

A Study on the Use of Stance Forms by Japanese EFL Learners in Discursive and Descriptive Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Previous research (Hyland & Milton, 1997; McEnery & Amselom Kifle, 2002; Aijmer, 2002) has shown that learners of English as a foreign language tend to use stance forms in discursive writing differently from native speakers of English. However, the pattern of use of such forms is not consistent among different learner groups. This study aims to contribute to this field of research by looking at the way intermediate-level Japanese learners of English use stance forms. It also aims to go one step further by comparing the learners' use of stance forms in discursive writing with their use in descriptive writing. The latter genre does not appear to have been studied with regard to learners' use of stance in spite of the fact that it is another genre where its use can be expected. As in the previous studies listed above, in this study too, learners' use of stance forms will be compared with their use by native speakers.

I begin by defining the terms 'stance', and the related grammatical category, 'epistemic modality', and to look at how this area of language is realized in English. Following this I will look at some studies which have used learner corpora to investigate the use of stance in learner writing.

Biber et al. (1999) contains a whole chapter on the grammatical marking of stance, which is defined as the expression of 'personal feelings, value judgments, or assessments' (p.966) by speakers and writers. Palmer (2001) defines epistemic modality as being 'concerned with the speaker's attitude to the truth-value or factual status of the proposition' (p.24). These two terms which are strongly related clearly refer to the same area of language, the mastery of which is crucial in order for speakers and writers to convey their point-of-view accurately and effectively. In this report the terms will be used interchangeably.

Stance can be realized in English through a variety of word-types. Below is a list of the main ways in which speaker or writer stance can be conveyed:

- modal verbs: *may, might, will, must* etc.
- lexical verbs: *think, suppose, guess, seem* etc.
- modal adverbs: *maybe, perhaps, probably* etc.
- modal adjectives: *possible, definite, certain* etc.
- modal nouns: *fact, opinion, certainty, possibility* etc.

Holmes (1988), Hyland & Milton (1997) and McEnery & Amselom Kifle (2002) all provide detailed taxonomies of the most common lexis used in English to convey stance.

It appears that this is a difficult aspect of language to master. Holmes (1988, p.21) writes that, "There is widespread agreement among both theoretical and applied linguists that modality is a complex and very important aspect of English which is not easy for first or second language learners to acquire."

As regards second language learners, some studies have compared the use of stance in writing by learners with its use by comparable groups of native speakers. Hyland & Milton (1997) looked at the use of stance in the examination scripts of Cantonese-speaking school leavers, and compared their use with that of British learners of a similar age and level of education. Corpus linguistic techniques were used in the analysis, which found that the Cantonese-speaking learners used a smaller range of devices to express stance and that they made stronger commitments to the propositions expressed than the native speakers. The authors suggested that 'it is unlikely that Hong Kong students differ greatly from other learners in the difficulties they experience in expressing doubt and certainty in English' (p.201).

In a study with a very similar design, although with smaller corpora, McEnery & Amselom Kifle (2002) compared the use of stance by Eritrean learners of English with that of native speakers. In their study short argumentative compositions by L2 learners at the university-level were compared with argumentative essays by British school students around the age of 16. Their findings agreed with those of Hyland & Milton (1997) in as far as the learners appeared to have some difficulty expressing stance in English. However, whereas the Cantonese learners in the earlier study used 'stronger' stance forms, the Eritrean learners tended to be more tentative than native speakers, and used 'weaker' forms.

In a further study along similar lines, Aijmer (2002) looked at more advanced learners of English. She focused predominantly on the argumentative writing of advanced Swedish learners, using the Swedish learner corpus from ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English, see Granger (1998b)) and LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, see also Granger (1998b)) as a reference corpus of native speaker argumentative essays. She also broadened her study by comparing the use of modality in Swedish learners' written interlanguage with that of German and French learners. She found that all three learner groups tended to overuse modal verbs as compared to native speakers. She also found from the data that the Swedish learners overused modal adverbs as well as modal verb + adverb combinations (eg, *will probably; should of course* etc.). Furthermore, the Swedish learners used lexical verbs conveying stance (eg, *I think; I believe*) much more than the native speakers. This led her to suggest that learners tend to adopt 'a more speech-like style in their writing than the native writers' (Aijmer, 2002, p.72).

All three papers therefore demonstrate that the expression of stance presents difficulties for the L2 learner of English. Apart from the possible reason that the difference between learner and native-speaker writing lies in the adoption of spoken-language forms, these papers also put forward the possibility that the underuse and overuse¹ of specific stance forms is a

result of other factors such as L1 transfer, instructional methods, textbook content etc.

This study will adopt an approach broadly similar to the three studies discussed above, in as far as a corpora of learner essays will be compared with the LOCNESS corpus of essays written by native speakers. However, this study will look not only at learners' discursive writing, but also at learners' descriptive writing. Therefore, one section of analysis will involve the comparison of two different learner corpora (see research question 1 below).

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- 1) How does the choice of epistemic forms by Japanese EFL learners differ depending on the genre of essay writing?
- 2) To what extent, and in what ways, is the use of epistemic forms in discursive writing by Japanese EFL learners different from their use by native speakers of English?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

For this study I decided to collect two different sub-genres of essays:

- (1) descriptive essays: This involved the description of a picture (see Appendix for details); the pictures were taken from the listening section of a practice test for the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) examination (Lougheed, 1996).
- (2) discursive essays: This involved the learners discussing a topic which was considered relevant to their context as university students (see Appendix for tasks).

For each type of essay, three different tasks were created. The reason for this was that due to space limitations in the computer laboratory, not all subjects could be accommodated at the same time. By having different tasks it was possible to decrease the likelihood of some participants talking with others and preparing essays in advance. All essays were written under examination conditions. The use of dictionaries or peer-consultation was not permitted. Learners were asked to write at least 300 words, and given approximately 90 minutes to do so. Most (but not all) learners were able to write more than the essay length requirement. These essays were saved as both Word documents and text files. I used the Word documents to correct the essays and provide feedback on the essays to the students (this task counted as a requirement for one of the students' English classes). The text files were used for Wordsmith Tools analysis (see below under 'Data Analysis').

In total, 67 students (mostly first-year students) completed the descriptive essay. However, 21 of these essays were not used in the analysis as the students had not adopted an 'epistemic perspective'. They had tended to write more of a narrative style essay in which they created a storyline to fit the picture. As this approach to the task generally negated the need to use stance forms, these essays were not considered suitable for this analysis. As for the discursive essays, a total of 41 students (mostly second-year students)² completed the essays and all of them could be used for analysis.

Data Analysis

The first stage of data analysis involved reading through each of the essays and highlighting stance forms. Although time-consuming, this manual analysis enabled me to 'get to know my data', which can be invaluable in this kind of study. It enabled me to identify broad patterns of use of stance forms, and also to pick out cases where ambiguity of function meant that decisions would have to be taken about whether a form was epistemic or not. This is particularly the case with modal auxiliaries which can have both root and epistemic functions (see Coates, 1983).

The second stage of data analysis involved the use of Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 1996). The following procedures were carried out:

- two learner corpora were created: (1) descriptive essays — consisting of 46 texts (15,259 words); (2) discursive essays — consisting of 41 texts (13,552 words);
- wordlists were created for both learner corpora and the LOCNESS corpus;
- all wordlists were checked for the frequencies of stance forms; for each stance form concordance information was analysed as well as information about collocations;
- where concordances contained both epistemic and non-epistemic forms, manual analysis of the data was carried out to identify the number of epistemic forms (theoretical support for choices made was based on Coates (1983));
- a keyword analysis was carried out between the learner corpus of discursive essays and LOCNESS

The data collected from this analysis was used to answer the research questions outlined above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: How does the choice of epistemic forms by Japanese EFL learners differ depending on the genre of essay writing?

The number of occurrences of the most common stance forms in each of the two learner corpora is shown in Table 1. Non-epistemic occurrences of these words are not included in the figures.

For both learner corpora, the most common way of conveying stance is to use a lexical verb which conveys epistemicity, and also that in both corpora, *think* is clearly the most commonly used verb (almost always in the form *I think*). However, it is of note that it is used almost twice as frequently in the discursive essays, occurring at an average of four times per essay. The only other lexical stance verb used more than twice in the discursive essays is *believe*. On the other hand, in the descriptive essays a broader range of lexical stance verb use can be seen, with *seem* and *look* being used quite frequently. The difference in the use of *seem* between the two corpora is investigated in more detail below.

Table 1: Frequencies of common stance forms in the two learner corpora

| epistemic form | raw frequency: descriptive | % of corpus | raw frequency: discursive | % of corpus |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| lexical verbs | | | | |
| think | 103 | 0.68 | 164 | 1.21 |
| seem | 38 | 0.25 | 1 | 0.01 |
| look | 35 | 0.22 | 1 | 0.01 |
| guess | 11 | 0.07 | 2 | 0.01 |
| believe | 4 | 0.03 | 9 | 0.07 |
| TOTAL | 191 | 1.25 | 177 | 1.31 |
| modal auxiliary verbs | | | | |
| will/won't | 41 | 0.27 | 34 | 0.25 |
| would/wouldn't | 5 | 0.03 | 10 | 0.07 |
| may | 29 | 0.19 | 18 | 0.13 |
| might | 3 | 0.02 | 4 | 0.03 |
| must | 17 | 0.11 | 0 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 95 | 0.62 | 66 | 0.49 |
| modal adverbs | | | | |
| maybe | 33 | 0.22 | 5 | 0.04 |
| probably | 13 | 0.09 | 0 | 0 |
| perhaps | 5 | 0.03 | 1 | 0.01 |
| TOTAL | 51 | 0.33 | 6 | 0.04 |

As regards the use of modal auxiliary verbs, for the most part they are used in a similar way in the two corpora. *Will* and *may* are the most commonly used modal verbs in both corpora. The situation for *must* is however rather exceptional in that although it occurs 24 times in the descriptive corpus and 23 times in the discursive corpus, 17 of the occurrences in the former are epistemic whereas none of the occurrences in the latter are epistemic. This will be discussed in more detail below.

The third most common way of expressing stance in the essays is the use of modal adverbs. They are used considerably more frequently in the descriptive essays than in the discursive essays.

Overall, a greater range and greater number of the most common stance forms are used in the descriptive corpus than in the discursive corpus. It is not immediately clear why this is the case. However, some possible reasons for the learners' epistemic choices will be highlighted by looking in more detail at the learners' use of *seem* and *must* in the two corpora.

SEEM(S)

The raw frequencies of occurrences of this verb in the wordlists produced by Wordsmith

do not provide us with information about how the verb is actually used in the two corpora. However, manual analysis of the data appeared to show a pattern in the way in which the verb is used in the corpora, and led me to look at the definition of *seem* in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary (2001). The first two senses of the verb given are as follows:

- 1st sense: You use *seem* to say that someone or something gives the impression of having a particular quality, or of happening in the way you describe.
- 2nd sense: You use *seem* when you are describing your own feelings or thoughts, or describing something that has happened to you, in order to make your statement less forceful. [my emphasis added]

Of the 38 occurrences of *seem* or *seems* in the corpus of descriptive essays, all but one occurrence take the first sense described above. Some examples from the corpus of the use of *seems* using this sense are given below:

- (1) *But, the other man who is seated in front of them seems to be little interested in it and seems to be bored.*
- (2) *They are drinking something like a cup of coffee or tea during the meeting, and they seems to be relaxed.*

This finding is not so strange considering that the sub-genre of description is likely to cause the writer to state their impression (sense 1) rather than to mitigate an opinion (sense 2). It would be reasonable to expect this latter sense to occur in the discursive essays. However, as the data above shows, the verb *seem* only occurs on one occasion in the learner corpus of discursive essays when it is used with sense 2:

- (3) *Actually, it seems that mobile phone is a must for our life now.*

It appears likely that the reason for this imbalance is that a greater number of learners have acquired the first sense of the verb than the second sense. This could be the result of L1 transfer, instruction or textbook materials.

MUST

Although this modal auxiliary verb is used almost equally in the two corpora, it is only used in its epistemic sense in the corpus of descriptive essays. 71% of its occurrences in this corpus are epistemic and 29% involve root modality. Two examples of each from the corpus are given below:

- (4) *He looks like a golf player. He must play golf three days a week.* (epistemic)
- (5) *At the top of the stairs, two men are walking down. They must be his friends.* (epistemic)
- (6) *Especially, young persons must not smoke. If they do, their future will ...* (root)
- (7) *One reason is that they must smile anytime they are on TV.* (root)

This data indicates that these learners are able to use *must* with both functions. However, it would require closer analysis of individual learners' production in order to confirm this. As regards the corpus of discursive essays, all uses of *must* involved root modality. It was to be expected that root modality would be more likely to be used in this genre as it

tends to involve the expression of opinions rather than impressions. However, it is surprising that there are no examples of its epistemic use in this data. In discussion of the second research question below, comparison with the LOCNESS data will show how *must* is typically used in discursive writing by native speakers.

To summarize this section, the two learner corpora show that these intermediate-level Japanese learners are able to use a variety of stance forms, and that they use the forms differently according to the genre of essay-writing. However, where stance forms have different functions they tend to use them in a uni-functional manner.

RQ2: To what extent, and in what ways, is the use of epistemic forms in discursive writing by Japanese EFL learners different from their use by native speakers of English?

The native speaker corpus used for this comparison was the LOCNESS corpus which was compiled as part of the ICLE project (Granger, 1998b). It is a 200,000 word corpus consisting of essays written by British and American university students. As this corpus consists of discursive essay writing, I decided to only use the learner corpus of discursive essay writing for comparison. As no corpus of descriptive essays by native speakers was available, no comparison could be made with this type of learner writing.

Wordsmith Tools was used to conduct a Keyword analysis of the two corpora, using LOCNESS as the reference corpus. Table 2 below shows (in bold type) stance forms which occurred significantly more or less frequently in the learner corpus than in LOCNESS.

Table 2: Selected Keywords (stance forms are in bold type) from comparison of the discursive essay learner corpus with the LOCNESS corpus

| WordSmith Tools 4.0 -- Keyword list | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|------|------------------|------|---------|
| Rank | Key word | learner corpus | | reference corpus | | Keyness |
| | | Frequency | % | Frequency | % | |
| 1 | I | 435 | 3.21 | 470 | 0.23 | 1233.13 |
| 3 | THINK | 194 | 1.43 | 132 | 0.06 | 656.1 |
| 59 | OPINION | 24 | 0.18 | 36 | 0.02 | 57.12 |
| -6 | WOULD | 13 | 0.10 | 855 | 0.42 | -47.31 |

It is highly noteworthy that the verb *think* is the third strongest keyword in the learner corpora. It is used more frequently in the learner corpus despite the fact that the LOCNESS corpus is around 15 times larger. It is almost always used following *I*, which presumably contributes to *I* being the strongest keyword in the learner corpus. It is interesting to note however, that the only other epistemic stance form which occurs significantly more frequently in the learner corpus is the noun *opinion*. Also, the modal verb *would* occurs significantly

less often in the learner corpus than in the LOCNESS corpus.

A closer look at the data underlying these figures, and also a more qualitative comparison of the use of some other stance forms, should build a stronger picture of the similarities and differences in the use of stance forms by learners and native speakers.

The raw frequencies used in the Keyword analysis include both epistemic and non-epistemic uses of words, so it was necessary for the analysis below to carry out manual analysis of concordance data in order to exclude non-epistemic uses.

Following this analysis, it was still clear that *think* is significantly overused by the learners (see Figure 1). This concurs with the findings of Aijmer (2002) above with regard to Swedish learners, and would appear to support the idea that learners tend to transfer spoken forms to their writing (*I think* is much more commonly used by native speakers in spoken language (see Biber et al., 1999, p.982)). However, native speaker informants have told me that it is common to use a Japanese form of *I think* in essay-writing in Japanese, so this could also be a case of negative transfer.

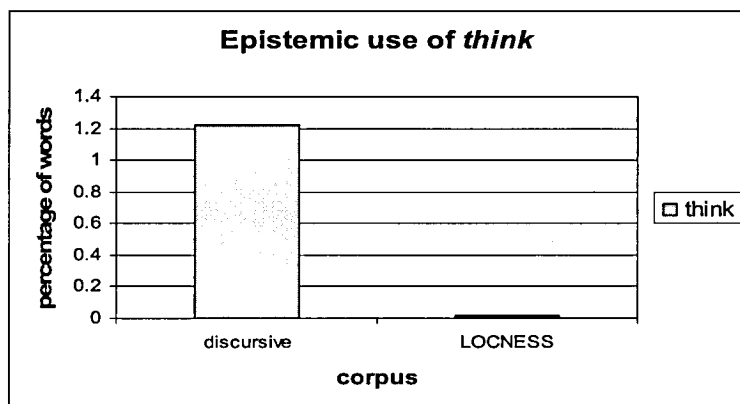


Figure 1: Comparative use of *think* as a stance form

I hypothesized that native speakers would use a greater variety of lexical stance verbs, so I investigated the use of other such verbs (*feel*, *believe* and *seem*) by the two groups (see Figure 2). These findings appear to disconfirm my hypothesis. The verb *feel* is used to a similar extent by both groups, *believe* is used more often by the learners, whilst *seem* is used more by the native speakers. Overall, therefore, other lexical stance verbs are used to a similar degree by both groups although the pattern of verb choice varies. The situation for *seem* will be discussed further below.

Figure 3, below, gives a comparison of the epistemic use of modal verbs in the two corpora. This shows that for *will/won't*, *may* and *might* there is little difference in the extent to which these modal verbs are used by the learners and native speakers, at least as regards frequency. As the key word analysis showed, there is a significant difference as regards the use of *would(n't)*, and there is also a complete lack of cases in the learner corpus in which

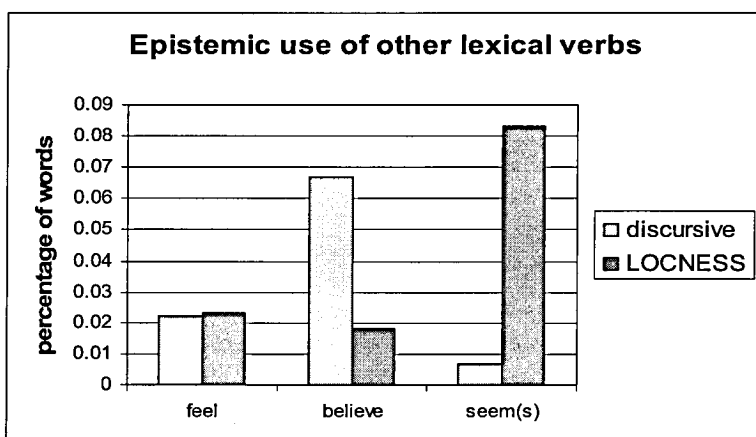


Figure 2: Comparative use of other lexical verbs as stance forms

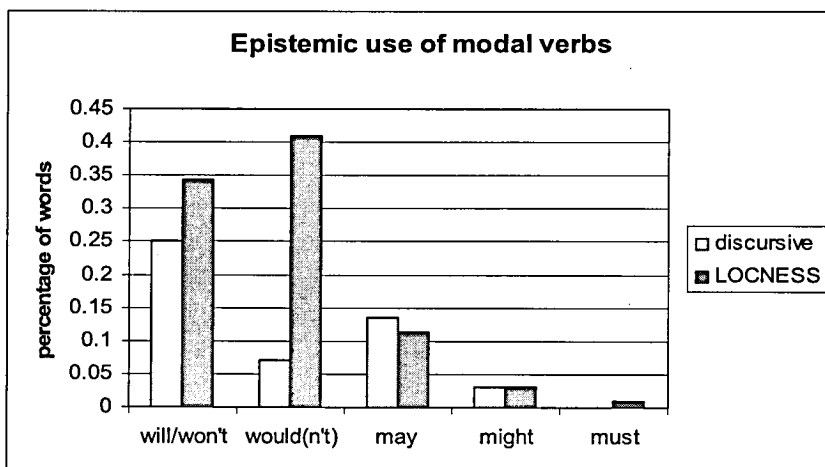


Figure 3: Comparative use of modal verbs as stance forms³

must is used in its epistemic sense. This will be looked at in more detail below.

Overall, the pattern of use of stance forms in discursive essays by learners and native speakers presents a somewhat confusing picture, in which some stance forms are used to a similar degree by both groups, whereas others are used to very different degrees. It certainly seems that this quantitative analysis needs to be complemented by qualitative analysis in order to establish a clearer picture of the way in which these forms are used. In order to parallel the analysis under the first research question above, the use of the forms *seem* and *must* will again be focused on here.

SEEM(S)

As shown above, the second most common sense of the verb *seem* occurred only once in

the learners' discursive essays. However, this sense of *seem* occurred frequently in the native speaker data. In fact both senses of *seem* outlined above can be found in the LOCNESS corpus:

- (8) *High school teachers seem to be more dedicated to teaching.* [sense 1 – impression]
(9) *This all seems to be just a big excuse.* [sense 1 – impression]
(10) *..it would seem that the very origins of a society...* [sense 2 – mitigated opinion]
(11) *..but it seems to me that Britain has lost some...* [sense 2 – mitigated opinion]

In the examples in LOCNESS there are 168 cases of *seem(s)* in total. It is often difficult to isolate whether sense 1 or 2 of *seem(s)* is being used. This would appear to show therefore that native speakers use this verb for a range of functions with sense 1 at one end of the cline and sense 2 at the other. The learners, on the other hand, appear to use the verb almost exclusively at the sense 1 end of the cline which suits the genre of description but doesn't suit discursive essay-writing.

MUST

Although the use of *must* in an epistemic sense is relatively infrequent in the native speaker essays (only 19 occurrences out of a total of 177 occurrences in total), it is important to look at how it is used in these essays in order to investigate the reason for its complete non-occurrence in the learners' discursive essays. Below are two examples of its use from the native speaker corpus:

- (12) *This must surely be seen as a clear loss of...*
(13) *All this paper must have been used for something.*

In example (12) *must* is used harmonically with the stance adverb *surely* to convey a very strong stance on an issue; it could be paraphrased as 'it is undoubtedly the case that...'. Example (13) is more similar to the epistemic use of *must* seen in the learner data for descriptive writing (see above) where the stance is based on a concrete object or person. This use is relatively rare in the native speaker data in LOCNESS; presumably because it is not so likely that this type of stance will be expressed in a discursive essay, as opposed to a descriptive essay.

As in the case of *seem(s)*, the learners appear to use a word in a more restricted sense; they use *must* to convey a stance based on physical evidence but do not use it to convey a strong opinion on an issue.

Summarizing the data looked at here in response to the second research question, on the whole the learners use a similar range of stance forms to the native speakers in their discursive essays. However, they considerably overuse the verb *think* and also underuse other stance forms (ie, *seem(s)* and *must*) in discursive writing which they use frequently in their descriptive writing.

CONCLUSION

Before summarizing the main findings of this study, it is important to mention its limitations. Firstly, when looking at stance forms, in particular the modal auxiliary verbs, it is often difficult to clearly separate epistemic from non-epistemic uses. This research would have benefited from the dual rating of the occurrence of epistemic forms based on theoretical outlines of modal verbs such as Coates (1983) and Palmer (2001). Established interrater reliability would have strengthened the findings of this research. Secondly, this study would have been further strengthened if a corpus of descriptive essays by native speakers had been available for comparison.

In spite of these limitations, this study supports previous research in this area by providing further confirmation that the expression of stance is a difficult area of language to acquire for second language learners. Even learners of an intermediate level and above have some difficulty in using fairly common lexical and grammatical stance forms in the way in which they are used by native speakers. This is not to say, however, that the learners are unable to express stance. This study has shown that the Japanese learners use a broad range of forms which effectively convey stance. However, at times they overuse more 'speech-like' stance forms, such as *I think*, and at other times they have difficulty using certain senses of frequent lexical items (as shown here by the analysis of *seem* and *must*).

Further corpus research on the use of epistemic stance would ideally look at the following possible influences on the way in which stance forms are used:

1) Transfer:

Comparative corpora of the same tasks written in the L1 would enable CA (Comparative Analysis: see Granger, 1998b) to support this CIA approach; this could help identify whether or not overuse or underuse of stance forms is a result of L1 transfer.

2) Textbook analysis:

A corpus consisting of the texts in the most common junior high school and high school textbooks in Japan would enable corpus analysis to see whether there is a relationship between the stance forms used by the learners, and the frequency with which those stance forms occur in the textbooks which they use prior to entering university. Furthermore, the senses of stance forms presented could be looked at in order to see whether, for example, the lack of use of sense 2 of *seem* (see above) is due to under-occurrence in textbook input.

This study has investigated the use of stance forms by Japanese students at the university level. It has highlighted some differences between Japanese learners of English and native speakers in the use of this important area of language. I have offered some possible reasons for these differences. However, this study also shows that further quantitative and qualitative studies focusing on Japanese learners are needed in order to clarify more accurately the causes of such differences.

More broadly, it is clear that the development of learner corpora covering a range of genres of writing and speech, along with the availability of reference corpora of native speaker use in the L1 and L2, and corpora of classroom materials, will enable an ever-increasing understanding of the nature of learners' use of stance forms.

¹ Within the field of CIA (Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis, see Granger, 1998b) these terms are used to denote quantitative differences in the use of linguistic features. No judgments about the quality of the writing are necessarily implied.

² A small number of learners completed both descriptive and discursive essays; this was not considered a problem as it did not seem likely that completion of one task would have any significant effect on completion of the other one.

³ On account of the large number of occurrences of *will (won't)* and *would(n't)* in the LOCNESS corpus, when manually checking for the number of epistemic uses of these forms, every tenth example was analysed and the overall frequencies were extrapolated from this data.

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APPENDIX

Descriptive writing – tasks

Instructions:

Describe the picture in front of you. You should write about the following:

- the people in the picture
- what the people are doing
- where the people are
- anything else which you think is important

It doesn't matter whether what you write is 'true' or not. It is just your opinion based on what you see in the picture.

Note: you should not use a dictionary or other reference book.

Discursive writing – tasks

(1)

Do you think that all Hiroshima university students should have to study a second foreign language (eg, French, German, Chinese, Korean etc.)?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages and express your own opinion.

You should write at least 300 words.

(2)

Do you think that the availability of mobile phones is a good thing for society?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages and express your own opinion.

You should write at least 300 words.

(3)

Do you think that the required age in Japan for voting, drinking and smoking (20) is appropriate?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages and express your own opinion.

You should write at least 300 words.

要 約

日本人英語学習者の散文的・描写的ライティングにおける stance forms の使用に関する研究

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本研究は、日本人英語学習者のライティングにおける「認識的立場（ある命題・状況の確実性に関する書き手の査定判断）」を表す語彙・文法形式の使用の特徴を考察しようとするものである。中級レベルの学習者が与えられた条件の下で書いた、描写的エッセイ（descriptive essays）67個と散文的エッセイ（discursive essays）41個をデータとして、これら2種類の作文に見られる「認識的立場」に関わる表現を比較した。さらに、散文的エッセイについてはLOCNESS Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays）を用いて英語母語話者によるこれらの表現の使用と比較した。分析の結果から、日本人学習者は両タイプのエッセイにおいて様々な「認識的立場」に関わる表現を使っていることが分かったが、一方‘I think’を多用し‘seem’‘must’などの表現は限られた方法でしか使わないことが明らかになった。このことは、第二言語学習者にとって「認識的立場」に関わる表現は習得がより困難な領域である、という先行研究を支持する結果となった。