Writing / Corpus Linguistics

Contrastive Research into L2 Proficiency, Textual Complexity, and Grammatical Usage Using NS and NNS Argumentative Essays

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Aims

The purpose of the present study is to assess how second language (L2) proficiency elicits lexical, syntactic, and grammatical properties under rhetorical influences in L2 writing to identify the learner ability required to control positive/negative transference of first language. In the framework of the present study, learner’s proficiency is construed as the main factor controlling rhetorical properties under the influence of first language thought patterns and L1 interference of L2 writing.

Three systematic analyses are employed to allow investigation into the learner corpus: (1) rank order comparison; (2) correlation coefficient; and (3) keyword list comparison. Over/underuse in lexical and functional features in learner corpus of non-native speaker (NNS) English is compared with those in native speaker (NS) corpus of English.

Method

I have compiled two corpora composed of argumentative essays written by native college students and Japanese EFL learners in colleges. To fully measure writing quality in lexical and textual complexity and in terms of developmental index, mean word length, mean text length in sentence, mean total text length, mean terminal unit (T-unit) score and standardized Type/Token ratio (S.TTR) are estimated. Comparison according to criteria of L2 proficiency, divided into 5 segments is also performed. Then, systematic analyses into: (1) rank order comparison; (2) correlation coefficient; and (3) keyword list comparison, are employed to estimate quantitative property of researched corpora. The results are compared using the analytical features of Hinkel (2002) from the perspective of L2 proficiency in terms of (1), (2) and (3). Over/underuse in lexical and functional features in learner corpus of non-native speaker (NNS) English is highlighted through comparison with usage in native speaker (NS) corpus of English.

In reference to Hinkel (2002), which produced elaborate lexical and functional research to clarify the Asian rhetorical context, the present study researches into overused and underused functional features to identify the similarities and differences in lexical and grammatical properties between NS corpus and NNS corpus. This study also attempts to find L1 interference to L2 learners that is relevant to L2 exposure and possible causes for distinction in usage of those features.
Results

Quantitative research analysis into lexical and textual complexity uncovers a significant correlation coefficient between most of the researched items and L2 proficiency. This shows that a proficient L2 writer can produce more complicated structures equipped with adverbial and adjectival clauses, using specific terms.

Regarding lexical and grammatical features, decreasing copula be as a main verb results in the using of more lexical verbs. The positive correlation between present tense usage and L2 proficiency suggests an increase of usage of present tense accompanies a rise in L2 proficiency. Increased usage of present tense suggests that contexts include more abstract and argumentative issues concerned with habitual actions and events. A decrease in cause clauses seems to be contradictory to logical development of text, but considering that most cause clauses employ because, this means L2 proficiency steers learners to change lexical choice from a conversational to an academic type. In phrase level coordinating and additive conjunctions (and, but, also), a similar trend can be found. Adverb clauses raise complexity in sentence structure and increase information contained in a sentence. This is reflected in high S.TTR, T-unit score, and mean sentence length. The frequent use of if, as observed in the competent learners' corpus, demonstrates an indirect cause and result (logical) relationship in a temporary situation. In comparing NS English and NNS English, NSs use the predicative modal verb would, the prepositions of and as, the article the, and plural pronouns more than NNSs, whilst NNSs employ more contractions and past tense verb forms.

In sum, verbs commonly used in NNS corpus display rhetorical influence in that many intransitive verbs and static meaning verbs are employed. Findings in keyword lists propose that highly proficient learners use more infinitives, modals, transitive verbs, and prepositions.

Conclusion

Findings in over/underuse produced by highly proficient learners can be divided into two phases: verbal usage including tense and adverbs, and logical development for the purpose of linear format and direct message, e.g., the existential there, the past tense, suasive verbs, passives, infinitives, seem and appear, and adverbs. In these features, L2 proficiency is considered to lead to moderation of over/underuse in Japanese L2 learners, but fairly competent L2 writers are still unable to produce "native-like" English and instruction in grammar for writing is required.

Rhetorical influence can be found in many over/underused features even in high L2 proficiency learner products. The following features, however, could be main "markers" of proficient L2 learners: plural nouns to generalize ideas, adjective and adverb clauses to generate longer texts, decrease of copula usage and increase in present tense verb usage.

Reference


— 132 —