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Extended discourse in Japanese learners of English: From the perspective of oral and written narratives

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This research study examined the acquisition of extended discourse skills in Japanese learners of English by focusing on oral and written narratives. Elicited narratives were collected from Japanese university students who are studying English and compared with narratives gathered from Japanese and English native speakers. The results showed some language-specific tendencies in the use of narrative strategies (e.g., evaluative expressions, referential structure, motion expressions) and some learners showed transfer of narrative strategies from Japanese to English. Use of narrative strategies also varied according to the proficiency level of the students. Furthermore, the results suggest that use of oral and written narratives in the foreign language classroom may be an effective way to develop extended spoken and written discourse skills.

Psycholinguistics

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Background of the study: Labov (1972) defines narrative as "the recapitulation of past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to a sequence of events." The ability to create narratives is a basic language skills which typically emerges effortlessly, early in first language development. Children ages 2-3 are already able to string sequential clauses together, forming simple stories which form the basis for more extended narratives with developing language skills such as increasing grammatical expertise, vocabulary, and discourse skills (e.g., Nakamura, 1990). Although the ability to form narratives develops smoothly and effortlessly in first language acquisition, in foreign language acquisition, it can be a significant challenge.

One of the important goals of communication-based language skills in the foreign language classroom is the ability to engage in extended discourse, both oral and written. Narrative skills play a key role in many types of extended discourse, such as everyday conversation and essay writing. All over the world, language teachers use storytelling for classroom speaking activities in which students tell stories about themselves, or others, such as family members or friends, or retell stories that they have read or heard. Story reconstruction is another useful teaching strategy, where students are given pictures which they must narrate or explain.

In recent years, emphasis on extended discourse has also increased in the Japanese educational context, with a shift toward communication-based English language teaching. Even language assessment tests, including the EIKEN (Test in Practical English Proficiency), which is currently Japan's most widely recognized English language assessment with the solid support of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) includes essay writing and interviews in its tests. Similarly, TOEIC also offers Speaking & Writing tests to assess learners' productive language skills. In such tests, students must narrate a story with photo or picture prompts. Potential employers are eager to hire students with productive English language skills; in other words, they need to be able to speak and write. However, despite the increasing emphasis on productive language skills, many Japanese students still have considerable difficulty with extended discourse (e.g., telling a story).

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to examine the acquisition of extended discourse skills in Japanese learners of English by focusing on oral and written narratives. Regarding foreign language learners of English, basic narrative skills are important for both speaking and writing. Elicited narratives were collected from Japanese university students who are studying English, ranging from elementary to advanced proficiency levels, and compared with those gathered from native speakers of English and Japanese in earlier studies (e.g., Nakamura, 1990, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014). Analyses of the English narratives created by the Japanese learners highlight issues they face in engaging in narrative construction in a foreign language (English). In addition, they revealed narrative strategies transferred from their first language, Japanese. In particular, narrative organization (e.g., referential structure), evaluative language, and motion expressions were examined closely.

Research method: Narratives were collected from Japanese learners of English at three Japanese universities. Participants were divided into three proficiency levels (i.e., elementary, intermediate, advanced) as determined by standardized tests scores (i.e., EIKEN, TOEIC, TOEFL). Oral and written narratives were elicited using two wordless picture stories which have been used widely to study narrative development: (1) the Frog Story (Mayer, 1969), and (2) the Balloon Story (Karmiloff-Smith, 1979). Mayer's 1969 storybook *Frog, where are you?* was initially used by Slobin and Berman (1994) to study development of children's narrative structure in five different languages (e.g., English, Hebrew, German) and later led to researchers using it with more than 50 different languages in first language acquisition and 17 languages in second language acquisition or bilingualism (refer to Strömqvist & Verhoeven, 2004; Guo, Lieven, Budwig, Ervin-Tripp, Nakamura & Özçalışkan, 2009).

Collection, transcription, and coding/analysis of the two types of narratives

were conducted from Japanese learners of English. Collection, transcription and coding/analysis of the data from native speakers of English and Japanese (in addition to narratives collected in previous studies) also proceeded in parallel. In addition, collection, transcription, and coding/analysis of bilingual narratives (English and Japanese, respectively) from native-level or near-native level university students was also conducted.

Research findings:

(1) Narrative skills in English and Japanese narratives created by native L1 users: Data had been collected from native L1 users of English and Japanese (e.g., Nakamura, 1990, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014) in earlier studies; some additional data was also collected as part of this project. Analyzing the English and Japanese narratives created by L1 native narrators created a baseline for culturally- and linguistically-appropriate narrative strategies:

Narrative organization: The use of narratives strategies and elements, such as referential structure, transition signals, verb tense in the Japanese and English narratives, was examined (e.g., Nakamura, 2021a, 2022c). The L1 data showed the use of language-specific referential strategies in Japanese (e.g., NP-*ga*, NP-*wa*, null anaphora) and English (e.g., indefinite article + noun, definite article + noun; pronouns) respectively.

Evaluative language: Expressions of affect and evaluation were examined in the Japanese and English narratives, looking at a wide range of grammatical and discourse strategies (e.g., character speech, frames of mind, causal connectors, onomatopoeia/mimesis and hedges, pragmatic participles, adversity passives, causative and benefactive constructions). Language-specific evaluative strategies were observed, such as the use of character speech and onomatopoeia/mimesis in the Japanese narratives, and the use of frames of mind in the English narratives (e.g., Nakamura, 2019a, 2020). While the specific strategies used by Japanese and English-speaking narrators may differ (e.g., onomatopoeia/mimesis, character speech, frames of mind, causal connectors, negative qualifiers, hedges, enrichment expressions), all narrators made clear attempts to mark evaluation and attitude.

Expressions of motion events: Strategies appropriate for Japanese (a verb-framed language) and English (a satellite-framed language) used by the Japanese and English-speaking narrators were examined from a developmental perspective (Nakamura, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). L1 narrators clearly paid attention to features that were important in their language. While L1 English narrators had a large repertoire of manner verbs, using complex path segments and ground elements, L1 Japanese narrators used path verbs to describe motion events with fewer path segments and ground elements, while adding manner details through subordinated verbs in the form of compound verbs, as well as adverbs/ adverbial expressions and mimetic expressions.

(2) Narrative skills in English narratives created by Japanese learners of English (as compared to the English and Japanese L1 narratives): L2 narrators often had difficulty with language-specific narrative skills, mainly due to limited grammatical expertise and vocabulary, among other things. There were some cases of transfer from L1 (Japanese) to L2 (English), especially in low proficiency learners.

Narrative organization: The Balloon Story, with its simpler and shorter plot and limited characters, was analyzed from the perspective of referential strategies (e.g., referent introduction, referent maintenance, and referent re-introduction (Nakamura, 2021a, 2022c). The L2 written narratives showed that narrators were able to use pronouns (e.g., *he, they*) despite the limited use of pronouns in Japanese. Other referential strategies proved to be more challenging, such as marking definiteness with definite or indefinite articles before referent nouns (e.g., *the boy, a man).* Students with lower proficiency levels often had difficulty with referential marking. Confusion with articles (indefinite/definite) influenced the cohesion and flow of the story, and such article errors were found even among some

of the advanced learners. Overall, the advanced narrators had a wider repertoire of referential strategies, making fewer mistakes. Transfer of language-specific aspects of the L1 referential system (Japanese) such as ellipted referents did not seem to occur in the L2 (English) narratives. Detailed findings were reported regarding the Frog stories in the IPrA2021 and JSLS2021 conference presentations.

Evaluative language: In Nakamura (2020), bilingual narratives of students with near-native or native levels of proficiency in both English and Japanese were analyzed from the perspective of biliteracy, mainly from the perspective of affect and evaluation. Regarding evaluative expressions, many participants showed distinct differences between their Japanese and English narratives which were culturally and linguistically appropriate. Other participants, however, showed clear transfer of strategies between the two languages. In Nakamura (2019a), Japanese learners of English (as compared with L1 Japanese and English users) showed different patterns of evaluative language in their narratives. Limited vocabulary and grammatical expertise in lower proficiency learners led to narrative strategies often used by Japanese children, such as onomatopoeia/mimesis and character speech, while more advanced learners used evaluative expressions more similar to the patterns of English native speakers. Depending on their proficiency level, some L2 narrators showed transfer of evaluative strategies from Japanese in their English narratives.

Expressions of motion events: Japanese learners of English learn to use the features of their target language (English) by using manner verbs and satellites (Nakamura, 2022a, 2022b). Low/medium proficiency learners have a limited repertoire of manner verbs (e.g., *escape, fly, climb*) but use them appropriately. High proficiency learners further expand their repertoire of manner verbs as their vocabulary increases. In addition, they gradually become able to encode their motion events in more complex constructions (i.e., multiple path/ground elements). Some differences in rhetorical style (e.g., static scene-setting vs. motion descriptions) were also observed, suggesting transfer of the rhetorical style more typical of Japanese narratives to the learners' English narratives, especially at lower proficiency levels. In addition, in Nakamura (2023a), an analysis of the expression of motion events in oral narratives by Japanese-English bilinguals, showed that bilingual narrators with high levels of proficiency in both English and Japanese were able to use language-appropriate motion expressions and rhetorical style, similar to that used by L1 narrators. However, some of the bilingual narrators with lower levels of proficiency in one of their two languages showed transfer of motion expression strategies between their two languages, in terms of types of motion expressions and trajectory of motion, as well as rhetorical style.

(3) Other relevant findings (i.e., attitudes toward reading; writing process; interpersonal involvement) from related studies:

Reading in the ELT Classroom (Nakamura, 2019b): A questionnaire regarding attitudes toward reading was administered in several extensive reading classes. The results show that despite the increasing emphasis on extended discourse in English language teaching classroom in Japanese educational contexts, there is an overall decline in interest in reading among Japanese university students, with many students spending minimal time engaged in reading in both their L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English). This means that students may have limited exposure to written narratives in both their L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English). Most students responded that they had never read a whole book in English, especially in the low proficiency classes because it was "too difficult." This illustrates the challenge that teachers face to enable their Japanese students to become fluent readers in English

The writing process of Japanese EFL learners: An Introspective Approach (Nakamura, 2021b): In this paper, an immediate retrospective interview (stimulated recall) was used to provide insight into students' thoughts, feelings, reasoning processes, and mental states as they engaged in the task of writing essays. The study revealed the need for explicit instruction in various writing sub-processes, such as conceptualizing, formulating, revising, and reading, as well as the importance of meta-cognition in writing.

The oral/literate continuum and interpersonal involvement: An analysis of the L1 and L2 oral and written narratives in English and Japanese was conducted to examine the oral/literate continuum and interpersonal involvement (Nakamura, 2024). The study examined two strategies of interpersonal involvement, namely direct quotations and onomatopoeia/mimesis, focusing on differences between L1 Japanese and L2 English, with preliminary findings regarding narratives created by Japanese L2 learners of English. Strategies of interpersonal involvement were not necessary limited to the oral narratives, but could be found in both spoken and written narratives. Narrators with low proficiency also showed transfer of interpersonal involvement strategies such as use of onomatopoeia and direct quotations in the L2 English stories.

(4) Unexpected developments: Due to Covid-19, from FY2019 onwards, it became difficult to collect oral narratives in person as university classes were conducted online, and so data collection and publication continued with emphasis on written narratives. This resulted in a closer look at the written narratives (as compared to the oral narratives) in publications and conference presentations conducted during the project. From FY 2022, an effort was made to collect oral narratives in the classroom and online.

(5) Domestic/international significance and impact & directions for further research:

Domestic significance and impact: The domestic significance of this study is that it addresses a gap in the research on English language learning in Japan which has focused heavily on issues such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, and less so on the topic of extended discourse skills. Extended discourse skills are crucial for both oral and written communication. Learners need to be instructed in the use of various narrative strategies in extended discourse, as they are invaluable for smooth communication. By gaining insight into the difficulties that learners may face in their construction of narratives, we can provide better instruction in the classroom regarding narrative skills.

International significance and impact: The international significance of this study is that it fills a gap in the crosslinguistic and crosscultural research on narratives. Narrative research has been widely conducted with more than 50 different languages in first language acquisition and 17 languages in second language acquisition or bilingualism (refer to Strömqvist & Verhoeven, 2004; Guo, Lieven, Budwig, Ervin-Tripp, Nakamura & Özçalışkan, 2009). However, research on Japanese narratives and narratives created by Japanese learners of English has been minimal. The narrative data collected is in the ongoing process of being formatted and prepared for public access, which will allow narrative researchers from around the world to incorporate Japanese data in their crosslinguistic and crosscultural narrative research.

Directions for future research: The results have provided insight into how to better instruct Japanese learners of English in their narrative skills, which in turn, will improve their ability to engage in extended spoken and written discourse. Narratives of Japanese learners of English differ according to their level of proficiency and different aspects of narrative (e.g., referential structure, expressions of motion) are influenced by the level of the learners. For example, the results show that Japanese EFL learners need more guidance in the classroom to effectively achieve successful referencing and discourse cohesion in extended discourse. Selecting the most appropriate referential strategy in each context requires both syntactic knowledge and discourse-pragmatic competence, which may be challenging for language learners. In order to become better able to engage in extended discourse, students must be provided with opportunities to create longer segments in both conversation and writing in the classroom. More research is necessary to gain insight into level-appropriate instruction in narrative construction in EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, further data is needed regarding different types of narratives, such as personal narratives, fictional narratives, and collaborative narratives. Research is currently ongoing in a Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research JP22K00688 (Extended discourse in the foreign language classroom: From the perspective of narratives of Japanese learners of English).

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