

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 discursal 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 emphasise 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 addressers 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.

I think, for Japanese learners of English, is a well-known phrase among English instructors as one of the most overused sentences in L2 English by Japanese learners. It is frequently observed not only in the spoken mode, but also in the written mode. Although the overuse seems to be overlooked in the verbal mode, it often gives a reader an unclear, indirect and unfavourable impression in the written mode, especially in more academic essays. In L1 English, *I think* is frequently used only in spoken English as casual conversation and in school it is commonly taught as a pattern to not use in writing. Japanese learners of English, however, often use *I think* in written English when stating their main idea, namely the thesis in their essays. The current study will reveal why Japanese learners overuse *I think*, including when they state the thesis in their essay with a subordinate clause, and it will show why the learners use it in a different way from native English speakers. It is rather rare to find *I think* in L1 English writing such as opinion essays since it de-emphasizes the objectivity of the evidence. Highland (2002) and Ishikawa (2009, 2012) suggested overuse by Japanese learners of English. Natsukari (2012) also showed such overuse in English writing and discussed L1 Japanese transfer, claiming that the equivalent Japanese expression *to-omou* has a function to introduce indirect content functioning exactly as *I think* of English. Her claim was that her Japanese learners produced *I think* in English writing in the same manner as *to-omou* in Japanese. However, our study will show that Japanese learners do not use it in the same way as Natsukari (2012) suggested because in Japanese essay writing *to-omou* generally triggers a direct and definite statement such as the main idea, namely the thesis of essays, which is a result of emphasizing their opinion. Therefore, this study will exhibit how Japanese speakers produce *to-omou* in L1 Japanese essays to emphasise a main idea like the thesis, and that is why they produce *I think* in English essays in the same manner, but this in fact functions differently from English native speakers' use. In other words, Japanese learner use in written English actually results in de-emphasizing the objectivity of evidence or a statement, which is unfavorable when stating a thesis in English writing. Furthermore, this study will suggest that overuse is due to L1 transfer and the Japanese learners' communication strategy to state their message strongly in an attempt to convey the thesis of their essays.

As a comparison, many Japanese teachers also find *to-omou* is overused by various L2 learners, but no previous research has yet determined the linguistic reason. There is one study related to the function in Korean and Taiwanese learners; Ijuin and Takahashi (2012) observed the overuse of *to-omou* in their study on common modal expressions of main ideas in L2 Japanese opinion essays, but their focus was neither *to-omou* nor English learners. Thus, our study will explore whether or

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-omou/to-kangaeru*

This section will illustrate the use of *I think* in English and *to-omou/to-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 in addition to the 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) hika-tta **to-omotta** shunkan-ni kaminari-ga ochi-ta
sparkle-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 in one's mind, to consider, to have a feeling of a determination or expectation, or to make a rational judgement." An example of *to-kangaeru* is illustrated below:

- (3) tabako-wa zettaini yameru-zo **to-kangae-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 zettaini yameru-zo
tobakko-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

L1 Data	L2 Data
English by native speakers of English (120 files)	English by Japanese Learners (79 files)
Japanese by native speakers of Japanese (134 files)	Japanese by English Learners (32 files)
	Japanese by Korean Learners (55 files)
	Japanese by Taiwanese Learners (57 files)

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 2009¹. 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/college (their teachers used English in all subjects except foreign language classes). The participants were asked to write an essay with the following direction²:

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-wareru*, *to-omotte-iru*, or *to-omotta*, 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 Ijuin 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 nyūsu-wo miru-koto-ga deki-temo*

I-SUB internet-INS news-ACC see-INF-SUB able-even if

korekara-mo shinbun ya zasshi-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) *ijyō-no riyū-kara watashi-wa kon'nichi-nioite-mo*

above-GEN reason-ABL I-SUB today-TEMP-also

shinbun ya zasshi-wa nao hitsuyō-dearu 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) *kono kankaku-ga hitsuyō-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 2. Frequency of sentences and sentences with “*I think*” and “*to-omou/to-kangaeru*”

	Total number of sentences	<i>I think/to-omou, to-kangaeru</i>	Frequency per participant
79 Japanese Learners (L2 English)	1,996	115	1.46
32 English Learners (L2 Japanese)	665	83	2.59
79 English Speakers (L1 English)	1,817	9	0.11
79 Japanese Speakers (L1 Japanese)	1,272	124	1.57

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

	Main idea		Not main idea		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
79 Japanese Learners (L2 English)	60	53%	55	48%	115	100%
79 English Speakers (L1 English)	3	33%	6	66.7%	9	100%
79 Japanese Speakers (L1 Japanese)	71	57%	53	43%	124	100%

For the L1 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 ($X^2=11.874$, $df=3$, $p<.01$).

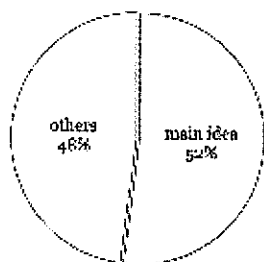


Figure 1: Proportion of the main idea and *I think* in L2 English Group

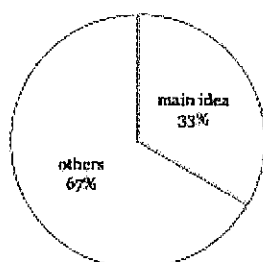


Figure 2: Proportion of main idea and *I think* in L1 English Group

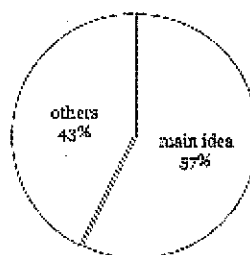


Figure 3: Proportion of main idea and *to-omou/to-kangaeru* in L1 Japanese Group

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 ($\chi^2=2.226$, $df=3$, $p=0.527$, *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 discursal 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), *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki*, *to-omou* appears in the first half, in Unit 21 of 50 units for *Minna-no Nihongo* 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 it 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-niyoru Nihongo Ikenbun Dētabēsu* (The Database of Japanese Opinion Essays by Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese University Students, by Ikuko Ijuin of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, also downloadable from http://www.tufs.ac.jp/ts/personal/ijuin/koukai_data1.html, which was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) (Grant Number 19720119, main researcher Ikuko Ijuin). 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-niyoru Nihongo Ikenbun Dētabēsu* (The Database of Japanese Opinion Essays by Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese University Students, by Ikuko Ijuin of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).