



Power Distance and Persuasion: A Study of Cultural Influences on Rhetorical Variation in EFL Essays

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Abstract: The prevalence of power distance in Confucian heritage contexts has been well documented, yet the impact of this cultural value on rhetoric has not been extensively explored. To address the gap in our current understanding of cultural influences on rhetoric, language to assert authority or make a proposition (modals and epistemic stances) and pronouns to express an author's relationship with their reader (pronoun deixis) were tallied and statistically compared in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) essays from six different Confucian heritage contexts. Essays were obtained from 1,288 participants included in the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE). Results of Pearson's correlation suggest that high-authority modals and first-person singular pronouns are used significantly differently in high- and low-power-distance contexts. Low power distance learners tended to use "I" and obligatory modals to engage the reader in a more direct fashion. Albeit insignificant, high power distance learners also appeared to use more epistemic stances of certainty (e.g., certainly and definitely) to increase the intensity of general and noncontroversial arguments. These writers may have chosen stronger stances with uncontroversial claims to reduce conflict or avoid offending the reader, which mirrors Confucian collective beliefs that value authority and harmony. The study suggests that cultural beliefs may have some impact on rhetoric. These influences should be investigated to develop targeted EFL curricula that enhance intercultural communication in global workplaces.

Keywords: Cultural Influences on Rhetoric, English As A Foreign Language, Corpus, Pronouns, Epistemic Modals, Epistemic Stances

1. Introduction

How are Qing dynasty revolutionaries and the overthrow of a feudal regime related to fashion and cosmetics? If you don't know, don't worry. You are not alone. I had absolutely no answer to this question while reading an editorial in China Daily, an online Chinese newspaper written in English. It wasn't until one of my Chinese EFL learners explained the passage that I finally understood what it meant. When the Qing dynasty fell, some men refused to cut off their braids, which were thought to have been bestowed by their parents (Kang, 2024). These braids were a symbol of honor and filial piety, just as fashion may be an outward expression of internal beauty and intellect. While I had trouble comprehending this idea at first, my students understood it instantly.

This anecdote highlights how cultural influences impact discourse (Bardhan, 2016). As pointed out by Connor et al. (2008), written compositions can only be understood through combined perspectives that consider not only textual content and purposeful descriptions, but complex and dynamic cultural systems that affect the expression of rhetoric. This perspective is illustrated by the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Banks, 2024; Llinares & McCabe, 2023). According to SFL, writing has an ideational component, which refers to the composition of content in accordance with an author's worldview. By establishing a written framework for understanding, text is imbued with cultural values, as is illustrated by the previous story of Qing dynasty revolutionaries. Past research also suggests that ideational frames for writing have cultural foundations. It is well known that argumentative discourse in countries such as the United States reflects Aristotelian rhetoric, which heavily appeals to logic (Shuter, 1999). Researchers point out that this style of discourse may not always align with the cultural norms of other countries (Liu & You, 2025).

According to SFL, writing also has an interpersonal component, which describes how an author constructs relations with others and provides opinions on propositions (Llinares & McCabe, 2023, p. 246). Writers can establish a relationship by withholding commitment to an opinion and opening communication about a topic, using hedges such as *perhaps*, *probably*, or *possibly*. They may also connect with readers by committing to an opinion or proposition, choosing more forceful words or phrases such as *"definitely"* or *"in fact"*. Finally, they may cultivate reader engagement by using explicit self-mentions to describe personal experiences or opinions (Hyland, 2005a). How a writer chooses these techniques is ultimately governed by cultural beliefs. An author must adhere to accepted norms and values in communication when addressing the reader. Some cultural contexts may demand more forceful, direct argumentative discourse, whereas others may require hedged propositions that complement collective social beliefs valuing harmony. While intriguing, little research has examined how interpersonal relationships in writing reflect differences in cultural norms. Additional consideration may lead

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to more effective pedagogical strategies that promote cross-cultural communication in EFL classrooms (Connor & Traversa, 2014).

2. Literature Review

Although EFL research has started to recognize the importance of viewing rhetoric through a cultural lens, our understanding of argumentative discourse remains limited. In the 1960's, Kaplan (1966) examined English essays written by learners from different geographical regions. The study found that essays from Anglophone contexts tended to be more linear, whereas those from Asian contexts tended to use circular reasoning to support a claim. While the study was insightful, it was overly simplistic and failed to identify dynamic processes of learner development or diverse cultural groups (Cahill, 2003; Huh & Lee, 2019; Severino, 1993). Research has also revealed that some of the insights are not always accurate (Belcher, 2014). In South Korean contexts, for example, writing often has characteristics associated with Anglophone texts (Kim, 2017). Despite refutation of Kaplan's approach, the overly simplistic dichotomy of rhetorical directness and indirectness continues to predominate in many Asian educational contexts, as evinced by a study of 29 business English textbooks published in China (Wang & Zhu, 2011).

Due to criticism of Kaplan's rhetorical frameworks (Kubota & Lehner, 2004), modern research often avoids examining cultural values on a national or regional level. As a result, a study that quantifies rhetorical variation via corpus analysis in Confucian contexts is largely absent, limiting the potential to improve pedagogy for intercultural communication in English. Although it is true that rhetoric is not culturally "frozen" and requires careful scrutiny of cultural subgroups (Connor et al., 2008, p. 3; Holliday, 1999), larger national or regional values are shaping rhetoric in Middle Eastern and Confucian heritage countries (Hamadouche, 2013; Hamam, 2020; Hammad, 2002; Jiang, 2006). As a result of these influences, L2 learning can become more challenging. This perspective is illustrated by research on American university learners who studied Chinese as a Foreign Language. These learners had difficulty using new rhetorical patterns associated with *yilunwen* writing and instead relied on patterns from their L1 (Liu & Du, 2018). Although modern research neglects the study of broader national or international cultural forces, these forces continue to influence how second- or foreign-language learners compose persuasive essays.

Studies that systematically dismantle the validity of Kaplan's work serve to bolster the view that investigation of large-scale cultural influences is biased and unnecessary. As a result, very little "macro-level" research of discourse has been conducted, limiting our understanding of contrastive rhetoric (Kostova, 2022). In the business field, research has empirically identified regional cultural values that influence communication (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, Javidan, Dickson, & Gupta, 1999; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Such a study suggests that cultural characteristics often traverse national boundaries. In Confucian countries, for example, individuals often display strong support for power distance, which denotes the degree to which members of a group accept unequal power relationships (Buja, 2019; Zhao & Khan, 2013). Although research has documented the influence of this factor on organizational behavior and communication in business, studies of contrastive rhetoric have avoided examining this cultural trait in detail, thereby limiting our understanding.

2.1. Power Distance in Education and Rhetoric

Power distance affects how students learn in the classroom (Choy et al., 2015; Zhang, 2013). In countries like Japan, power distance appears to limit agency, while collectivist values appear to support teamwork and student-centered projects (Alshahrani, 2017). Power distance also affects communication in the classroom. Research suggests that Chinese teachers often use language that maintains authority even when working in Western contexts like Great Britain (Li & Guo, 2012; Zhang & Wang, 2022).

Oyedele and Lasisi (2019) suggest that all teachers should be given the skills needed to reduce power distance. Such empowerment may require a change in rhetoric, as well as changes in how learners understand and deal with this rhetoric in the classroom. While educational reform is indeed needed, little is known about how discourse and behavior may be changed to help empower learners in cultures with high power distance. This is primarily because the rhetoric currently used to express these cultural values is not well-known. We do know about behaviors that may affect how rhetoric is used. Concerning power distance, forms of discourse may be affected by the following behaviors, which are commonly observed in Confucian heritage contexts:

1. Teachers are often perceived as responsible for students' learning, as the authority who knows and presents the material, and as the one who initiates communication.
2. Teachers generally expect their students to respect them because of their position. This respect is often shown by the dress of both teachers and students and by the manner in which students address their teachers.
3. Some classrooms appear formal, especially to members of lower-power-distance cultures. Teachers and students may dress more formally, with students sometimes wearing uniforms. Chairs and desks may be arranged in neat rows, and the classroom rules may seem formal.
4. Generally, an effective teacher is expected to know the subject matter well and to transmit that knowledge to the students. This is often accomplished in a teacher-centered manner, frequently through lectures. (Nelson, 2000, p. 83)

In some high power distance classrooms, teachers are often respected, and criticism may be tacitly limited, per observations in literature (Yoo, 2014). Concerning collectivist traditions, students often participate only when called upon, seldom ask questions to their teacher, and avoid behaviors that would cause anyone in the classroom to lose face (Nelson, 2000, p. 77-78). Characteristics of power distance may influence rhetoric in several ways. Students who are mandated to show respect may use language that expresses deference. They may also use more formal language, which reflects the decorous classroom context and the status differences between a student and their teacher. Finally, they may use careful hedging of opinions in academic arguments to maintain collective beliefs that promote harmony and reduce conflict.

In diverse Confucian-influenced contexts, links between power distance and rhetoric vary and require further exploration. As with other aspects of intercultural communication, rhetorical variation due to subtle cultural differences has not been

extensively studied in collectivist societies (Yuk & Kikutani, 2026). While contexts with Confucian philosophical traditions share high values regarding power distance, these values still vary by location and may impact communication. Refer to the following values for power distance (see Table 1).

Table 1: Power Distance in Confucian Heritage Contexts (Culture Factor Group, 2025)

Context	Power Distance
China	80
Singapore	74
Hong Kong	68
South Korea	60
Taiwan	58
Japan	54
United States	40

Source: by the author

Moving down the list in Table 1, power distance decreases. Because little is known about how these differences impact rhetoric, more study is needed.

2.2. Evaluating Cultural Differences in Persuasive Writing

Although power distance can have a clear impact on how learners communicate, there is little research examining its influence on persuasive writing. As with other forms of communication, the writer must establish a relationship with their reader when composing rhetorical argumentation. This interpersonal component, which governs how authors frame opinions (Llinares & McCabe, 2023), may differ based on cultural values such as power distance. Contexts with low power distance, for example, might value forceful, direct opinions. In contrast, contexts with high power distance could prefer hedging to express humility and respect for authority. Further research is needed to examine interpersonal connections that may mirror beliefs about power distance, yielding new insights into cross-cultural communication.

There are some key rhetorical techniques that may regulate either the “power” of an argument or the “distance” perceived by a reader. Stances, for example, are one means to adjust the force (power) of a proposition. They are defined as “the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitment” (Hyland, 2005b, p. 5). Whereas stances with strong assertions may convey authority and power, stances that weaken a proposition may communicate a respect for authority or a desire to reduce potential conflict with a reader. This opinion is echoed by Hyland (2005b), who described stances as being the way that “writers intrude to stamp their personal authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement” (Hyland, 2005b, p. 176). Through stances, writers can express power or maintain a respectful distance from the argument and the reader.

Modals can increase or decrease the power of a stance. They may vary in intensity as the following examples suggest:

1. You (might/could) See a doctor.
2. You (should/ought to/had better) see a doctor.
3. You (must/have to) see a doctor. (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1999, p. 146)

The above modals are deontic, meaning that a proposition is “obligatory, advisable or permissible according to some normative background such as law, morality, convention” (Suhadi, 2011, p. 156). The strength of the proposition varies, becoming more authoritative in succeeding examples in the list. Modals may also be epistemic, meaning that they define the possibility or impossibility of a proposition (Winiharti, 2012, p. 532). The following are examples:

1. That could/might be Sydney.
2. That may be Sydney.
3. That should be Sydney.
4. That must be Sydney. (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1999, p. 142)

As in the case of deontic expressions, epistemic modals increase in power in succeeding examples. If the writer often uses “must” in deontic or epistemic expressions, it may reflect the writer’s confidence in a proposition, along with his or her perceived authority to convey the proposition. In addition to modals, other lexico-grammatical epistemic stances can be used to enhance judgment. These stances constitute “a word or phrase that makes a statement less forceful or assertive” (Fatihi, 2019, p. 29). As with modals, epistemic stances vary along a continuum of assertiveness. This degree of assertiveness can vary by stance type. Adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, for example, may be separated into epistemic certainty (e.g., *certain, obvious, actually, certainly, definitely, conclude*) and epistemic likelihood (e.g., *likely, probable, possible, apparently, perhaps, probably, assume, guess, seem*) (Min, Paek, & Kang, 2019).

Whereas modals and other forms of epistemic stances can convey power (or weakness), pronouns may be used to define relationships between the writer and his or her reader, effectively serving as a measure of “distance.” Pronouns serve as a means to engage the reader (Hyland, 2005b). The pronouns *I* and *you* may be used to establish a connection between the writer and the reader. Whereas *I* may be used to describe personal experience and bolster the validity of an argument, *you* may be used to elicit a reader’s attention or interaction with a particular form of discourse. The connection or distance established by using pronouns is referred to as deixis. In addition to direct connections through the pronouns *I* and *you*, an inclusive *we* may be used to express membership in the same group or speech community (Yule, 1996). An example would be, “We need to work together to eliminate poverty.” The statement includes the reader in the same speech group, establishing a close connection and mutual ownership of the argument. By using the inclusive *we*, the writer establishes their own discursive identity (Petersoo, 2007). While *I*, *you*, and *we* may establish close connections between the writer and their reader, more distant relationships denoting

“other” may be established by using more general pronouns such as *he*, *she*, or *they* (Yule, 1996, p. 10). Using more indirect pronouns that do not address the reader directly may help avoid conflict.

Despite an apparent connection between cultural values and rhetorical devices such as stances and pronouns, research has failed to investigate this link, largely ignoring potential variation across different levels of power distance. Further study is needed. Although a link to cultural influences has not been clearly established in prior research, it has been shown that stances produced by learners from China, Japan, and Korea differ significantly from those of their English L1 peers (Hinkel, 2009; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hu & Li, 2015). Chinese learners tend to make stronger assertions in argumentative essays and use a more restricted range of epistemic modals (Chen, 2012). In addition to learner differences, Chinese-medium journals in empirical research use less hedging than English-medium journals, revealing cultural differences shaped by pragmatic context (Hu & Cao, 2011). While the results are insightful, they do not adequately address potential cultural reasons for the variability.

More research is needed to identify how differences in power distance influence the rhetoric of academic essays. Despite its limited scope, one recent study examined variability in rhetoric across two countries with high power distance: the United Arab Emirates and South Korea. Emirati learners, who had a higher degree of power distance, tended to diminish the authority of propositions and avoid a direct connection with the reader, while Korean learners tended to use more direct, authoritative rhetorical strategies (Schenck, 2023). The study provided a more detailed view of larger cultural processes. At the same time, it did not investigate the nuances of rhetoric within just one region. Learners from one region may all support the same cultural traits, yet not to the same degree. In Confucian contexts, for example, there are subtle differences in the support for power distance. A more detailed examination of cultural differences is needed. Unlike prior research, which has examined the UAE and South Korea, this study examines nuances within Confucian regions for greater granularity, heightening the ability to adapt research results to diverse EFL environments. Such a study may yield new insights into cross-cultural rhetoric that can be used to develop more effective pedagogical techniques for writing. Therefore, to investigate cultural influences on rhetoric in Confucian contexts, the following questions were posed:

1. Does modal usage in EFL essays significantly vary based on Confucian heritage context? Could this variation reflect different levels of support for power distance?
2. Does the usage of epistemic stances in EFL essays significantly vary based on the Confucian heritage context? Can this variation reflect different levels of support for power distance?
3. Does the usage of pronouns and in EFL essays significantly vary based on the Confucian heritage context? Could this variation reflect different levels of support for power distance?

The present study was limited to Confucian contexts. It was thought that such a study could add to existing research, which has focused primarily on Western comparisons

3. Methodology

This study was designed to evaluate cultural influences on rhetoric in Confucian heritage contexts. To fulfill this objective, persuasive essays were selected from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE) for examination. ICNALE used the same prompts to collect persuasive essays from EFL learners, which helped reduce conflation with extraneous factors that may affect rhetorical variation (e.g., different essay topics or genres). It included essays from several Confucian-heritage contexts, including Japan (110,513 words), South Korea (103,177 words), Singapore (99,262 words), Taiwan (79,506 words), Hong Kong (46,985 words), and mainland China (168,881 words). It also included a group of essays from students with English as their L1 for comparison (45,028).

3.1. Participants

Participants were EFL learners at the university who ranged in age from 19 to 29 and majored in a variety of subjects, from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. To help ensure that language proficiency was not the cause of the rhetorical variation observed in the present study, only the highest CEFR levels in the corpus were used (CEFR B1 and B2). Of the remaining essays available for examination, 1,288 participants from different countries were represented, 572 of whom were male and 716 of whom were female.

To provide a benchmark for comparison, a portion of the ICNALE corpus, comprising 100 participants with English as their L1, was included in the analysis. Participants were largely from the United States, representing 82% of the total. The remainder were from Canada (8), Great Britain (3), Australia (3), and New Zealand (4). Power distance for these countries was lower than that of the Confucian contexts examined in the present study (United States – 40; United Kingdom – 35; Australia – 38; New Zealand – 22; Canada – 39), making it a useful benchmark for comparison. Values for individualism were also high compared with those in countries investigated in the present study, which are known for stronger collective values (United States – 60; United Kingdom – 76; Australia – 73; New Zealand – 69; Canada – 72). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 29 years and had majors in a variety of subjects across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Gender was divided into 44 females and 56 males.

3.2. Data Collection

Essays in the ICNALE were written about the same topics. Participants were given 20 to 40 minutes for each essay and were asked to write about the same two following prompts (Ishikawa, 2013, p. 97):

Topic A: It is important for college students to have a part-time job.

Topic B: Smoking should be completely banned in all restaurants in the country.

Learners were told that essays between 200 to 300 words were required, and only essays meeting this requirement were included in the corpus. No dictionaries or other reference tools were allowed (Ishikawa, 2013). Control of topics and writing procedures helped to ensure that learners had a similar experience and wrote about common topics. Therefore, the corpus was deemed an ideal tool for intercultural comparison of rhetoric.

3.3. Data Analysis

To investigate the use of formulaic language, the freeware corpus analysis tool AntConc was used. ICNALE separates corpus files into sub-corpora for each target group. For the present study, files for each target group were analyzed separately (Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China). Files from writers with English as their L1 were then analyzed. Since the sub-corpora were of different sizes, the frequency values for rhetoric were adjusted to reflect a corpus of equal size (the Korean corpus). Frequency values were normalized using a ratio (Korean corpus size/target corpus size) to enable comparison (See [Appendix A](#) for raw frequency values before adjustment). This ratio helped adjust frequency values so they could be compared across all sub-corpora.

After total frequency values were tallied and statistically adjusted for size, they were compared to empirical values for power distance defined by the Culture Factor Group (2025) using Pearson's correlation (See [Table 1](#)). The Culture Factor Group uses empirical scores based on Hofstede's (1980) work and draws on the latest research from experts to ensure that empirical values are up to date (Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov et al., 2017; Almutairi et al., 2021). Other empirical studies of power distance, such as the GLOBE study by House et al. (2004), were considered. However, they did not have up-to-date, open-access data that was currently available. Modern-day study of Hofstede's work suggests that the cultural dimensions remain valid predictors of communication and behavior but have changed to some degree over the years (Yi, 2026). Therefore, the Culture Factor Group's Country Comparison Tool was considered an ideal resource for the present study due to rigorous efforts to keep empirical values current through modern research.

3.3.1. Research Question One: Modals

To investigate the power or force of propositions in persuasive essays, the following modals were tallied: must, have to, has to, got to, need to, should, had better, ought to, could, and might. These modals were chosen because they can be ordered according to a "speaker's degree of authority" (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1999, p. 146). In accordance with Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1999, p. 146), they were separated into highest authority (*must* and *have to / has to*), intermediate authority (*should*, *had better*, and *ought to*), and lowest authority (*could* and *might*). After the target modals were tallied and normalized, they were grouped into the three respective authority levels (highest, intermediate, and lowest). The resulting average frequencies were then statistically compared with power distance values using Pearson's correlation. Due to the limited number of frequency values (6 matched pairs with each target feature), there is a higher chance of a Type II error, which refers to instances in which significant values are not detected by the Pearson formula.

Despite this issue, some highly prevalent relationships could still be discovered. It is important to note that these relationships will need further quantitative and qualitative validation in later studies. To determine why the findings were significant, specific frequency values were analyzed and plotted. Normality was also examined for significant variables using Q-Q plots and normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov) to ensure that significance was not driven by outliers. Since the frequency values were based on large corpora of English essays (2,576 in total), they would be expected to follow a normal distribution. Statistical analysis was exploratory and was not meant to be definitive. Inferential statistics were used in conjunction with descriptive frequency statistics to evaluate the true significance of the findings. Modals may vary in whether they are epistemic or deontic (Suhadi, 2011; Winiharti, 2012). Whereas deontic modals may serve as a form of advice or obligation (e.g., *You must do your homework.*), epistemic modals reflect the certainty or possibility of a circumstance (e.g., *You must be happy right now.*). While pragmatic usage differs, they both share a common progression from least assertive (*might* or *could*) to most assertive (*have to* or *must*).

3.3.2. Research Question Two: Epistemic Stances

To investigate the power of other epistemic stances, a study by Min, Paek, and Kang (2019) was used to select the following adjectives, adverbs, and verbs in [Table 2](#):

Table 2: Epistemic Stances Evaluated in the Present Study

Epistemic Certainty	Epistemic Likelihood
Certain, obvious, actually, certainly, definitely, conclude, prove, notice	Likely, probable, possible, apparent, apparently, perhaps, probably, assume, guess, seem

Source: By the author

This was not an exhaustive list of all epistemic stances that could be used. As a result, other epistemic stances were investigated for potential inclusion, to include words such as evident (appeared seven times in total), evidently (appeared two times in total), and definite (appeared three times in total). Results revealed that these epistemic stances were rarely used in the corpus, yielding little additional insight concerning differences between writing groups. This finding helped to confirm the relevance of stances in [Table 2](#), which were highlighted in the study by Min, Paek, and Kang (2019).

In the case of epistemic certainty, a perceived authority to make a proposition is conveyed, which may reflect low power distance. Epistemic likelihood is a form of hedging, which may reduce the power of an assertion, reflecting an attempt to respect the opinion or authority of the reader (high power distance). It may also reflect a desire to reduce conflict, thereby promoting the harmony associated with Confucian beliefs. After the target stances were tallied and normalized, they were combined into two groups: epistemic certainty and epistemic likelihood. The resulting frequencies for each country were then statistically compared with power distance values using Pearson's correlation. After normality was assessed using Q-Q plots and normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov), inferential statistics were used alongside descriptive statistics to evaluate the significance of the findings. Frequency comparisons were also plotted for further examination.

3.3.3. Research Question Three: Pronouns and Determiners

To answer research question three, the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we*, *he*, *she*, and *they*, as well as the demonstrative pronouns *my*, *your*, *our*, *his*, *her*, and *their*, were investigated. Pronouns such as *I*, *you*, and *we* appear to foster more direct communication between the writer and their reader, thereby reflecting decreased power distance. In contrast, *he*, *she*, and *they* are imbued with a sense

of “other,” and may be used to denote distance from the subject being expressed (Yule, 1996). By avoiding direct engagement with the reader, power distance may be maintained through the use of these pronouns. Conflict may also be reduced, reflecting a desire to adhere to collective beliefs. After the pronouns and determiners were tallied and normalized, the resulting frequencies were statistically compared with power distance values using Pearson’s correlation. As with prior variables, the normality of significant variables was assessed. Inferential statistics were then used in conjunction with descriptive frequency statistics to evaluate the significance of the findings. Finally, frequency comparisons were plotted for further examination. The present study was designed to provide an overview of rhetorical variation that may reflect large-scale cultural influences. A sizable corpus was used for evaluation, which limited the amount of qualitative review that could be conducted. Although analyzing the pragmatic context of each stance or pronoun could provide additional insights concerning deontic vs. epistemic usage, such inquiry was beyond the scope of this paper. Future studies are needed to triangulate and expand the results of the present study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Comparison of Modals

Correlations between modal use and values for power distance were not significant for the lowest authority ($r = .004$; $p = .994$) and intermediate authority modals ($r = -.210$; $p = .690$). In contrast, correlations with the strongest authority modals were highly significant ($r = -.927^{**}$; $p = .008$). Concerning this finding, examination of Q-Q plots and non-significant values for the Shapiro-Wilk ($p = .713$) and Kolmogorov-Smirnov ($p = .200$) formulas suggested a normal distribution without outliers (See [Appendix B](#) for more information). Explanations for the findings may be gleaned by examining individual frequency values, as shown in [Table 3](#).

Table 3: Frequency of Modals Used in Different Subcorpora*

Modal	China	Singapore	Hong Kong	South Korea	Taiwan	Japan	English
could	57	186	79	112	164	63	80
might	18	144	35	69	90	33	71
had better	7	0	2	3	3	14	0
ought to	9	4	4	1	3	6	0
should	685	659	632	578	690	765	614
has to	7	23	7	36	14	9	11
have to	67	105	132	198	191	209	204
must	110	36	86	123	100	185	32

Source: by the author. *Frequency values have been adjusted to reflect a corpus of the same size.

Modals of lower intensity (e.g., *might*, *should*, *had better*, *ought to*) did not reveal any notable trends as power distance changed. However, the modal *could* seem to be frequently used in texts from Singapore and Taiwan. These learners tended to use it to reduce the likelihood of a proposition, as in “a part-time job could let you learn to control your money” or “it could let us live without the smoke.” Although modals of lesser intensity did not reveal any significant pattern, modals of the highest intensity did reveal a pattern which may be related to power distance (Refer to [Figure 1](#)).

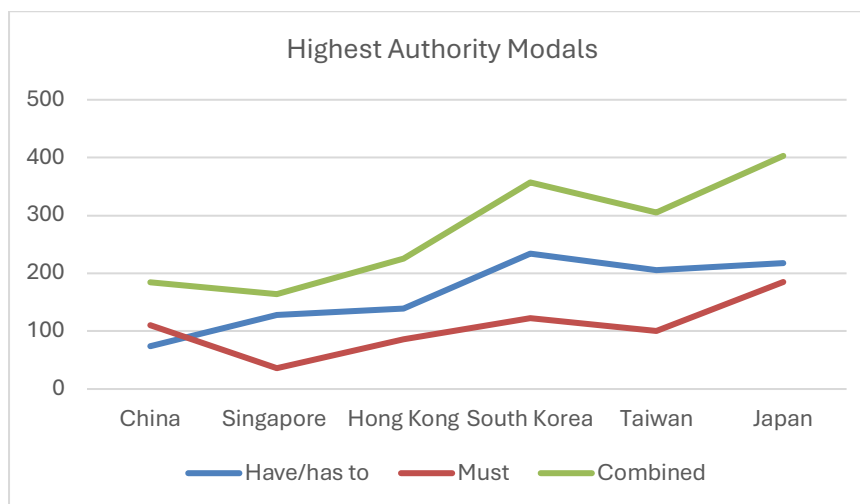


Figure 1: Obligatory Modals (Highest to Lowest Power Distance)

Whereas other modals do not appear to be used differently by subgroup, obligatory modals *must* and *have to* tend to be used more often in the persuasive essays as power distance decreases. Learners from contexts with lower power distance also appeared to use the modals more forcefully or directly. This perspective is exemplified by a qualitative review of Japanese EFL writing, which showed that the highest authority modal *must* was typically used in deontic fashion (e.g., *you must be careful not to waste money*; *we must be careful with this*). Out of 100 instances sampled from Japanese EFL essays, 78 were deontic. Chinese learners also used *must* for a deontic purpose (e.g., *smoking must be banned*; *college life must be more colorful*), yet not quite as often. Out of 100 instances sampled from Chinese EFL essays, only 67 were deontic. Assertions also seemed less controversial and did not engage the reader directly. Chinese learners often utilized *must* to assert epistemic viewpoints (e.g., *it must be a good choice*; *it must be a great joy*; *it must be very bad!*), which seemed less controversial, potentially reflecting a desire to reduce conflict or maintain power distance (through showing respect for the reader’s opinion or authority). Usage patterns of deontic modals of highest authority may mirror cultural values, explaining the findings.

High authority modals did appear to vary in tandem with levels of power distance. This finding may add to prior research examining the rhetorical functions of modals (Hyland, 2005a, 2005b). Rather than simply defining how the grammatical feature is used, the results may add to our understanding of why variation occurs. Furthermore, the findings may place research on Chinese EFL learners, who are reported to use stronger assertions and fewer epistemic modals than English L1 learners (Chen, 2012), within a broader cultural context of greater rhetorical diversity. Results from the present study suggest that EFL learners from Japanese contexts may make stronger assertions (e.g., more high-authority modals) and use fewer epistemic modals than their counterparts from the Chinese mainland. Due to heightened acceptance of power distance, Chinese learners may avoid high authority modals, relying on more indirect epistemic modals to temper the force of a proposition. This finding adds to the research of Chen (2012) by providing a nuanced perspective of differences that may exist beyond overly simplistic binary comparisons such as East vs. West. Providing a more comprehensive view of rhetorical variation in Confucian heritage contexts may make the impact of cultural beliefs on rhetoric more salient. While the investigation of modals in the present study is insightful, further investigation across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts is needed to ascertain the accuracy of its findings, which are based on a corpus of limited size and scope.

4.2. Comparison of Epistemic Stances

Correlations between stances and power distance were not significant for either category of epistemic likelihood ($r = .475$; $p = .341$) or epistemic certainty ($r = .514$; $p = .296$) (See Appendix B for more information). The absence of significant relationships suggests no strong association between epistemic stances and beliefs about power distance. Despite this, examination of individual stances and hedges revealed some notable patterns in usage. Epistemic stances tend to be used more often in higher power distance contexts in Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. For example, these contexts used the stances *certain*, *definitely*, and *obvious* more often than in Japanese EFL contexts (See Table 4). Essays from China and Hong Kong also had more stances, such as *certainty* and *conclude*, than their counterparts in Japan. As for learners from Hong Kong, they used *conclude* (57) and *definitely* (51) more often than any other group, whereas learners from Singapore used *certain* (75) more often than any other group. Finally, learners from Hong Kong, Singapore, and China tended to use epistemic stances of less certainty, such as *likely* and *possible*, more often than countries with the lowest power distance, Taiwan and Japan (See Table 4).

Table 4: Frequency of Epistemic Stances Used in Different Subcorpora*

Stance	China	Singapore	Hong Kong	South Korea	Taiwan	Japan	English
actually	24	45	46	20	29	40	32
certain	12	75	15	15	12	6	11
certainly	18	12	26	2	9	16	9
conclude	13	6	57	7	8	7	0
definitely	16	48	51	12	25	1	30
obvious	15	4	20	4	5	1	23
notice	5	0	0	1	4	14	5
prove	9	8	2	3	9	1	2
apparent	1	0	2	0	0	0	0
apparently	4	1	0	2	3	0	5
assume	1	5	2	3	0	1	5
guess	4	0	0	5	4	2	14
likely	17	32	24	14	14	16	11
perhaps	8	35	9	2	4	19	18
possible	26	26	31	27	21	22	30
probable	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
probably	15	26	11	7	12	20	66
seem	5	24	7	16	5	3	46

Source: by the author. *Frequency values have been adjusted to reflect a corpus of the same size.

Learners with high power distance on the Chinese mainland often used epistemic stances of certainty. However, many of the stances were used generically and formulaically to mimic aspects of persuasive discourse, rather than serving to heighten certainty or communication (e.g., *a certain time* (3), *a certain answer* (1), *a certain company* (1), *a certain place* (1), *to a certain degree* (2), etc.). These epistemic stances appeared to be used indirectly or asserted propositions that the reader would agree with, as in the statement “a part-time job certainly brings about several advantages,” which was used three times in the Chinese B1 corpus file. Stronger stances with uncontroversial claims may have been chosen to reduce conflict or avoid offending the reader. This style may align with Confucian values of harmony, as supported by qualitative examples in the corpus.

The use of epistemic stances and hedging may complement cultural values that support power distance. Epistemic stances of possibility can make claims less forceful and more indirect than their deontic counterparts, potentially tempering the force of an assertion. This finding adds to previous research, which examined differences between learners from China, Japan, and Korea and their English L1 peers (Hinkel, 2009; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hu & Li, 2015). It reveals that the use of epistemic stances may be more nuanced in Confucian-heritage contexts, reflecting subtle cultural differences that influence the expression of rhetoric in argumentation. It should be noted that despite a general tendency to have more epistemic stances in countries with a higher power distance, the pattern was not distinct, making discrete differentiation between contexts difficult. Additional research will be needed to verify the importance of the usage patterns examined in the present study.

4.3. Comparison of Pronouns

Comparison of pronoun frequencies and values for power distance yielded only one notable significant relationship. First-person singular pronouns and determiners (e.g., *I* or *my*) tended to be used less often in countries with the highest power distance ($r = -.839^*$; $p = .037$). Regarding this finding, examination of Q-Q plots and non-significant values from the Shapiro-Wilk ($p = .380$) and Kolmogorov-Smirnov ($p = .200$) tests suggested a normal distribution without outliers (See Appendix B for more

information). Taiwan's utilization of the pronouns *I* and *my* was double that of Singapore and more than double that of Hong Kong (See Table 5). Taiwan has a lesser degree of power distance than both Singapore and Hong Kong, which may contribute to the finding. Using these pronouns reveals a clear attempt to connect with a reader, thereby reducing distance. Concerning the pronouns “*We* and *Our*,” Taiwan used them more than Singapore and Hong Kong, which may reveal an attempt to connect directly with the reader (See Table 5).

Table 5: Frequency of Pronouns and Determiners Used in Different Subcorpora*

Pronoun	China	Singapore	Hong Kong	South Korea	Taiwan	Japan	English
I	867	820	610	1844	1648	2741	2326
My	296	170	173	315	418	344	566
He	140	134	90	99	152	91	55
His	101	191	53	71	88	49	44
She	32	41	29	49	106	43	27
Her	31	77	20	38	67	35	16
We	1426	227	426	582	757	1336	355
Our	713	131	228	153	310	279	160
They	761	851	1065	1125	975	1296	1068
Their	571	943	1008	726	645	593	779
You	748	103	281	722	888	495	681
Your	230	45	138	189	315	91	220

Source: by the author. *Frequency values have been adjusted to reflect a corpus of the same size.

Although differences between pronouns were not always significant, comparisons of usage across different Confucian contexts revealed parallels with power distance values. As for the pronoun *I*, it steadily rose in usage as power distance decreased (See Figure 2):

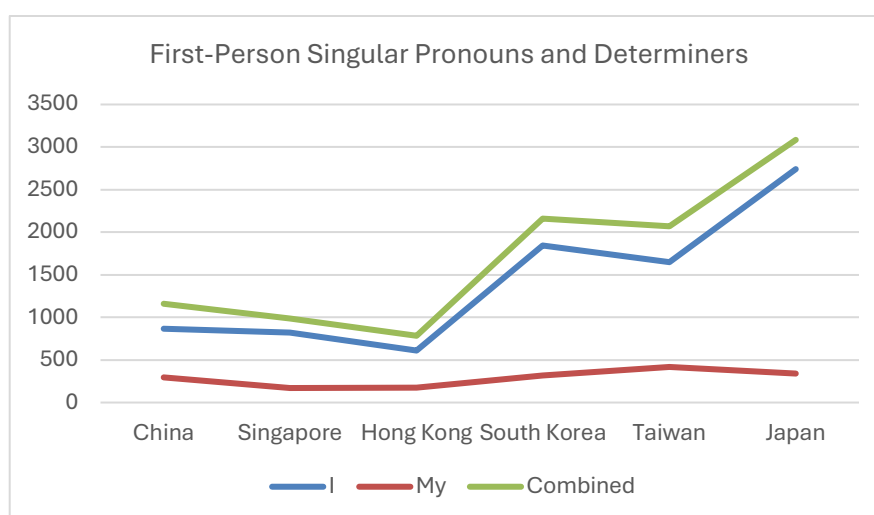


Figure 2: First-Person Singular Pronouns and Determiners (Highest to Lowest Power Distance).

The tendency to rise may reveal the influence of power distance on rhetoric (See Table 5 for specific frequency values). It is also important to note that Confucian contexts with decreased power distance (e.g., Japan) also use this grammatical feature in similar frequencies to English L1 speakers from Western contexts. As power distance decreases, writers may be empowered to express their personal feelings or experiences. This perspective is exemplified by low power distance writers in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, who tend to use more personalized support for arguments.

Differences in the use of pronouns may be exemplified by comparing two essays from Chinese and Japanese contexts, which lie along opposite ends of the continuum with respect to power distance. The following excerpt from a Japanese EFL student essay about Topic A (*It is important for college students to have a part-time job*) was taken from ICNALE:

I agree with the idea that it is an important thing for college students to have a part-time job. Of course, **we** need money to buy what **we** want, such as clothes or a motorcycle, or to pay for a club activity. Since **our** parents pay **our** educational expenses, **we** should make money for our enjoyment. But **I** think we can ... For these reasons, **I** think it is a meaningful thing for **college students** to have a part-time job.

In the above essay, there appears to be a greater tendency to use *I* as a means to state opinions. This appears to be a more personal and direct plea to the reader. Concerning the pronoun *we*, it is used to present ideas that are perceived as desirable to the reader (e.g., clothes and a motorcycle). This rhetorical style appears to differ slightly from those found in the Chinese corpus, which tend to look more like the following essay about Topic A retrieved from the ICNALE corpus:

Nowadays, more and more college students would like to do some part-time jobs, the majority of whom tend to be tutors. And several of them prefer to hand out leaflets for kinds of newspapers or magazines. Is this right? For one thing, **we students** can certainly make money in this method, so that **we** can relieve **our** parents' burden. What's more, **you** know, **we** will gain more experience by doing part-time jobs...All in all, **as far as I am concerned**, **we** should strike a balance between a part-time job and study. If **you** really need to do some part-time jobs, please keep the following tips in mind. College studies should be ranked first. There is no excuse for getting a bad score.

In contrast to the Japanese excerpt, the essay by a Chinese learner uses the pronoun *I* less. Instead, more general pronouns such as *college student(s)*, which appeared 913 times in the Chinese EFL sub-corpus, are used to create some distance between the writer and their argument. As in the above excerpt, *as far as I am concerned* is used extensively in the formulaic language of Chinese essays, occurring 73 times in the Chinese corpus. This expression does not directly assert a proposition. The essay also presents a Confucian perspective when explaining the parents' burden. Empathy for the parents conforms to traditional Confucian values that promote filial piety, respect for authority, and concern for others. Overall, the essay appears to reveal a more collective perspective and a desire to maintain power distance.

Power distance may affect how pronouns are used in argumentation in EFL essays across different contexts. Learners may use pronouns to establish a degree of distance between the writer and their reader, which mirrors beliefs in power distance. This insight builds on prior research by Hyland (2005b) and Yule (1996), showing how cultural values may influence the expression of rhetorical pronouns across diverse EFL contexts. Rather than representing a distinct dichotomy between Eastern and Western contexts, the results may reveal a cultural continuum of diversity that spans multiple Confucian-heritage contexts. While insightful, the results of the present study require further research to verify.

5. Conclusion

Results suggest that power distance may contribute to rhetorical differences. EFL learners from contexts with higher power distance tend to use modals and pronouns differently. They tend to use lower authority modals and first-person singular pronouns. Their claims may also be generic or avoid assertions that readers can contest. In contrast, EFL learners from contexts with lower power distance tend to use rhetoric that directly engages the reader. They often use self-mentions and high authority modals to express controversial opinions.

Results reveal the importance of studying intercultural variation in rhetoric. Such a study can help us cultivate a better understanding of discourse and promote effective communication in diverse cultural contexts. It may also lead to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies that help second- or foreign-language learners acquire the skills needed for modern global organizations. With a heightened awareness of rhetorical variation, teachers may develop new teaching techniques using modern corpora like ICNALE as materials for student inquiry. Through analysis of writing from diverse contexts, learners may gain a more sophisticated view of rhetoric needed for cross-cultural communication. Today, international partnerships proliferate, requiring employees of multiple nationalities to use English and rhetoric in unique ways. Thus far, research investigating unique ways English is used in diverse contexts has been limited (Kecskes, 2007, 2015). Future studies must be more comprehensive, addressing present corpus limitations to advance L2 pedagogy in intercultural rhetoric.

Although the current study highlights rhetorical differences that may be influenced by cultural values, it is not without key limitations. The study examined rhetoric from broad cultural contexts using corpus linguistics. Investigation of individual essays will be required to further examine the pragmatic variation of target features. In the future, more qualitative inquiry is needed to explain and expand the results revealed in this paper. In addition, a more precise examination of learner variables such as gender will be needed. Such variables may impact how cultural values influence rhetoric. Finally, aspects of deontic vs. epistemic stances should be further studied in each individual essay. Such qualitative inquiry may yield further insights into rhetorical differences, leading to new applications in second- or foreign-language writing pedagogy. Through additional research, new strategies to promote awareness and competence in cross-cultural communication may be developed, leading to more effective EFL pedagogy.

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About the author

Andrew Schenck has taught English for over 20 years, gaining valuable experience in countries that include the United States, South Korea, and China. While working as an educator, he completed an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership with a specialization in English and a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature. He uses his doctoral research as a foundation for further research, examining issues in English education.

Appendix A

Table 6: Raw Frequency Values Before Normalization

	China	Singapore	Hong Kong	Korea	Taiwan	Japan	English
apparent	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
certain	20	72	7	15	9	6	5
obvious	24	4	9	4	4	1	10
likely	28	31	11	14	11	17	5
possible	43	25	14	27	16	24	13
probable	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
actually	40	43	21	20	22	43	14
certainly	29	12	12	2	7	17	4
definitely	27	46	23	12	19	1	13
apparently	7	1	0	2	2	0	2
perhaps	13	34	4	2	3	20	8
probably	24	25	5	7	9	21	29
conclude	21	6	26	7	6	8	0
notice	8	0	0	1	3	15	2
prove	14	8	1	3	7	1	1
assume	2	5	1	3	0	1	2
guess	6	0	0	5	3	2	6
seem	8	23	3	16	4	3	20
could	94	179	36	112	126	68	35
got to	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
had better	12	0	1	3	2	15	0
has to	11	22	3	36	11	10	5
have to	110	101	60	198	147	224	89
might	30	139	16	69	69	35	31
must	180	35	39	123	77	198	14
need to	78	58	56	96	58	49	31
ought to	14	4	2	1	2	6	0
should	1121	634	288	578	532	819	268
I	1419	789	278	1844	1270	2936	1015
You	1224	99	128	722	684	530	297
He	229	129	41	99	117	98	24
She	53	39	13	49	82	46	12
They	1246	819	485	1125	751	1388	466
We	2334	218	194	582	583	1431	155
My	485	164	79	315	322	368	247
Your	376	43	63	189	243	97	96
His	165	184	24	71	68	53	19
Her	51	74	9	38	52	37	7
Their	934	907	459	726	497	635	340
Our	1167	126	104	153	239	299	70

Source: by the author

Appendix B

Table 7: Correlations of Modal Frequency to Power Distance

	Lowest Authority Modals	Intermediate Authority Modals	Highest Authority Modals
Pearson Correlation	.004	-.210	-.927**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.994	.690	.008
N	6	6	6

Source: by the author

Table 8: Correlations of Epistemic Stance Frequency to Power Distance

	Epistemic Certainty	Epistemic Likelihood
Pearson Correlation	.514	.475
Sig. (2-tailed)	.296	.341
N	6	6

Source: by the author

Table 9: Correlations of Pronoun Frequency to Power Distance*

	I	He	She	They	We	You
Pearson Correlation	-.839*	.563	-.319	-.471	.118	-.253
Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	.245	.538	.346	.823	.629
N	6	6	6	6	6	6

Source: by the author

*Categories include both pronouns and associated determiners.

Table 10: Tests of Normality for Significant Variables

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
“I” Pronouns and Determiners	.209	7	.200*	.908	7	.380
Highest Authority Modals	.168	7	.200*	.948	7	.713

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Source: by the author