

A Comparison of L1 and L2 Argument Structures in Student Writing

Abstract

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The current study investigates argument structures in the English academic writing of Japanese native speakers and Australian English native speakers at the undergraduate level in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. Whereas much of the previous research in argumentation has relied on analysis of set tasks, this study conducts an in-depth and comprehensive case-study analysis of a small number of coursework essays submitted for assessment by the students participating in the study. Follow-up interviews with the students and their tutors provide insight into the processes of writing and contribute towards qualitative analysis of the data. In recognising that student academic essay writing is of a persuasive type, the analytic framework for the present study consists of three core analyses central to the nature of persuasive argumentation as outlined by Connor and Lauer (1988): a Toulmin analysis of informal reasoning, an analysis of persuasive appeal, and a superstructure analysis of argument. Adopting a modified version of Toulmin's (1958) representation of argument schema for the model of argument structure, as proposed by Crammond (1998), the study takes argument as the basic unit of analysis to examine the complexity of argument structure in terms of the elaboration of individual arguments and the relational links between multiple related arguments of extended persuasive discourse. Measures obtained for each participant include the overall frequency of argument substructures and the maximum variety (how many different types) of substructures incorporated into an argument structure, the number and length of argument chains created by having embedded arguments and the frequency of different types of evidence used in support of arguments. In addition to identifying and characterising the argument structures in L1 and L2 English texts, the study determines the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 argumentative structures in the English essays of the participants and the nature of argument in Japanese ESL writing.

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