

The Use of “For Example” by Japanese
Learners of English in Opinion Essays

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Abstract

This study examined English opinion essays of English speakers and Japanese learners and revealed the overuse of “for example.” The learners overused the phrase when it functions as a hypothetical that is not fundamentally present in English but present in the Japanese equivalent phrase “*tatoeba*”. The results implied that the overuse is due to first language transfer. Furthermore, the qualitative study attributed the overuse to Japanese learners’ communication strategy to exhibit and share subjective evidence as convincing fact with readers, and to compensate for the lack of objective evidence and their L2 writing skills.

Introduction

Due to ever-increasing globalization, the need to teach academic writing also continues to grow. In Japan, however, this topic is often disregarded, even at a university level. As a result, most Japanese learners have great difficulty in effectively expressing their ideas and opinions, let alone doing this in another language such as English. Furthermore, even learners who have received essay-writing education are highly likely to end up with English writing patterns that are heavily influenced by the first language (L1) (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2017). Such writing with L1 transfer tends to leave a negative impression on native-English language readers due to an inadequate combination of proper form and function in the writing.

This study investigates the function of an L1 influenced linguistic expression frequently overused by Japanese learners of English, namely “for example.” Japanese speaker use of this pattern is compared with actual production by L1 English speakers to explore differences in use of “for example.”

The results indicate that Japanese learners produce “for example” in a manner similar to their use of its supposedly Japanese equivalent phrase “*tatoeba*,” which has both similarities and differences in function from typical usage of “for example” in English.

The functional difference between “for example” and “*tatoeba*” in each L1 was first examined, and then compared to Japanese learner use of “for example” in their second language (L2), English, and compared with L1 English speaker use.

The differences found between such usages can be attributed to the transfer of L1 Japanese “*tatoeba*” into L2 English use of “for

example.”

Background

The current study utilizes 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) explains that when there are several patterns having a similar meaning in a language, the more frequent pattern is the prototypical pattern, which is stronger in the language users' cognitive organisations. Thus, learner production of “for example” represents their cognitive organisations in L2 English. However, if the learners assume the phrase is exactly equivalent to “*tatoeba*,” it seems reasonable to predict that such production will be influenced by organisations of “*tatoeba*” in L1 Japanese.

A study by Okugiri, Ijuin, and Komori (2017) showed that Japanese learners have a strong tendency to overuse “I think” in opinion essays as a strategy to assert a clear and direct opinion, while English L1 speakers rarely produce the expression because the phrase de-emphasizes the objectivity of evidence, which is undesirable in formal writing.

Although the two phrases are generally exhibited as equivalent in most dictionaries (*Shōgakukan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary*, 1993; *Kenkyūsha Shin Eiwa Daijiten*, 2002; *O-Lex English-Japanese Dictionary*, 2013), Okugiri et al. (2017) point out that their functions are not a perfect match and that Japanese learners of English

showed a strong tendency to produce a different function of “I think.” Furthermore, they argue that this is attributed to the functional gap between English “I think” and Japanese “*to-omou/to-kangaeru*,” even though they are superficially equivalent in English-Japanese, Japanese-English dictionaries.

Specifically, in English L1, “I think” functions to express a more personal and indirect statement, which is typically less desirable in an opinion essay. Meanwhile in Japanese “*to-omou/to-kangaeru*” functions to present a writer’s clear and direct opinion, which is frequently encouraged and used in formal Japanese opinion essays. Our findings suggested that Japanese learners make some assumptions about the function of the linguistic form of L2 in a manner similar to that of its equivalent L1 expression without noticing the functional gap.

In Okugiri, Ijuin, and Komori (2015), we conducted an exploratory study examining the production of “for example” by six English speakers and seven Japanese learners of English. Although the data set was small, we found that the learners produced the phrase “for example” more frequently than the native speakers. More interestingly, we revealed a crucial difference in functions between the learners and the English speakers.

The learners produced “for example” when they attempted to convey one of two denotations: illustrative instances demonstrating a typical example or hypothetical instances indicating an assumptive situation as a hypothesis. Meanwhile, the English speakers used the phrase only in presenting actual examples and never produced any hypothetical example.

Examples in our data are shown below (linguistic errors are unaltered and are presented as they were actually written in the essays):

(1) *Illustrative instance in L2*

Many people uses twitter and facebook and they write their daily life, for example, it might be what they enjoyed and what they irritated.

(2) *Illustrative instance in L1*

Over the last 20 years as technology has improved, the amount of data that an average person receives has multiplied by an extraordinary amount. For example, many people around the world are starting to use different social media sites and this allows people to give and receive information in real time that was not allowed before when all of the media was on printed-paper.

(3) *Hypothetical instance in L2*

Second, in internet, we can access much information anytime anywhere if you want it. For example when I talk to my friend about same topics but they don't know them, I can look up them on internet soon.

In L1 English the function of “for example” is fundamentally an illustrative instance demonstrating a typical example (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2010; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2011). Meanwhile in L1 Japanese, there are three functions of “*tatoeba*”: showing illustrative instance and hypothetical instances as examples (1)-(3), and metaphorical instance as “metaphorically speaking” or “so to speak” (*Gendai Fukushi Yōhō Jiten*, 1994; *Seisen-ban Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 2005; *Meikyō Kokugo Jiten*, 2010).

However, in English-Japanese dictionaries (*Shōgakukan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary*, 1993; *Kenkyūsha Shin Eiwa Daijiten*, 2002; *O-Lex English-Japanese Dictionary*, 2013), “for example” is simply

translated as “*tatoeba*” in Japanese with no further explanation. Thus, “for example” in English is used to illustrate a typical instance and English-Japanese dictionaries show nothing more than the single translation “*tatoeba*” and do not give sufficient explanations about differences in function and usage. Therefore, similar to the results of our previous study, this suggests that learners probably assume that functions are the same and this results in the L1 Japanese transfer on the linguistic function of “*tatoeba*” when using “for example” in the learners’ interlanguage. However, we were not able to reach a definite conclusion because of the small data size.

In the current study, we further examine the function of “for example” by English speakers and Japanese learners with a larger number of data files and investigate the learners’ prototypical pattern of “for example” in their interlanguage cognitive organisations. We will also show the Japanese equivalent of the function for the phrase “*tatoeba*” and how this affects the learners’ cognitive representation of “for example” in L2 English.

Methods

The current study collected samples of “for example” from *The Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students* (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015). The corpus includes opinion essays on a single topic. The essays were collected in the same manner as our last study (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015), but the participants were new. All participants were asked to write an opinion essay in front of the researchers within one hour, according to the following instructions, without using a dictionary.

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.

The data collection method is based on *Nihon Kankoku Taiwan no Daigakusei ni yoru Nihongo Ikenbun Deetabeesu* (Ijuin 2011), which is also a part of the corpus in this study, *the Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students*. The L1 English speakers were college students in Australia, and the learners were also students, all based in Japan. 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. Among the English files, we extracted the adverbial phrase “for example” and among the Japanese files “*tatoeba*.”

Results and Discussion

This section illustrates the frequency of “for example” and “*tatoeba*” in L1 English and Japanese and L2 English groups. The frequency of “for example” was 27 in the L1 English Group, 58 in L2 learner files, and “*tatoeba*” was identified 35 times in the L1 Japanese Group. The learner production was far more frequent than the other groups, more than double that of the L1 English Group. Among the production, in the L1 English Group “for example” was utilized with an illustrative function 24 times (89%) and with a hypothetical function three times (11%); in the L2 English Group, illustrative use was employed 37 times (64%) and hypothetical use 24 times (36%); and in the L1 Japanese Group,

illustrative use was 28 times (80%) and hypothetical use seven times (20%) as shown in Table 1 and Figures 1-3.

Table 1: Frequency of “for example” and “*tatoeba*”

	Illustrative	Hypothetical	Total
L1 English “for example”	24 (89%)	3 (11%)	27 (100%)
L2 English “for example”	37 (64%)	24 (36%)	58 (100%)
L1 Japanese “ <i>tatoeba</i> ”	28 (80%)	7 (20%)	35 (100%)

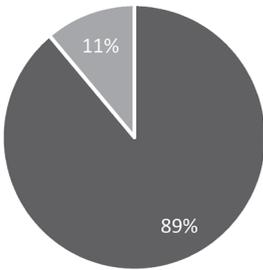


Figure 1: Proportion of illustrative and hypothetical use in L1 English

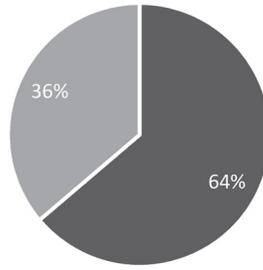


Figure 2: Proportion of illustrative and hypothetical use in L2 English

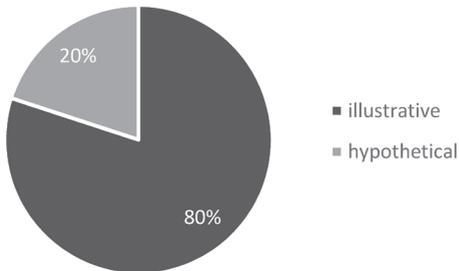


Figure 3: Proportion of illustrative and hypothetical use in L1 Japanese

The results show that the more frequent usage in all groups is the same; i.e., the illustrative function. In our L1 English data, although hypothetical “for example” is not present in English dictionaries (*Oxford*

Dictionary of English, 2010; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2011), we found three cases of hypothetical use.

In the L1 Japanese group, there was no instance of metaphorical use. Figures 1-3 illustrate that L2 English learners show a unique tendency to produce more hypothetical instances of “for example,” more than three times that of L1 English and almost double of L1 Japanese in proportion. One possible explanation for the overuse is L1 transfer of the hypothetical function of Japanese “*tatoeba*” and that the learners produce more hypothetical instances because such use is quite frequent in their L1 Japanese compared to in English and emphasized in L2 to compensate for the difficulty in managing L2. It may also have been that learners simply do not know the difference in function between “for example” and “*tatoeba*,” unless specifically taught, as typical English-Japanese dictionaries merely exhibit that “for example” is “*tatoeba*” and do not explain functional differences.

More specifically, in Japanese the phrase pattern “*tatoeba* … *tosuru*,” denoting “(let us) assume that” is commonly used, thus L2 learners may assume this Japanese use is also available in English, as shown Example (4) (linguistic errors are unaltered and are presented as they were actually written in the essays).

(4) *Hypothetical (L2 English)*

On the other hand, news paper have to write a correct thing. For example, when writer write an wrong information. It is a big problem among the society.

In (4), the writer’s intention is to denote, “Let us assume that a newspaper writer writes an article based on incorrect information,” which sounds

perfectly all right using “*tatoeba* … *tosuru*” in Japanese, although it is not expressed in English through the use of “for example.”

A qualitative analysis reveals another possibility for the overuse; i.e., the learner strategy is to bring the reader into their realm, namely their personal and subjective experience or ideas. Actual examples of both illustrative and hypothetical use in all groups are shown below (linguistic errors are unaltered and are presented as they were actually written in the essays):

(5) *Illustrative (L1 English)*

Similarly, hard copies of newspapers are commonly used for people to look back on previous events. For example, newspapers can be used to look up death notices, and historical events.

(6) *Hypothetical (L1 English)*

Given the lower distribution costs, manufacturing costs, and overheads associated with digital media, as well as the abundance of free media on the internet, consumers may feel detached. For example, if one appreciates a piece of music enough which they sampled for free online, they may feel obliged to buy a physical copy in order to support the creator.

(7) *Illustrative (L2 English)*

I think that newspapers and magazines are needed for our communication. For example, I and my father read the newspaper’s article, and we can talk about it together during eating dinner.

(8) *Hypothetical (L2 English)*

... the writers of magazines research about articles every day. For example, the writers know that entertainers had a dinner one day. The writers research where and when they had, and write in magazine about its. If we like those entertainers.

(9) *Illustrative (L1 Japanese)*

Sore wa motomoto ryoosha ga dooiu mokuteki ni
 That TOP¹ fundamentally both NOM what purpose for
 tekishi-te-iru no ka ni mo kankeishi-te-iru. Tatoeba
 fit-GER-STAT NMLZ Q to also relate-GER-STAT. For example
 intaanetto wa shasin dooga moji nado no jyoo hoo o
 Internet TOP pictures movies words etc. GEN information ACC
 tairyoo-ni shunji-ni sekaijyuu ni hasshin
 large amount-ADVBL instant-ADVBL all the world LOC sending
 dekiru.
 capable.

“That is also related to the adequacy of the role of both media. For example, on the Internet one can send a large amount of information, such as pictures, movies, and words instantly to the world.”

(10) *Hypothetical (L1 Japanese)*

Jibun no handan ni-yori shiri-tai jyoo hoo nomi
 Self GEN judgment ABL know-want to information only
 shika mi-nai koto no-hoo ga ooi des-yoo.
 more than see-NEG NMLZ than NOM frequent COP-may
Tatoeba aru uebusaito ni ikutsuka no nyuusu no
 For example certain website LOC some GEN news GEN

komidashi ga aru to shimasu.
subheadings NOM exist COMP assume.

“More people seem to be reading news that interests themselves. For example, assume that we have some subheadings of news on a certain website.”

Comparing the contents of “for example” in (5) and (7), in (5) the English speaker gives death notices and historical events as stereotypical examples to find events that occurred in the past, while in (7) the learner presents her personal and habitual activity with her father. Such learner use is often observed in the data; in the L2 English group, 18 among the total occurrences (out of 58) involved the first person I or we. On the contrary, in both L1s such production was very rare; only once in both the L1 English and Japanese groups. In language acquisition, learners at a novice level tend to write by providing more personal, familiar, and subjective evidence, then after developing their writing skills they are able to manage writing more abstract, more general, and more objective evidence that contributes to a more persuasive and convincing essay.

The results imply two possible learner strategies: (1) if they are not able to conceive a general, objective or typical example, they utilize a personal, familiar, or subjective example as a typical evidence to convince the reader and (2) to bring a reader to the realm of their own ideas or personal experience as a shared example between the writer and reader in order to convince the reader. Given no chance to look up new evidence on the direction in the data collection, the writers needed to write an opinion essay using their own knowledge; in addition, they had only one hour to create a persuasive essay. The hypothetical use is possibly more convenient when learners do not have an objective or stereotypical

example at hand, and thus create and share a hypothetical situation with a reader. It may also compensate for the linguistic difficulty in L2 when learners cannot manage L2 as well as they do their L1. Hence, one accessible approach is to convince readers by introducing a personal experience as an example.

Conclusion

This study explored similarities and differences in function between “for example” and “*tatoeba*” and Japanese learners’ overuse of the hypothetical “for example” in L2 English, although such use is fundamentally undefined in L1 English. In Japanese, “*tatoeba*” functions to introduce hypothetical content and also to introduce a typical instance. Conversely, however, in English, “for example” generally does not function in this manner (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2010; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2011).

The results of our study suggested two possible explanations for the hypothetical use: transfer from the hypothetical function of “*tatoeba*” and Japanese learner strategies to exhibit and share with the reader subjective evidence as a convincing fact, which is done to compensate for the lack of objective evidence and for shortcomings in L2 writing skills and vocabulary.

The current study was able to show possible factors affecting learners’ overuse of “for example.” However, in order to further specify the primary factor and types of production, further psychological experimental study is necessary.

Broadly speaking, English-Japanese dictionaries typically provide only a simple translation between “for example” and “*tatoeba*” without any explanation about functional differences, which unfortunately then

carries over to language learner usage. The results of this study shed light on shortcomings in the translations provided by English-Japanese dictionaries, suggesting the need to provide explanations that touch upon functional use of words and phrases in each language.

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Notes

¹ Abbreviations are listed as below.

TOP: topic

NOM: nominative

GER: gerundive

STAT: stative aspect

NMLZ: nominalizer

Q: question particle

GEN: genitive

ACC: accusative

ADVBL: adverbial

LOC: locative

ABL: ablative

NEG: negation

COP: copula

COMP: complementizer

