

Developmental Patterns of Metadiscourse in Second Language Writing

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The understanding of language learners' developmental patterns is one of the central issues in second language acquisition (SLA) research. The availability of computer learner corpora allows SLA researchers to focus afresh on descriptive facets of interlanguage analyses and to identify in an increasingly meticulous manner the language characteristics at different developmental stages (Tono, 2013). However, learner-corpus based developmental studies have concentrated upon the lexical aspects of learners' production (Meunier, 2015), and in turn, have given little attention to second language (L2) discourse development.

In order to address the lacuna of previous scholarship, the present study aimed to profile the developmental patterns of discourse in L2 writings among different first language (L1) groups. Applying the list of metadiscourse markers proposed by Hyland (2005) to learner language, this study investigates variation of metadiscourse across proficiency levels, as well as across L1 backgrounds. This study draws on the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE) (Ishikawa, 2013), which is considered to be the largest Asian composition database. The data analysed here is a subset from this database, including L2 writings of six L1 groups (viz., Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai). In this dataset, all learners were classified into three levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): A2 (Waystage), B1 (Threshold), and B2+ (Vantage or higher). The writing conditions were rigorously controlled for the contrastive analysis of these groups. All compositions in the subset were written in response to a single writing topic, namely "It is important for college students to have a part-time job."

Starting from the presumption that a "unique matrix of frequencies of various linguistic forms" characterizes every interlanguage (Krzyszowski, 1990), the present study compared the frequencies of metadiscourse markers used in the writings among different learner groups. As correspondence analysis provides a statistical summary of the characteristics of variation, it can be utilized as a first step to consider which metadiscourse features should be investigated in more detail. After identifying analysis points for further investigation, the present study tracked the frequency change patterns of metadiscourse features across proficiency levels in each L1 group.

The results suggest that the six learner groups that were compared have diverse frequency change patterns of metadiscourse features across proficiency levels. To be specific, Japanese learners' heavy reliance on self-mentions and boosters is remarkably antithetical to Thai learners' preference of engagement markers and hedges. Moreover, B2 and higher level learners in China and Taiwan exhibited greater numbers of evidentials than learners in other groups. These differences can be attributable to their L1 rhetorical strategy, not to their lexical and grammatical competence. Therefore, we should consider the idiosyncrasies in metadiscourse of each L1 group when assessing L2 learners based on their language

performance. The present study makes a contribution to our understanding of the nature and characteristics of L2 metadiscourse variation.

References

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