The Overuse of *I think* by Japanese Learners and *To-omou/To-kangaeru* by English Learners in Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study investigated second language (L2) English and L2 Japanese essay writing in comparison with the learners' first language (L1) to elucidate the effect of L1 transfer. Analysis of the functions of *I think* and *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* were done from a usage-based account and discoursal point of view. Samples were collected from a multilingual written corpus, *The Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students* (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015). A rhetorical analysis showed different functions in the use of *I think* between learners and native speakers. In L2 English, Japanese learners showed a strong tendency to use *I think* to emphasize or mark the following sentence as their main argument. Meanwhile, native speakers use this only to explain a personal experience or to indicate uncertain information. The overuse suggests the possible transfer of *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* from Japanese. In L2 Japanese, English learners produced *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* more than Japanese learners did with *I think* in L2 English, even though English learners rarely produce *I think* in L1 English. The results are likely to imply the effect of instruction in a beginning Japanese class.

1. Introduction

This study examines the use of *I think* and the equivalent Japanese expressions *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* in second language essay writing in English and Japanese in comparison with their L1 Japanese and English to elucidate the effect of L1 transfer. We compared the frequency and functions of *I think* in L2 English by Japanese learners with that of English native speakers and the use of the Japanese equivalent expression *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* by Japanese native speakers. We also examined the use of *to-omou* and *to-kangaeru* in L2 Japanese by English learners compared with use by Japanese native speakers and the function of *I think* in the learners' L1 English. The aim of this bi-directional comparison was to provide a comprehensible and conclusive conclusion and to elucidate the universal effect of L1 transfer in conveying ideas or statements.

The current study adopts a usage-based approach that predicts frequent productions of a word or a phrase as a strong representation in memory and also the prototypical or central pattern in a language (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2008). In other words, prototypical patterns are frequent in both output and input because the patterns are representations of cognitive organisations of both addressees and addressees (Bybee & Hopper, 2001). Bybee (2008) argues that a more frequent pattern is the prototypical pattern stemming stronger in the language users' cognitive organisations.
not English learners of Japanese also overuse to-omou as well as Korean and Taiwanese learners along with Japanese learners' overuse of I think in English. Our bi-directional analysis will reveal the L1 transfer of opinion-stating expressions from a functional point of view.

2. Methods

This study will compare the English I think and comparable expression in Japanese to-omou. It will also include to-kangaeru as an equivalent expression in Japanese, since to-kangaeru, along with to-omou, is considered to have a meaning very close to I think (O-lex English-Japanese Dictionary, 2013).

2.1. I think and to-omouto-kangaeru

This section will illustrate the use of I think in English and to-omouto-kangaeru in Japanese to show the differences and similarities between English and Japanese. The definitions and explanations of I think in Collins Dictionary Online (http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/i-think), offer additional definitions of these words, some explanations of phrases and examples in English, such as “You use I think as a way of being polite when you are explaining or suggesting to someone what you want to do, or when you are accepting or refusing an offer. E.g., I think I'll go home and have a shower.” As the example, adding I think to the excuse I'll go home and have a shower functions to indirectly and politely reject some offer. The dictionary further defines “You use I think in conversations or speeches to make your statements and opinions sound less forceful, rude, or direct. E.g., I think he means 'at' rather than 'to'.” As this definition explains, I think is generally used in the spoken mode of English and infrequently in the written mode, and it gives an indirect and unclear impression that is not preferred in written English.

One of the Japanese equivalent expressions is to-omou, which generally translates to I think. The definitions are, “You use to-omou to perceive, to judge, to state one's opinion, or to consider” (Meikyō Kokugo Jiten, 2012; translation by the authors). Examples are shown below (adapted from Meikyō Kokugo Jiten, 2012):

1. hikata to-omotta shunkan-ni kaminari-ga ochi-ta
   sparkly-past thought-moment-ACC lightning-SUB drop-past
   "Just as I saw a bright light, a bolt of lightning hit."

2. kanojo-wa shōjiki-da to-omou
   she-ACC honest-is I-SUB think
   "She is honest."

In example (1), to-omotta is the past tense form of to-omou and to-omou denotes perceiving by the speaker: the speaker describes what s/he sees (bright light). In example (2), the speaker is stating her opinion subjective judgement that she is honest, which may be different from others', and to-omou functions to exhibit the speaker's considered opinion.

To-kangaeru denotes similar meanings to to-omou. A crucial difference is that to-kangaeru often involves a deeper or more careful consideration. Meikyō Kokugo Jiten (2012) defines it as “You use to-kangaeru to think logically, to solve a problem, to turn over one's mind, to consider, to have a feeling of a determination or expectation, or to make a formal judgement.” An example of to-kangaeru is illustrated below:

3. tabako-wa zettaimai yameru-ko to-kangaeru-te imasu
   tobacco-ACC definitely quit-AUX carefully consider PROG
   "I will definitely quit smoking."

This example denotes that the speaker is thinking about or considering quitting smoking, and is determined after some deep consideration. In general, to-omou and to-kangaeru exhibit similar functions and both phrases are frequently used in the written mode as well as in the spoken mode in Japanese. Furthermore, they are preferable in formal Japanese, since they exhibit a careful and deeper consideration.

Without to-omou or to-kangaeru, the above sentences denote a subjective proposition and sound naïve or childish unless the proposition is a well-known fact and only acceptable in the spoken mode. For example, in (4) and (5) below, a repeated example without to-omou or to-kangaeru of (2) and (3), the English translation is the same, but they sound very casual and like naïve statements in spoken Japanese because they lack a linguistic expression, which implies the statement lacks a cognitive process of a careful consideration.

4. kanojo-wa shōjiki-da
   she-ACC honest-is
   “She is honest.”

5. tabako-wa zettaimai yameru-ko
   tobacco-ACC definitely quit-AUX
   “I will definitely quit smoking.”

In example (4), the proposition is likely to vary depending on the speakers and is without any evidence; in comparison, to-omou in example (2) is made after consideration based on the speaker's own judgment, although it does not include objective evidence. Example (5) even sounds very casual as if the speaker is talking to herself and saying her decision in her mind, merely reflecting the speaker's thought to herself.

Hence, while I think is generally used in spoken English, to-omou and to-kangaeru are used in both spoken and written Japanese, but with some differences in context. I think functions to make some content vague or indirect, which is often appropriate in verbal exchanges. Meanwhile, a writer typically wants to be clear, and should avoid the phrase in English essays. However, that is opposite to the use of to-omou and to-kangaeru in Japanese academic essays. In fact, particularly to-kangaeru is preferable in Japanese essays because it implies a writer's cognitive process and a deeper consideration or judgment. That is why the words are frequently used in Japanese essays.

Currently, however, in most Japanese-English dictionaries, the words are both the primary translation of think in English-Japanese dictionaries (O-lex English-Japanese Dictionary, 2013). That may be one of the reasons why Japanese learners' overuse I think in English essays, assuming the phrase denotes a careful consideration, which is something they want to express in their writing.

2.2. The Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students

The data used in the current study comes from the Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015). The corpus is a collection of opinion essays by college students in English and Japanese as L1 and L2. This corpus is open to any researcher for research purposes. The corpus includes essays of English (collected in Australia, including international students with English as an L1 background), Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese L1, and English of Japanese learners, Japanese of English learners, Japanese of Korean learners, and Japanese of Taiwanese learners. The Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students (MOECS) includes the following essay data.
Table 1. The number of files in the Corpus of MOECS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1 Data</th>
<th>L2 Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English by native speakers of English (120 files)</td>
<td>English by Japanese Learners (79 files)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese by native speakers of Japanese (134 files)</td>
<td>Japanese by Korean Learners (55 files)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japanese by Taiwanese Learners (97 files)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The L1 and L2 English data and L2 Japanese by English Learners were collected from August 2014 to August 2015, and the rest was collected from June 2007 to September 2009. The participants were undergraduate or graduate students at a college. They were either a volunteer or received a reward when they completed the task. In this project, native speakers are defined as people who received education in English in any subjects in their secondary to university (their teachers used English in all subjects except foreign language classes). The participants were asked to write an essay with the following direction:

**Direction: Currently, people worldwide are able to use the Internet. Some people say that since we can read the news online, there is no need for newspapers or magazines, while others say that newspapers and magazines will still be necessary in the future. Please write your opinion about this issue.**

All the essays of the MOECS were collected in the same manner. The participants were told to handwrite in front of the researchers to control their writing condition and to avoid plagiarism. The essay data was typed into a text file after the data collection by the researchers. The participants gave their consent and received an explanation that the data collection was for research.

The number of files (participants) of L2 English by Japanese learners is 79. Therefore, the current study selected all the files and randomly selected 79 files among 120 L1 English and 134 L1 Japanese essays from the corpus. For L2 Japanese by English learners, we used 32 files because that comprised all files that the corpus had at the time of the extraction. This study compares four groups: L2 English, L2 Japanese, L1 English and L1 Japanese.

This study extracted I think sentences from the English files to-omou/to-kangaeru from the Japanese files. All the examples are accompanied with a subordinate clause. We excluded I think before pronouns as “I think so.” and at the end of a sentence as “...I think.” For the Japanese samples, conjugated forms, such as to-omo-warau, to-omo-tru, or to-omotia, are excluded from the data, since such conjugations involve modality, aspect or tense and it is not our focus of this study.

After the sample extraction, I think and to-omou/to-kangaeru sentences were categorised into the main idea or not. The main idea is the thesis statement in an opinion essay. This study follows the definition of main idea by Ijiri and Takahashi (2012): the main idea is a definite statement directly answering the question or direction asked. Examples from the samples in our analysis are shown below:

**English examples**

(6) I think that newspapers and magazines are still important and a necessary in future. (Japanese learner)

(7) Maybe I'll carry it (cut article) in my bag if I think I’ll wait to read it later. (English native speaker)

**Japanese examples**

(8) watashi-wa intanetto-de ayasu-wo miru-koto-ga dekitemono I-SUB internet-INS news-ACC see-INF SUB able-even if korekara-mo shinbin ya zashii-wa from now on-also newspaper and magazine-SUB hitsuyō-da to-omou necessary-ASSERTIVE think

“Although we can read news on the Internet, I think we need newspapers and magazines in the future.” (Japanese native speaker)

(9) ijo-no riō-kara watasu-wa kon’ichi-nichi-te-mo above-GEN reason-ABL I-SUB today-TEMP-also shinbin ya zashii-wa no hityū-do aru to-kangaeru newspaper and magazine-SUB still necessary-ASSERTIVE think

“From the above reasons, I think we will still need newspapers and magazines even today.” (Japanese native speaker)

(10) koo kankaku-ga hityū-da to-omou this sensation-ACC necessary-ASSERTIVE think

“I think we need this sensation.” (Japanese native speaker)

For sentences (6) to (10) above, (6), (8) and (9) were categorised as the main idea since they are a definite statement directly answering the direction. Meanwhile, (7) and (10) are not the main idea because the writers are merely mentioning possible behaviour toward paper-based news and magazines in (7) and the reason or evidence of touching paper affecting the importance of the newspaper departs from the thesis in (10).

3. Results

There were a total 1,996 sentences for L2 English, 664 for L2 Japanese, 1,817 for L1 English, and 1,272 for L1 Japanese. Table 2 below shows the frequency of the total number of sentences in each group to illustrate the size of the data and the occurrence of I think and to-omou/to-kangaeru along with frequency per participant. We first examined L2 English data along with L1 English to compare learners' production with that of the native speakers, and with L1 Japanese to determine the effect of L1 transfer. Subsequently, we examined L2 Japanese.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total number of sentences</th>
<th>I think</th>
<th>to-omou, to-kangaeru</th>
<th>Frequency per participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79 Japanese Learners</td>
<td>1,956</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I2 English)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 English Learners</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I2 Japanese)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 English Speakers</td>
<td>1,817</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(L1 English)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 Japanese Speakers</td>
<td>1,272</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(L1 Japanese)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1. L2 English

In L1 English, the occurrence of I think appears only nine times, which is much fewer compared with the other groups. The frequency per participant is only 0.11. This is an expected result since L1 English speakers are commonly taught not to use
the first person in an essay. Two examples by English native speakers are shown below:

(12) I think my preference stems from my childhood.
(13) I think this will become a very niche, specialised market in the near future.

These examples show that I think is used to illustrate the writer’s uncertain assumption of her past (in (12)) or of future society (in (13)). Meanwhile, L2 English learners produce more I think; 1.46 times per participant.

We further examined occurrence depending on the content of the subordinate clause and whether it reflects the main idea or not. The results are illustrated in Table 3. For the L2 English group, the frequency of I think as the main idea is 60 among 115 sentences, i.e., 53% of I think sentences are produced to introduce the main idea in the subordinate clause as repeated in example (6):

(6) I think that newspapers and magazines are still important and a necessary in future. (Japanese learner)

Table 3. The frequency of “I think” and “to-omou/to-kangaeru” and main idea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main idea</th>
<th>Not main idea</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79 Japanese</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners (L2 English)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>115 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 English</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers (L1 English)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9    100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 Japanese</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers (L1 Japanese)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>124 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the L2 English Group, among the nine occurrences, three was used to introduce the main idea. Figures 1 and 2 below exhibit this difference. Statistical analysis also yielded a significant difference between the groups (X^2 = 11.874, df = 3, p < .01).

Comparing the L2 data with the L1 Japanese group, the results are similar; where the frequency of the main idea was 71 times among 124 sentences, i.e., 57% of to-omou/to-kangaeru sentences are used when the writers introduce their main idea.

Figure 3 illustrates the results. The statistical analysis yielded no significant difference between L2 English and L1 Japanese Groups (z^2 = 2.226, df = 3, p = 0.527, n.s.). The results suggest the effect of L1 transfer in L2 acquisition of English by Japanese learners.

3.2. L2 Japanese

According to the L1 transfer found in our L2 English data, one might also expect the possibility of L1 transfer in L2 Japanese. If English learners of Japanese transfer their L1 use of I think into Japanese to-omou/to-kangaeru, they would rarely produce to-omou/to-kangaeru in Japanese. Whereas, they produced them very frequently (2.59 times per participant). The frequency was 1.6 times as many as the L1 Japanese group (1.57 times per participant).

This study did not perform a further statistical calculation for the main idea of the L2 Japanese group because the number of files was insufficient to perform a statistical analysis and is incomparable with the other groups.

The results of this study revealed that Japanese learners overuse I think and that they transfer the function of to-omou/to-kangaeru to I think in L2 English, and the function is to state the main idea in opinion essays. The overuse may be due to the learners’ strategy to mark the main idea and to maintain the coherence of the essays while compensating for a lack of L2 fluency in writing. Therefore, the overuse of I think is a type of discoursal marker as a signal of their main idea. Meanwhile, English learners did not show any L1 transfer; rather they overused to-omou/to-kangaeru in L2 Japanese and the tendency was stronger than Japanese learners’ overuse of I think in English.

4. Discussion

This study shows that I think and to-omou/to-kangaeru are not equivalent in function in written discourse, but Japanese learners use I think as they do in L1 for to-omou/to-kangaeru. In the case of Japanese, this is done to state an idea or opinion after careful consideration, which is indicated by using to-omou/to-kangaeru in the statement. The occurrence is common and conventional in written Japanese. The results showed that Japanese learners transferred the function of to-omou/to-kangaeru in L1 to I think in L2 English. However, this differs from the typical function of I think by L1 English speakers to state an indirect or unclear content or to exhibit uncertain assumptions. In fact, English native speakers rarely produce I think in their L1 English writing because it would have a
negative function when they are attempting to state an assertive opinion, such as the thesis in an essay. Without knowing the original native-language function of *I think*, it is possible to suggest that the Japanese learners’ overuse is probably due to the learners’ strategy to mark the main idea and to maintain a clear idea in their essay and to overcome the lack of L2 fluency in writing. Therefore, the overuse of *I think* found in this study may be a type of discoursal marker as a signal of their main idea because in Japanese a statement without to-omou and to-kangaeru sounds naïve and childish. Japanese may intuitively feel uneasy writing their main idea/thesis in an English essay without using *I think*, since in their L1 Japanese, *to-omou/to-kangaeru* is used to express a careful opinion after some deep consideration and to avoid having their main idea sound naïve and infantile. Another possibility for the overuse is that they have not received instruction similar to that received by L1 English speakers in an English class. This instruction typically teaches that *I think* is used in spoken English and not in the written mode. Additionally, in English writing the phrase is likely to emphasise an unclear and indirect impression, thus writers should avoid using the phrase when trying to be clear about a point.

Meanwhile, English learners did not show any L1 transfer. Instead, they overused *to-omou/to-kangaeru* in L2 Japanese, far more frequently than *I think* by Japanese students. There are two explanations for this result: the effect of classroom instruction and the learners’ communication strategy when trying to be indirect. For the effect of classroom instruction, *to-omou* is in fact taught as an opinion-stating marker at the early stage of typical L2 Japanese instruction. Learners are encouraged to use the phrase in their Japanese class. For example, in two of the major textbooks for L2 Japanese classes at a very beginning level in Japan and Australia (Tomoko Aoyama, personal communication in 2014), *Mina-no Nikongo and Genki, to-omou* appears in the first, in Unit 21 of 50 units for *Mina-no Nikongo* and Unit 8 of 23 units for *Genki*. Thus, *to-omou* is probably utilised as an opinion-stating strategy by the learners and overused.

In terms of other explanations, the learners are taught or possibly assume that Japanese culture is more considerate and modest, thus one should state the main idea in an indirect way. Thus, an L1 English speaker may be attempting to transfer an indirect function, as used with *I think* in English, to Japanese, *to-omou*. In Japanese culture, however, it is not common to state one’s opinion or idea in public, and self-assertiveness is not a virtue, which possibly gives English learners an impression that Japanese culture is much more indirect and modest and distant from English culture. Therefore, to accommodate themselves to the Japanese culture, the learners probably overuse *to-omou/to-kangaeru* as a convenient communication strategy to be more indirect. And in Japanese writing, they may assume that *to-omou/to-kangaeru* can be used to express indirect and suitable expressions in written opinion essays (Michael Harrington, personal communication in 2016). This requires a further investigation to determine whether the learners’ use is indirect or direct. However, the psychological and cultural distance regarding directness/indirectness may be a significant factor in the overuse.

Future research would be aided by a larger number of English learners’ Japanese files to allow one to draw a definite conclusion on their overuse of *to-omou/to-kangaeru*. That will also allow a psycholinguistic experiment to determine when and why they produce *to-omou/to-kangaeru*.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted a discoursal and rhetorical analysis and found that the function of *I think* by learners tended to emphasise their opinion as a clear statement after careful consideration, usually the thesis. As a result, L2 learners overuse the phrase in English. The results suggest that Japanese learners mark the thesis statement with *I think* to emphasize that the statement was established after careful and deep consideration. This reflects that in their cognitive organisation a discoursal marker such as *to-omou* or *to-kangaeru* is required to promote the suggestion of careful consideration.

Meanwhile, as expected, L1 English speakers rarely produced *I think* in an English essay to avoid being unclear and vague. This study showed that the function of *I think* for native speakers was only used to explain about a personal experience or to narrate an assumption, and is only used in support of other ideas apart from the thesis.

Interestingly, in L2 Japanese, English learners overused *to-omou/to-kangaeru* more frequently than L1 Japanese speakers. Moreover, the frequency was far more than Japanese learners’ use of *I think*, even though in their L1 English they rarely produce the equivalent phrase *I think*. This study suggests that the overuse is attributed to Japanese language education and the learner’s attitude toward the Japanese culture; being self-assertive is not a virtue in Japanese culture. Meanwhile, being self-assertive is seen as a positive value in Western culture. However, this speculation requires further investigation.

The discoursal analysis in this study revealed different linguistic perceptions of *I think* by Japanese learners in L2 English from that of English native speakers and suggests the crucial importance of academic writing education from a discoursal perspective to deliver ideas and knowledge properly in this global era.

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Notes

1 This data was originally collected for the *Nihon Kankoku Taiwan-no Daigakusei-ni youru Nihongo Ikutsun Dōshō* (The Database of Japanese Opinion Essays by Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese University Students, by Ikuko Ijini of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, also downloadable from http://www.tufs.ac.jp/~i/personal/ijini/koukai_data_1.html, which was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) (Grant Number 19770119, main researcher Ikuko Ijini). And among 32 Japanese files of English learners, 10 files were collected by Kazuko Komori of Meiji University.

2 The methodology originates from the *Nihon Kankoku Taiwan-no Daigakusei-ni youru Nihongo Ikutsun Dōshō* (The Database of Japanese Opinion Essays by Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese University Students, by Ikuko Ijini of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).