

Japanese University Students' Receptive and Productive Skills of English Essays

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1. Introduction

Since Kaplan (1966) maintained that specific rhetorical patterns exist with respect to different cultures, the discipline of contrastive rhetoric has gathered much attention from many researchers. Although contrastive rhetoric is concerned with both writing and reading skills, most researchers dealt with only either skill. In Iwamoto (2006), I examined how Japanese university students' ability to distinguish English rhetorical patterns from Japanese rhetorical ones relates to the ability to write good English essays. It was found that there was no statistically significant difference between receptive and productive skills. The participants of the study were Japanese university students who had just finished taking an Academic Writing course. In the present study, I decided to include students who have just entered the university and have not taken English writing classes yet. I would like to examine receptive and productive skills of the new students, and compare the results with those of the students who have taken English writing classes.

2. Literature review

Most studies on contrastive rhetoric involve one group of participants with the same cultural background. Usually, the researchers describe the characteristics of writings written by such participants, or compare their writings with the writings written by native English speakers. However, there were few studies which divide the participants into two groups: those who received English writing instructions

and those who did not. Kobayashi's (1984) study examined 676 writing samples written by four groups: U.S. college students, Japanese ESL students, English-major Japanese EFL students, and non-English-major Japanese EFL students. Kobayashi reported that ESL students wrote essays more similar to American students than the latter two groups. As for EFL students, essays written by English-major students contained more English rhetorical elements than non-English-major students. Petric (2005) dealt with 19 Russian students and compared their English essays written before and after an English writing course. The results revealed that by learning cultural difference in writing patterns, the students were able to produce better English essays.

With regard to a receptive skill, Kobayashi and Rinnert (1996) examined four groups: 128 English-major Japanese students, 127 non-English-major Japanese students, 104 Japanese EFL teachers, and 106 native English teachers. The participants read English and Japanese rhetorical essays and evaluated them. Four groups differed in their evaluation. English-major students rated the essays more favorably and more similar to English teachers than non-English major students. This is because English major students were more exposed to English essays than other Japanese students. Chu et al.(2002) dealt with Chinese university students, 120 freshmen and 120 seniors. Only the latter group received English writing instructions and had much exposure to English rhetoric. Unlike Kobayashi and Rinnert (1996), it was found that there were little difference in receptive ability between freshmen and seniors.

There were no previous studies which compared receptive and productive skills of two groups: those who received the instruction of how to write English essays and those who are inexperienced. In the present paper, I would like to examine whether receptive and productive skills of English essays differ between experienced and inexperienced student groups.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study involved 112 Japanese university students. All of them belonged to the department of science and engineering at a private university in Japan. Since

this university is one of the most prestigious universities in Japan, the students have fairly high level of English ability, especially in their reading skill.

Sixty students from two English classes took a one-year academic writing class when they were freshmen, while 52 students from two English classes were new students who just entered a university and have not taken English writing classes yet. Among the new students, 41 students said they have never learned how to write English essays, while 11 students said that they learned briefly about English rhetorical structures at high school or yobiko (cram school), but they did not have much experience writing English essays. This is because at typical Japanese high schools, reading is more often emphasized than writing. So usually many Japanese students have little experience writing English essays, as Mok (1993) puts it:

In a typical high school level English writing class, tasks are restricted to sentence-combining, paraphrasing, and translating, and the largest unit of discourse is the paragraph (p.157).

Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) also note that many Japanese high students hardly have opportunities of writing essays in Japanese as well as English.

3.2 Materials

Materials in this study were the essays used in Kobayashi and Rinnert's (1996) study. The first essay compared cars and bicycles. The second essay discusses the disadvantages of owning a TV set. Both essays have two rhetorical patterns, English and Japanese. According to Kobayashi and Rinnert (1996), American pattern is deductive, has a thesis and tight connections between paragraphs, and tries to convince readers. On the other hand, Japanese pattern is inductive, includes no thesis, has looser connections between paragraphs, and the author's argument is not clearly stated (pp.405-406).

3.3 Procedure

Sixty students, who have taken a one-year English writing class, read the essays on Car and TV topics and distinguished English patterns from Japanese patterns, respectively. After that, they wrote a 30 minute timed essay. The topic of

the first class was, "Students are allowed to work while attending universities. Do you agree with the idea that students should have part-time jobs, or should students concentrate on studies?" (Kanbe 2000). To prevent students in the second class from knowing the topic beforehand, I gave them a different topic: "The advent of the Internet and its derivatives, such as e-mail, has destroyed communication among friends and family. Do you agree or disagree with the above statement?" (Kanbe 2000).

Fifty-two students, who have not taken English writing classes, wrote a 30 minute timed essay first. As most of them never learned how to write English essays, I thought it would be better to write before reading English essays because they may be influenced by what they have read. The topics of the essays were the same as above. The first class wrote about part-time, and the second class wrote about the computer. Then, they read Car and TV topic essays and distinguished Japanese rhetorical essays from English rhetorical ones.

The essays written by students were rated by the author according to ten questions concerning English rhetoric:

- (1) Does the essay start with introductory sentences?
- (2) Does the essay include a thesis statement?
- (3) Does the body paragraph contain a topic sentence?
- (4) Are supporting sentences related to a topic sentence?
- (5) Are there enough supporting sentences to convince readers?
- (6) Does the concluding paragraph contain a concluding sentence?
- (7) Does the essay end with final thoughts?
- (8) Are paragraphs divided appropriately?
- (9) Are there explicit transitional markers?
- (10) Does the essay have consistency?

Based on these 10 questions, students' essays were scored 0 to 10.

3.4 Analysis

I divided participants into four groups, based on their experience of taking an English writing course at a university and on their results of the reception tests. Students who have taken an Academic Writing class were classified as

"Experienced group," while new students were called "Inexperienced Group." Those who could distinguish English patterns from Japanese ones for both topic essays correctly were assigned to "High reception group," whereas those who failed to distinguish both topic essays belonged to "Low reception group." Thus, we have four groups: Group 1 (Experienced students with high reception, EH), Group 2 (Experienced students with low reception, EL), Group 3 (Inexperienced students with high reception, IH), and Group 4 (Inexperienced students with low reception, IL). As for inexperienced students, many of them had not learned about rhetoric yet. Therefore, on reception tests when they could not explain the reasons properly, I did not consider their answers to be correct. Some inappropriate answers were: "No particular reason." "The essay contained a lot of commas, so it must be an English essay." "Just used my intuition." On the other hand, accepted explanations were: "The English essay contains the author's argument." "The first sentence of the second and third paragraphs begins with conclusion, (which probably means "topic sentence")."

Independent variables in this study are four student groups (EH, EL, IH, and IL). The dependent variable is their writing scores (0 to 10).

4. Results

The results of the reception tests showed that as for experienced students, 19 (31.7%) students were able to tell English essays from Japanese ones for both Car and TV topics, while 18 (30.0 %) students failed to distinguish them correctly for both topics. With regard to inexperienced students, 15 (28.8%) students distinguished both topic essays correctly, while 17 (32.7%) students wrongly distinguished them. Then, I compared their essay scores. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviation of writing scores for each group. Figure 1 also shows the histogram of scores for four groups.

Next, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the relationship among the four groups. Table 2 indicates that the ANOVA was significant, $F(3,65) = 15.40$, $p < .05$. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. Tukey test revealed that there was no significant difference between Group 1(EH) and Group 2 (EL), as well as between Group 3 (IH) and

Group 4 (IL). However, there was a significant difference between the former two groups and the latter two groups. Figure 2 is a boxplot that shows the distributions of the four groups.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Writing Scores

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group 1 (EH)	6.21	2.04
Group 2 (EL)	5.61	2.59
Group 3 (IH)	2.60	2.67
Group 4 (IL)	1.82	1.91

Figure 1. Histograms of Writing Scores for Four Groups

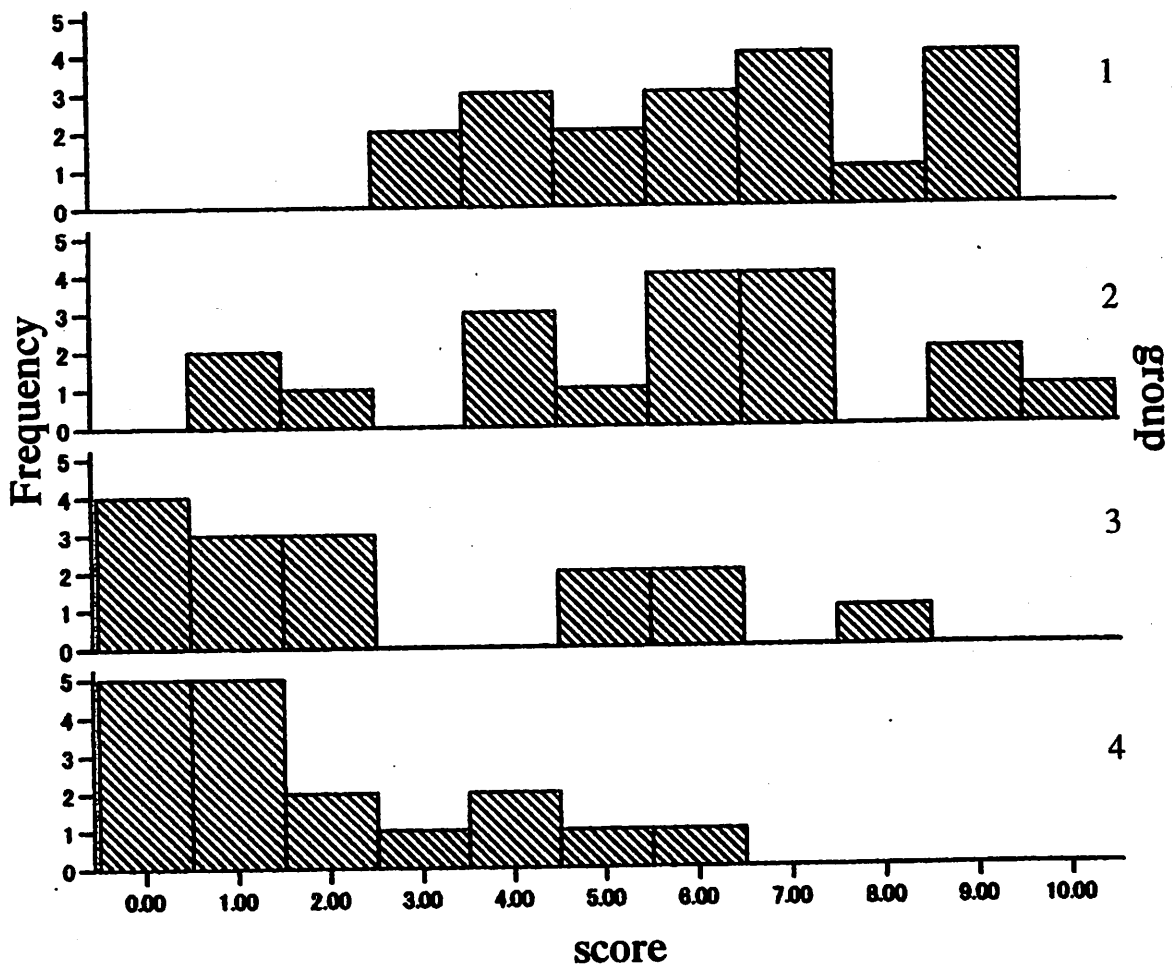
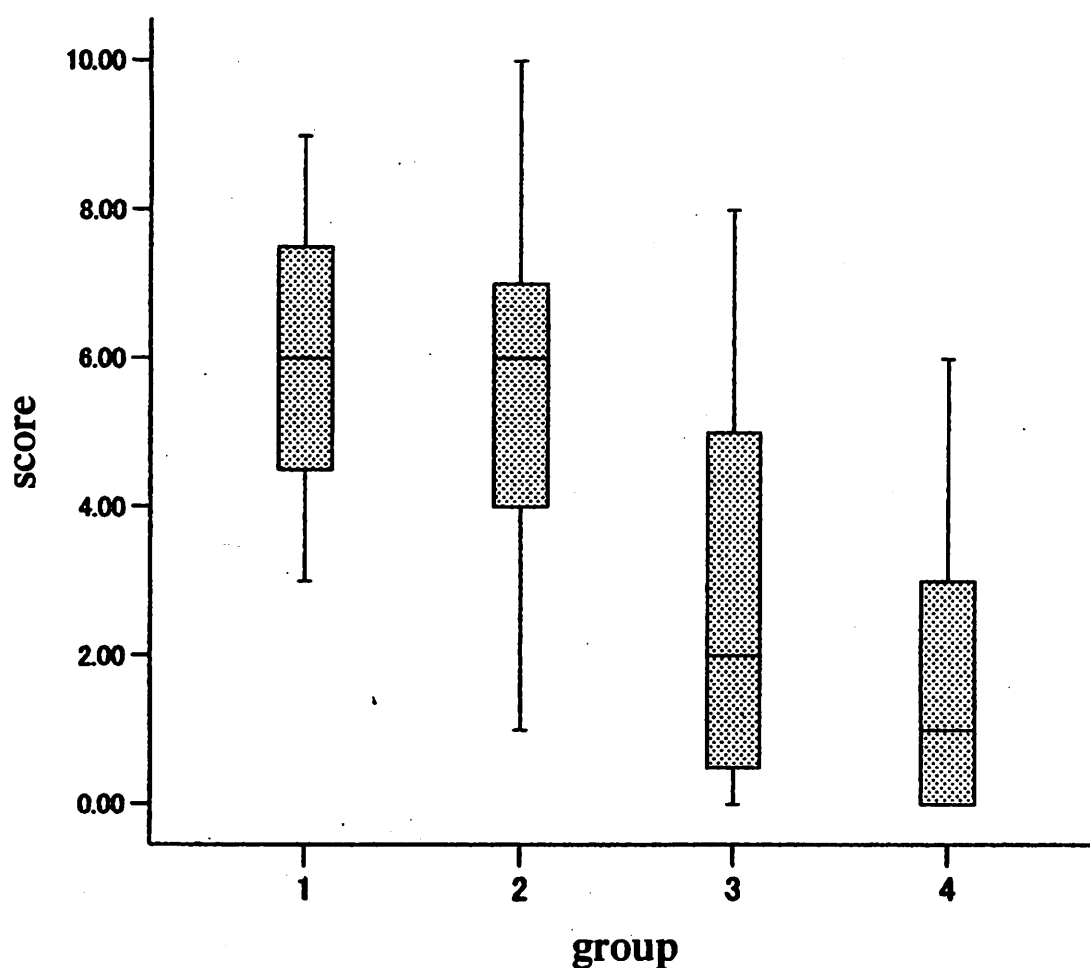


Table 2. *One-way ANOVA Summary*

Group	<i>Df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Between groups	3	247.04	82.34	15.40*
Within group	65	347.51	5.35	
Total	68	594.55		

* $p < .05$

Figure 2. *Distributions of Writing Scores for Four Groups*



5. Discussion

The results displayed very interesting implications for the study of contrastive rhetoric. We shall first look at a productive skill. As for mean scores of essays, EH is slightly higher than EL, and IH is slightly higher than IL. However, there was no significant difference in productive skills between EH and EL, and

between IH and IL. On the other hand, there was a significant difference between experienced (EH and EL) and inexperienced (IH and IL) students. This seems to suggest that explicit teaching of English rhetorical patterns does lead students to write good English essays.

With regard to a receptive skill, the percentages of students who belonged to high reception groups were almost the same for experienced and inexperienced groups (EH=31.7%, IH=28.8%). Likewise, for the percentage of students in low reception groups, both student groups did not differ each other very much (EL=28.8%, IL=32.7%). Thus, we may say that a receptive skill is not likely to be influenced by experience of learning English rhetorical patterns or ability to write good English essays.

Since this study dealt with a small number of students at one university, it may be difficult to generalize the results. Nevertheless, the findings suggest two important things. First, explicit instructions of rhetorical patterns are effective for writing good English essays. Second, a receptive skill of rhetorical patterns has a very unique characteristic which is not related to one's learning experience or productive skill of rhetoric. Compared with a productive skill, fewer studies concentrated on a receptive skill. However, considering the unique characteristics of a receptive skill, I believe it is worth while examining the skill more closely in the future research on contrastive rhetoric.

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