiting the cognitive resources of the JEFL writers, as well as to issues of redundancy and unintentional repetition, most likely compounding the struggles the learners faced as inexperienced writers.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that JEFL writers in particular struggled negotiating the intended rhetorical structure of a text with the content of that structure. Though they generally had a clear sense of what an English text should look like on the surface, they were unable to establish that structure with regard to the content. Accordingly, teachers should take the time to show their students exactly how a coherent text is formed beyond the macro-level. Breaking the text into smaller units and explaining how each of those units are connected would certainly be a step in the right direction in helping students understand how a text is constructed at the micro-level to form not only a cohesive piece of writing, but a coherent one as well. In fact, RST may even be a useful pedagogical tool in the classroom for this purpose.

Study Limitations

Although every possible effort was made to avoid flaws in the research design of this study, it cannot be claimed this study is entirely without its own set of limitations.

Sample Size

Though the size of each corpus (N = 22) was adequate enough for a statistical analysis of the data, the sample size was still relatively small. This could account for why few significant differences were identified between the two groups. Additionally, the most telling phenomenon of incoherence in RST, that is, dangling units/cross dependencies, occurred too infrequently in the corpora used in this study. Though it was clear the phenomenon was a much more common occurrence in the JEFL corpus and the statistical analysis conducted indicated a significant difference between the two corpora, the test itself could not be considered entirely reliable due to the small number of occurrences compared. A larger sample size in future studies may reveal greater statistical difference and may make it possible to reliably run a statistical analysis on the frequency rates of such phenomenon as dangling units/cross dependencies. At the same time, however, a very large sample size may inaccurately point to a phenomenon as significant when in fact the significance was artificially inflated due to a very large sample size (Chatfield, 1995). Accordingly, future studies may consider increasing the sample size in order to produce results

that would be more generalizable to a larger population but should be careful to not make the sizes overly large, thereby artificially raising the chances of finding statistical difference.

Another problem with the small sample size is that the findings of this study may be rather difficult to generalize across all NESs' and JEFLs' writing. However, the generalizability of the results of this study is strengthened by the fact that the sampling was taken from a diverse group of participants of various universities around Japan (for JEFL texts) and the United States (for NES texts), which helped to cover a wide range across the populations.

Quality of NES Texts

A serious shortcoming of this study is that it was assumed texts written by NESs are generally coherent and logical. While this, for the most part appeared to be true compared to the texts written by L2 writers, the NES texts certainly did not always represent the best examples of good writing. In fact, two of the raters commented that several of the NES texts were not very well written, in their opinion, but they were better than the other choices, and so these raters judged them higher in comparison. Thus, these texts benefited from the fact that the yardstick by which they were measured was at times shorter than a yard. As mentioned previously, the poorer quality of these texts was probably due to a lack of revisions. Furthermore, it is possible that the participants' performance was impacted as a result of the lack of incentive, which will be discussed in more detail momentarily.

Quality of JEFL Texts

Something else lacking in this study is an independent assessment of JEFL texts by a panel of raters as was done with the NES texts. While this was not an essential step for the purposes of this particular study, which simply sought to find a possible source of the phenomenon that the English writing of Japanese is often seen as incoherent relative to that of NESs' writing, it would have done much to extend on past studies that had assessed L2 texts' structure/organization but did not look closely at the structures (see Hirose, 2003, for example). Furthermore, like with the NES texts, it was simply assumed that English writing of JEFLs is of lower quality. An impartial evaluation, however, would be an effective way to provide further validation of the results: I predict that the better structured texts in the JEFL corpus will be regarded of higher quality than the poorly structured ones. Also, considering text quality of JEFL writing not only in comparison to NES texts but to one another would perhaps provide further insight into whether or not RST is indeed effective at discerning the quality of a text based on its rhetorical structure. Such information would

be useful to instructors as well since they will be able to have a clearer picture of what a higher evaluated English text written by a Japanese looks like—a much more realistic and attainable goal for lower-level/poorer performing JEFL writers than native-like texts.

Lack of Motivation

As mentioned above, the context in which the writing task was completed by the JEFL and NES writers may have influenced the quality of the texts used in each corpus. ICNALE collects texts on a voluntary basis, which means there are no actual consequences of poor performance. Therefore, there may have been a lack of genuine motivation for the participants to demonstrate their best writing skills. Since there was essentially no incentive for the participants to do their best, it is unclear if the texts can accurately depict the highest-level of writing abilities of each group. Accordingly, for more representative writing samples, future studies should consider how to motivate the participants with incentives, such as using classroom-writing assignments that the participants know will be graded.

Writer Characteristics

While many past studies comparing Japanese and English writing have made claims of rhetorical transfer, the findings of this study suggest that errors and issues of coherence and logic may (at least) equally be due to a lack of training in writing. This claim is based on past literature and not on the background of the participants of this study as such. The characteristics of the individual writers involved in this study are unknown beyond the demographic information ICNALE provided. While the results point to errors that could be traced back to inexperience in writing, this assertion is, at this point, a hypothesis, still to be tested, rather than a claim based on empirical evidence. Knowing more about the participants of this study would have helped make claims about the writers more valid. Furthermore, the results of this study would be more applicable to a larger and more diverse group if more were known about each individual writer. Thus, future studies should consider conducting interviews with participants in order to better understand each writer's unique characteristics and take into account these characteristics when discussing the findings.

Researcher & Rater Bias

A common criticism of discourse analysis is the role that the human element plays, which can result in biased, fallible data. As this study was based on the assumption that JEFL writers' English texts are less coherent, more illogical, and overall not as well written as texts written by NESs, there may have been some bias in the

annotation of those texts written by Japanese. Though inter-rater reliability was established, it was easy for the co-rater and author to distinguish between the texts written by Japanese and those written by NESs due to their experience with Japanese English writing, which may have contributed to a higher inter-rater reliability. Nevertheless, as both are experienced educators and researchers, conscious efforts were made to be objective and neutralize bias during analysis. Furthermore, it was possible to minimize bias when analyzing the NES texts as they were double rated. First, 100 texts were rated by three NES judges and the top 22 were chosen as examples of well-written texts, which were then analyzed within the RST framework. After the analysis, these 22 texts were once again rated by the same three judges as well-written and less well-written in order to demonstrate that the RST analyses were not based on the judgments of the raters but rather on the actual structure of the texts.

Suggestions for Further Research

Since this study only focused on the written product, very little could be confidently claimed about the intentions of the writers beyond what was more or less explicitly stated in the texts. However, because RST relations are based on what the annotator considers to be the most plausible intention of the writer, future studies such as this one may benefit from follow-up interviews with the writers of the texts to confirm and validate the relation tags. This could also shed some light on issues on which a researcher could only speculate, such as the reasoning and logic behind an argument. Furthermore, follow-up interviews would allow for future studies to take into consideration a greater number of factors that may contribute to the rhetorical structure of a text and help to further move contrastive rhetoric away from relying solely on explaining errors in L2 writing based on a negative cultural transfer framework.

The quantitative results in the domain of the SM relations pointed to plausible cognitive issues JEFL writers may be having when writing in English. However, a relatively lower degree of SM relations turned out not to lead to lower text quality in general, so it remains unclear how exactly they affect the quality of a text, or if this combination of low frequency of SM relations and low quality was specific to the JEFL corpus of this study. It would therefore be worthwhile for future endeavors to focus on text quality and further explore the relationship between it and SM relations. Additionally, it was hypothesized that “explicit linkage” was an unintentional result of the JEFL writers’ focus on micro-level structure due to the limitations on their cognitive resources; however, before applying this idea in teaching practices, it would be necessary for future studies to investigate the

use of logical connectors by L2 writers, novice writers, and experienced writers within an analytical framework such as RST in order to examine the validity of this hypothesis.

One of this study's most revealing findings was that of how the JEFL writers had a tendency to form rhetorical structures that the content of the text could not effectively hold, i.e., the appearance of the artificial nucleus. It would therefore be worthwhile to investigate this further. For example, future research could specifically seek this phenomenon out in texts written by both NESs and L2 writers; comparisons between texts judged more positively versus those judged negatively could be made to discover whether this phenomenon is indeed more prevalent in texts that are judged poorly. It would also be worth exploring whether this phenomenon occurs among texts written by L2 writers of various cultural backgrounds as well as novice NES writers or if it is more common in specific kinds of cultural groups, such as Japanese.

Finally, it might be worthwhile to consider adding and/or revising the RST relations when analyzing Japanese texts. Nagano (1986) identified seven different relations in Japanese (see Table 5.1 in Appendix A). Future studies may want to adopt relations that have been identified in Japanese discourse and analyze Japanese English writing based on these relations. It would also be interesting to apply these same rhetorical relations to NESs' English texts and, if possible, Japanese texts written by NESs. Such a study would help to further understand the differences in writing between these two languages and whether or not, in fact, L2 writers make errors that are unique to L2 writers.

The findings of this study are limited to a rather small cultural group, namely, Japanese college students. Future research needs to take into account a variety of languages and cultures and investigate them across genres and rhetorical contexts so that more generalizable conclusions can be made. Furthermore, future studies should also consider adapting RST according to the language to be analyzed. Though theoretically RST should be applicable across languages, it would be interesting to see if results differ depending on the types of relations used and the language of text, that is, when rhetorical relations identified in Japanese discourse are applied to English texts and vice versa.

Conclusion

This study has been careful to shape a theoretical framework to bring contrastive rhetoric back to its roots, avoiding subjectivity as much as possible while maintaining the goal of diagnosing the nature of low quality in foreign language writing. Though some speculations were unavoidable, the focus has been from the beginning to identify errors and anomalies that could plausibly account for why Japanese English writing is often regarded by NESs as incoherent and illogical. An important result is that there is no basis for the general, wide-sweeping claim that these errors are caused or a result of the JEFL writers' L1, i.e., Japanese. Rather, the experience of incoherence in JEFL texts is arguably related to a relatively high number of unclear or even absent coherence links between segments of texts, an overuse of weak coherence relations like Joint, and a mismatch between the marking of a coherence relation and the actual content of a segment—the sum total of which results in a 'violation' of basic communication principles that may be diagnosed as comparable, if not identical, to those produced by inexperienced writers.