Do you really "think" or "believe"?
Japanese ESL Writers' Use of *I Think/Believe* in Academic Writing

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Abstract

This paper investigates Japanese ESL writers' use of the "*I* + private verb + complement clause" construction both quantitatively and qualitatively. It examines 20 academic essays written by Japanese ESL students and 20 essays written by English native speaker (NS) writers, specifically comparing the use of *I believe* and *I think*. The NS writers do not use *I believe/think* very frequently in academic writing; however, when they use these expressions, they achieve specific purposes, clearly indicating their personal "beliefs" and "thoughts," and clarifying or evaluating the content of the writing prompt. The NS writers tend to do this type of clarification and confirmation of their "beliefs" and "thoughts" in the introductory part of the essays. The Japanese ESL writers, on the other hand, use *I believe/think* with high frequency, and their overuse is often considered problematic. While the ESL writers also use *I believe/think* to describe their own opinions, their attempts often result in weakening their claims because they use these expressions as weak forms of stance marker or softener as they do in spoken discourse, which does not necessarily indicate their strong "beliefs" or "thoughts." The comments made by five NS writing instructors suggest that the ESL writers do not fully realize how *I believe/think* should indicate stronger writer identity when used in academic writing, and this discrepancy between the ESL writers' use and the NS reader expectations is often perceived as ESL writing weaknesses or problems. The findings of this study reiterate the importance of explicit instruction of academic conventions for ESL writers.

1. Introduction

I have been looking at Japanese ESL writers' use of sentence-initial elements in English academic writing (Kusuyama, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009). Kusuyama (2008), in particular, looked at NS/ESL comparisons of sentence-initial stance adverbial usage. The findings show that the ESL writers do not use sentence-initial stance adverbials as much as the NS writers. Instead, they frequently use the expressions with the first-person pronoun *I* (e.g., *I think*) in sentence-initial position, and a likely source of the overuse comes from some L1 writing features salient in Japanese academic writing. In the current study, I investigate the Japanese ESL writers' sentence-initial use of the first-person pronoun *I* + verb, specifically the use of the two verbs most frequently used with the pronoun *I: think* and *believe*. Even though these verbs take different grammatical constructions, the features investigated here are limited to the "*I think/ believe* + complement clause" constructions because this is a follow-up study of my previous research on the Japanese ESL writers' use of sentence-initial stance expressions.

2.Literature Review

2.1. Use of *I* in Academic Writing

Using the first person pronoun *I* is traditionally discouraged in English academic essays, and writing instructors often recommend student writers to avoid using expressions such as *I think* in their academic essays. More recent studies, however, show that academic writers in some disciplines do not always conform to this tradition, and the use of first-person pronouns vary in different academic disciplines. Hyland (2002b) shows that in humanities and social sciences first-person pronouns are used more frequently than in hard sciences. Other studies (e.g., Hyland, 2002a, Kuo, 1999, Tang & John, 1999) also show that even the authors of scientific research papers use first-person pronouns, both singular and plural, to perform different functions, such as establishing their research claims, because the use of first-person pronouns is an indication of how authors present their roles and claims to their readers. Thus, even though the use of *I* is generally discouraged in academic essays, its use is not completely avoided.

Because the pronoun *I* is not used frequently, when it is used, it carries some specific meanings and functions. Different researchers have used various terms to refer to the meanings and functions of *I* in writing: "identity" (e.g., Ivanic, 1995), "authorial identity" (e.g., Hyland, 2002a), "self-mention" (Hyland, 2001, 2005), "authorial presence" (e.g., Tang & John, 1999), "voice as self-representation" (e.g., Ivanic & Camps, 2001), and "self-promotion" (Harwood, 2005), just to name a few. Hyland (2001) explains that self-mention is a "powerful rhetorical strategy for emphasizing a writer's contribution" (p. 207). In regard to scientific writing, it is "related to authorial stance, and with the desire to both strongly identify oneself with a particular argument and to gain credit for one's individual perspective or research" (p. 217). Harwood (2005) also demonstrates how personal pronouns serve as a self-promotional device even in "supposedly 'author-evacuated' articles in the hard sciences"[1] (p. 1207).

Regarding the ESL writers' use of first-person pronouns, Hyland (2002a) reports that science students in Hong Kong do not use *I* that much when they present their interpretations of research findings, although they use it more frequently in describing research procedures. According to Hyland, these writers avoid "the potentially problematic role of writer-as-thinker, a role which carry accountability for the propositions expressed" (p. 1003) because it is "most vulnerable to criticism" (p. 1004). Therefore, the use of *I* in academic writing is quite complex, and ESL writers do not seem to realize how loudly the pronoun *I* speaks in academic writing.

2.2. Use of Private Verbs in Academic Writing

Verbs like *think* and *believe* are called by different names such as "private verbs" (Quirk, 1985), "mental verbs" (Biber et al., 1999), and stative verbs of "mental perception" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Quirk (1985) explains that, while public verbs refer to "speech act verbs introducing indirect statements," private verbs express "intellectual state such as belief and intellectual acts such as discovery" (pp. 1180-1181). Quirk also points out that "[m]any stative verbs denote 'private' states which can only be subjectively verified; *ie* states of mind, volition, attitudes, etc.," and he categorizes these in four categories (p. 203):

(a) Intellectual states (e.g., *know, believe, think, wonder, suppose, imagine, realize, understand*), especially when followed by a nominal clause as object;

(b) States of emotion or attitudes (e.g., *intend, wish, want, like, dislike, disagree, pity*), especially

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1   Harwood (2005) cites Geertz (1983) for the term "author-evacuated" in his article. See the reference list for Geertz (1983).

when followed by a clausal complementation;

(c)   States of perception (e.g., *see, hear, feel, smell, taste*), which may also place appearance as expressed by *seem* and *appear*; and

(d)   States of bodily sensation (e.g., *hurt, ache, tickle, itch, feel cold*).

Biber et al. (1999), on the other hand, use the term "mental verbs" in their classification. They claim:

Mental verbs denote a wide range of activities and states experienced by humans; they do not involve physical action and do not necessarily entail volition. Their subject often has a semantic role of recipient. They include both cognitive meanings (e.g. *think* or *know*) and emotional meanings expressing various attitudes or desires (e.g. *love, want*) together with perception (e.g. *see, taste*) and receipt of communication (e.g. *read, hear*). (p. 362)

Biber et al., (1999) further explain:

Many mental verbs describe cognitive activities that are relatively dynamic in meaning, such as *calculate, consider, decide, discover, examine, learn, read, solve, and study*. ⋯. Other mental verbs are more stative in meaning. These include verbs describing cognitive states, such as *believe, doubt, know, remember, understand*, as well as many verbs describing emotional or attitudinal states, such as *enjoy, fear, feel, hate, like love, prefer, suspect, want*. (p. 363)

In short, the verbs such as *believe* and *think* belong to the category of stative verbs called either "private verbs" or "mental verbs" describing intellectual or cognitive states. In this paper, the term "private verbs" (PV hereafter) is used to denote these verbs.

As already explained in Quirk's (1985) "category (a)" (i.e., intellectual state) above, many of these PVs take a complement *that*-clause ("nominal clause as object" in Quirk's term). According to Biber et al. (1999), the nine most common verbs controlling post-predicate *that*-clauses are: *think, say, know, see, find, believe, feel, suggest*, and *show*. These mental verbs are an "important device used to express stance," and "verbs such as *think, feel*, and *assume* convey a sense of possibility combined with uncertainty, while verbs such as *know, find*, and *see* convey a definite sense of certainty" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 666). However, private verbs followed by a *that*-complement clause are found less commonly in academic writing. In Biber et al. (1999), four types of registers (fiction, news, academic, and conversation) are compared and the following is reported regarding *think* and *believe: think* with *that*-clauses is very common in conversation because it often appears as *I think* to "report one's personal thoughts" (p. 669) while the verb *believe* "reports a cognitive state" and is "more common in news than the other registers" (p. 670). Biber et al., further explain that "[a]cademic writers consider it less relevant or appropriate to report personal thoughts, so mental verbs are least common in academic prose" (p. 670).

Therefore, the use of *I* + PV, such as *I believe* and *I think*, is very limited in academic written discourse. The use of the first-person pronoun *I* is generally discouraged, but if it is used, this pronoun carries emphatic meanings on the writer's identity or claim and serves specific functions. Additionally, PVs denoting mental state do not appear in academic prose as frequently as they do in other registers. The combination of *I* + PV in academic writing is not perceived and used the same way as in speaking or other registries of writing.

2.3. Japanese Writers' Use of *I* + Private Verbs in Academic Writing

The overuse of *I think* by Japanese English learners has been reported by different researchers (e.g., Miki, 2010b; McClostie, 2008; Pech-Tyson, 1998). Kusuyama (2008) shows that Japanese students of English often use *I* + PV as a stance marker in sentence-initial position instead of using stance adverbial expressions. Kusuyama's study examined 20 essays written by Japanese ESL and 20 essays written by NS writers, both groups studying at the same American university. The results show a considerable difference in the use of *I* + verb between the ESL writers and the NS writers. The ESL writers in that data used *I* + verb constructions in sentence-initial position much more frequently than the NS writers (NS=4.07 vs. ESL=10.05 per 100 orthographic sentences). Among these expressions of *I* + verb, a major difference was found in the use of *I think/I don't think*. The NS writers seldom used *I think/I do not think* (0.61 per 100 orthographic sentences), but the ESL writers used *I think/I don't think* very frequently (ESL=3.27 per 100 orthographic sentences).

While Kusuyama (2008) compared the ESL essays with the NS essays, Miki (2010a, 2010b) conducted a corpus-based study and compared the use of *I think* by different levels of Japanese learners of English. According to Miki (2010b), advanced writers used less tokens of *I think* than low level writers. Miki's studies also examined the corpus of the essays corrected by NSs and demonstrated how the NSs treated the Japanese writers' use of *I think*. This expression was often deleted when it was used under the following conditions: followed by clauses containing *not*; followed by clauses containing expressions of certainty (e.g., *of course*); followed by result clauses of conditional statements; used with adverbial expressions indicating results (e.g. *In result, I think…*); and used within clauses indicating causes or reasons (e.g., *Because I think…*). The NSs, on the other hand, maintained *I think* when the complement clauses contain expressions indicating obligations (e.g., use of *must* and *need*).

Some writing textbooks consider the Japanese ESL/EFL writers' overuse of *I* as a potential problem and discourage its use in English academic essays (e.g., Kamimura & Ooi, 2004; Ooi, 2002). Kluge & Taylor (2007), based upon their experience of teaching in Japan, also warn ESL/EFL writers: "… you opinions and judgments should be based on good arguments and support and not on emotion. You should not express your opinion with a phrase like 'I think' or 'I believe'" (p. 72).

Thus, both research findings and instructional materials address the Japanese ESL/EFL writers' overuse of *I* + PV in academic writing, and many teachers teaching Japanese students have both noticed this tendency and expressed their concerns regarding this issue. For Japanese ESL writers, the problem is not only the overuse of *I* + PV. It seems that they do not fully realize the strong writer identity implied by the use of *I*, which is associated with the writer's claim, the most important concept in academic essays. This study, therefore, aims at examining more closely the Japanese ESL writers' use of *I* + PV in academic writing. In particular, it investigates the use of *I* + single lexical PV (*believe, think*) followed by a complement clause.

3. Methodology

The essay prompt used in this study came from the composition section of the ESL placement examination administered at one of the University of California Campuses. The Japanese writers in this data are ESL learners in the United States, not EFL. In order to reexamine the NS/ESL frequency comparisons of tokens as a follow-up to Kusuyama (2008), this study uses an essay prompt different from the one used in my previous studies. The prompt titled "Groups in America" was selected. This writing task specifically instructed the students to read two quotations, state which author's idea they agree with, and explain and support their opinions. Quotation A supports the idea of melting pot, suggesting that people must "accept and be accepted by the American culture" in order to be successful in the American society.

Quotation B opposes this idea, stating that the melting pot has not worked and people in America still keep their own identities.

3.1. ESL Data

ESL test takers were given a choice of two possible writing prompts in the placement test, and they had 50-minute writing time to compose an academic essay. Twenty essays written by Japanese ESL students were selected. Those students were university students (both graduate and undergraduate) placed either in a high-intermediate or advanced level ESL course or exempted from ESL instruction on the basis of their placement scores.

3.2. NS Data

Twenty timed essay samples were collected from NS university students (both graduate and undergraduate). Unlike the ESL placement examination, NS data collection sessions used only one prompt without an option; therefore, the essay-writing time was adjusted to 40 minutes in order to compensate for the differences.

3.3. Methods of Analyses

Even though all tokens of *I* and the finite verbs corresponding to *I* are coded in the data, the analyses of this paper focus on the "*I* + PV" as the main subject/verb of independent and subordinate clauses. As a follow-up study on the use of *I* + PV in sentence-initial position, the pronoun *I* in embedded clauses (i.e., complement clauses and relative clauses) are excluded from the analyses. The expression "complement clauses" in the analyses refers to post-predicate complement clauses controlled by verbs, that is, complement clauses introduced by three types of complementizers: complementizer *that*, null complementizer ($\varnothing$), and interrogative complementizers *if* and *whether* (e.g., Radford, 1988). All other elements such as phrasal verbs and NP complements are not part of the analyses.

The types of verbs taking complement clauses are analyzed following Biber et al. (1999). Boundaries of embedded clauses were first examined grammatically. Semantic judgments were then exercised to best interpret the authors' intended meanings whenever structural ambiguity existed. Clause-level collocational expressions such as *the more*..., *the more and not only*..., *but also*... are counted as "one independent clause and one dependent clause."

Additionally, five NS instructors were consulted for acceptability judgments in the analyses of ESL writers' use of *I* + PV. All five instructors have the experience of teaching college-level academic writing. Their acceptability levels and opinions, of course, are not always unanimous; therefore, the analyses in findings summarize the NS instructors' comments and their general tendencies regarding the acceptability of the expressions in question.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Use of *I*

First, Table 1 identifies general writing features (e.g., number of words and sentences), and all tokens of *I* in all types of clauses. The tokens of *I* for the NS writers are 45 for the NS writers and 175 for the ESL writers; thus, the ESL writers use *I* almost four times more frequently than the NS writers. The NS writers also have to use this pronoun to a degree because of the nature of the writing prompt and task in this case: it specifically asked for the writer's personal opinions. However, even in such a task, the NS writers use *I* much more selectively than the ESL writers who clearly overuse it.

Table 1.
Use of *I* (Entire Essays)

	NS	ESL
Total number of words (20 essays)	8,944	6,480
Average number of words per essay	447.20	324.00
Total number of orthographic sentences (20 essays)	443	394
Average number of orthographic sentences per essay	22.15	19.70
Average number of words per orthographic sentence	20.19	17.01
Total number of *I* in the essays	**45**	**175**

4.2. Use of "*I* + Single Lexical Private Verb Followed by a Complement Clause"

As explained in the methodology section, this study examines the use of "*I* + PV + complement clauses." Only the tokens of *I* serving as main subjects in independent and subordinate clauses are compared here, while tokens of *I* appearing in embedded clauses are excluded. Table 2 shows that the ESL writers' use of *I* in this construction is much higher than the NS writers (NS=37 tokens; ESL=138 tokens).

Table 2.
Use of *I* as Main Subject (Independent and Subordinate Clauses)

	NS (20 essays)	ESL (20 essays)
Number of *I* used as the main subject in independent clauses	31	128
Number of *I* used as the main subject in subordinate clauses	6	18
Total	**37**	**138**

Out of these tokens of *I*, the tokens that follow the pattern of the "*I* + single lexical verb + complement clauses" construction are 11 cases for the NS writers and 43 cases for the ESL writers. Because the use of modals, progressive and perfective aspects, and past tense carry different semantic functions, only the verbs used as "*I* + single lexical verb (simple present tense)" are isolated. Eight tokens of verbs appear in the NS data and 27 tokens in the ESL data (Table 3).

Table 3.
_I_ + Single Lexical Verb Followed by a That-clause

Verbs	NS	ESL
Total	**11**	**43**
(Modal + verb)	(3)	(3)
(Progressive)	(0)	(1)
(Perfective)	(0)	(1)
(Past tense)	(0)	(11)
Simple Present	**8**	**27**

The breakdown of these verbs is shown Table 4.

Table 4.
Breakdown of Verbs (Simple Present)

Verbs	NS	ESL
admit	0	1
agree/disagree	1	1
believe	**3**	**11**
imagine	1	0
know	1	0
mean	1	0
think	**1**	**14**
Total	**8**	**27**

All the verbs identified here belong to the category of PV, but the following sections of this paper discuss the use of *believe* and *think*, the most notable differences found between the NS and the ESL writers.

4.3. Use of *Believe*
In the NS data, three cases of simple present form of *believe* are identified. See Examples 1-3.[2]

Example 1. *believe* (Simple Present) – NS
(First¶) America is a unique country because we are a nation of immigrants. Besides a sparse number of Native American, many of us are descendants of people that came to America to start a new life. Although this country is composed of many different races and ethnicities, **I believe** that Eric Miller is correct when he states that "To become a successful person in this society, one must accept, and be accepted by, the American culture." (NS3)

Example 2. *believe* (Simple Present) – NS
(First¶) I agree with quotation A. Miller suggests that immigrants to America should strive to become "Americanized" as soon and as completely as possible. **I believe** this is true to more extent than quotation B, in which Kidwell states that people retain as much of their own identity (and culture) as possible. (NS10)

Example 3. *believe* (Simple Present) – NS
(First¶) Eric Miller has argued that "(to) become a successful person in this society, one must accept, and be accepted by, the American culture⋯ The sooner immigrants to America do this, the sooner they will 'melt' into the melting pot of American culture." While I agree that immigrants to America must accept and be accepted by American culture to be successful in our society, **I do not believe** that accepting and being accepted by American culture necessarily means melting into the "melting pot" of American culture. (NS16)

In these examples, the NS writers' complement clauses following *I believe* specifically include

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2   Writers' grammatical errors are left uncorrected in these essays.

evaluative values, with expressions like *is correct, is true*, and *necessarily means*. The NS writers use this expression to confirm the writers' personal evaluations and express their beliefs in direct comparison to the prompt quotation's position. Furthermore, all three examples of *I believe* appear in the first paragraphs of the essays. In other words, the NS writers do not use the expression *I believe* very frequently, but when they do, they use it in the introductory part of the essays to evaluate or clarify the content of the quotations cited in the prompt.

In the ESL data, 11 tokens of *I believe* are identified. The ESL writers use it without any serious problems in most cases, and the NS instructors accept the majority of these cases as well. However, their usage of *I believe* differs from the NS writers. For example, one ESL writer's complement clause contains what is not really the writer's belief (Example 4), and most NS instructors suggested that *I believe* be deleted or changed in this example.

Example 4. *believe* (Simple Present) – ESL
(Beginning of 4th¶) Thirdly, there is no understanding Miller's argument about melting pot, which used to be a common definition of what America is. He fails to show what the American culture is, and **I believe** that <u>the United States was originally established by British immigrants</u> although Native Indians had long lived in that place. (ESL471)

The content of the complement clause here, "the United States was originally established by British immigrants although Native Indians had long lived in that place," is a historical fact. The ESL writer's use of *I belief* gives an impression that he/she is not certain of this historical fact. This ESL writer uses *I believe* as a stance marker to indicate his uncertainty regarding the content of the complement clause. It is not an indication of his "belief," and such use of *I believe* is perceived as unnecessary or inappropriate by the NS instructors.

Example 5 is another case in which some NS instructors consider the ESL writer's use of *I believe* problematic because of the content and word choice in the complement clause.

Example 5. *believe* (Simple Present) – ESL
(Beginning of 3rd ¶) **I believe** <u>it's very ideal for each American citizen to have his own sense of identity and to be proud of his culture</u>. The more American people appreciate their own groups and cultures, the more influences they'll give to their society or even to other countries. There are many Asian people who admire American culture and what makes them so is the diversity of American culture. In Japan, we don't have many groups and our culture is pretty much uniform. (ESL 428)

The comments by the NS instructors indicate that *I believe* here is "unnecessary", "repetitive", or "superfluous" because it adds nothing to the writer's opinion. One NS instructor also points out that the word *ideal* in the complement clause "has a similar meaning" as *I believe*; therefore, both expressions are not needed. The writer's opinion would be stronger without it.

Additionally, unlike the NS writers, who use *I believe* to refer to the content of the quotations in the prompt, the ESL writers tend to use it to state their opinions. In so doing, their opinions may be either strengthened if used properly or weakened otherwise. In Examples 6 and 7, the ESL writers use *I believe* not only appropriately but also effectively, and most of the NS instructors recommend keeping it in these examples. In both cases, the ESL writers use adverbs *still* and *strongly* with *I believe*, clearly showing that the contents of the complement clauses are their personal "beliefs."

Example 6. *believe* **(Simple Present) – ESL**

(Beginning of 2nd ¶) I agree with Quotation B rather than Quotation A since **I strongly believe** that the "melting pot" has not worked. Each immigrant has his/her own sense of identity and perceives the world differently. (ESL485)

Example 7. *believe* **(Simple Present) – ESL**

…Then I realized that the more I am used to this culture, the more I try to keep my original identity and try to show it without thinking.

(Concluding ¶) **I still believe** that the melting pot exist. However, we need to keep identity inside. The melting pot only works in that way. (ESL156)

Another ESL feature is that *I believe* often appears in the concluding part of their essays. Some ESL writers use it quite effectively to strengthen their conclusions, and the NS instructors suggest keeping *I believe* in these cases (Example 8 and Example 9). In both examples, modals *will* and *can* are used in the complement clauses.

Example 8. *believe* **(Simple Present) – ESL**

(Concluding ¶) I'd like to conclude that American society should not build uniform identity, because its diversity makes its culture unique and interesting. **I believe** their struggles to have their own identities will improve American culture. The word "melting pot" doesn't mean that the people in it should be the same but it rather means each person should has their own sense of dignity, pride and identity. (ESL428)

Example 9. *believe* **(Simple Present) – ESL**

(Concluding¶) Thus, the opinion of Quotation B shares a lot of ideas with that of mine. It is always recommendable to try to assimilate into the major society, but one cannot leave behind his/her own sense of identity when he/she leaves for a new society. Even though people have different customs and sense of identities, **I firmly believe** that they can have ethnic harmony. (ESL485)

In some other cases, the NS instructors' comments regarding the ESL writers' use of *I believe* is ambivalent. For Example 10 below, three NS instructors suggest deleting *I believe* because it is "unnecessary," but two suggest keeping it. One reason why the NS instructors are somewhat unsure about the use of *I believe* here may be related to the use of the modal verb *must* in the complement clause. Two instructors refer to the word *must:* one suggests deleting the expression *I believe* while the other suggests keeping it. The NS instructor who suggests deleting *I believe* explains that the use of *must* here indicates that the ESL writer "wants to make a strong point," so he recommends not using *I believe*. The other NS instructor, on the contrary, suggests keeping *I believe* because "it is wrapping things up" here and "the use of *must* by itself sounds too strong" and *I believe* here "softens it."

Example 10. *believe* **(Simple Present) – ESL**

(Concluding ¶) As a conclusion, **I believe** that new comers to America must accept and be accepted by the American culture due to the following reasons: firstly, it's reasonable for everyone to accept the same culture to live without problems, and secondly, it's their own responsibility to adjust to the culture as long as they want to live in this country. (ESL500)

Examples 8, 9, and 10 show that the use of modals (e.g., *can, will, must*) in the complement clause

is a factor in the NS instructors' acceptability judgment of the expression *I believe*. This parallels Miki's (2010b) findings on the NS treatment of *I think*, which tends to be kept if the following complement clause contains modal expressions such as *must* and *need* to specifically expresses obligations or needs.

Some cases of repetitive use of *I believe* are also identified in the current study. For example, one ESL writer uses it in two consecutive sentences in the concluding paragraph (Example 11).

Example 11. *believe* (Simple Present) – ESL
(Concluding¶) **I believe** <u>the reason why the USA is the strongest country in the world is because people who have different cultures help each other to improve this country</u>. **I strongly believe** <u>we should not change our own culture which we originally have and we don't need to adopt and change into American culture</u>. We should take advantage of each own culture to contribute to the USA. (ESL642)

The NS instructors' opinions are not unanimous regarding this repetitive use of *I believe*. Some NS instructors accept it as long as the content of the complement clause clearly indicates the writer's belief, opinion, or strong stance, even if it is used in two consecutive sentences. The other instructors suggest either deleting *I believe* in one sentence or changing it to some other expressions (e.g., *indeed, therefore*) because of its redundancy.

The NS instructors do not seem to consider the ESL writers' use of *I believe* as major writing weaknesses in most of these cases; therefore, these features analyzed here may not be considered "ESL problems" as such. However, these examples do demonstrate some NS/ESL differences. The NS writers use *I believe* to evaluate or clarify the meaning of the quotations in the introductory part of their essays. The ESL writers, on the other hand, use *I believe* to indicate their opinions or stance, often in the concluding part of their essays. Additionally, the ESL writers may use *I believe* as a weak form of stance marker which does not necessarily indicate their own beliefs or opinions. This often results in softening or weakening the writer's claim or the content of the complement clause without expressing what NS readers would consider "the writer's belief." The ESL writers need to be aware of this type of softening/weakening effects of the use of *I believe* in academic writing, and they should be warned to strengthen, not to weaken, their opinions and claims, particularly in the concluding part of the essays.

4.4. Use of *Think*

There is only one NS case of *I think* found in the entire NS data set (Example 12).

Example 12. *think* (Simple Present) – NS
(5th sentence in the 2nd¶) First, we must analyze how the "American culture" is defined. In my opinion, it is comprised of several cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices. If it weren't for this, we not see so many establishments owned by different cultures. **I think** that <u>when Miller addresses "the melting pot" of American society, he is speaking about the need for immigrants to adapt the methods of survival in a free-enterprise economy such as America's</u>. (NS13)

This NS writer may be considered an exceptional case because his writing demonstrates some other non-traditional academic writing features. This writer only wrote 292 words (cf. NS average = 447.2 words per essay), and he/she is the only NS writer who composed a two-paragraph essay. The NS average number of paragraphs per essay is 4.35 paragraphs, and even the shortest NS essay (257 words) consists of three paragraphs: an introduction, a body paragraph, and a concluding paragraph. The NS writer in Example12, therefore, does not seem to be following so called "academic writing conventions" in general and may not

be as sensitive regarding the use of *I think* as the other NS writers who apparently avoid using it. However, even this unconventional example shows a particular feature and function of NS use of *I think* because the complement clause refers back to the content of one of the quotations, just like the three cases of NS use of *I believe* discussed earlier. This is again the writer's attempt to evaluate, clarify, or confirm the content of the quotations, and it indicates definite involvement of his/her "thoughts" or some personal involvement on the writer's part.

In the ESL data, *I think* is used by eight ESL writers, and the most noticeable feature is the overuse of *I think* (ESL=14 tokens vs. NS=1 token). Some ESL writers use it repetitively, and the NS instructors' acceptability varies to a large degree for these cases. In Example 13 below, three NS instructors suggest deleting the first token of *I think*. One instructor suggests changing it to *it may be the case* because it "sounds more academic," and the other suggests keeping it because this case "indicates slight ambiguity/ an option." For the second token of *I think*, which is used in the concluding paragraph, the NS instructors prefer deleting it because it "weakens" the argument and conclusion.

> **Example 13. *think* (Simple Present) – ESL**
> (First ¶) I basically agree with the idea that American culture shouldn't teach only uniform identity or commonality for two reasons.
> (Second ¶) The first reason is concerning about organization of the US.
> In general, the US is considered as the country of immigrants. So **I think** <u>teaching uniform identity in the US is kind of contradiction</u>.
> (Fourth and Concluding ¶) In conclusion, **I think** <u>American culture should not teach only uniform identity because American doesn't have uniform identity and should not have it</u>. Identity is the thing that is not made by culture or nation but by each people. So what we have to do is to respect other identity and take it as a part of our identity. (ESL73)

Example 14 is a case for which the NS instructors prefer deleting *I think*.

> **Example 14. *think* (Simple Present) – ESL**
> (Third ¶) (7 sentences explaining how the writer's father has changed his Japanese way of thinking) My mom was the last one who could melt in a melting pot. Because she couldn't speak English at all. However, she discovered her own way of learning English by learning tool paint from her neighbors. She now has many American friends and is spending a happy life without stressed out. Again, **I think** <u>to become a successful person here, you need to accept the American culture and be accepted by them</u>. (ESL440)

Two of the instructors said either "ok" or "author's choice" for this example, but one instructor suggests changing it to *as shown by her case* because there is "no need to explicitly use *I think*" here. The other two instructors suggest deleting *I think* because it "weakens" the author's point made by the use of the expression *you need to* in the complement clause.

For the two tokens of *I think* in Example 15 below, some suggest keeping it because it shows the ESL writer's "viewpoint" or "personal argument." Some instructors, however, suggest changing this expression to something else, such as *Some say* for the first case, because it is "more academic." One instructor specifically suggests changing these two cases of *I think* to *after all* and *however* because "[g]rammatical connectors create a stronger connection than *I think*." Whenever deletion is suggested, it is unanimously due to the reason that the use of *I think* "weakens" the statement.

Example 15. *think* (Simple Present) – ESL
(First ¶) What is the real "American culture?" **I think** <u>nowadays most of countries in the world have more than one culture or ethnics and the USA is a country which represent such kind of countries.</u> Originally, "American culture" is a mixture of many different kinds of cultures and we cannot define clearly what is American culture because it is not only one culture. I strongly believe and agree with the idea, written by Clare Sue Kindwell, which is "American culture should not teach only uniform identity or commonality" by following reasons.
(Second ¶ - the first reason, 2 sentences)
(Third ¶) Second, to keep each own identity is important to keep confidence of people. Although immigrants can adopt other culture and change their habits or methods of thinking, it is difficult for them to be superior to original people who were born in the U.S.A. and didn't need any efforts to adopt American culture. Some people of immigrants may have difficulty to adopt American culture and will lose their confidence if their identities are denied. **I think** <u>each person should be different and should have different culture and identity to be himself or herself.</u>
(Concluding ¶ , 3 sentences) (ESL642)

The NS instructors' acceptability differs, and their treatments of the ESL writers' use of *I think* seem to vary greatly on the surface. Actually, when we look at the NS instructors' reasons for deleting or keeping *I think*, a remarkable consistency exists. The NS instructors may be bothered by the repetitive use of *I think*, but they tend to accept it as long as the statements following *I think* clearly indicate the writers' "personal tones," "arguments," "opinions," and "viewpoints." However, when the NS instructors feel the use of *I think* weakens the writer's argument, they suggest deleting it. This is again consistent with Miki's (2010b) findings. Her corpus of essays edited by NSs also show that *I think* was deleted in sentences involving logic, cause/effect, and high probably, but was kept when personal opinions and standpoints were emphasized.

It should also be pointed that this high frequency of *I think* among the ESL writers is partly due to the result of one ESL writer's repetitive use (five times) of this expression. Example 13 below is the entire essay written in one-paragraph by this ESL writer.

Example 16. *think* (Simple Present) – ESL
I agree with quotation A and B from looking at different racial groups. For example, for quotation A, in terms of Asian, European immigrants to America, they are good example of showing this statement. For them, this country is a country of opportunities, freedom, and democracy, so that they immigrate here as voluntary immigrants. They work hard and try to assimilate to the mainstream of American culture which is a white Anglo Saxon America. Therefore, they don't want to keep their own culture so much and become accepted by the mainstream of American culture without so much of conflict in the U.S. Even though they may not be accepted so openly as other white Anglo Saxon people, especially when they go up to ladder of success. (You can see this phenomena by the rate of ratio for minority groups in the upper class society.) However, **I think** <u>many Asian, European immigrants believed this statement, and some became very successful in this country</u>. For Quotation B, the Black immigrants are the good example showing the conflict and struggle people were brought here as slaves around 2 centuries ago by white American people. African Americans had been exploited by white American until they get free after the Civil War. Therefore, they were involuntary immigrants who didn't want to come but forced to come as involuntary immigrants without any rights. Even after the civil war, they got prejudiced against by the white American by being segregated in American society. Therefore, they have antagonism toward the mainstream of American culture and they want to

keep their identity as African-American by keeping their own races together without becoming inter-racial marriages, but encouraging people to play black music—such as jazz, blues rather than classical music (which is considered to be a white music), speaking Black English rather than standard English, etc. During 50's and 60's, Dr. Martin Luther King had led people as a black leader and after that civil rights movement occurred and many of the organizations, schools, etc. opened their door to black people in terms of employments, school enrollment, etc. Therefore, it's been a history of struggle and conflict for the African Americans to live in this society, yet still they have been prejudiced by the white Americans. Therefore, **I think** <u>for them, the quotation B signifies a lot about Black history in the U.S. and many African American might agree with this opinion</u>. **I** myself **think** <u>that quotation A and B has to be combined</u>. Because without assimilation American will be divided by so many different ways of think, values, habits, customs, behaviors, common-senses, and the human relationship will not work smoothly. Also, without their own cultural identity, **I think** <u>people will lose the sense of who they are, what they are, what their ancestors did in their history</u>, etc. which I think[3] are very important to keep as human beings. Therefore, **I think** <u>quotation A and B have to be combined and have a nice harmonious multicultural society</u>. (ESL78)

This ESL writer is a female graduate student, with relatively fluent written English. This writer not only wrote the longest essay (497 words) among the ESL essays (ESL average of 324.0 words per essay) but also produced long sentences (24.85 words per sentence vs. ESL average of 17.01 words per sentence). Both of these figures are even higher than those of the NS averages (447.2 words per NS essay and 20.19 words per NS sentence: see Table 1). However, this ESL writer obviously does not follow academic conventions in many ways, and she is placed in a high-intermediate multi-skill ESL class based on the results of the placement test. One piece of evidence showing her lack of knowledge of academic writing conventions is the fact that she wrote a one-paragraph essay, and she is the only ESL writer who composed a one-paragraph essay in this data set. Another non-traditional characteristic of her essay is the content of her essay: she constructs the arguments from both viewpoints instead of agreeing with one quotation even though the test instructions specifically asked the students to state which quotation he/she agrees with. Argumentation with both viewpoints is not considered a suitable approach for this prompt because it requires the writer to present the arguments very skillfully, which is a difficult task to complete when writing a timed essay. The other ESL writers in this study may not write as fluently as this writer and have produced less writing, but they follow academic conventions more closely because they all employ more traditional approaches of taking one viewpoint and composing a three-part essay with introduction, body, and conclusion. The other ESL writers also use the expression *I think* but not as repetitively as this one particular writer in Example 16.

The ESL writers' problems with the use of *I believe/think* is not just the matter of frequency. Unlike the NS writers' examples, the ESL writers' use of *I believe/think* often do not indicate the involvement of their "beliefs" or "thoughts." Instead, they use these expressions like stance markers or softeners, which are often perceived by NS readers as a problem because it weakens argumentative essays.

While the NS instructors indicate apparent concern or annoyance with the ESL writers' overuse of *I believe* and *I think*, they accept a good number of cases. This is partly because there are more serious writing problems in the ESL essays than the overuse of these expressions, but the NS instructors also accept *I believe/think* if the statements clearly indicate something related to the writers' opinions and claims in a specific way. In other words, the NS instructors accept the use of *I believe/think* as long as the statements made by the ESL writers indicate actual involvement of the writers' own beliefs and thoughts or the results

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3   This is within a relative clause; therefore, this token is not included in the analysis here.

of their cognitive engagements. On the other hand, the NS instructors suggest deleting these expressions if they are used as stance markers because they weaken the writers' statements or arguments. In some other cases, the NS instructors suggest changing *I believe/think* to something that more specifically indicates the writers' beliefs, thoughts, opinions, or claims.

The verbs *believe* and *think* belong to the category of private or mental verbs describing intellectual or cognitive states as explained in the literature review (Quirk, 1985; Biber et al., 1999). However, the results of this study indicate that *believe* and *think* used in academic essays should not merely describe intellectual or cognitive "states." The examples and the NS instructors' comments in this study suggest that these verbs should indicate more active involvement of the writers' cognition. In this sense, *believe* and *think* in academic essays may function more like "mental verbs describe cognitive activities" – just not "so dynamic" as Biber et al. (1999) explain for the verbs such as *calculate, consider, decide, discover, examine, learn, read, solve,* and *study* (p. 363). Therefore, it is necessary for the ESL writers to realize that the expressions *I believe/I think* have very particular meanings and specific functions when they are used in academic writing.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The Japanese ESL writers use the *I* + PV construction, especially *I believe* and *I think*, more frequently than the NS writers, which is consistent with some previous research findings. This type of overuse is often perceived by NS writing instructors as "weaknesses" of writing style because it softens the writer's stance or claim made in the complement clause. The most important point of the present research findings, however, is not so much the matter of frequency: the examples cited in this paper demonstrate specific NS/ ESL differences, and they provide important insights in teaching academic writing.

Both Example 12 (the only case of the NS writer's use of *I think*) and Example 16 (a case of ESL writer's repetitive use of *I think*) reiterate the importance of explicit instruction in academic writing conventions to students. It may be argued that these examples ought to be excluded from the data as these two cases are both deviations from the norms of the other NS and ESL essay samples. However, they provide a good overview of some common features quite meaningful for teaching of academic writing. Both writers do not conform to the academic conventions not only in the use of *I think* but also in other ways (e.g., essay organization). This suggests that student writers, both NS and ESL, should familiarize themselves with academic conventions commonly expected and practiced in writing academic essays.

I am well aware that my incorporation in the data set of these two essays raises some methodological concerns. However, if we exclude these two writers, the implications of the research findings here would be completely different. I would have to claim that the NS writers in this data set do not use *I think* at all and the ESL writers do not really "overuse" *I think*. This is an important issue in research interpretation because this kind of judgment is left to each researcher's discretion. I personally do not believe that a researcher should exercise freedom to manipulate the data to that extent. Rather, these two examples should be included in the data "as is," and each case should be accepted as a particular example showing some potential student writer problems. As demonstrated in the findings, the large majority of the NS writers follow the advice of not using *I think*, but they may still use it if a writer feels the need to indicate his/her "thoughts" (Example 12). The ESL writers, on the other hand, use *I think* more frequently than the NS writers, and repetitive use may occur if an ESL writer is not aware of this particular academic writing convention, even though his/her writing may sound relatively fluent. Without specific knowledge of writing conventions required for academic prose, the essays students produce do not meet the academic standards expected by readers in American higher education.

Another important implication of this study is the insights obtained from the NS instructors' comments

and acceptability judgments on the ESL writing samples. In spite of the fact that some writing textbooks warn against using *I believe/I think*, the NS instructors demonstrate relatively high acceptance of these expressions. While their high acceptability is influenced by the fact that the ESL writers' essays contain more serious errors than the problems related to the use of *I believe/I think*, the deciding factor in keeping or deleting the expressions is clearly related to both the content of the complement clause following the verb, and where in the essay these expressions appear. The underlying condition for acceptance is that the complement clause must explicitly indicate the writer's "belief" or "thought," as a result of some cognitive engagement. Writing instructors, therefore, should be aware of this fact and pay closer attention to the content of the complement clause when they deal with ESL writers' use of *I* + PV. This structure should not be used as a mere stance marker, a softener, or an indication of uncertainty. In particular, such weakening of the writer's opinions and claims should not occur in the concluding part of an essay. The "*I* + PV + complement clause" construction must clearly indicate the writer's actual "beliefs" and "thoughts."

Additionally, the examples cited in this study support the importance of pointing out the registry differences between spoken language and written language. Biber et al. (2002) show how spoken language and written language in an academic setting bear characteristics of involved versus informational polarization. Language used in classroom teaching is of a highly involved nature (pertaining to style), while university textbooks, course packs, and other campus writing are very informational (pertaining to content). This distinction between spoken versus written language in the academic setting is important because the high frequency of the colloquial register influences the ESL writers' use of *I believe/think*. The first-person pronoun *I* appears very frequently in spoken language even in the academic setting; however, it does not carry the same meaning or function in academic written language.

The ESL writers need to know these academic writing conventions, and they also need to be aware that anything that does not match the widely accepted academic writing conventions may be perceived as not only non-native features but also as weaknesses or even as problems in the worst cases. Explicit instructions, therefore, must play an important role in raising ESL writers' awareness. As suggested by Hyland (2002b), highlighting *I* in essays is a commonly practiced and very effective approach. Learners can highlight all instances of *I believe/think* and examine if each case truly expresses their personal beliefs and thoughts without weakening their opinions or claims. If they use *I believe* or *I think*, they must have first engaged in some sort of cognitive activity which has led them to that state. Then they can use *I believe* and *I think* to claim what they really "believe" or "think."

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