A Comparison of Essays Written by Native and Nonnative Speakers of English on the Topic *Kokusai Shakai* (International Society)

By
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Abstract

This paper compares essays written by native and nonnative speakers of English on the topic *kokusai shakai* (international society) using various criteria: content schema, number of words written, readability scale, holistic rating, and T-unit analysis. It includes implications for classroom teaching and suggestions for further research.

I. Introduction:

The primary purposes of the present study were: 1) to determine the extent and nature of background knowledge relating to the term *kokusai shakai* (international society) of entering freshmen enrolled in the Department of Intercultural Studies at a private, four-year women's college in Japan; 2) to compare this to that of a group of exchange students from English-speaking countries studying at the same college; and 3) to compare essays written in English by the Japanese students to those of the group of native speakers of English. In order to carry out the above, five research questions were investigated:

1. Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the type and frequency of content schema "items" found in their essays?

2. Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the total number of words in their essays?

3. Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a Fry Readability Scale rating of their essays?

4. Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a holistic rating of their essays?

5. Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the number of T-units, error-free T-units, words per T-unit, and words per error-free T-unit?

II. Method:

A. Subjects:

A total of 15 freshmen, Japanese female students in the Department of Intercultural Studies at a four-year private women's college in Japan, in one intact freshman English Conversation class, and four female exchange students from English speaking countries (three from Canada and one from New Zealand) studying at the same college took part in the study. The Japanese students' ages ranged from 18 to 20 years old (mean 18.8, standard deviation 0.6). The four native speakers of English were 19, 20, 21, and 29 years old (mean 22.3, standard deviation 4.6).

The Japanese students' English was judged to be at an elementary level. In this study, elementary means that most of the students can engage in simple daily conversation; that they can only produce extended description and narration in the present with difficulty; and that extended description and narration in either the past or future is very difficult for them. The ability to handle hypothetical situations and give supported opinion is limited to simple, everyday situations. Standardized test scores, such as TOEIC and TOEFL, were not available for any of the students involved in the study.

B. Materials and Procedures:

The materials for the Japanese students consisted of one sheet of paper. At the top of the paper was space for the student's name and student identification number, the term *kokusai shakai* in romaji and Japanese, and the question, "What does the term *kokusai shakai* mean to you?" The remaining space on the paper consisted of 23 lines for the students to write on. The papers were distributed to the students at the end of the first class meeting of the first term of the students' freshman year. The students were told, in English, to complete the task for homework and to hand in the assignment at the beginning of the following week's class. They were also told to use the back of the paper if they needed additional space. No other instructions were given. Papers were collected one week later and analyzed.

The native speakers of English were provided with the same material as the Japanese students. As in the case of the Japanese students, the native speakers were told to complete the task at home and to hand in the assignment the following week. They were also told to use the back of the paper if they needed additional space. No other instructions were given. All of the papers were collected one week later and analyzed.

III. Analyses and Results:

A. Research question 1: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the type and frequency of content schema "items" found in their essays?

"Items" were defined as any word (e.g., communication, justice, humanity, equality, etc.) or phrase (e.g., international events, new social order, no borders, etc.) that was felt to be related to the term "international society" in some way. The definition was deliberately left vague so as to avoid the exclusion of any relevant data.

Each "essay" (i.e., each student's paper) was read a number of times by two native speakers of English who have been teaching English at the college level in Japan for a number of years. Any "item" was noted. This resulted in a list of 23 "items" (see Table 1). Twenty-one items were found to have been used in the Japanese students' essays, and two additional items (numbers 22, 23 below), were found in the native speakers' essays. The 23 items were used to create a check sheet, each essay was reread, and any item that was found in an essay was recorded on a separate tally sheet for each essay. Tables 2 (Number and percent of students by item) and 3 (Top four items in each group — by number of students in each group) provide additional ways of looking at the material.

Table 1: Items found in the essays.

1. international political events (negotiations, treaties, etc.)
2. awareness of other customs and cultures
3. understanding others' ways of thinking
4. learn about other countries
5. exchange of cultures and ideas
6. communication
7. associating with foreigners
8. one society
9. global countries
10. countries are interdependent
11. world culture
12. cooperation (e.g., friendly relations with other countries)
13. help others
14. international trade

15. study abroad

16. language study – non-Japanese languages

17. language study – English

18. travel

19. easy to visit foreign countries

20. world peace

21. adopt foreign culture (physical artifacts such as mayonnaise, pizza, and sushi)

22. adopt foreign culture's values

23. create a mixture of societies

Table 2: Number and percent of students by item (J = Japanese, E = native speaker of English)

Number of students		Percent of students by group		item	
J	E	J%	E%		
2	2	13	50	1.	international political events (negotiations, treaties, etc.)
2	0	13	0	2.	awareness of other customs and cultures
4	1	27	25	3.	understanding others' ways of thinking
7	1	47	25	4.	learn about other countries
0	4	0	100	5.	exchange of cultures and ideas
5	0	33	0	6.	communication
1	0	7	0	7.	associating with foreigners
0	3	0	75	8.	one society
0	1	0	25	9.	global countries
1	0	7	0	10.	countries are interdependent
0	1	0	25	11.	world culture
3	2	20	50	12.	cooperation (e.g., friendly relations with other countries)
1	0	7	0	13.	help others
1	1	7	25	14.	international trade
0	1	0	25	15.	study abroad
5	0	33	0	16.	language study – non-Japanese languages
5	0	33	0	17.	language study – English
2	0	13	0	18.	travel

1	0	7	0	19.	easy to visit foreign countries
2	0	13	0	20.	world peace
0	1	0	25	21.	adopt foreign culture (physical artifacts such as mayonnaise, pizza, and sushi)
0	1	0	25	22.	adopt foreign culture's values
0	1	0	25	23.	create a mixture of societies

Table 3: Top four items in each group － by number of students in each group (J = 15, E = 4) selecting an item and percent

Japanese number %		Item
7	47%	4. learn about other countries
5	33%	6. communication
5	33%	16. language study – non-Japanese languages
5	33%	17. language study – English
English number %		Item
4	100%	5. exchange of cultures and ideas
3	75%	8. one society
2	50%	1. international political events (negotiations, treaties, etc.)
2	50%	12. cooperation (e.g., friendly relations with other countries)

B. Research question 2: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the total number of words in their essays?

Table 4: Total number of words － mean and standard deviation

Group	Number of students	Mean	Standard Deviation
J	15	62.7	30.1
E	4	107.5	26.2

Note: J = Japanese / E = native speakers of English

As can be seen from Table 4, the group of Japanese students wrote fewer words than the group of native speakers of English.

C. Research question 3: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a Fry Readability Scale rating of their essays?

In order to provide an additional comparison, six essays were rated on a Fry Readability Scale. The Fry Readability Scale requires a minimum sample length of 100 words. As a result of the 100-word minimum, only those essays that were at least 100 words or longer were included in this part of the analysis. A total of six students who had written more than 100 words, (three Japanese [J1, J2, J3] and three native speakers of English [E1, E2, E4]) were included. In addition, only these six essays were used for the remaining analyses. Tables 5 and 6 show the results of the Fry Readability Scale analysis.

Table 5: Fry Readability Scale － individuals

Student	total words	total number of syllables	total number of sentences	Fry scale
J1	110	146	7.5	7
J2	103	144	6.8	7
J3	102	143	5.8	8
E1	157	165	3.2	15
E2	119	205	7	11
E4	115	182	3.9	17+

Table 6: Fry Readability Scale － group averages

Group	average total words	average total number of syllables	average total number of sentences	average Fry scale
J	105	144	6.7	7.3
E	130	184	4.7	14.3

As can be seen from Table 6, the average readability for the Japanese group is 7.3 while that of the native speakers is a little over 14.3. The Japanese group average is around half of that of the native speakers.

D. Research question 4: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a holistic rating of their essays?

A holistic rating of the essays was conducted by two native speakers of English who have been teaching English at the college level in Japan for a number of years. The holistic rating consisted of an overall general impression of either "good," "fair" or "weak" (see Table 7).

Table 7: Holistic rating

Student	good		fair		weak	
	rater 1	rater 2	rater 1	rater 2	rater 1	rater 2
J1				*	*	
J2			*	*		
J3					*	*
E1			*	*		
E2	*	*				
E4	*	*				

In the case of the holistic rating, the essays were judged based on the following seven points: 1) well-developed, 2) a feeling of active involvement with the subject, 3) focused and intentional writing, 4) originality, 5) a feeling of "voice" in the writing, 6) command of sentence structure and vocabulary, and 7) technical errors do not intrude on the readers' appreciation and pleasure. These, or similar points, are frequently used in holistic ratings of essays.

As can be seen from the above, there was a high degree of inter-rater reliability. The holistic ratings matched in all cases except that of student J1, which one of the raters evaluated as fair and the other as weak. As might be expected, in general the native speakers were rated higher than the Japanese students; however, J2 and E1 were both given a "fair" rating.

E. Research question 5: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the number of T-units, error-free T-units, words per T-unit, and words per error-free T-unit?

In order to investigate this question, comparisons of the two groups were made on the basis of the following: the number of T-units, the number of error-free T-units, the number of words per T-unit, the number of words per error-free T-unit. The following tables (Table 8 and Table 9) show the results of the T-unit analysis.

Table 8: T-unit analysis － individual averages

Student	total number of T-units	average number of words per T-unit	total number of error-free T-units	average number of words per error-free T-unit
J1	4	15.5	2	13
J2	9	10.7	5	10
J3	3	12	1	8
E1	4	23.8	4	23.8
E2	6	16.3	6	16.3
E4	6	24.2	6	22

Table 9: T-unit analysis － group averages

Group	average number of T-units	average number of words per T-unit	average number of error-free T-units	average number of words per error-free T-unit
J	5.3	12.7	2.7	10.3
E	5.3	21.4	5.3	20.7

It is interesting to note that although the Japanese students' average number of words per T-unit, average number of error-free T units, and average number of words per error-free T-unit were around half of those of the native speakers, both groups had the same average number of T-units (i.e., not error-free T-units in this case). In addition, there was also a far greater variation within the Japanese group with regard to the number of T-units (4, 9, and 3) than within the native speakers' group (4, 6, and 6).

IV. Discussion:

A. Research question 1: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the type and frequency of content schema "items" found in their essays?

According to Carrell (1987), "One type of schema, or background knowledge, a reader brings to a text is *content schema*, which is knowledge relative to the content domain of the text. Another type is *formal schema*, or knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational

structures of different types of texts [i.e., genre]" (p. 461).

If we accept that "Background Knowledge is a resource shared by the producers and receivers of utterances" (Giltrow, 1994, p. 155); then it would seem that the identification of items which constitute that shared background knowledge would be a necessary prerequisite to ensuring comprehension of both written and spoken material (e.g., textbooks and lectures), and the question of how much background knowledge students bring with them and how unique and different from a native speakers' or teachers' background knowledge this might be, would be of interest.

Although there seem to be many studies on genre (Swales, 1990; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Johns, 1995) and the relationship between L1 and L2, they seem to be mainly devoted to top-down processes and related areas of formal schema rather than content schema – an area which seems to have been somewhat neglected. This is unfortunate. According to Carrell (1987), "...when both content and rhetorical form are factors in ESL reading comprehension, content is generally more important than form" (p. 476). She also says that, "...when either form or content is unfamiliar, unfamiliar content poses more difficulties for the reader than unfamiliar form" (p. 476). Obviously, if one does not know any of the vocabulary (i.e., "items") in a passage, then one will not be able to comprehend it, even if one is familiar with the formal rhetorical pattern involved in the creation of such a passage (i.e., knowledge of the appropriate formal schema for the particular genre). It is interesting to note here that a study by Yoshimura (1996), in which she attempted to determine if rhetorical schema differ depending on cultures, suggested "...that there is little significant difference between Japanese and English readers' evaluation or preference for rhetorical organization and schema" (p. 208).

Although background knowledge can be divided into content schema and formal schema, and both are undoubtedly important, in the case of elementary EFL students, such as the group of Japanese students in the present study, content schema may be the more important, for without it comprehension may well be impossible.

One interesting thing that appeared in the data was the two new items which were mentioned by the native speakers of English but which did not appear in the essays by the Japanese students (i.e., number 22 [adopt foreign culture's values] and, number 23 [create a mixture of societies]). The fact that these items appear in the essays by the native speakers may be the result of the fact that all of the native speakers in this case were exchange students. In order to verify if this is indeed the case or if it represents a more general culture-specific tendency one would have to analyze essays by Canadian and New Zealand students

who had no intention of becoming exchange students, written in their respective countries.

Another interesting area was the contrast between the numbers of students in each group selecting various items (see Table 2 and Table 3). An examination of Table 3 would seem to indicate that the Japanese students appear to view "language" as an essential element of "international society" whereas the native speakers seem to have focused more on the exchange of cultures and ideas, and do not even mention language. It is impossible to say exactly what this might mean; however, one might speculate that in the case of the native speakers of English, being exchange students, they take the need for language as a given and therefore do not feel any need to mention it; and in the case of the Japanese, that the assignment was given in a language class and when working on the task they felt a need for more language study in order to communicate their ideas more fully. (In a follow-up interview, with a small group of the Japanese students, they said that they had found the task "interesting but difficult" because of their "lack of English.")

All of the native speakers included item 5 (exchange of cultures and ideas) and 75% of them included item 8 (one society), none of the Japanese included these items. In addition, although 33% of the Japanese included item 6 (communication), item 16 (language study − non-Japanese), and item 17 (language study − English), none of the native speakers did. This may again be due to the fact that all of the native speakers are exchange students and the Japanese are students in an English Conversation class; however, it does indicate an interesting contrast in what might be called a "passive" (i.e., study something) versus a more "active" (i.e., do something) approach.

When one takes into consideration the fact that this was a homework assignment and that the Japanese students were therefore free to use dictionaries, then one might argue that it is at least probable that any "items" must be part of the Japanese students' underlying background knowledge. After all, if they did not at least have some awareness of the items in Japanese they would not have been able to look them up in a dictionary.

B. Research question 2: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the total number of words in their essays?

As noted earlier, on the whole the Japanese students tended to write fewer words than the particular group of native speakers involved in the present study. An examination of the total number of words in 132 essays written on the same topic by entering freshmen at the same college over a six-year period also indicated that on the whole Japanese students at

this college wrote fewer words than the particular group of native speakers involved in the present study. In addition, the average number of words has steadily declined from a high of 97 to a low of 63 over that six-year period. However, further research would be needed before any generalizations could be made with regard to either of these findings.

As teachers I believe that we tend to place more emphasis on grammar, form, and content than on length when it comes to writing. However, length may be more important than we think, especially for timed essays used for college entrance such as the SAT (the "SAT Reasoning Test," formerly called the "Scholastic Aptitude Test" and "Scholastic Assessment Test") and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) essays. A recent article by Michael Winerip (May 4, 2005) in the New York Times reported on a study of the new 25-minute SAT writing test. The SAT is the most widely used standardized test that most American colleges and universities require for admission. The study was carried out by Dr. Les Perelman, one of the directors of undergraduate writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

According to Winerip (May 4, 2005),

… Dr. Perelman studied every graded sample SAT essay that the College Board [the creators of the SAT tests] made public. He looked at the 15 samples in the ScoreWrite book that the College Board distributes to high schools nationwide to prepare students for the new writing section. He reviewed the 23 graded essays on the College Board Web site meant as a guide to students and the 16 writing "anchor" samples the College Board used to train graders to properly mark essays (p. 9).

It seemed to him that length was a more important factor than expected.

According to the article,

He was stunned by how complete the correlation was between length and score. "I have never found a quantifiable predictor in 25 years of grading that was anywhere near as strong as this one," he said. "If you just graded them based on length without ever reading them, you'd be right over 90 percent of the time." The shortest essays, typically 100 words, got the lowest grade of one. The longest, about 400 words, got the top grade of six. In between, there was virtually a direct match between length and grade (p. 9).

EFL Teachers, especially those with students who are hoping to enter universities abroad, might be well advised to point out to their students the possible importance of length.

C. Research question 3: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a Fry Readability Scale rating of their essays?

The "Fry Readability Formula" (or "Fry Readability Graph") was first published by Edward Fry in 1963. It was revised in 1977, after which it became one of the most widely used measures of readability. This was mainly because it was one of the easiest to use. In order to calculate the Fry, you pick a random 100-word section of prose and count the number of sentences (using approximations for incomplete sentences). You then count the number of syllables in that same 100-word section, graph the number of sentences versus the number of syllables, and read the difficulty off the Fry Readability Graph in order to obtain the grade reading level (or reading difficulty level).

The Fry, like most readability measures, is designed to indicate the reading level a reader will need in order to understand a given text. However, readability measures do not factor in meaning or grammar, and so they should not be considered definitive measures of readability.

As we saw, the Japanese students were generally lower (average 7.3) than the native speakers (average 14.3). However, this simply reconfirms the fact that readability increases with the number of words in a sentence and the number of syllables in those words; and that holistic ratings can provide an additional, and often more informative way of judging a particular piece of writing, especially in the case of EFL students who are not writing in their native language (For more on readability see Duppenthaler, 2000).

D. Research question 5: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to a holistic rating of their essays?

As noted earlier, the raters looked at seven points when judging the essays. In the case of the Japanese, technical errors tended to intrude on the readers appreciation and pleasure. The difference in the number of errors is also evident from the fact that although the average number of T-units was the same for both groups (5.3), the average number of error-free T-units was much different (J = 2.7, E = 5.3). As noted above, length, as measured by the number of words (J = 105, E = 130), might also have had a subconscious effect; however, in this case the number of words was more or less the same. Especially when we find that J2 and E1 were both given a "fair" rating.

Despite the limitations of holistic measurements noted by some researchers (Casanave, 1994; Freedman, Flower, Hull, & Hayes, 1995), the value of holistic rating in this

study is that it provides another scale that can be used in conjunction with others to provide a more accurate assessment of a particular piece of writing (For more on holistic evaluation of writing see Cooper, 1977; Reid, 1993) .

E. Research question 4: Is there any difference between the two groups with regard to the number of T-units, error-free T-units, words per T-unit, and words per error-free T-unit?

Hunt (1970) defined the T-unit (minimal terminable unit) as "one main clause plus any subordinate clause or non-clausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it" (p. 4) and used it as a measure of L1 syntactic maturity; and this is how it was used in the present study. Other studies (Dehghanpisheh, 1978; Paviolo, 1980) found that the T-unit could be extended to L2 situations.

In their search for an SLA [Second Language Acquisition] 'index', Larsen-Freeman and Strom (1977) examined ESL students' compositions and determined that the written measures which seemed most suitable were the average length of T-units and the total number of error-free T-units per composition. In a later study, Larsen-Freeman (1978) added another measure: the average number of words per error-free T-unit (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, p. 43).

Although as Pery-Woodley (1991) points out, there are "problems posed by the variability of the T-unit across discourse-types…. Syntactic complexity measures continue however, to be used, usually as one indication of language development amongst others" (p. 72).

Kaplan (1966) concluded that in expository writing, "each language and each culture group has a paragraph order unique to itself, and part of the learning of a particular language is the mastering of its logical system" (p. 256). However, in a follow-up interview with the raters, it was found that they could not detect any clear-cut rhetorical patterns in this study that marked one essay as belonging to either one group or another. The clearest separation between the two groups was the number of syntactic errors, with raters commenting that the Japanese students' poor command of syntax had more of an effect upon their holistic rating than rhetorical patterns of development.

Grabe (1991) has pointed out that,

… little research actually exits on how readers evaluate texts; that is, how readers might find texts persuasive, interesting, boring, exciting, and so on, and how these evaluations are related to reading comprehension, recall, formal and content schemata, first language background, and readers' prior expectations (p. 381).

This would undoubtedly be a very interesting area for further study, especially from the perspective of a cultural comparison.

V. Conclusion:

All of the findings are of a tentative nature and can only be applied to the groups of students involved in the study. It should also be noted that only a very small number of students were involved in this study and that this should be kept in mind when interpreting any of the findings. Having said this, there are some points of interest. As noted at the beginning of this paper, the primary purposes of the study were: 1) to determine the extent and nature of background knowledge relating to the term *kokusai shakai* (international society) of entering freshmen enrolled in the Department of Intercultural Studies at a private women's college in Japan; 2) to compare this to that of a group of exchange students from English-speaking countries studying at the same college; and 3) to compare the language development of the Japanese students to that of the group of exchange students.

With regard to the later two points, it would seem to be fairly obvious that EFL/ESL writers are not as proficient as native speakers of English when writing in English; and that L2 writing is "…simpler and less effective (in the eyes of L1 readers) than L1 writing" (Silva, 1993, p. 688); however, this may be an oversimplification. Not only did the Japanese produce an equal number of T-unit (not error-free T-units) but both raters judged at least one Japanese writer's essay and one native-speaker's essay to be equal (i.e., "fair").

Let us now turn our attention to the first point regarding the question of content schema. Although Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) have pointed out many of the drawbacks to schema theory, including the apparent paradox that "… if something doesn't fit well into a schema, it is less well remembered [and] … on the other hand … that things that fit more poorly into a schema are remembered better than things that are too typical" (p. 307); there are undoubtedly few teachers who would deny the value of trying to determine the background knowledge students, especially students who are majoring in Intercultural Studies, bring to the classroom and to contrast this with native speakers' background knowledge of the same topic area. For low-level students, content schema is an essential element for understanding both written and spoken material. Determining which types of content schema are already in place and which need to be taught allows a teacher to develop more effective materials and teaching situations.

All of the students, both native and nonnative, focused on the positive aspects of

international society; with no mention of possible negative aspects — for example: international trade versus competition for markets and market share; more open immigration policies versus calls by immigrants (e.g., Iranian day laborers, resident Koreans, etc.) for better working conditions and more of a say in government policies; and international understanding versus international misunderstanding. It would therefore seem prudent to include classes in the college curriculum devoted to ways in which to cope with the negative aspects of internationalization. For example, classes designed to educate, or at least expose students to the disputant's view of such volatile problems as trade issues and immigration policies. This is especially important given the crucial role Japan will undoubtedly continue to play in the world economy and the increasing chances of encounters both at home and abroad with people from diverse cultures and cultural backgrounds. Positive feelings can very easily turn to negative ones if individuals and nations are not made aware of the very strong possibility of culturally-based misunderstandings.

As indicated by this study, there are a number of possibilities for further research. A study in which the students would be asked to write in their native language might not only reveal additional content schema but additional contrasts with the English essays written by native speakers of English. In addition, asking Japanese and non-Japanese (both students and teachers) to rate the 23 items on a Likert scale (from essential to non-essential) might provide some interesting insights into cultural differences. Finally, a comparison of openings, closing, and discourse patterns used by native and nonnative speakers of English might prove to be of interest.

Although the conclusions that can be drawn from the present study are limited, as time goes on it becomes increasingly important to find ways to increase awareness, understanding, acceptance, and communication between people from different cultures. Hoopes and Pusch (1979) have defined intercultural education as, "Educational activity which fosters an understanding of the nature of culture, which helps the student develop skills in international communication and which aids the student to view the world from perspectives other than one's own" (p. 6). In order to develop effective classes in this curriculum, not only must careful attention be paid to course content and curriculum guidelines, but the preconceived ideas and levels of background knowledge of entering students and the relationship of this knowledge to that of other culture groups, must be determined in order to see how these fit in with existing courses, and as the basis for improvements in existing programs. When educators know what knowledge the students bring with them they will be able to develop more effective teaching situations.

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