Roles of Metadiscursive Nouns in L2 English Writing – Comparison with L1 Writing

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Abstract—**Taking a position that L2 writers could benefit from learning the patterns that L1 writers use, this paper reports the findings of a study that investigated the quality of L2 English argumentation essays written by L1 Japanese students. based on the use of metadiscursive nouns, unspecific and pragmatic meaning nouns that can mark the discourse by recovering their meanings from the preceding, or the succeeding, segments of the texts. The L2 essays were compared with L1 essays using contrastive interlanguage analysis, both quantitatively and qualitatively, selecting a small number of high frequency metadiscursive nouns that occurred in the two corpora (i.e., *reason, thing, problem, fact*) as target items. Using the shell noun conceptual framework (Schmid, 2000), the study examined meaning recovery patterns of the nouns in relation to several syntactic patterns. The study revealed some distinct differences in the way these nouns were used in the two corpora, and they seem to have affected the ways the nouns: a) marked the discourse in the text, and b) formed argumentation, functioning as causation devices. This paper discusses implications of the findings for the teaching of L2 writing. Through the analysis, I attempt to show the importance of metadiscourse in L2 writing, and this paper can provide a way to approach this area of study.**

Index Terms—**Causal relations, contrastive interlanguage analysis, metadiscursive nouns, shell nouns.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study compared L2 English argumentation essays with L1 English essays. Any discussion about native and non-native differences may be criticized nowadays, mainly because the number of speakers of English as second language (L2), or later language, has exceeded that of speakers of English as first language (L1), and the English used in non-native countries is considered equally legitimate to the English used in native countries, according to the theory of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (e.g., [1]-[5]) or World Englishes (WE) [6]. To what extent is this ELF concept applicable to the EFL classroom? In particular, the concept seems not as applicable to written genres as to spoken English [7]. For one thing, some written genres like argumentation or academic essays have some standard patterns to follow. Not following them may negatively affect a reader's perception of the genre ([8], [9]). Also, writing tests are usually assessed and graded by native speaker (NS) examiners, most likely following their L1-based patterns. Thus the present study was conducted taking the position that

it is important for writers of L2 essays to understand how to follow L1 genre patterns.

This paper compared metadiscourse in the two groups of essays, analysing how a writer used words to mark the direction and purpose of the text, based on the use of metadiscursive nouns. Metadiscourse is an area that has not often been looked into until recently, and it has not been studied from the perspective of metadiscourse nouns in particular.

The present study firstly identifies high frequency metadiscursive nouns in the two groups of essays (i.e., *problem, reason, thing, fact*) (Section V), and analyses them by applying a shell noun conceptual framework [10], to show some distinct differences between the two corpora in the use of these nouns as markers of the discourse (Section VI). This paper concludes by suggesting a need for more attention to the area of metadiscourse in the teaching of L2 writing. Firstly, the background of the present study is explained.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Types of Metadiscursive Nouns

Metadiscursive nouns are abstract, unspecific nouns with pragmatic meanings that depend on contextual lexicalization [11]. The function of such nouns, which the present study used for the text analysis, is to organize the text through a recovery of the meanings expressed in the text. Perhaps due to the complexity of the mechanism, a variety of discourse organising roles of these nouns have been proposed, each emphasising one or two aspect of the functions under varied names. For example, *anaphoric nouns* [12] emphasise summarization and evaluation roles of the preceding discourse; *enumeratives* [13] focus on marking of the start of a new topic for succeeding discussion; and *shell nouns* [10] emphasise discourse marking roles of nouns in relation to several syntactic patterns. The present study uses the latter of these, the *shell noun* conceptual framework, to analyse the use of metadiscursive nouns in the student essays. .

B. Metadiscursive Nouns in L2 Argumentation Writing

There has been a dearth of studies of student writing from the perspective of metadiscursive nouns, in part because the discourse of texts had not been considered much until the 1980s, when Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in Text* [14] was published. At that time, studies of cohesion of student writing started to be conducted using cohesive vocabulary items. However, vocabulary items used for the textual investigation were often grammatical cohesive items (e.g.,

demonstratives, pronouns), rather than lexical items (e.g., synonyms, superordinates, general nouns), where metadiscursive nouns belong. There are recent studies of cohesion in student writing that have used metadiscourse markers, which were proposed by Hyland [15] (e.g., [11], [16]). Although metadiscourse markers overlap with metadiscursive nouns in terms of both items and functions, metadiscourse markers do not necessarily follow the Hallidayan concept of cohesion, and Hyland views the items as interpersonal resources that shape the writer's arguments to the needs of the target readers (e.g., hedges, boosters, attitude markers), as well as text organising resources ([15]).

Although still a developing area of study, major studies that investigated student writing, particularly NNS writing, based on the use of metadiscursive nouns (e.g., [17]-[22]) have yielded some common patterns in the use of these nouns by NNS students, in comparison with NS students, or lower level students in comparison with higher level students within the same L1. These include: a) general NNS competence in the use of core nouns (e.g., [19], [21], [22]); b) less frequent use of these nouns among NNS than NS students (e.g., [17], [21], [22]); and c) unclear lexicalisation of general meaning abstract nouns in NNS writing (e.g., [17], [21]). However, these findings include little information about Japanese students' use of metadiscursive nouns.

The quality of L2 argumentation essays by Japanese students has not been investigated in terms of the use of metadiscursive nouns in Japanese research contexts either, as far as the author has been able to confirm. Japanese EFL research seems to have developed following somewhat different agendas, such as relationships between holistic writing skills and L2 writing (e.g., L1 and L2 writing experience in the Japanese EFL context); general language competence and effects of writing instruction in L2 writing (e.g., [23], [24]); and transfer of such rhetorical patterns in L1 and L2 writing as inductive and deductive patterns (e.g., [25]-[27]), and argumentation patterns (e.g., [28]). Although some studies (e.g., [29], [30]) have focused on the use of connectives of varied types in L2 writing, their target linguistic items were formal grammatical links that overtly connect the nouns to the textual segments of varied types (the sentence, the paragraph, a larger segment), not lexical items that construct a discourse by forming a meaning connection with segments that are being referred to (called "referred segments" in the remainder of this paper).

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Drawing on the body of literature reviewed above, the present study analysed the use of metadiscursive nouns in L2 argumentation essays by Japanese students, in comparison with L1 essays by American students, to find where differences lie. To address this overreaching question, the present study set up specific research questions, as follows:

1. In which host syntactic types do shell nouns occur in the two groups of essays?

2. How are the meanings of shell nouns recovered in the two groups of essays?

3. How are shell nouns used to serve as text organising devices in the two groups of essays?

These research questions were based on the conceptual framework of shell nouns [10]. According to this framework, discourse marking roles of nouns are formed through a recovery of their meaning in the text, either anaphorically (pointing backward) or cataphorically (pointing forward). Shell nouns occur in several syntactic patterns (host syntactic patterns), which are as follows (CL: clause; th: the referent is in the preceding discourse; in the examples, metadiscursive nouns are shown in bold font):

- **N-be-CL**: N + be + complement clause (*The weak **point** is that…*)
- **N:CL:** N + adjacent clause (***conclusion** that the Bush Administration is…*)
- **th-N:** Def. article/Dem. determiner + N ([referent] *The **change** is …*)
- **th-be-N:** Def. article/Dem. determiner + be + N ([referent] *I felt it was a good **way**…*)

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Reference Corpus

The text analysis was conducted using Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis [31], which compares native and learner varieties of language. With regard to the use of NS students' data as a benchmark, some have argued that such data cannot be a model for instructional and pedagogical purposes (e.g., [32], [33]). However, students' data can be considered more suitable for identification of non-native speaker (NNS) features than professional writers' data, as the foreign language essay is a genre which "constitute[s] a highly idiosyncratic type of text, hardly to be compared to professional writing" (1999: 14) [34]. Students often write essays on a given topic to be assessed or to pass exams, and also writer variables (e.g., age, writing proficiency level) and task variables (e.g., text length, text topic, target readership) are not comparable with professional writing (2007: 322) [35].

B. Text Data

L1 Japanese students texts analysed in the present study (JICLE) were drawn from the Japanese subcorpus of the International Corpus of Learner English [36], and L1 English students texts (US) were from the US subcorpus of the Louvain Corpus of Native English. They are relatively small corpora, whose sizes are 198,241 and 150,530 words in JICLE and US respectively, and the average essay lengths are 542 and 850 words, as shown below in Table I.[1]

TABLE I: INFORMATION ON JICLE AND US CORPORA

Student Corpus	No. of essays	Corpus size	Ave. length	Text
L1 Japanese (JICLE)	366	198,241	542	
L1 English Americans (US)	176	149,574	850	

Many of the topics in the two corpora are not the same. While common topics include the death penalty, nuclear energy, and animal rights, JICLE-only topics include English education, use of maiden names after marriage, and the

1. The word counts of JICLE and US were recalculated with the AntConc and post-edited after removing some false hits.

seniority system, and US-only topics include euthanasia, life prolonging technologies, abortion, and religious or racial discrimination. Nevertheless, all the topics address current controversial issues in each society.

C. Nouns Analysed

The present study firstly analysed the following 33 items, Ivanič's [37] core *carrier nouns*, which emphasise expressions of the noun meanings in a verbal complement of the sentence:

advantage, aim, aspect, benefit, cause, comment, criticism, decision, difference, difficulty, effect, element, example, explanation, fact, factor, feature, function, idea, intention, interpretation, issue, justification, opinion, principle, problem, purpose, question, reason, result, solution, thing, view

These carrier nouns were analysed using the shell noun conceptual framework, which emphasises discourse marking roles of the nouns occurring in several syntactic patterns. Analysing carrier nouns within the shell noun conceptual framework should be appropriate, because membership of one type of metadiscursive nouns is considered replaceable with other subtypes of metadiscursive nouns.

D. Procedures

The text analysis tool used was AntConc [38] with its KWIC and Text View functions. The present study identified higher frequency nouns in the two corpora to narrow down target items to be analysed in detail, as follows:

1. Raw frequencies of each of the 33 nouns were calculated by inputting a search item (e.g., *problem*) in AntConc, and manually removing some false hits (e.g., *change* occurring as verb).

2. Of the noun occurrences, nouns functioning metadiscursively were selected from those that were not, by defining metadiscursive nouns as:

· Nouns whose meanings are in the complement clause (e.g., *that*-clause, *to*-clause) for **N-be-CL** and **N:CL**.

· Nouns whose meanings are in a text segment larger than a clause in the proceeding segment for **th-N** and **th-be-N**.

The lexicalisation analysis was done using the Text View function of AntConc.

3. Of the metadiscursive nouns, high frequency nouns in both corpora were selected for further analysis.

4. The nouns selected were categorised by the type of host syntactic patterns they entered into, using concordance lines identified with the KWIC function. They were further examined for lexicalisation patterns, by referring to the context where the nouns occurred.

V. RESULTS: NOUN FREQUENCIES

Separation of the nouns between metadiscursively functioning and non-metadiscursively functioning in the data analysed was not straightforward, and metadiscursive nouns in this paper include the following:

· Nouns of non-collocational or unnatural lexicalisation were counted as metadiscursive, as long as there were no problems in conveying the meanings of the nouns (e.g., …

*a financial **problem** to pay for the teachers or educate them…*).

· Nouns were considered metadiscursive even if the meanings expressed were vague or insufficient in the referent.

· Nouns combined with comparative referents (e.g., *the same, such a*) were metadiscursive, because comparative referents create cross-sentential anaphoric links (1976: 76) [14].

A. High Frequency Nouns

With regard to the total frequencies, they were similar in the two corpora at the normalized ratio of 277:271, to a base figure of "per 100,000 words", in JICLE and US, respectively. This yields the log-likelihood score (LL) of 0.11 (N=277:271, LL 0.11), indicating insignificant frequency difference.[2] However, the ranges of metadiscursive nouns were different in the two corpora. In JICLE, it was very small, with *reason, problem* and *thing* comprising most of the total frequency in the corpus. In US, *fact* occurred predominantly more than the other nouns, but metadiscursive nouns occurred in a much wider range than in JICLE, because they included noun items which did not occur in JICLE (e.g., *interpretation, principle, criticism, element, comment*).

VI. RESULTS: LEXICALISATION FOR HOST SYNTACTIC PATTERNS

Based on the frequency analysis explained in the above section, the present paper selected *reason, problem, thing* and *fact* as high frequency nouns in the two corpora, and examines them further in this section.

A. Preferred Host Syntactic Patterns

The normalized frequencies of occurrence of the four metadiscursive nouns in each of their host syntactic patterns are shown in Table II below. As seen in the table, *reason, problem,* and *thing* occurred significantly more in JICLE than in US for **N-be-CL**, **th-N** or **th-be-N**, whilst *fact* occurred mostly for **N:CL**, and it occurred significantly less in JICLE than in US.

TABLE II: HOST SYNTACTIC PATTERNS FOR HIGHER FREQUENCY NOUNS

	Reason	*Problem*	*Thing*	*Fact*
N-be-CL	36:20 (LL 7.65)	9:9 (LL 0.01)	14:5 (LL 6.65)	2:3 (LL 0.22)
N:CL	4:1 (LL 1.66)	6:6 (LL 0.12)	1:0 (LL 2.23)	15:50 (LL 35.10)
Th-N	13:5 (LL 6.05)	22:17 (LL 1.53)	17:3 (LL 17. 34)	11:4 (LL 5.61)
Th-be-N	8:3 (LL 4.61)	8:3 (LL 4.61)	10:1 (LL 15.93)	0:1 (LL1.70)
SUM	62:31 (LL 1.96)	48:39 (LL 16.50)	47:11 (LL 41.45)	29:58 (LL 18.20)

(Figures are normalized; Ratios are JICLE:US)

The ways in which these nouns were lexicalised are explained in the following sections.

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2. The frequency ratios were interpreted by applying the log-likelihood test, setting the critical value for rejecting the null hypothesis at 3.84 using the 0.05 significance level.

B. *Lexicalisation for N:CL*

Fact occurred significantly more in US than in JICLE, accounted for by its usage for **N:CL,** which occurred at the normalized ratio of 15 and 50, in JICLE and US, respectively、 with an LL score of 35.10 – hereinafter this is shown as (N=15:50, LL 35.10) in this paper. In terms of lexicalisation of *fact,* it was similar in JICLE and US. Thus, the difference was mostly in frequency only. An **N:CL** complex can function as a "rhetorical gambit" (2000: 331)[10] by allowing the writer to direct the line of argument in a subtle way by stating *new* information as if it were *old*, and a *fact that*-clause, in particular, is a "general purpose shelling device" (ibid: 242), to indicate that what the writer knows to be true is not a universally agreed truth. Therefore, significant preference for *fact that*-clauses in US may suggest that the US students preferred a strategy to manipulate their argument in a subtle way, whilst the JICLE students strongly dispreferred the strategy.

C. *Lexicalisation for N-be-CL*

Both *reason* and *thing* occurred significantly more for **N-be-CL** in JICLE than in US, at the ratio of 36:20 (LL 7.65) and 14:5 (LL 6.65), respectively. In terms of lexicalisation of N, expressed in the complement clause, there was no particular difference between JICLE and US. This suggests that significantly more occurrences of *reason* and *thing* may not be accounted for so much by lexicalisation patterns. What, then, accounts for significantly more use of these nouns for **N-be-CL** in JICLE than in US is analysed in the following sections.

1) *"Reason" for* **N-be-CL**

Reason for **N-be-CL** occurred at the ratio of 36:20 (LL 7.65) for JICLE and US, respectively. The frequency difference seems related to different types of adjectives. In JICLE, the noun most often occurred in combination with ordinal adjectives (e.g., *first, second*) as in *First reason is that…*, and *Second reason is that…*. The text span between one *reason* and the next *reason* was short. This indicates that the meaning of *reason* expressed in the complement clause (the CL) was not explained in much detail in the succeeding segment before the next *reason*. The discourse in JICLE seems to have been constructed by relying heavily on explicit discourse marking adjectives, without sufficient meaning explanation.

In US, *reason* was almost always (29 times out of 30) modified by restrictive adjectives (e.g., *another, one, main, next*) as in *The main reason is that…*. Restrictive adjectives directed the reader's attention to a specific aspect of a reason, and its meaning was explained in a longer, sometimes very long segment. The text span between *reason*s therefore was much longer than in JICLE. The discourse in US seems to have been formed much more through meaning lexicalisation than the discourse in JICLE.

2) *"Thing"* for **N-be-CL**

Thing for **N-be-CL** occurred significantly more in JICLE than in US (N=14:5, LL 6.65), mostly occurring in the form of *The most important thing is that…*. In this type of sentence, the content of the CL was a generalised and uncontested comment, not so much drawn from the preceding discourse,

and the sentence functioned to terminate the discourse. This can be seen below (the extracts in the present study have been left in their original form without errors being corrected or marked):

Extract 1

Finally, in the future, for we flourish not only in Japan, but also in foreign country, Japanese students need to master English as a second language. It is never easy, but someday our efforts will be paid off. The most important **thing** is enjoy to learn English. I think it is good for Japanese to use English as a second language. I want to let foreigners know about Japan. <text end> (JICLE)

The writer expresses that it is important for Japanese students to learn English, stating several advantages of studying English in the referent of *thing* (the extract above shows only a part of the whole referent). However, the meaning of (*important*) *thing* in the complement clause is [*to*] *enjoy to learn English,* which is not closely connected to the content of the long preceding discourse, and is an uncontested comment.

In US, *thing* for **N-be-CL** was not combined with *important* at all, and the content of the CL was more closely related to the preceding discourse as in Extract 2:

Extract 2

Each year a new amazing product astonishes me even more. I am starting to wonder when we will have robots cleaning our house and driving us around. The scary **thing** is that it's just around the corner! <text end> (US)

The referent of *scary thing* in the preceding segment describes the amazing development of new products (e.g., robots cleaning house and driving people), and this is linked to the meaning of *scary thing* in the complement clause, *it is just around the corner.*

D. *Lexicalisation for* **th-N** *and* **th-be-N**

Thing may not be well suited for academic essays, but it was the third most frequent noun in JICLE, with the total frequency ratio in JICLE and US at 47:11, respectively, with an LL score of 41.45. Most instances of *thing*s occurred in anaphoric functions for **th-N** and **th-be-N**. What accounted for the significantly greater frequency of *thing* in JICLE than US for these syntactic patterns is analysed below.

1) *"Thing"* with comparative referents

One strategy to use *thing* as a marker of the discourse in JICLE was the use of comparative referents. *Thing* for **th-N** (N=17:3, LL 17.34) most often occurred in the form of *the same thing,* and *such a thing* (much less frequently). How this use of *thing* marked the discourse is shown below in Extract 3:

Extract 3

According to the survey of the Service Company of Marriage Information in 1998, about 9.3 percent of women in Japan said the reason for their marriage was their pregnancy. The investigation also found that 20 percent of single women decided to get married and also gave birth to their babies in their twenties, and 11 percent of single women who were in their thirties said **the same thing**. Moreover, even though they had never thought about marrying their partners, … (JICLE)

A shift of discourse occurs at (*the same*) *thing,* as

suggested with *Moreover.* (*The same*) *thing* refers back to the content of what women in their 20s said (*get married and… gave birth to their babies in their twenties*) and the discourse is terminated, without stating how much the "same" (that is, how similar) the referred content is to "what women in their 30s said".

This finding seems to accord with Hinds [39], who reported that in Japanese writing a "reader-responsible" style was used, as opposed to a "writer-responsible" style used in English writing.

2) "Thing" with evaluative adjectives

Another strategy for the JICLE students to use *thing* as a marker of the discourse was by combining it with an evaluative adjective referring to short, insufficient content. For **th-be-N** (N=10:1, LL 15.93), adjectives were used mostly to express a subjective feeling, such as *sad, happy* or *proper* as in: *It is a happy thing.* Maybe as the result of a discourse terminating role of evaluation [40], *thing* often occurred where the discourse was being closed, as shown below (// marks a paragraph break):

Extract 4

They should make the murderers pay the expense by making them suffer for their horrible acts and doing something good for the society. The murderers should have to live with the guilty feeling of taking another person's life away. It is a more **proper thing** to do.// Third, would less people commit a crime… (JICLE)

The writer expresses opposition to the death penalty. (*Proper*) *thing* refers to the preceding sentences, containing what the murderers should undergo as a punishment presented in a list (e.g., to suffer, to work for the society), and serves to terminate the discourse as indicated with a paragraph break (//). Without explaining each of the topics, the discourse seems to end in an abrupt manner.

In US, *thing* for **th-be-N** occurred only two times altogether. One was combined with a restrictive adjective *one* (*This should be one thing…*), and the other was with an adjective *cross-cultural*, which is the writer's evaluation of the content of the long previous paragraph, as shown below:

Extract 5

// How many times have we seen on the evening news a family being broken apart, a company going under, or even a nation crumbling simply because there was a desperate desire, on the part of one or many, for something that exceeds what was actually needed or required? Even individuals can be destroyed who are in constant search of what evades them. They think that having the "right" car or living in the "right" neighborhood or knowing the "right" people can bring them happiness or contentment. This love of money urges them on, causes them to neglect their families and at times to commit crimes for which they are imprisoned. Our society pays dearly, both financially and socially, for their love affair with money.// It is a cross-cultural **thing**. We can be speaking of the American dollar, … (US)

Cross-cultural refers to the preceding segment, which describes a negative consequence of people' love of money to the family, the company and the country. It expresses the writer's evaluation of the content, and summarises the discourse, and it also serves as a departure point for the next segment, as indicated with a paragraph break.

E. Summary: Metadiscursive Nouns as Discourse Markers

So far I have examined lexicalisation of *fact, reason,* and *thing* to find in what ways, and why, they occurred in significantly different frequencies in JICLE than in US. Here are the main points of the findings:

1. Significantly more use of *reason* and *thing* in JICLE than in US for **N-be-CL** was accounted for by the following strategies in JICLE:

·   JICLE used *reason* in combination with ordinal adjectives (e.g., *First reason is that…*), which shifted the focus very explicitly, and *reason*s occurred in a series of short spans.

·   JICLE used *thing* in the form of *The most important thing is that…,* by expressing generalised and uncontested content in the CL without drawing from the content of the preceding discourse.

2. Significantly more use of *thing* in JICLE than in US for **th-N** or **th-be-N** was accounted for by the following use of the noun in JICLE:

·   *Thing* for **th-N** occurred in the form of *the same thing* as a JICLE-specific pattern. It shifted the focus without explaining how much the same the succeeding content is to the preceding content.

·   *Thing* for **th-be-N** in JICLE occurred in combination with an evaluative adjective (e.g., *It is a happy thing*), which terminated the discourse.

I suggested that these strategies in JICLE may indicate a JICLE preference for constructing text by relying on frequent use of explicit discourse markers, whilst not sufficiently explaining the noun meanings. The use of *fact* for **N:CL**, which occurred significantly less in JICLE, indicates a JICLE dispreference for this implicit discourse maneuvering strategy. This seems to be the other side of the same coin to a strong preference for explicit discourse marking in JICLE.

F. Nouns for Causal Relations

Let us move now to lexicalization of *reason* and *problem*, which occurred significantly more for **th-N** (e.g., *for this reason*) or **th-be-N** (e.g., *This is a reason/problem*) in JICLE than in US. The analysis revealed that these nouns may have been used for different functions in each of the corpora, as explained in the following sections.

1) "Reason" as a causation device

In English, *reason* can function as a linguistic strategy that can mark or express causation explicitly in English writing [41]. In the US corpus, *reason* occurred significaintly less than in JICLE, either for **th-N** (13:5, LL 6.05) or **th-be-N** (N=8:3. LL 4.61); in US it functioned as an "explicit" causation device, whereas it did not in JICLE. Extract 6 shows a typical example of when *reason* in US was used for **th-N**:

Extract 6

No one can tell if euthanasia will cause the same problems as abortion did. But because euthanasia involves the same ethical questions as abortion, similar problems may arise. For that very **reason,** the law on euthanasia should be modified to restrict its practice, so the risk of future euthanasia related violence is lowered.// (US)

The essay argues for tighter regulation of the practice of

euthanasia. The direct referent is the immediately preceding segment (*euthanasia involves the same ethical questions as abortion, similar problems may arise*), although the referent is expanded into the further preceding segment, where the meaning of *the same ethical question* is expressed. Then (*that very*) *reason* connects the referred content to the succeeding discourse (*the law on euthanasia should be modified*) as an explicit causation device, leading to a clear statement by the writer.

Similarly, *reason* for **th-be-N**, occurring significantly less in US than in JICLE (N=8:3, LL 4.61), was generally used for an explicit causation as shown below:

Extract 7

These people are wrong. The battle flag was first flown in the year 1964. This was the year that the civil rights movement started. Actually, the flag was set up the day after the civil rights movement started. This clearly shows that the battle flag stands for nothing more than hatred. This is probably the single largest **reason** why the battle flag should be brought down. (US)

(*The*) *reason* refers to the content that "the battle flag stands for hatred", and connects it to the writer's proposition, *the battle flag should be brought down.* It provides a clear and focused cohesive tie to the immediately precedent sentence and leads the discourse to a clear statement of the writer's opinion.

Now I compare the use of anaphorically used *reason* in US, analysed above, with the use in JICLE. Whilst forming some type of causal intersegment relations, and leading to an explicit statement by the writer in the US corpus, (*the*) *reason* in JICLE mostly served more like a temporal noun that connect the two segment as *and, then,* or *therefore* can do. Extract 8 shows a typical use for **th-N** (e.g., *for this reason*):

Extract 8

Another was that France and Great Britain decided the boundary of the Bangkok Dynasty on their own, which became the boundary of Thailand; for that **reason,** many ethnic groups were left which were not Thai. (JICLE)

The referent of *reason* is a situation (*France and Great Britain decided the boundary*) and what follows is another situation of what happened next (*Many ethnic groups were left…*). *For that reason*, therefore, is connecting two situations, like *and* or *then* can do, and there is not clear statement of the writer in the segment that follows.

Similarly, *reason* for **th-be-N** (*This is…reason*) usually does not form a clear causal relation between the referent and the succeeding segment, as shown below in Extract 9:

Extract 9

Our ancestors didn't need to learn second language because they have everything they needed inside Japan. They didn't need to import or export their product. This was the main **reason** why our ancestors didn't learn second language, including English. (JICLE)

The referent of (*main*) *reason* is a situation that Japan did not need to import or export products, and *reason* directs it to another situation where the ancestors didn't learn second language. So, *reason* seems to be serving to connect two situations, similarly to "*so*" or "*therefore*", expressing a temporal shift.

2) "Problem" as a causation device

I move to the use of *problem* in JICLE and US. *Problem* can form an "implicit" or "non-explicit" causal relation in English, which is then followed by a reason why it is a problem (1992: 65) [41]. In US, *problem* for **th-be-N** (*This is a problem*), which occurred significantly less than in JICLE (N=8:3, LL 4.61), was usually followed by a reason segment, which was could be made explicit with a "marker of reason" (e.g., *since, because*) as in *This poses a **problem**, since….* Sometimes a reason segment followed without any "marker of reason", as shown below:

Extract 10

If a student has the desire to pray at any moment during the school day he or she should not encounter any determent. Only when students (or faculty) force any students to join in the prayer does it become a **problem**. The act of trying to force an unwilling person to digest the religious philosophy of another may lead to an uncomfortable educational setting that would hinder learning and social growth. (US)

The extract discusses whether religious prayer should be allowed or regulated at school. The content of *problem* is in the preceding segment (*students…force any students to join in the prayer*). There is no "marker of reason", but the succeeding segment (*The act of trying to force an unwilling person to digest the religious philosophy of another may lead to…*) forms a reason content to the problem.

In JICLE, *problem* for **th-be-N** (e.g., *This is a problem*) was rarely followed by a reason segment. Instead, it terminated the discourse, as shown below in Extract 11:

Extract 11

<text initial> In Japanese class, teachers take too much time to teach English grammar. I think that it is too enough. However, students aim an entrance examination of Japanese university. It is a big **problem**. In order to increase the number of children who can speak English well, the government has to change the educational system. (JICLE)

(*A big*) *problem* refers to too much emphasis on grammar teaching in English education in Japan, and terminates the discourse. Without explaining why it is a problem, *problem* ends the discourse. The discourse is suddenly shifted to a Solution segment, which is indicated with *in order to….*

Thus, *problem* for **th-be-N** (e.g., *This is a problem*) functioned as an implicit marker of causal relations in US, but in JICLE it did not serve as a causation device but to terminate the discourse, often abruptly.

3) Use of "reason" and "problem"

The above sections examined the use of *reason* and *problem* in anaphoric functions in JICLE and US. The main findings are as follows:

1. In the US corpus, both (*the*) *reason* and (*the*) *problem* served as some type of causation devices, and *reason* was used to lead to a clear statement by the writer in US (see Extracts 6 and 7). *Problem* on the other hand, formed an implicit causation inter-sentential relation in the discourse, which was followed by a reason segment.

2. In the JICLE corpus, neither (*the*) *reason* nor (*the*) *problem* served as a causation device. *Reason* worked like a temporal noun, functioning similarly to *and, therefore*, and *so* (see Extracts 8 and 9), and *problem* was used to terminate the discourse, often abruptly.

These findings seem to indicate a difference in preferred argumentation style. The US writers seem to prefer to make an argument by expressing a statement clearly and providing reasons. This suggests that English speakers have a "*because*" thinking pattern, where the conclusion is presented first, and then why it is so is explained in the succeeding section (2001: 65) [42]. On the other hand, the JICLE writers tend to construct their argumentation without clearly stating reasons, but presenting topics one by one and expressing a conclusion at the end, which implies that Japanese speakers have a "*therefore*" thinking pattern (ibid.).

VII. CONCLUSION

Taking the position that NS essays can be a model for NNS students to refer to, I analysed the use of metadiscursive nouns of high frequencies in JICLE and US (i.e., *reason, problem, thing, fact*) within the shell noun conceptual framework [10].

Noteworthy in the findings, in particular, was the fact that the high frequency nouns in JICLE were realized with the very frequent use of noun-modifying adjectives of varied types (e.g., ordinal adjectives, evaluative adjectives, comparative referents), indicating a JICLE preference for an overt discourse structure in L2 English essays. Another finding was that whilst the US students used *reason* and *problem* as causation devices and clearly expressed their opinion statements, the JICLE students avoided using these nouns as causation devices and constructed their argument implicitly. Thus, the study has shown that the use of metadiscursive nouns was a source of perceived difference in the two groups of essays. It suggests the importance of paying more attention to metadiscourse for the students to gain competence in achieving coherence in the writing of L2 essays.

However, from the viewpoint of ELF or WE, it seems unavoidable to question whether or not differences need to be addressed in the teaching of L2 writing. For example, the explicit marking of the discourse found in JICLE may be a good strategy, but should overly explicit marking, at the cost of sudden and abrupt topic shifts, as shown in Extracts 4 and 11, still be considered effective for constructing readable and coherent English argumentation essays? Can the type of argumentation where causation is not marked or expressed explicitly, and the writer does not express his/her proposition clearly be perceived as an inappropriate form of argumentation in English essays? Whilst ELF is promoted in the teaching of English these days, these questions may become helpful to guide us toward some sort of plausible answers.

The present study has provided a methodology for how to pursue this line of research. In further studies, the findings of the present study should be tested for more accurate generalisation, using corpora which are larger in size and written on similar topics. Moreover, the findings should be tested through comparison with other subtypes of metadiscursive nouns, or with L2 writing by other L1 students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conducted the research, analysed the data, and wrote the paper.

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