Citation

Error Analysis of High School Student Essays

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Introduction

Ever since the introduction of oral communication into the school curriculum in 1989, speaking has drawn attention as an important skill for Japanese students to master. A variety of speaking and listening practices have been experimented within high school English classes. Writing has also been included as an extensive practice. The 2003 revision of the Course of Study emphasizes "writing" as a vehicle of communication to convey messages according to the purpose and the situation (MEXT, 2003). However, in many of the university entrance exam-oriented high schools, writing classes are modified into grammar-centered classes; in other words, the students are accustomed to writing short sentences based upon the structures or the grammar points they are taught, and chances of writing effective essays are limited (Minegishi, 2005). It is true that grammar processing is needed for accurate production, but it is a challenge to teach how to write essays or even paragraphs within the available classroom hours, with the exception perhaps of some foreign language elective courses in select high schools.

Under these circumstances, the English Composition Division of the Saitama Senior High School English Education and Research Association hosts writing contests, for the purpose of encouraging students to test their English knowledge and to enhance their production skills in the form of writing. The contest consists of two sections: a translation section and an essay writing

section. In the essay section the participants are given topics and expected to write their opinions in about 200 words. They have 80 minutes to work on translation and essay writing. The translation sentences are assigned according to level, but the essay topic is the same for all. The translation part is marked and graded by Japanese teachers; the essays are evaluated by ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) according to three criteria: creativity, organization and grammar. The winners are chosen depending on the total points of the two sections. In this paper, I will shed some light on the essays and analyze them with a view towards identifying problems students have, which will provide evidence of how English is learned and what strategies students are employing to construct their essays. The primary focus of this paper is on grammar in writing not creativity and organization, but some pedagogical suggestions for teaching and learning are also mentioned.

Methods

The data analyzed for this study are errors in students' essays written in an essay competition held in Saitama Prefecture, Japan. In this contest, the participants were given the topic, "If you were to meet a celebrity, who would you like to meet? What would you like to ask him/her? What would you like to do with him/her?" The errors in the essays were categorized based on Ferris' (2005) Analysis Model (Fig.1). Her "Common ESL writing errors" fall into four categories; morphological errors, lexical errors, syntactic errors, and mechanical errors. This model is based upon the "Description of the major error categories" (Fig. 2), which covers verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, word wrong, and sentence structure (p.92). According to James (1998), an error analysis model must be "well-developed, highly elaborated, and self-explanatory" (p.95). Ferris' model fulfills these needs. With this system it is easy to identify *global* and *local errors* (Burt and Kiparsky, 1972, cited in James, 1998) which I added to Ferris' model of major errors in Figure 1. *Global errors* are major errors in sentence structure, which makes a sentence difficult or impossible to understand, whereas *local errors* are minor mistakes, which do not cause problems of comprehension. In Ferris' classification, syntactic errors are considered *global errors*. Mechanical and lexical mistakes, on the other hand, are *local errors*. Morphological errors can be *global errors*,

but when they do not hinder readers' understanding of the content they are *local errors*.

Figure 1

Common ESL Writing Errors based on Ferris'(2005) Model

Morphological Errors → global / local errors
Verbs: Tense, From, Subject-verb agreement
Nouns: Articles/determiners, Noun endings (plural/possessive)
Lexical Errors → local errors
Word choice, Word form, Informal usage, Idiom error, Pronoun error
Syntactic Errors → global errors
Sentence structure, Run-ons, Fragments
Mechanical → local errors
Punctuation, Spelling, Capitalization*

* "Capitalization" is added in this study.

Figure 2

Description of major error categories (Ferris, 2005)

Verb errors	All errors in verb tense or form, including relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Noun ending errors	Plural or progressive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary; includes relevant subject-verb agreement errors
Article errors	Article or other determiner incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary
Word wrong	All specific lexical errors in word choice or word form, including preposition and pronoun errors. Spelling errors only included if the (apparent) misspelling resulted in an actual English word.
Sentence structure	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries(run-ons, fragments, comma splices), word order, omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases; other unidiomatic sentence construction.

Participants

    The essays analyzed for this study were written by 148 high school students: 46 first year students, 58 second year students, and 44 third year students; 48 males and 100 females. The participants' high schools consisted of twenty public schools and two private schools. Most of these

schools are considered "academic" high schools in that they prepare students for university exams, which means the students tend to be highly motivated and are expected to be able to utilize their English grammar, structure knowledge and vocabulary in writing.

Procedure

All errors were marked and classified. They were first classified into global errors or local errors. The verb-related errors were considered as "verb errors", therefore, they were considered morphological errors. However, confusion in the use of transitive/intransitive verbs was considered a global syntactic error because it affects the whole sentence structure. Also, tense errors were anticipated because the essay topic "If you were to meet a celebrity…?" presumably requires the use of the conditional. As long as the errors did not interfere with the understanding of the sentence, they were put into tense errors, i.e., morphological errors.

It was sometimes difficult to draw the line between lexical errors and mechanical errors; that is, whether the word is a wrong choice or simply a spelling mistake. If the word had a separate meaning but exists as a word, then it was treated as lexical error; otherwise, it was marked as a mechanical error. However, if an inappropriate word choice disrupts the meaning in the whole sentence, it was considered a syntactic error. In short, the decision of error classification depends on each sentence. As for repeated mechanical errors in the same sentence, i.e., spelling mistakes, punctuation, and capitalization, the multiple mistakes were counted as one.

Findings and Discussion

First of all, not all errors were easily categorized: some went beyond and across the categories. In each case, errors were carefully identified and classified according to the seriousness of the problem. If one major error included other minor errors, then together they were considered to be a major error. For example, a sentence "*And, I want to *go to abroad such as the UK, the US, *French, *Australlia and so on" was categorized as one syntactic error because the misuse of verb and adverb (go to abroad) causes sentence diffusion, even though this sentence included one lexical error

(French) and one mechanical error (Australlia).

Secondly, a danger with lists of "common" ESL/EFL errors, as Ferris (2005) herself points out, is that they may be over-generalized to all students. Of course, individual students have different language capabilities and learning traits; for example, one student constantly omitted articles and another student confused tense of verbs all through her essay. Although the statistics give a general picture of the problems, these do not apply to every student.
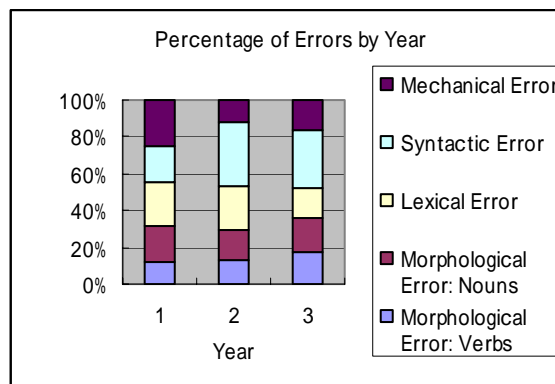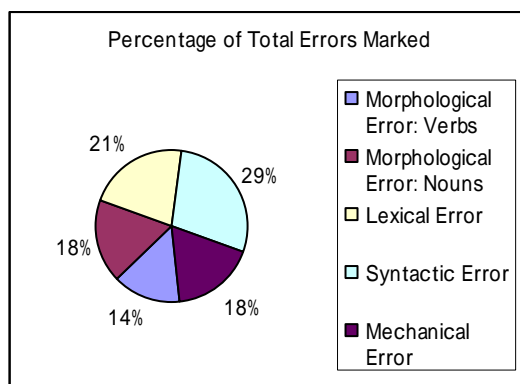
While keeping these considerations in mind, the statistics provide interesting information. The total number of errors was 1518 (596 in 46 first year essays, 491 in 58 second year essays, and 431 in 44 third year essay). The average number of errors per student was 13.5 for the first year students, 11.2 for the second year students, and 9.8 for the third year students. Considering the short length of the essay, these were not small numbers, although the average number of errors decreased according to the students' year in school. As a total, syntactic errors dominated the rest at 29%, followed by lexical errors (21%), morphological errors in nouns and mechanical errors (18%), and morphological errors (14%). According to the school year, the most common errors observed in first year essays were lexical errors, which comprised 24% of the total, while syntactic errors comprised most errors in second and third year essays, which amounted to 35.2% and 31.1% respectively. Among the first years' lexical errors, "word choice" was the most common mistake (93 in total). As for second year and third year samples, as many as 158 and 121 errors were made respectively in "sentence structure." These findings indicate that first year students did not have sufficient vocabulary while the second and third year students did not use it adequately.

Table 1.

Common EFL Writing Errors in Japanese High School Students' Essays

Error Type		Percentage of Total Errors Marked (%)			
		1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Average
Morphological Errors	**(Verbs)**				
	Tense	5.87	8.96	11.1	8.66
	Form	5.87	1.22	2.09	3.06
	Subject-verb agreement	0.67	2.65	4.64	2.65
	Total Verb Errors	**12.4**	**12.8**	**17.9**	**14.4**
	(Nouns)				
	Articles/determiners	10.6	11.0	9.98	10.5
	Noun endings	8.22	5.91	8.12	7.42
	Total Noun Errors	**18.8**	**16.9**	**18.1**	**17.9**
Lexical Errors	Word choice	15.6	13.6	9.51	12.9
	Word form	1.51	4.07	3.25	2.94
	Informal usage	1.01	0.61	0.23	0.62
	Idiom error	3.19	1.02	1.16	1.79
	Pronoun error	2.68	3.87	2.55	3.04
	Total Lexical Errors	**24.0**	**23.2**	**16.7**	**21.3**
Syntactic Errors	Sentence structure	15.3	32.2	28.1	25.2
	Run-ons	1.34	0.61	1.86	1.27
	Fragments	3.19	2.44	1.16	2.26
	Total Syntactic Errors	**19.8**	**35.2**	**31.1**	**28.7**
Mechanical	Punctuation	5.7	1.43	1.86	3.0
	Spelling	14.4	6.11	11.4	10.6
	Capitalization	4.87	4.28	3.02	4.05
	Total Mechanical Errors	**25.0**	**11.8**	**16.2**	**17.7**

Percentage of Total Errors Marked

- Morphological Error: Verbs
- Morphological Error: Nouns
- Lexical Error
- Syntactic Error
- Mechanical Error

21% 29% 18% 18% 14%

Percentage of Errors by Year

- Mechanical Error
- Syntactic Error
- Lexical Error
- Morphological Error: Nouns
- Morphological Error: Verbs

100% 80% 60% 40% 20% 0%

Year: 1 2 3

❁

The syntactic errors, the most prevalent errors, were mainly related to verbs, for example, the misuse of be-verbs, transitive and intransitive verbs, auxiliary verbs, no verb use, the word order in indirect questions, and tense confusion in relation to the conditional. From an English educator's point of view, it was rather disappointing that many students made errors in the use of basic verbs such as "go", "want" and "listen", such as in "*I want to go my future", "*I want become a doctor", and "*I want to listen the story". In the case of errors in conditional sentences, on the other hand, the structure was usually grammatically correct, but the meaning was irrational. For example, if a writer mentioned a celebrity such as a historical man/woman, movie actor, singer, athlete or an imaginary character, s/he had to make the sentence conditional. However, some used simple present tense. One of these examples is, "*If I ride Doraemon's time machine, I can go everywhere". This type of error was put into verb tense errors under morphological errors. As an explanation of Japanese students' use of conditional, Thompson (2001) asserts that even when students have mastered the mechanics of forming unreal conditionals and wishes in all their complexity, the problem of concept remains. Additionally, it is difficult for Japanese students to use conditionals correctly, for there is a disparity in the use of conditionals in English and Japanese.

Another characteristic in the syntactic errors stemmed from interference from Japanese, their mother tongue (L1 interference). L1 interference is considered a major obstacle to second and foreign language acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Ferris, 2005; Lightbrown & Spada, 2002; Littlewood, 2002. Some examples from students' essays are as follows:

(a)* He challenged.   (   )

(b)* They hit all over the world since 1984.

   (1984   )

In these sentences, the writers used English equivalents for the Japanese words, i.e., (a)

chousen-suru=challenge, and (b)   *hitto-suru*=hit.   Incidentally, the verbs "challenge" and "hit" are transitive verbs, which means these sentences are grammatically incorrect; therefore, they were classified as syntactic errors. Other syntactic errors from L1 interference are observed in

relation to the choice of prepositions. The examples are:

(c) *I will join to children's network of UNICEF.

(‗)

(d) *I want to marry with him. ‗

The writers translated the Japanese prepositional particle " [*ni*]" into "to" in example (c) and "

[*to*]" into "with" in example (d). This type of error is common among Japanese students because

transitive verbs include prepositions in their Japanese meanings; therefore it is hard to distinguish

whether a verb is transitive or prepositional from the translated meanings.

The second dominant error category was that of lexical errors, especially in first year student

essays. Here again L1 interference was observed in word choices.

(e) *I think his baseball soul is the biggest of all.

( )

(f) *I want to hear Murasaki Shikibu three questions. ( )

In (e), "soul" and "big" do not match with each other in this context. The writer meant to say, "I

think he has the strongest spirit in baseball." In Japanese "soul" and "spirit" are given the same

translation as " *tamashii*." Besides, neither soul nor spirit can be "big" but rather

"strong". In (f), the verb "hear" is derived from the Japanese word " ( ) *kiku*", which can

also mean "listen" or "ask" in Japanese. These students seemed to have picked up words without

thinking about content and collocation. Presumably, in English class, there is a tendency for

students not to consult dictionaries for language usage but to look up word meaning only, then

memorize the main translation of the word, and use this translation regardless of context.

The third and fourth prominent error categories were noun related morphological errors and

mechanical errors, especially spelling mistakes. In noun errors, article errors outnumbered the rest,

accounting for as much as 10% of the total. The problem with articles stems from the fact that the

Japanese language has no concept of articles and the countable and uncountable distinction. It is

natural that Japanese students have difficulty in using them correctly. In addition, articles are

introduced near the end in many of grammar textbooks, which in a sense is parallel to the language

acquisition order described by Littlewood (2002) of a study of children acquiring morphemes in their native language. Plurals and articles have always been, and will continue to be difficult to teach to Japanese students, which is why some teachers wait until the end of school year to introduce them in class.

Spelling mistakes, sorted as mechanical errors, comprised 10% of the total number of errors. This was partly because many students applied Japanese (*katakana*) pronunciation to English spellings.   For example, writers who spelled *performance (performance), *calacter (character), and *confort (comfort) did not seem to spell according to his/her understanding of the pronunciation, but from how the words sound through the filter of *katakana*.

Lastly the problem of organization as well as the use of conjunctions needs to be mentioned. Sentences starting with "because" were categorized as fragments which belonged to syntactic errors, whereas sentences starting with "and" and "so" were not treated as errors. "And" and "so" are taught as conjunctions that connect two phrases that carry equal weight in the sentence, whereas "because" is taught as a conjunction followed by a subordinate clause. However, the fact is that as many as 75 "and"s and 89 "so"s were observed at the beginning of the students' sentences.   James (1998) states that learners tend to overuse connectors to support logical relationships between propositions that just do not exist. It is probable that few students have learned how to organize English writing; that is, they do not know they should start with an introduction, followed by a main body, and then a conclusion, paying attention to the consistency of their thoughts. Those who were not familiar with English writing ended up listing items in order: who they wanted to meet, what they would like to do, and where they would like to go. Without cohesive devices such as paraphrasing and rephrasing, or markers that direct the logical flow of sentences, the writers could not communicate their ideas effectively.

Conclusion

How, then, can teachers empower students to become better writers? Obviously the class time allotted for writing is limited, yet there are things teachers can do in order to improve students'

writing in other English classes.

Judging from the fact that sentence fragments outnumbered other errors in this study, teachers need to draw students' attention to the whole sentence structure and sentence combining when discussing verbs and other grammar points in class. The confusion between transitive/intransitive verbs and prepositional verbs can be pointed out in reading class, bringing awareness to the differences between English and Japanese. When students come up with a new verb, or even a familiar one, they should be aware of the conceptual gap between English and Japanese. One good example of a split between Japanese and English is the word   (to see). There are many more English verbs for *miru*. In Japanaese *miru* is used when you perceive with your eyes, when you watch, look, view, overlook or investigate; when you take care of somebody like children or sick people, as in "*kodomo wo miru*". You can even say *miru* when you try something, like '*mitemiru*' or '*yattemiru*', literally "try to see" and "try to do" respectively. Therefore, it is confusing for students to select the suitable equivalent of *miru* in English. They have to think about the context. Kowalski (2005) gives usages of   in Figure 4:

Figure 4   Different kinds of meanings associated with

	see (something that falls within your field of vision)
	look (intentionally at a stationary object)
	watch (something moving)

Also, the gap between English and Japanese applies not only at sentential level but also to the lexical level. As I mentioned earlier, L1 interference affects both sentence structure and word choice. Underlying knowledge of usage and collocation enables students to choose the right words in right the places in their writing. Because of the avalanche of Japanese-English in the media, however, it has become even more difficult to eliminate these *Japanglish* words from students' vocabulary. Teachers and learners should pay special attention not reinforce these words and phrases in the English language classroom.

Good writing, however, does not rely only on grammatical and lexical accuracy but also on the creativity in context and the logical flow of sentences. In order to write coherent, well-structured paragraphs and essays, the writers have to be creative and concentrate on the content as well. First, teachers can help students raise their awareness of how to organize English writing, and how units of sentences and paragraphs are connected with one another to form meaningful text. By recognizing the importance of coherency in their writing, the students can dedicate themselves to the ideas or message that they are trying to convey. I employ "process writing" for the improvement of this skill.   In contrast to translation or guided composition, "process writing" emphasizes the processes such as planning, drafting, and reviewing (Johnson & Johnson, 1998 cited in Furneaux, 2000). In this contest, only a few participants seemed to employ this approach, possibly because of the time constraints of the competition. By reflecting on their writing process, students will internalize their grammatical and lexical knowledge and utilize it for production.

Another effective approach to improve writing skill is to work on other language skills. All four skills are interconnected. Even though writing classes are not consistently available in school curriculums, compared to reading and oral communication classes, students can cultivate their writing skills by consciously reading or listening. Krashen and Terrell (1983) claim that speech and writing production emerges by focusing on listening and reading.   Extensive reading outside of the class, for instance, will become a rich source for extensive writing. Exposure to authentic writing will help students expand their vocabulary and write well-organized, reasonably cohesive essays.

In conclusion, I believe that Japanese students can become competent writers of English with the appropriate support from teachers. Quoting Kramsch (1993): "Teachers have to impart a body of knowledge, but learners have to discover that knowledge for themselves in order to internalize it" (p.6). I suggest that teachers integrate the grammar focus while encouraging creativity and teaching organizational form. Learners, on the other hand, can enrich their knowledge of language by taking every opportunity to use it, developing learning strategies outside of the class, and reflecting on the writing process before, during and after they write.

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