

Are We Being Globalized?: A Contrastive Analysis of Application Essays

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The findings in contrastive rhetoric research of the twentieth century have shown that different cultures have different conventions in organizing written texts. These culture-related conventions were claimed to influence English texts written by L2 learners, including Asian learners of English. However, due to the massive inflow of the American culture into Asia as well as increased exposure to English in the midst of globalization of the last decade, it is quite probable that the textual gap between the native English writers and Asian EFL writers have been reduced. The present study investigates the changes that have taken place in EFL writer's knowledge of genre-specific writing over the past decade. To this aim, this study compared four sets of application essays written by four groups of applicants: (1) native American applicants in 1993, (2) Korean EFL applicants in 1993, (3) native American applicants in 2003, and (4) Korean EFL applicants in 2003. The results suggested that the disparity between the Korean EFL writers' and the native English writers' texts were becoming less noticeable at the macro-level, possibly due to Korean EFL writers' enhanced textual awareness of English genre structures. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

[text/contrastive rhetoric/application essays/macrostructure/ super structure, 텍스트/대조수사학/지원서/상위의미구조/상위형식구조]

I. INTRODUCTION

ESL/EFL writing has attracted teachers in many language classrooms, partly because writing has been believed to be teachable, i.e., it is where explicit teaching will pay off in that writing contexts allow time to tap their conscious knowledge built in the classroom (Krashen, 1982). One of the main aspects on the list of items to be taught was crosscultural differences in text organization. Thanks to the research findings of contrastive rhetoric, some differences in English texts written by learners with various cultural backgrounds have been identified. These findings led researchers and others working in the contrastive rhetoric paradigm to claim that cultural differences need to be explicitly taught, in order to acculturate EFL writers to the target discourse community (Connor, 2002).

However, with the recent acceleration of the globalization process and massive inflow of western culture into the Asian countries, the boundaries that had existed between cultures are more likely to be blurred. As the second/foreign learners of English are more exposed to authentic oral and written English, it is now reasonable to suspect that the contrasts between the native and non-native patterns and norms are being neutralized.

The present study is an attempt to investigate whether such changes have been taking place during the past decades. To this aim, it will focus on a specific text genre—application essay—and compare the text organizing patterns of English application essays written by native American and Korean EFL writers at two different times. Throughout this paper, we will adopt a contrastive rhetoric approach to analyze the organizational characteristics of the application essays written by two different cultural groups.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1 Contrastive Rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric is a field of research that examines differences and similarities in writing across cultures. Kaplan (1966), through his seminal work

on the organizational patterns of ESL students' academic essays, proposed that students' essays were differently patterned depending on their cultural backgrounds. For example, Anglo-European essays were found to be linearly developed, whereas essays by students with oriental backgrounds tended to be indirect. Kaplan attributed this difference to the writers' different cultural backgrounds. In the same vein, Hinds (1983) suggested that Japanese written discourse exhibit culturally unique conventions such as *ki-sho-ten-ketsu*, whose Korean equivalent is *ki-sung-cen-kyel*. He further suggested that a sudden topic shift in *ten* might disturb Anglo-American readers' processing of English texts written by Japanese writers.

As contrastive rhetoric evolved, it came to employ more rigid text linguistic frameworks as tools to describe and compare writing in first and second languages (Connor, 2002). The text analytic frameworks ranged from coherence and cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), macrostructure and superstructure (van Dijk, 1980), to rhetorical structure analysis (Mann & Thompson, 1988) and corpus-based techniques (Upton & Connor, 2001). As the present study analyzes the texts in terms of van Dijk's (1980) macrostructure, some central notions in macrostructural analysis will be briefly discussed.

According to van Dijk (1980), discourse/text has a higher level semantic/conceptual structures that organize the local representation of discourse. These higher-level semantic/conceptual structures are called macrostructures. Language users implicitly or explicitly make a distinction between local and global structures of discourse. For example, when a person say "I don't remember what he said, but the upshot (his point) was ", he is already distinguishing less relevant local details from more important or central outline. This upshot, point, topic, gist, theme or outline corresponds to macrostructure.

According to van Dijk's model, macrostructure is constructed by reducing the concrete local propositions (i.e., micropropositions) of the text into more general propositions (i.e., macropropositions). This process becomes possible by applying a set of cognitive rules, or macro-rules, such as generalization, deletion, construction, etc. For examples, the macro-rule of generalization is formally defined as (1)

- (1) Generalization Given a sequence Σ of propositions $\langle p_i, p_{i-1}, \dots, p_1 \rangle$ of a

text T , satisfying the normal linear coherence constraints, substitute Σ by a proposition q such that each proposition $p_i, \in \Sigma$ entails q and q is the smallest possible generalization of Σ

Now, suppose we have three sentences in (2)

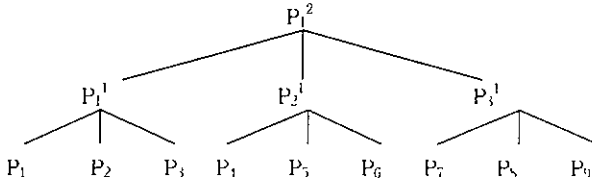
- (2) John was playing with his top Mary was building a sand castle Sue was blowing soap bubbles

The macro-rule of generalization will reduce them into a more general proposition like (3), which is entailed by all the three propositions in (2)

- (3) The children were playing

The macropropositions derived by macro-rules are further reduced into higher-level macropropositions as schematized in Figure 1

FIGURE 1
Levels of Macrostructure



Adopted from van Dijk(1980)

Macropropositions have their semantic roles or functions within the text. They are ranked, ordered and hierarchically organized in a schematic form. This global schema for the global meaning is called superstructure (van Dijk, 1980). Each discourse type or genre has a prototypical superstructure. Superstructures of narrative and argumentative, for instance, can be represented as Figure 2 and Figure 3 respectively, adopted from van Dijk (1980).

FIGURE 2
Narrative: Superstructures

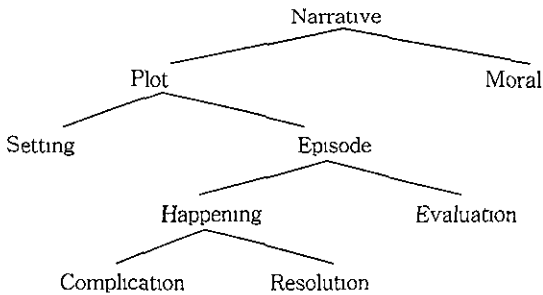
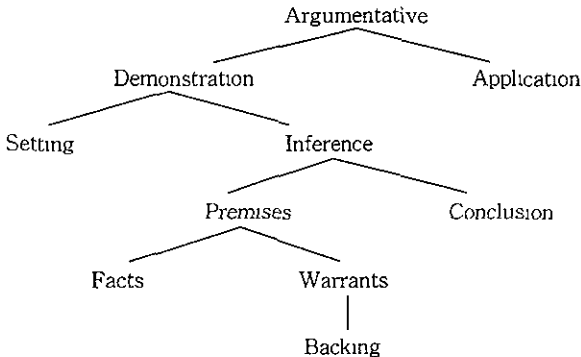


FIGURE 3
Argumentative: Superstructures



Some genres have strict norms. For example, experimental research papers have the kind of conventional or even institutional schema with introduction, theoretical development, experiment, evaluation, and application as essential components. Other genres like advertisements can be more flexible while ads are geared toward argumentation (i.e., X is good, so buy X), other schemata such as stories or scientific demonstrations can be embedded in the larger

schema of argumentation. Some genres like narrative are universal. But other genres like business request letters (Kong, 1998, Zhu, 1997) and newspaper editorials (Hinds, 1983, Kubota, 1997) have been claimed to vary in their global structure, indicating that many genres are socio-culturally learned and used by language users of a speech community.

2 The Dynamic Nature of Culture and Genre

While contrastive rhetoric had highlighted the disparity in text structures due to different cultures, the static view of culture and genres is recently being challenged. In other words, cultures and genres are beginning to be viewed as fluid and dynamic. Zamel (1997), for example, criticized contrastive rhetoric of the past for viewing cultures as discrete, discontinuous, and predictable. Atkinson (1999) also challenged the "received" view of cultures that sees them as relatively unchanging and homogeneous. Critics argue that there is no social group that is not constantly infiltrated by outside influences. According to Appadurai (1996), the recent globalization of formerly localized individuals and media has led to fundamental change at the cultural level.

When we consider the dynamic aspect of culture in the context of globalization, we can expect that our writing conventions might be undergoing changes as well. As written exchanges in English increase with the extensive globalization and as more EFL writers are exposed to abundant authentic samples of English genres, the learners are likely to have become more sensitive to the English ways of organizing texts. To see if such a change has taken place, the present study chose one genre—application essay—and investigated it diachronically in a Korean EFL context.

3 Application Essay as a Text Genre

Application essay, also called admissions essay, refers to a personal statement for school application. Its ultimate purpose is to persuade the admissions committee members to accept the applicant as their student. For this purpose, the essay reveals the applicant's motivation and describes the strengths, accomplishments, and future plans that help predict his/her future success.

As we can predict from previous studies in other text genres, application essays are also expected to display different textual conventions across cultures. At the same time, it is highly probable that the contrast between American and Korean writers has been weakened to some degree during the last decade. Accordingly, the present study raised the following research questions

- (i) How do the Korean EFL writers' application essays differ from native American writers' in terms of their content and organizational pattern?
- (ii) Have the Korean EFL application essays undergone organizational changes during the past decade?

III. METHOD

1 Data Collection

With a view to compare American and Korean EFL application essays at a macro-level, and to investigate the diachronic change in the structural organization of this genre, four sets of sample texts were collected

TABLE 1
Sample Application Essays

Year	Cultural group	n
1993	Korean EFL applicants	35
1993	Native American applicants	27
2003	Korean EFL applicants	36
2003	Native American applicants	20

As Table 1 shows, the first set of samples consisted of 35 samples written in English collected in 1993 from Korean EFL applicants who applied to American graduate programs, with the approval of the Human Subjects Review Board of an American University. Twenty seven samples written by native English speakers were collected during the same period, from volunteer providers, from

application records in the university admissions files, and from published samples. As for the data 10 years later, 36 samples by Korean writers were collected in the year 2003 from voluntary informants who wished to have their essays reviewed before application to American graduate programs. For the sake of comparison, 20 American samples written in the same year were taken from several Web sites that provide actual application essay samples.

2 Data Analysis

The contents of the application essays were summarized into macro-propositions according to macro-rules proposed by van Dijk so that they represent the global meaning of the text. For example, the micro-level propositions in the sample sentences (4) from an actual Korean EFL learner essay were reduced to a macro-level proposition in (5).

(4) I served as a class president for two years in middle school and a student vice-president in high school. Leading fellow students, I sometimes experienced difficulties. But I could get much more gains during this period. And I really enjoyed that my efforts can make differences. I learned leadership.

(5) [I developed leadership]

The derived macropropositions were assigned categories in terms of its function within the text, and the organizational pattern of the text was derived accordingly. The organizational patterns at a macro-level were compared in terms of the applicant's nationalities and in terms of the times when the essays were written. This study is largely qualitative and heuristic in the sense that it attempts to render generalizations from ground data. But we will include some statistics to show whether the changes over time has been significant.

IV. RESULTS

1 American Application Essays in 1993

As an opening, some of the American essays introduced an anecdote or quotation of lines from a poem which might pave the way to the main body of the text. The next component, the main body of the text, was generally on facts about the writer.

The writers were found to present data indicating, among others, that (a) they have a strong motivation, (b) they are qualified (considering objective facts), and (c) they have plans. For this purpose, the writers draw their academic background, work and research experiences, personality factors, and extracurricular activities. Examples (6-8) illustrate that the applicants employed their work experiences, educational backgrounds, and personality factors to show their strong interest/motivation. The derived macropropositions are represented in the brackets.

- (6) *My work as a Teaching Assistant and Resident Advisor contributed to my interests* in becoming involved with XXXX field that allows greater and more diverse

→ [My work experiences have strengthened my motivation]

- (7) *My educational interests* were also factors which contributed to my decision to pursue a career in XXXX field

→ [My academic background has strengthened my motivation]

- (8) *An intense interest in people—unusual people—has always been a trademark of mine.* My mother has often remarked that my friends are a rare collection.

→ [My personality factors strengthen my motivation]

The macropropositions in (6-8) can be further subsumed into an even more general macroproposition, [I have a strong motivation]

- (9) [My work experiences have strengthened my motivation]
 [My academic background has strengthened my motivation]
 [My personality factors strengthen my motivation]

→ [I have a strong motivation]

Let us turn to the American applicants' descriptions of their qualifications

- (10) Since graduation *I worked with XXXX Union*. Over the past seven years, I have directed many *successful organizing drives*

→ [My work experiences qualify me]

- (11) The *foundations of my skills* in computers were built *while I was a physics student* at XXXX college. The computer systems I designed to graphically display gave me a visual reference

→ [My academic background qualifies me]

- (12) It is necessary in my work as a computer consultant to *quickly adapt to a new technology*. I am undaunted by technological innovation, and strive to master it as rapidly as possible.

→ [My personality factors qualify me]

From these, we can draw a macroproposition, [I am qualified]

- (13) [My work experiences qualify me]
 [My academic background qualifies me]
 [My personality factors qualify me]

→ [I am qualified]

In the same way, from the descriptions of their short-term and long-range goals, a broader macroproposition [I have plans] is derived

- (14) In general, therefore, *what I would like to do while at XXXX graduate program is to examine the nature of the interaction between...* On a more specific level I am currently interested in the following questions .

→ [I have plans while at graduate program]

- (15) *My goal in attending the XXXX School of Business is simple I want to become a business a nonprofit consultant*

→ [I have long-term plans]

- (16) [I have plans while at graduate program]
[I have a long-term plans]

→ [I have plans]

The propositions on motivation, qualities, plans, and others function as supporting facts that lead the reader to the conclusion that the applicants intend to draw [I am the right person]

- (17) [I have a strong motivation]
[I am qualified]
[I have plans]

→ [I am the right person]

Among major global contents were reasons why the writer chose the reader (i.e., the school/program the writer is applying to), not others. Some stressed on the inherent positive qualities of the reader, and others focused on how the reader can help the writer's dream come true.

(18) I have *selected XXXX School* as my program of choice *because of its reputation for*

→ [You have positive qualities]

(19) The design training that I would receive at XXXX School *would allow me to bring a unique perspective to my career* as a practicing architect

→ [You can help me]

These propositions work as supporting propositions of a metaproposition that amounts to [You are my No 1 choice]

(20) [You have positive qualities]

[You can help me]

→ [You are my No 1 choice]

Texts tended to be structured thematically, the premises that led to the conclusion were, in turn, backed by supporting facts. For most American applicants, the superstructural schema that served this purpose was "argumentation" in van Dijk's (1980) term. The macrostructures categorized by functional labels are organized into a global superstructure in Figure 4.

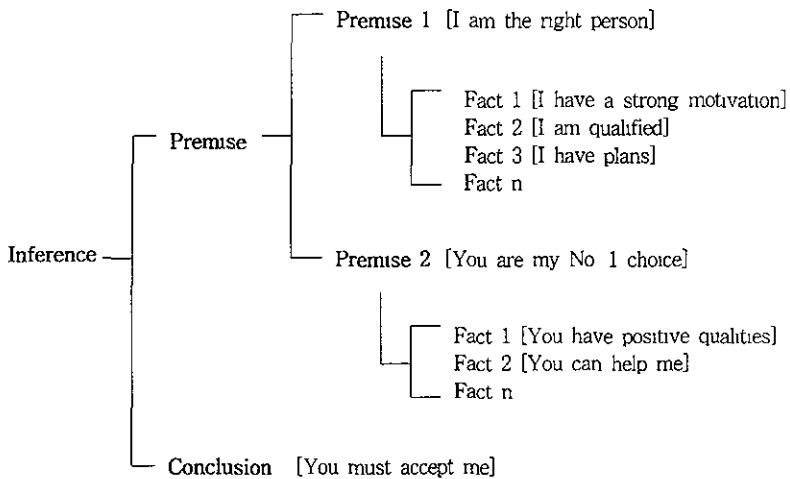
2 Korean Application Essays in 1993

Korean applicants' essays in 1993 shared many characteristics with those of Americans in their propositional content, except for a few differences. Korean essays often included the applicants' dates and places of birth, which were mentioned in none of the American essays, many Korean male applicants included their military services as a part of their background, the Korean applicants rarely mentioned their work experiences. Still, the overall propositional ingredients were quite similar in kind. The Korean applicants in 1993 also used

their personal data on academic background, work experiences, if any, personality factors, and extracurricular activities. Most of them also mentioned future plans.

On the other hand, the way the propositions were arranged and organized into the superstructural frame showed a considerable distance from that in the American samples in 1993. First, facts tended to be arranged according to time sequences. They rarely regressed in time to talk about what had happened before the event they just mentioned. Instead of providing evidence for an argument, Korean applicants talked about their past, their present, and then their future in chronological order. Paragraphs in (21) illustrate a typical example ("Prgh"s in (21) refer to paragraphs)

FIGURE 4
American Essays 1993: Superstructural Schema



(21)

<Prgh 1> I was *born in A* city, Korea, on (Month/ Date/ Year) I have made every effort to maintain...

<Prgh 2> *During my elementary school days*, I participated in lots of oratorical contests...

- <Prgh 3> I attended *B middle school and C high school from March 19XX to February 19XX*...
- <Prgh 4> *After entering D university*, I was so interested in extracurricular activities
- <Prgh 5> My campus life was interrupted by a *compulsory military service from 19XX to 19XX*
- <Prgh 6> *After being discharged from my military service*, I returned to school and did my best in studying my major, Economics As a result
- <Prgh 7> *After graduation from D University*, I considered going abroad for MBA study in the United States.
- <Prgh 8> *When I came here at first on April 15, 19XX*

The strict time order thus stood out as one prominent feature of the Korean essays in 1993, when compared with American essays As you see in Table 2, the chronologicality varies depending on whether the writer is Korean or American

TABLE 2
Chronologicality in Application Essays in 1993

	Korean essays	American essays
chronological	30	6
non-chronological	5	21

Chi-square = 25.234, $p < .0005$

Second, Korean writers had a strong tendency to put together whatever event belonging to the same period In other words, facts were divided into categories in terms of time zones, not in terms of topic or theme, frequently resulting in poor logical relationships among propositions As can be seen from the following sample paragraph, academic and extracurricular activities and military service are frequently put together in a single paragraph just because they happened during the writers' college years ("S" in (22) refers to sentence)

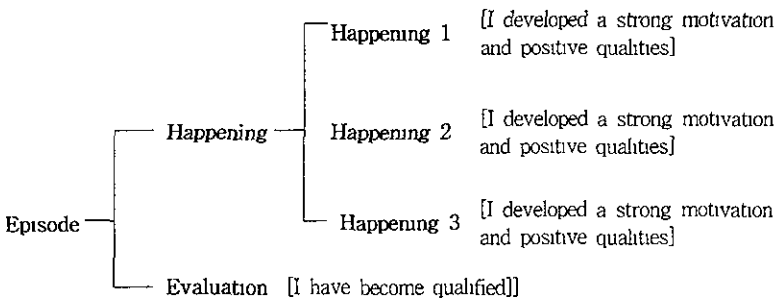
(22)

<S1> During my freshman and sophomore years, I could find *the basis*

- of various academic field, (→ academic)*
 and understand social problems and changes
- <S2> And I *explored many historic scene* with my friends, but I regret that I didn't get good grades (→ extracurricular)
- <S3> In my sophomore year, I went for *army service* For my army life, I could feel · (→ military)
- <S4> After completion of my military service, I returned back to school and I *studied eagerly* (→ academic)

The chronologicality and the lack of theme-based construction suggest that the text is equivalent to an "Episode"—the key component of narrative—rather than argumentation

FIGURE 5
 Korean Essays 1993: Superstructural Schema



The schema in Figure 5, characteristic of about 87% of the 1993 Korean applicants' essays, suggests the essays are more narrative than argumentative. What made the Korean applicants ten years ago use this peculiar schema? The purpose of the Korean applicants for using this structure might have been the same as that of Americans—to prove that they are the right person for the program. But when they were to apply to Korean schools or positions, they were not required to write such essays. Actually, back then, there existed no such genre as application essays in the Korean language. Applicants to Korean institutes/schools were only supposed to fill in a formal resume form with

empty slots that required them to record their education and work experiences and relevant periods in time order. Back in 1993, Korean applicants had rarely been exposed to this type of English text. The Internet was not yet available to many people. The absence of the corresponding native genre and the lack of authentic samples available might have led them to turn to an alternative way of translating the non-prose resume form into a prose.

3 American Samples 2003

American samples ten years later did not show much difference from those in 1993. When its chronologicality was compared with that of 1993, no difference was found at a significant level.

TABLE 3
Chronologicality of Application Essays in 2003

	Chronological	Non-chronological
American samples 1993	6	21
American samples 2003	3	17

Chi-square = 134 p = .514

4 Korean Samples 2003

Meanwhile, a certain change at the macro-level was observed in Korean samples. Unlike the samples 10 years ago, narrative style was not dominant in many of the samples. More applicants were found to use a theme-based argument schema, as the sample paragraph written by one Korean applicant in 2003 shows.

- (23) My major is biology. Biology needs correct observations and many experiments. In addition, it is the science which is very intimate to nature. These special features are why I like biology so much. I like living things from my boyhood, and my liking biology is unchanged.

In terms of chronologicality as well, the ten year period has changed the

trend Out of 36 samples, Only 10 samples adhered to the principle of time order, which shows a stark contrast to the 1993 samples

What might have caused the changes in Korean applicants' organizational pattern in this genre over the past decade? The applicants reported that they had never been explicitly taught how to write application essays in English in the classroom Instead, some of them informed the researcher that they consulted sample application essays and guidelines available on Websites

TABLE 4
Change in Chronologicality in Korean Essays Over Ten Years

	Chronological	Non-chronological
Korean samples 1993	30	5
Korean samples 2003	10	20

Chi-square= 20.152 p < .0005

So far, we've seen through our diachronic study that Korean EFL application essay as a genre is undergoing a structural change, and that the change is toward the Anglo-American norms The radical shift from narrative style to argumentative shows that this kind of organizational competence can be learned—if not acquired—with relative ease With the help of the Internet, commercial and academic exchanges, and westernization, the EFL learners seem to become more conscious of the English text genres

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

In ever-increasing interactions across cultures, second/foreign language writers' transfer of patterns, styles, and contexts from their first language can be a major obstacle to efficient communication (Mauranen, 2001, Connor, 2002) This has led us as English educators to feel it necessary to educate our students about writing in conformity with reader expectations And as mentioned earlier, raising learners' consciousness of English text norms and standards seems practicable in that this kind of knowledge is something teachable at a conscious level as well as something retrievable when enough planning time is allowed

A related issue is whether the norms and standards should be imposed on the learners. As Kubota (1999) points out, teaching norms can invoke "the danger of perpetuating established hierarchies." This relatively recent ideological issue on text norms is closely related to the newly developed notion of world Englishes (Kachru, 1992). There has recently emerged a growing voice that English should not be viewed as something authorized by the inner circle. The status of English as a global language requires speakers with different language backgrounds to express their own native linguistic and cultural identities through English. In the same context, contrastive rhetoricians are now frequently blamed for teaching students to write for native English speaker/writer expectations.

Although the choice may not be straightforward, there are at least some guidelines at the individual levels, as suggested by Connor (2002). If a Finnish scientist wishes to get European Union (EU) research grant, they need to follow the EU norms and expectations, if the same scientist wishes to write in Finnish, it would be advantageous to follow the expectations of the Finnish agents. The same can be true of Korean students writing application essays. Anyone who wants to get accepted to an American school needs to follow what American schools expect, while s/he would be wise to follow Chinese norms if s/he wants to get accepted to a Chinese school. It is quite a practical matter of whether we get an admission, a job, a business deal, and a research grant or not. Then the rule of thumb is "Be reader-friendly." It seems to have little to do with such issues as national identity or the perpetuation of existing hierarchies.

The present study showed that the textual gap between Korean EFL writers and native English writers are being dramatically reduced these years. Although the gaps at the level of sentence grammar have been outside the scope of the present study, the overall impression from the analysis of the writings was that there has not been as much improvement in grammar as in text organization. Our tentative conclusion is that text organizing skills can develop within shorter period of time. Considering that the EFL learners in this study had not been explicitly taught organizational rules of application essays in the classroom, it may be sufficient to call the EFL writers' attention to how genre conventions differ from culture to culture by examining and contrasting some authentic and prototypical genre samples in L1 and L2 in the class, and then to encourage

them to further explore the target textual norms by exposing themselves to sufficient amount of actual samples and guidelines available in books and on the Internet

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예시언어(Examples in) English

적용가능 언어(Applicable Language) English

적용가능 수준(Applicable Levels) Secondary/Tertiary

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