

Japanese learner use of “reason” and the effect of L1 Japanese on English Essay Writing

This study investigated the use of the English noun “reason” in English essays written by Japanese learners of English and found a different tendency in function from native English speakers. The usage was similar to the learners’ use of the equivalent noun “*riyū*” in their first language (L1) Japanese. This resulted in a unique function that exhibited itself in the number of uses of “reason” applied in the learners’ second language (L2) English.

A Japanese learners’ tendency to utilize usage-based account is examined in this study. Although many studies have exhibited language learners’ use of various constructions or lexical words (Ellis & Cadierno, 2009), as yet there have not been any specific inquiries about the English noun “reason,” which is in fact often overused by Japanese learners’ in their L2 English essays (Okugiri, 2016). As such, the current study focuses on the function of “reason” to reveal factors for why Japanese learners frequently utilize this in an English essay and how the use is attributed to L1 transfer.

Sentences including “reason” and “*riyū*” were collected from *the Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students* (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015), which includes English essays by English speakers and Japanese learners of English and Japanese essays by Japanese speakers. There were three groups in the study, English speakers (L1 English), Japanese learners of English (L2 English), and Japanese speakers (L1 Japanese), with 79 participants in each group. The number of sentences showing such usage was 1,817 sentences for the L1 English group, 1,996 sentences for the L2 English group, and 1,272 sentences for the L1 Japanese group.

The results show that the occurrence frequency for “reason” by the L1 English group was 40, and that of the L2 English learner group was 80 in their English essays. In the L1 Japanese essays, the frequency of “*riyū*” was 50 in total. The production was categorised into three functions: literal use (e.g., One reason many people still prefer printed newspapers and magazines is...), metalinguistic use denoting the number of reasons the author has (e.g., There are three reasons why I think this is the case.), and deixis use illustrating the position of the reason in the essay (e.g., In contrast to the reasons listed above ...).

Among the 40 instances by English speakers, there was only one metalinguistic use (3%). The most frequent use by native speakers was literal use (17 times, 70%), followed by deixis (11 times, 27.5%), and only one metalinguistic use (2.5%). Among the 80 instances by learners of English, 45 were metalinguistic at 56.3% of all use, followed by deixis (18 times, 22.5%), and literal (17 times, 21.3%). For the 50 instances by Japanese speakers, literal and deixis were the most frequent (19 times, 38% each), followed by metalinguistic use (12 times, 24%). The proportions are illustrated in Figures 1-3.

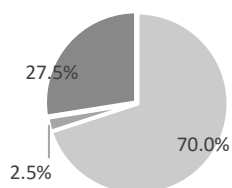


Figure 1: The proportion of literal, metalinguistic and deixis use in L1 English

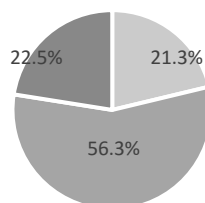


Figure 2: The proportion of literal, metalinguistic and deixis use in L2 English

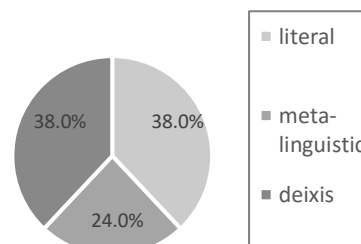


Figure 3: The proportion of literal, metalinguistic and deixis use in L1 Japanese

Statistical analysis yielded a significant difference in metalinguistic function between all the groups: $\chi^2(1) = 37.7295$. $p < .01$ between the L1 and L2 English, $\chi^2(1) = 7.5475$. $p < .01$ between L2 English and L1 Japanese, and $\chi^2(1) = 13.9503$. $p < .01$ between L1 English and L1 Japanese. There was also a significant difference in deixis only between L1 English and L1 Japanese ($\chi^2(1) = 6.0117$. $p < .05$).

The study findings indicated that in L1 English, metalinguistic use denoting number of reasons is rare. In contrast, L2 English learners overuse the metalinguistic use of “reason” in their English essay writing. In L1 Japanese the use of the equivalent noun “*riyū*” is about one fourth in the total frequency, which is a major difference between L1 English and L1 Japanese. While in English language, the word “reason” is rarely used to indicate the number of reasons (metalinguistic function), in Japanese, the word “*riyū*” is sometimes used in such a way. This difference explains why Japanese learners overuse the metalinguistic version of “reason” in English essays. Additionally, possible motivation for such overuse by L2 writers is to promote cohesion in their essay, which would be pursued differently by native speakers. Thus L2 use of “reason” is very different from native speakers.

The results imply that L1 learners attempt to apply a function from their L1 and transfer this to L2, which can trigger overuse of certain words in their L2. This can result in application that is very different from a native speaker. Furthermore, this tendency involving a metalinguistic function is attributable, in particular, to Japanese learners’ strategy to maintain coherence in their English essays.

References

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