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Text analysis of personal statements written in English by Japanese medical students

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Abstract

Introduction: Personal statements are important documents in the admission and programme application processes, including international elective programmes, in medical education. However, writing these is challenging for international applicants not only because of their unfamiliarity with this genre but also their English academic writing skills. This study aims to explore the organisation and elaboration of text in personal statements written by Japanese medical students for international elective programme application.

Methods: Drawing on genre analysis, the first draft of personal statements written by eight fifth-year medical students at a Japanese university were analysed. The text data were deductively classified into moves and steps, using Chiu's framework of the personal statement genre.

Results: In the introduction, Japanese medical students commonly described the context and issues of healthcare in Japan and the future goals for physicians. In the move of the relevant background, it was notable that six out of eight personal statements showed personality. Although a range of moves was covered when writing about the reasons for applying, only two students described their understanding of programmes and institutional attributes. In the move of conclusion, they focused more on writing their goals of future success and contribution to the course. Furthermore, no applicant expressed self-promotion and praise for academics, programmes, and institutions.

Conclusion: The findings of this study can provide a springboard for the development of support for Japanese students' academic writing in English in medical education across cultures.

Keywords: *Medical Education, International Electives, Personal Statement, Genre Analysis, Discourse, Rhetorical Patterns, Written Communication*

I. INTRODUCTION

The personal statement, as a promotional academic genre, is an important document in the admission process for higher education. However, numerous applicants face difficulties while preparing application materials because of their unfamiliarity with the genre of discourse and audience expectations (Ding, 2007). In medical education, particularly institutions in Western countries, several instances require the submission of personal statements for application to, for instance, medical schools, international electives, residency programmes, and research programmes.

Globalisation in medical education has promoted worldwide student mobility. Currently, many Asian

medical students, including Japanese students, participate in international electives in Western countries. International electives provide several benefits to medical students, including cultural competence, communication skills, and clinical reasoning (Imafuku et al., 2021). However, because some institutions require the submission of personal statements for application to the international elective programme, it can be challenging for international applicants not only because of their unfamiliarity with the genre of discourse but also their English academic writing skills.

As the preparation of application materials, including personal statements, can be challenging for Asian medical students, educators must facilitate a more

comprehensive pre-departure course, along with providing support for composing such documents. Specifically, a better understanding of the linguistic features of their personal statements is fundamental for developing academic writing support for their application documents. Therefore, this study used the genre analysis framework (Swales, 1990) to explore the organisation and elaboration of text in personal statements written by Japanese medical students for the international elective programme application. Specifically, the following research question was developed: What are the rhetorical characteristics of Japanese medical students' personal statements written in English?

II. METHODS

A. Setting

International electives, which allow the students at the Gifu University School of Medicine to study overseas, are optional modules of either four or eight weeks in the final year of the clinical clerkship programme with the goals of observation, understanding and experiencing clinical practices in different cultural contexts. Through this programme, every year, 10–15 medical students study clinical medicine in a foreign country and gain cross-cultural experience in a clinical setting. As some highly competitive overseas institutions require the submission of personal statements, letters of recommendation, and curriculum vitae during the application, faculty members of the medical education division provide some support for their preparation, if required by the students. Although the guidebook for international electives briefly explains the definition and role of personal statements, the students are not officially given any sample or format of English personal statements.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

This study collected personal statements written in English by fifth-year medical students (n=8; Student A-H) at a Japanese university, from 2013 to 2017, as part of the application documents for international electives in institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) or the United States (US). Their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) (iBT) score ranges from 90 to 101. Written informed consent to participate was obtained from them. Their first drafts were analysed through the lens of move analysis as an element of genre analysis (Swales, 1990)

to reveal rhetorical patterns from a cultural perspective. The first draft, which has not been revised using feedback from others, directly reflects their cultural and linguistic influences regarding the rhetorical patterns. Text data were analysed by the first author, who has a background in applied linguistics and medical education. Subsequently, the preliminary findings of the text analysis were discussed by all the research team members to establish the credibility and dependability of the data analysis.

Genre analysis aims to describe the organisational patterns of text in a specific context, and genres are viewed as staged goal-oriented social processes of the written or spoken practice. For example, in written communication, reader expectations, document structure, and rhetoric development vary depending on the genre, such as research articles, invitation letters, and reminder emails. A move is an analytical unit defined as a rhetorical component shifting from one part of a text to another that performs a specific communicative function (Swales, 1990, p.140). Each move is subcategorised into one or more functional units called steps.

Specifically, this study applied Chiu's (2016) framework of moves and steps in the context of personal statements for graduate school application to medical education. Drawing on this analytical framework that comprises five moves: introduction, relevant background, reasons for applying, extra-curricular information, and conclusion, the text data were deductively classified into moves and steps.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Gifu University Ethics Committee (No. 25–367). Students were assured of the confidentiality of the contents.

III. RESULTS

The average length of the personal statements was 535.5 words (range: 314–873 words). The deidentified data of personal statements by some participants who gave their consent to share the whole text that support the findings of this study are available in Figshare at <http://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17030705>. All the data set can be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Table 1 indicates the total number of personal statements that consists of any step of each move and shows the representative text in each move.

	n (%) (n=8)
Move 1 Introduction	8
Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and experiences	4 (50)
Step 1-B: Generalisations about the profession	6 (75)
Step 1-C: Research/clinical interest	1 (12.5)
Step 1-D: Future goals or decision to apply for a specific programme/institution	7 (87.5)
<i>1-B: In Japan, the proportion of surgeries and research is unbalanced. In urban hospitals, they do a lot of research but the number of surgeries is smaller than the one of local areas. In local areas, a lot of surgeries are done but they have less time to do research because the lack of doctors makes them too busy... (Student F)</i>	
<i>1-D: I have ... a strong desire to become knowledgeable, trusted, and approachable doctor. (Student C)</i>	
Move 2 Relevant background	8
Step 2-A: Education achievements and experiences	1 (12.5)
Step 2-B: Work or clinical experiences, including experiences as patient	3 (37.5)
Step 2-C: Research experiences	2 (25)
Step 2-D: Understanding of the study field	2 (25)
Step 2-E: Language and culture proficiency	2 (25)
Step 2-F: Background such as travel and family	1 (12.5)
Step 2-G: Personality	6 (75)
<i>2-B: ...I have pursued my dream when I suffered from pneumonia twenty years ago. The long stay in the hospital was never easy with separation from my family. However, with all the doctors by my side, I was able to keep my spirit up to fight against the pain... (Student E)</i>	
<i>2-G: I am a sociable person who can get along well with others... (Student B)</i>	
Move 3: Reasons for applying	8
Step 3-A: Gap in applicant background	4 (50)
Step 3-B: Personal development and ambition	6 (75)
Step 3-C: Understanding of programmes and institutional attributes	2 (25)
Step 3-D: Personal observations, experiences, and self-reflection	3 (37.5)
Step 3-E: Disciplinary and research reasons	2 (25)
<i>3-B: to make a lot of friends all over the world will lead to broadening my horizons. These experiences will stand me in good stead in the future.... (Student C)</i>	
Move 4 Extra-curricular information	0
Move 5 Conclusion	8
Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future success	5 (62.5)
Step 5-B: Self-promotion/evaluation	0
Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study and programme	2 (25)
Step 5-D: Praise for academics/programme/institution	0
Step 5-E: Contribution to the courses	4 (50)
<i>5-A: Overall, I would like to train myself to improve the clinical skills and broaden the insight into the healthcare system. (Student A)</i>	
<i>5-E: On this chance, I want to do my best to participate in the programme for externship... (Student D)</i>	

Table 1. Moves and steps of the personal statements for international electives written in English by Japanese medical students

As can be seen from Table 1, in the introduction, Japanese medical students commonly described the context and issues of healthcare in Japan (1-B) and future goals for physicians (1-D). Expressions of their research

and clinical interests (1-C) were made the least in the introduction move. In the relevant background move, it is notable that six out of eight personal statements in this study showed personality (2-G), which is much higher

than the rest of the other steps. In the reasons for applying move, six Japanese medical students made the rhetorical step of personal development and ambition, whereas only two students described their understanding of programmes and institutional attributes (3-C) and disciplinary and research reasons (3-E). Extra-curricular information (Move 4) was not provided by the applicants in this study. In the move of conclusion, Japanese medical students focused only on their future success goals (5-A) and contribution to the course (5-E). Furthermore, no applicant expressed self-promotion (5-B) and praise for academics, programmes, and institutions (5-D) in this study.

IV. DISCUSSION

Drawing on genre analysis (Swales, 1990), this study revealed the rhetorical patterns of personal statements written by Japanese medical students. Although the participants had high or adequate English proficiency, they seemed to struggle with personal statement writing due to the unfamiliar genre of discourse. Imafuku et al. (2021) found that the participants faced several difficulties related to linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural aspects during the international electives, whereas this study showed that the applicants had already experienced difficulties of cross-cultural communication at the pre-departure stage.

Genre analysis offers a useful theoretical framework and an analytical perspective of people's communicative practices in a cultural context, especially allowing educators or researchers to examine how language is used in specific contexts for particular purposes, thus contributing to the knowledge of specific writing instructions (Ding, 2007). Writing a personal statement is a common issue not only in medical education but also in higher education. Personal statements are a type of promotional academic genre in admissions to higher education institutions or programmes that expects textual self-aggrandisement by applicants. Chiu (2016), who examined personal statements in the areas of educational policy, language and literacy, and higher education, demonstrated that self-promotion or evaluation is an important step in the conclusion move for graduate school applications in the UK and the US. As a response to Chiu's (2016) study, the finding of this study that self-promotion or evaluation is not indicated in the move of conclusion by Japanese medical students suggests their need to learn not only the rhetorical structure and reader expectations but also ways of logically and effectively expressing their own strengths. The results of this study can be a useful learning resource to understand what rhetorically characterises a personal statement.

Reflecting on the rhetorical patterns of the students in a given genre is pivotal to communicative achievement in intercultural settings. In this sense, contrastive rhetoric studies have provided useful implications for a better understanding of writing patterns from a cross-cultural viewpoint. For example, contrastive rhetoric studies of Japanese and English to date have shown different discourse organisations of and approaches to writing in a variety of genres, such as newspaper columns, doctoral dissertations, and narrative essays (Connor, 1996). In the previous studies reviewed by Connor (1996), Japanese writing was characterised by a reader-responsible language and a deductive rhetorical pattern. Furthermore, the Japanese are oriented to share values of indirectness, and the reader is expected to interpret what the writer intended to convey. This study suggests that understanding the rhetorical features in the writer's own cultural context is essential to writing in the target genre of discourse in different cultural contexts.

Although this study illuminates written communication across cultures through the text analysis of personal statements, investigation should be undertaken continuously for further data collection, as the sample size of text data from eight students is limited to a particular institution. Furthermore, follow-up interviews are worthwhile to explore students' writer identity and cognitive process during writing.

V. CONCLUSION

There are increased opportunities for cross-cultural communication, including both spoken and written formats, in globalised contexts, such as medicine. For written communication, in the genre of personal statements in medical education, this study found that Japanese students shared limited information about the relevant background (Move 2) and did not express adequate self-promotion (Move 5). The findings can act as a springboard for the development of support for Japanese students' academic writing in English in medical education across cultures.

Notes on Contributors

Rintaro Imafuku reviewed the literature, designed the study, conducted text analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

Kaho Hayakawa was involved in data collection and analysis of the text.

Takuya Saiki was involved in data collection and analysis of the text.

All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Gifu University Ethics Committees (No. 25–367). Consent was obtained from all participants for the research study. Confidentiality was assured for the contents of students' writing. All participants have given written consent for their data to be used in the research and for publication.

Data Availability

Deidentified data of personal statements by the participants who gave their consent to share the whole text are openly available at <http://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17030705>. The data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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