

Student Argumentative Knowledge

Kana Matusmura

Graduate School of Education, Waseda University

kmatsumura@suou.waseda.jp

Abstract

This study examined the ability of Japanese EFL students in grade 11 to judge the quality of arguments. It also aimed at exploring what argumentative feature(s) appealed to the students. The study replicated part of the research of McCann (1989), in which he examined the ability of American students in 6th, 9th, and 12th to write argumentative prose and their knowledge to judge written passages as argument. The passages constructed by McCann systematically varied in terms of argumentative features based on the Toulmin (1958) model of argument. The present research reveals to what extent Japanese students possess knowledge about some features of argument and recognize the strength of the argument in written passages in L2. The results are compared with those of American students and adults in McCann's research.

Keywords

Toulmin model, constructed passages, argumentative features

Introduction

Amid ongoing globalization, understanding and producing an argument in English language context is an essential skill. Students' argumentative skills can be viewed from two aspects, which are receptive and productive; the former is comprehension of argument and the latter is presentation of argument. This article focuses on the former.

1 Review of Literature

There have been many researches on EFL argumentative writing skills both in assessment and instruction (e.g., Oi, 1999, 2005; Stapleton & Wu, 2015) focusing on the argumentative elements proposed by Stephen Toulmin (1958; 2003).

McCann's research is distinctive in that

he examined subjects' cognitive skill to identify and recognize argumentation as well as their writing ability by applying one of the most universal models. He concludes that students as early as sixth grade already know something about argument, which does not contradict the results of the present study with Japanese EFL students.

2 Method

2.1. Participants

Two-hundred and six EFL students in the 11th grade in Japanese private high school in Tokyo participated in the study. Their English proficiency levels varied from lower to upper middle; the TOEIC Bridge mean score is 133 (LL108-UL168) and that of Pre-TOEFL ITP Level 2 is 387 (LL340-UL473).

2.2. Instruments

Seven passages were taken from McCann's research that varied the presence of argumentative features systematically constructed over the set (see Table 1). One more passage from another material was added to the list to make it eight. Each passage deals with a different topic. Argument features include items such as *claim*, *data*, *warrant*, and *proposition*.

The eight passages accompanied by glossaries chosen by the researcher were divided into two sets; passages (1)-(4) and (5)-(8). They were presented on separate days within a week. Glossaries were provided to help them pay attention to the logic of the essay exclusively.

2.3. Procedure

Six classes with the same English proficiency level of participants were randomly assigned to two groups and worked on each four passages in opposite order for counter balance so that the effect of order may be minimized.

First, participants were asked to read each passage and decide whether it represented an

argument or not. If they thought a passage was an argument, that is ‘positive’ as argument, they then rated its quality on a five-point scale.

2.4. Data Analysis

The responses were analyzed in two ways. First, the researcher compiled the percentage of positive responses for each passage. Then for the 5 scaled ratings of the eight passages, the mean ratings and their standard deviations for each passage were calculated. The passages were also rank ordered by the mean rating.

3 Results

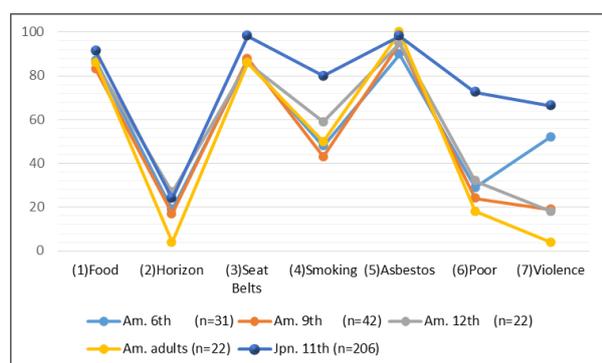


Figure 1: Percentages of Positive Responses in Identifying Arguments of Passages with Japanese EFL students and American Students and Adults in McCann’s study

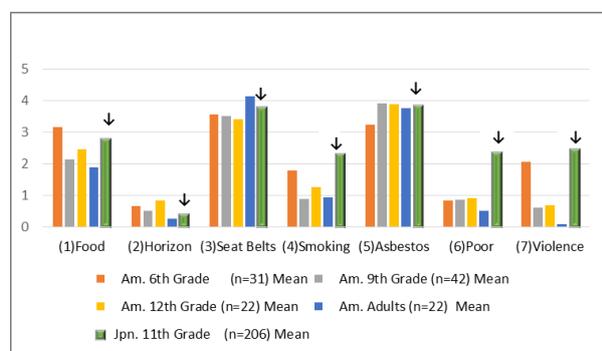


Figure 2: Mean Ratings of Passages as Arguments on 5 scale, with Japanese Students and McCann’s American Students and Adults

First, the figures above show a quite similar tendency between American and Japanese in response to passages. This indicates that the sensitivities against argument are shared between grade school students plus adults in the US and the students in Japan.

Second, the Japanese students identified the passages as argument in fairly higher percentages and ratings in some passages than Americans. This suggests they may not have a clear idea of what makes a passage an argument.

Third, the table 1 shows the passages rated higher contained *proposition(s)*. McCann noted “These (top) three texts all contain *propositions* of policy, statements suggesting that some specific action should be taken.” (p.71) Though it is not the only element that guided the quality ratings, the feature seemed to have “a powerful influence” (p.71) as is pointed out.

Table 1: Passages Rank Ordered by Mean Ratings by Americans & Japanese students

Rank order	Passage	Argumentative features
Best	Asbestos	<i>Proposition, claim, data</i>
2nd	Seat Belts	<i>Proposition, claim, data, warrant</i>
3rd	Food	<i>Proposition, claim</i>
4th-6th	Smoking	<i>Proposition</i>
5th-6th	Poor	<i>Claim, data</i>
4th-7th	Violence	<i>Claim, data</i>
6th-7th	Horizon	<i>Narrative only</i>
(Last)	Tokyo	<i>Narrative only</i>

4 Conclusion

The study concludes that Japanese EFL high school students possess knowledge about some features of argument and to recognize how strong the argument is in written passages in L2, although they seem to have less knowledge and confidence in what makes a passage an argument.

Such unsureness about identifying argument may well result in argumentatively weak production in English discourse. They need explicit instructions for successful performance in terms of argumentation in L2 discourse.

References

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