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Cross-cultural Study of American and Korean Students' Reflective Essays and Collaborative Literature Discussions

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Purposes of the Study

The present study has three research purposes. First, this study investigates cultural influences on rhetorical patterns in the reflective essays of American and South Korean children. In particular, it focuses on four rhetorical aspects: organizational structure, types of supporting reasons, elements of argumentative discourse, and rhetorical forms. Second, this study investigates the effects of participation in collaborative literature discussions upon these four rhetorical features. It examines the essays of American and Korean children who participated in collaborative discussions and who did not participate. Collaborative literature discussions in the present study are based on the Collaborative Reasoning approach (CR henceforth), which has been shown to have positive effects on the development of children's reasoning skills (e.g., Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). Finally, this study attempts to determine whether there is any interaction between cultural influences and the effects of collaborative discussions upon American and Korean children's use of the rhetorical features. That is, it investigates whether the effects of participation in CR discussions upon reflective essay writing are consistent across American and Korean children. In certain rhetorical aspects, the effects of collaborative discussions might be greater for Korean students than American students.

One significance of the present study is that it is the first cross-cultural study to examine rhetorical patterns of children's essays following collaborative literature discussions. Another significance is that for its research design and analysis, this study draws on studies from various academic disciplines: educational psychology, literacy, rhetoric, and applied linguistics. Another significance of this cross-cultural study is that it can expand our knowledge of rhetoric. It enables the identification of rhetorical features which might not be recognized when studied in one culture alone. It also enables us to find useful rhetorical strategies which can be applied from one culture to another, and it can enrich our inventory of rhetorical strategies.

Method

Participants were fourth-grade students and teachers from two public schools in the United States and three schools in South Korea. A total number of participating students in the U.S. was 196 (103 boys, 93 girls), and a total number of Korean participants was 238 (114 boys, 124 girls). Within each school, classrooms were randomly assigned to either a CR group or a Non-CR group. The students in CR classrooms participated in a total of four CR discussions, while the students in Non-CR classrooms continued their regular language arts instruction without experiencing CR discussions. For CR discussions, students were divided into small groups of six to nine. Before each discussion, students read a story silently at their seats. Then they gathered in a group with their teacher and discussed the central question related to the story. After all four CR discussions were finished, the students in both CR and Non-CR classrooms were asked to write a reflective essay individually in response to a story that had not been previously read or discussed by any of the student. Students wrote an essay in their native language and were given forty minutes for the writing task.

Analysis

The reflective essays of the Korean and American students were examined in terms of four aspects: organizational structure, types of supporting reasons, elements of argumentative discourse, and the use of rhetorical forms related to argumentation. First of all, the organizational structure of the essay was carefully examined whether it followed any specific pattern. It was examined whether there was any thesis statement in the essay. Rhetorical functions of each part of the organizational structure were also examined.

For analyses of types of reasons and argumentative elements, the coding scheme adapted from a study by Reznitskaya and her colleagues (2001) was used. All the essays were coded in the following four steps using QSR NVivo computer software (2000). At the first step, the essays were parsed out into "idea

units" as defined by Mayer (1985), according to whom an idea unit "expresses one action or event or state, and generally corresponds to a single verb clause" (p. 71). Next, each idea unit was coded as one of the subcategories: *Position*, *Repetition of Position*, and *Reason*. Finally, idea units which contradict the writer's own chosen position were additionally coded as *Counterargument*, and the units which provide a rejustification of the position in response to the counterargument were coded as *Rebuttal*. An idea unit coded as *Reason* was further examined to determine, for example, whether it was from personal experiences or facts from the story.

An analysis of rhetorical forms was based on the study by Anderson and his colleagues (2001). In examining students' oral discourse, Anderson and his colleagues found that certain rhetorical forms were repeatedly used for serving various cognitive and social functions during argumentation. They referred to such recurrent rhetorical forms as *argument stratagems*. For example, the phrase "What do you think [NAME]?" is an argument stratagem serving the social function of managing participation of classmates. The capitalized and bracketed terms are place-holders for context-specific information. Based on a taxonomy of argument stratagems suggested by Anderson et al., relevant categories of argument stratagems were identified and coded by entering key search terms in the QSR NVivo software (2000).

Result

The analyses of organizational structure revealed that the most prevalent pattern in American and Korean students' essays was *introduction-body-conclusion*. The rhetorical function of *introduction*, *body*, and *conclusion* was also similar for Korean and English essays. The typical rhetorical functions of the parts of the essay were *announcement of position*, *providing support for the position*, and *repetition of the position*. In this pattern, the thesis statement was presented at the beginning of the essay. These similarities were also observed in CR and Non-CR groups.

In regard to the types of reasons used in the essay, Korean and American students' essays did not show significant difference. In both Korean and English essays, the most common type of reasons put forth for the main position is the reference to the facts in the story they have read. However, there was a minor difference: The next common type of reasons in Korean essays was moral principle and the next common type in English essays was predictions of characters' actions. There was no significant differences detected between CR and Non-CR groups in terms of types of reasons.

In order to determine the effects of culture and CR discussions on students' use of argumentative elements in their essay, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The dependent variables were the number of idea units coded as *Reason*, *Counterargument*, and *Rebuttal*. The dependent variables were analyzed simultaneously using a MANOVA procedure with Culture and Condition as fixed factors. The factor Culture has two levels: US and Korea, and the factor Condition has two levels: CR and Non-CR.

The MANOVA result indicated a significant main effect for Culture, Wilks's lambda = .87, $F(3, 428) = 22.19$, $p < .001$. There was also significant main effect for Condition, Wilks's lambda = .93, $F(3, 428) = 10.76$, $p < .001$, and a significant interaction between Culture and Condition, Wilks's lambda = .96, $F(3, 428) = 5.52$, $p = .001$.

The hypothesis that the effect of CR discussion would be greater for Korean students than American students was tested for each dependent variable. There was an interaction between the factors of Culture and Condition for the dependent variable *Reason*. In the Non-CR groups, the mean of the idea units coded as *Reason* was lower for Korean students than American students, but in the CR groups it was higher for Korean students than American students. The difference in means between CR and Non-CR groups for Korean students minus the difference in means between CR and Non-CR groups for American students was 3.5, and it was statistically significant, $F(1, 430) = 7.59$, $p < .01$. There was no significant interaction between the factors of Culture and Condition for the dependent variable *Counterargument*. For the idea

units coded *Rebuttal*, there was an interaction between the factors of Culture and Condition. The difference in means between CR and Non-CR groups for Korean students minus the difference in means between CR and Non-CR groups for American students was 1.0, and it was statistically significant, $F(1,430) = 4.40$, $p < .05$. Therefore, with regard to the argumentative elements of *Reason* and *Rebuttal*, the results supported the research hypothesis that the effect of CR discussion would be greater for Korean students than American students.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of culture and CR discussions on students' use of argument stratagems in the essay. The dependent variables were a total number of the instances of argument stratagems which belong to the same category. Since seven argument stratagems had been grouped into four categories, there were four dependent variables labeled as *Making Arguments Explicit*, *Extending the Story World*, *Acknowledging Uncertainty*, and *Using Story Evidence*. The dependent variables were analyzed simultaneously using a MANOVA procedure with Culture and Condition as fixed factors. The factor Culture has two levels: US and Korea, and the factor Condition has two levels: CR and Non-CR.

The MANOVA results indicated that main effects were significant for the Culture factor, Wilks's $\lambda = .83$, $F(4,427) = 21.47$, $p < .001$, and also for the Condition factor, Wilks's with $\lambda = .91$, $F(4,427) = 10.63$, $p < .001$. The interaction between Culture and Condition was not significant, Wilks's $\lambda = .99$, $F(4,427) = 1.62$, $p > .05$. Thus, the effect of culture was consistent across Non-CR and CR groups, and the effect of CR discussions was consistent across American and Korean students. With respect to use of argument stratagems, the results do not support the hypothesis that Korean students would benefit more from CR discussions than American students.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results revealed the general similarities between English and Korean essays in regard to organizational structure and the types of reasons. The only minor difference was that Korean students were more likely to refer to moral principles in support of their position than American students. However, in regard to the use of argument stratagems and argumentative elements, Korean and American students show significant differences. American students' essays contained more instances of argument stratagems than Korean students' essays.

With regard to argumentative elements, Korean students' essays in general contained fewer reasons than American students' essays, which was consistent with the general assumption that students in Korean elementary school have fewer opportunities to engage in collaborative literature discussions like CR and thus they are likely to contain fewer argumentative elements in their essays. After participating in collaborative discussions, however, Korean students included more reasons in their essay than the counterpart students in the U. S. This finding supports the hypothesis that Korean students would get more benefits from collaborative discussions than American students in terms of generating reasons in support of their position. The number of counterarguments contained in Korean students' and American students' essays was similar. This finding is somewhat surprising because Korean culture has been long influenced by the Confucianism, which emphasizes social harmony and obedience to authority, and so it was assumed that Korean students would have fewer counterarguments in their writing than American students. This finding may suggest that the influence of Confucianism tradition in Korean schools has decreased and that Korean rhetoric has been changing in allowing the expression of counterarguments. In response to counterarguments, Korean students included more rebuttals in their essay than American students. When reasons, counterarguments, and rebuttals are all combined, Korean students who had experienced CR discussions included significantly more such argumentative elements in their essay than their counterparts who had not participated in CR discussions.

These findings suggest that a collaborative literature discussion like CR is an effective approach to enhance argumentative skills not only for students in the U. S., but also for students in Korea. Engaging in a collaborative discussion helps students acquire more rhetorical forms and elements necessary for making valid arguments. It will eventually help our students become citizens who can make reasonable judgments in their civic and daily life.

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