The function of "I think" by Japanese learners of English and first language transfer

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This study investigated the use of "I think" followed by a complement clause in English opinion essays of Japanese learners and examined the possible first language transfer of the function of Japanese equivalent expression "omou" and "kangaeru." Previous related studies have pointed out that "I think" is rarely used by English native speakers in essays, but Japanese learners of English have a strong tendency to overuse the phrase (Highland, 2002; Ishikawa, 2012). Researchers, however, have not gone into detail about possible reasons for such overuse. As such, the present study examined the discoursal function more explicitly. Samples of "I think" and "omou/kangaeru" were collected from the Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students (Okugiri, Ijuin, & Komori, 2015), which includes English and Japanese essays by native speakers and learners. There were three groups in the study, native English speakers, Japanese learners of English, and Japanese native speakers, with 79 participants in each group. The English results show that the native speakers rarely produced "I think," with only nine instances. Meanwhile, learners frequently produced the phrase 105 times. For the Japanese native speakers, we found more frequent instances, 180 sentences with "omou/kangaeru." Our discoursal analysis revealed that the learners’ use of "I think" and their first language use of "omou/kangaeru" were similar; 61 (58%) occurrences of "I think" and 94 (52%) occurrences of "omou/kangaeru" functioned as a type of discourse marker to introduce their main idea/thesis in an opinion essay (e.g., I think we still need newspapers and magazines). For the nine instances of the native English speakers, only two were followed by the main idea, and the other seven show uncertainty or a personal/subjective idea. Therefore, the findings of this study exhibit the possibility of first language transfer of the discoursal function of "omou/kangaeru" into English "I think."

Keywords: second language writing, function, discourse, the Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students, usage-based approach.