E-mail Survey of Native-Speaking Teachers on Typical Errors

Produced by Japanese EFL Learners

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1. Purposes of this research

In this study, I made a pilot survey of native-speaking (NS) teachers on the internet via e-mail concerning typical errors produced by Japanese learners of EFL (English as a foreign language) or ESL (English as a second language). The survey aims to investigate (1) the types of errors produced by Japanese learners of ESL/EFL that teachers perceive, (2) the types of grammatical errors produced by Japanese learners that should receive explicit instruction (e.g., grammatical explanations) in class, and (3) the reaction of NS teachers to a list of 45 errors made by Japanese learners.

A variety of linguistic features used in the questionnaire were chosen from my corpus, including the written data of speech manuscripts I had gathered from third-year junior high school students (aged 14-15), senior high school students (aged 16-18), and first-year university students (aged 18-19), in addition to the data from first-year university students in a written test of picture description and open-ended questions.

I e-mailed to NS teachers with experience in teaching ESL/EFL to Japanese learners. The questionnaire comprises Part I – NS teachers' ideas of errors that Japanese ESL/EFL learners tend to produce, and Part II – NS teachers' reactions to the typical errors of their learners, as shown in Appendix 1. In Parts I and II, if the teachers consider some types of errors as typical, structurally difficult, serious for communication, or persistent, I propose that the errors should be treated well at junior/senior high school and university levels.

2. Method

I e-mailed the questionnaire to NS teachers with experience in teaching ESL/EFL to Japanese learners on the three mailing lists, ATEG, GULINGUIST, and TESL-L (see Appendix 1). Part I (1) aims to discover what types of errors made by Japanese learners are:

    (a) serious for communication?,
    (b) typical of Japanese learners?, and
    (c) persistent, regardless of instruction?[1]

The teachers were asked to list them and specify the proficiency level(s) [e.g.,beginning, intermediate, advanced] of learners where applicable. Seven teachers responded to the questionnaire during a month. Table 1 shows the personal data of the respondents:

Table 1: The personal data of the respondents

	Age	Sex	Residence	Teaching experiences	Degrees
Respondent No.1	20's	female	USA	1 year − Japan (EFL)	?
Respondent No.2	?	female	USA	? years − Japan (EFL)	?
Respondent No.3	30's	male	USA	12 years − ?	Ph.D (Applied Linguistics)
Respondent No.4	30's	female	USA	9 years − USA (ESL)	BA
Respondent No.5	40's	male	Japan	15 years − Canada (ESL)/Japan (EFL)	MA (TESOL)
Respondent No.6	30's	male	Japan	10 years − Canada (ESL)/Japan (EFL)	MA (Applied Linguistics)
Respondent No.7	40's	female	Japan	17 years − Japan (EFL)	M.Ed (EFL)

Only seven teachers voluntarily responded to the questionnaire. The total number of the respondents, however, was too small to afford meaningful analysis of the results.

3. Results

3.1 Questionnaire − Part I (1)

Table 2 demonstrates the results of Part I (1) − NS teachers' ideas of errors that Japanese ESL/EFL learners tend to produce.

Table 2: Results of Questionnaire − Part I (1)

(a)
− incorrect response to negative questions (e.g., A: 'Don't you read a newspaper everyday?'
    B: 'Yes' (I don't read one) instead of 'No')
− active/passive voice confusion (for beginning & intermediate)
− word form and word choice errors
− improper use of the conventions of speech act/pragmatics (e.g., requests, question asking)
− accent (especially in adults)
− pronunciation errors
− 'maybe' for the future when they actually mean 'will be' or 'almost definitely will be'
− rarely using subjunctive 'might'
− not understanding the politeness necessary for effective communication
− males translating abrupt or "rude" language into conversation in English (e.g., issuing commands impolitely or terse comments)
(b)
− word order in Noun Phrases (for beginning & intermediate)
− word order, singular/plural forms, count/non-count nouns, first/third person forms
− lack of singular 's' in subject-verb agreement in the present tense
− b/v, l/r substitution (at all levels)
− turn-taking infelicities
− saying 'by the way' in the wrong context
− saying 'enjoy' far more than a native English speaker would and often in the wrong context
− using strange vocabulary and not acknowledging changes in English (e.g., 'lover,' 'tasty,' 'dish,' 'colored people'
− using very technical grammatical structures because the "rules" say it's possible even if common usage disallows such grammar
(c)
  confusing masculine/feminine personal pronouns
− text cohesion (for advanced)
− word order, singular/plural forms, count/non-count nouns, first/third person forms
− omission of the third person singular ending
− confusing 'he/she'
− [r] vs. [l], [θ] vs. [f] pronunciation errors
  definite/indefinite/omission of articles
− definite/indefinite articles (at all levels)
− mass vs. singular nouns

3.2 Questionnaire − Part I (2)

Questionnaire − Part I (2) is designed to discover which types of grammatical errors produced by Japanese learners should receive explicit instruction (e.g., grammatical explanations) in class, (a) serious for communication, (b) typical of Japanese learners, or (c) persistent? The NS teachers were requested to choose (a), (b), or (c). They were allowed to give a multiple answer. The following table

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displays the results of Questionnaire – Part I (2).

Table 3: Results of Questionnaire – Part I (2)		
(a) 3	(b) 2	(c) 2

3.3 Questionnaire – Part II

Questionnaire – Part II aims to examine how NS teachers react to a list of 45 typical errors made by Japanese learners (see Appendix 1). The list includes transfer errors caused by translation from Japanese and developmental errors irrespective of L1. The teachers were requested to simply choose the letter corresponding to their rating of:

(a) Are structures produced by Japanese learners grammatically difficult?
   [D(ifficult) / E(asy)],
(b) Are errors produced by Japanese learners serious for communication?
   [S(serious) / N(ot serious)], and
(c) Do Japanese learners produce the same errors over a long period, regardless of instruction?
   [P(ersistent) / N(ot persistent)].

Four of seven NS teachers sent me a complete response to Part II. The results of Part II are shown in Appendix 2, but I did not analyze them because of the small sample size.

4. Discussion

The overall results of Questionnaire – Parts I & II and personal comments made by the respondents revealed that the most of errors in my corpus were rated as 'Not serious,' i.e., local errors that do not significantly hinder communication. Some ESL teachers argued that "Really NONE of your above examples posed serious problems for understanding," "Learners pick up correct English very quickly once in the target country. I would not waste a lot of time drilling," "Expressions which are used frequently self-correct quickly with lots of practice talking. Less drill and more interactive talk seems to be the solution." It was found in the questionnaire that ESL teachers are likely to emphasize the importance of exposure to the target language and interaction with NS speakers, which should eventually decrease grammatical errors. ESL teachers tended to view the target language as 'Survival English' and treat 'meaning' as more important than 'form.' They also stated that more emphasis should be placed on discourse, lexical, or culture-related errors than on grammatical ones. Teaching principles in ESL environments seem to differ significantly from those in Japanese EFL settings, where exposure and interaction are extremely limited and entrance examinations have a great impact. In addition, it was extremely difficult for native-speaking ESL/EFL teachers to make a reliable judgment of the errors, because of the following reasons:

-------- "Whether the errors are deemed serious or not depends on the listener. A person who has had little contact with non-native speakers may find most of them to be serious. As for persistence, I think it depends on the level of the learner and whether or not the errors have become fossilized. 'Difficult/Easy' is of course dependent on the interlanguage development of the learner."

-------- "You have too many examples (n=45) and too many confusing categories from which the respondent must choose."

[NB: Three respondents of 7 did not complete the questionnaire.]

5. Conclusion

In this pilot study, the e-mail questionnaire proved to work well in discovering NS teachers' ideas regarding perception of errors, their behaviors toward error treatment, and their reaction to typical errors. If more responses were obtained on mailing lists, the selection of the target structures in future investigation would be based on the results of this type of questionnaire. The method of data collection in this research relies completely on the members on the three mailing lists. If they feel bored with the contents of e-mail questionnaires or have insufficient time for their responses, numerous responses such as 50 or 100 e-mails cannot be obtained. One of the methods will be e-mailing questionnaires to the teachers one knows personally or paying respondents for their questionnaires.

From a number of e-mail questionnaires, one will be able to determine which typical errors even advanced Japanese ESL/EFL learners incorrigibly continue to produce. Results will provide pedagogically useful information in that certain types of errors will be emphasized in class.

Note
I would like to thank Prof. Leon Richards for his insightful comments on earlier versions of this study.
1. Long (1991: 46) argued that form-focused instruction may be effective, when students make errors which are (1) systematic/persistent, (2) pervasive/typical, and (3) remediable (see Sawyer 1995: 142). Long's No. (3) is replaced by (a) "serious for communication" in my questionnaire.

References
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APPENDIX 1: Questionnaire to Native Speakers with Experience in Teaching ESL/EFL to Japanese Learners

I am a college EFL teacher and am working on errors in English produced by Japanese learners. If you are a native-speaking ESL/EFL teacher with experience in teaching ESL/EFL to Japanese learners and you are interested in this topic, would you kindly respond to the questionnaire that follows? The questionnaire comprises two parts and concerns your idea of typical errors Japanese learners tend to make, based on your teaching experience.

It will take about 20 minutes of your time to complete. I will collate your responses with my data and after analyzing them I will share the results with you later. Here is the questionnaire:

[Part I]
(1) In your opinion, what types of errors made by Japanese learners are
    (a) serious for communication?,
    (b) typical of Japanese learners?, and
    (c) persistent regardless of instruction?
Please list them and specify the proficiency level(s) [e.g.,beginning, intermediate, advanced] of learners where applicable.
    e.g., (c) omission of third person singular verb ending, for intermediate
Your opinion:

(2) Which types of grammatical errors produced by Japanese learners should receive explicit instruction in class (e.g., grammatical explanations), (a) serious for communication, (b) typical of Japanese learners, or (c) persistent?
    Please choose (a), (b), or (c). You may give a multiple answer.
Your opinion: ( )

[Part II]
Here is a list of 45 typical errors in English that seem to persist with Japanese learners, based on my personal experience. Please let me know how you as a native-speaking teacher will react to each example. Simply choose the letter according to your rating of:
(a) Are structures produced by Japanese learners grammatically difficult?
    [D(ifficult) / E(asy)],
(b) Are errors produced by Japanese learners serious for communication?
    [S(serious) / N(ot serious)], and
(c) Do Japanese learners produce the same errors over a long period, regardless of instruction?
    [P(ersistent) / N(ot persistent)].
Please indicate your rating by deleting the characters not of your choice.
Your response should, for example, look:
    1. D,N,P
    2. E,S,P
[I have put the usual asterisks to phrases that are ungrammatical and have given a gloss in brackets at the end. If you judge a sentence as grammatical, please comment on it.]

[1] Errors caused by translation from Japanese
Ellipsis in Japanese
1. *Young people playing tennis is increasing. (The number of young...)
    1.DE,SN,PN
2. I gave the money *which I worked. (the money which I got by/from working)
    2.DE,SN,PN
3. I want to study the subject which *need to get a good job. (which I need ...)
    3.DE,SN,PN
4. I like telephone, because I can hear the voice *whom I'm talking with.
    (of the person with whom I'm talking/...who I'm talking with)
    4.DE,SN,PN
Verb
5. Mary *uses a long time cleaning the room. (spends a long time cleaning...)
    5.DE,SN,PN
6. My sister *met a car accident last week, so she was sent to the hospital. (had a car accident)
    6.DE,SN,PN
7. Please *teach me the way to the station. (tell)
    7.DE,SN,PN
8. As a first-year student, I *am enjoying my high school life. (enjoy my ...)
    8.DE,SN,PN
Adjective
9. I am *delightful that my plan was successful. (delighted)
    9.DE,SN,PN
10. I am *lonely that I will graduate from this school. (sad)
    10.DE,SN,PN
11. The *price of the computer is cheap. (low)
    11.DE,SN,PN
Noun
12. I had a *story with John on the bus. (talk, conversation)
    12.DE,SN,PN
13. I am in the first *grade of senior high school. (year)
    13.DE,SN,PN
Interrogative

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14. *How do you think about this idea? (What)
    14.DE,SN,PN
Word-order
15. I like receiving letters, because *they can read again and again. (I can read them...)
    15.DE,SN,PN
[2] Developmental errors irrespective of native languages
Verb
16. They are permitted to *take on the dress. (put on)
    16.DE,SN,PN
17. The old woman has been very sick for many years. She *was died in the bed yesterday. (died)
    17.DE,SN,PN
18. I am going to *develop films. (have films developed)
    18.DE,SN,PN

19. I can't *listen your voice. (hear)
    19.DE,SN,PN
Ergative verb
20. The game was continued about two hours. (continued)
    20.DE,SN,PN
21. This book *is sold well. (sells)
    21.DE,SN,PN
to-infinitive
22. Mary decided *study abroad. (to study)
    22.DE,SN,PN
23. I went to New York *for studying American history. (to study ...)
    23.DE,SN,PN
-ing
24. I am not good at *to play the piano. (playing)
    24.DE,SN,PN
25. The man kept *study English for three hours. (studying)
    25.DE,SN,PN
Past participle
26. I'll talk about my favorite jockey who *named Masato Shibata. (who is named)
    26.DE,SN,PN
Adjective
27. There was *few milk, so I went to the supermarket. (little)
    27.DE,SN,PN
28. I think you will be *interesting in this magazine. (interested)
    28.DE,SN,PN
29. John *convinced that his girlfriend was a very kind girl. (was convinced)
    29.DE,SN,PN
30. My sister is six feet *high. (tall)
    30.DE,SN,PN
Adverbials
31. I have *ever been to New York. (have been to...)
    31.DE,SN,PN
32. I think I'll go *to home. (go home)
    32.DE,SN,PN
Relative clause
33. I know the man *who father climbed Mt. Fuji. (whose)
    33.DE,SN,PN
34. I climbed the mountain *where was covered with a lot of snow. (which)
    34.DE,SN,PN
Preposition
35. I'll finish this homework *till tomorrow morning. (by)
    35.DE,SN,PN
36. I went swimming *to the river near my grandfather's house. (in)
    36.DE,SN,PN
37. I think *of a traffic accident so dreadful. (I think that the traffic accident was so dreadful.)
    37.DE,SN,PN
Conjunction
38. Let's not go on a picnic tomorrow, because *of the typhoon is coming. (delete 'of')
    38.DE,SN,PN
39. I listen to music *during walking, having a bath, reading magazines.
    (while I am walking,.../while walking...)
    39.DE,SN,PN
Word-order
40. Pet dealers *forced to buy expensive animals for customers. (forced customers to buy...)
    40.DE,SN,PN
41. What do you like *song? (What song do you like?)
    41.DE,SN,PN
Nouns
42. Are you a good *cooker? (cook)
    42.DE,SN,PN
43. He gave me some good *advices. (advice)
    43.DE,SN,PN

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Pronoun

44. How long *did you take to go to school? (did it take you to...)
    44.DE,SN,PN
45. *I was difficult to answer such a question.(It was difficult for me to answer...)
    45.DE,SN,PN

Thank you for your time.
       Now, could you let me know something about your background?
(The data will be used for statistical purposes only and for this project of mine.)

Your age: ( )0's, Your sex: (   ), Your country living now: (   ), Your native language: English
Your ESL/EFL teaching experience: ( ) years, where ? (   ), ESL or EFL? (   )
Your experience of teaching ESL/EFL to Japanese students: ( ) years, where? (   ), ESL or EFL? (   )
Degrees and/or professional qualifications earned or currently studying toward: (   ) majoring in (   )

       Do you know of any native-speaking ESL/EFL teachers who might be interested in this topic and whom I can ask to cooperate in this way? I would appreciate it if you let me know how I can get in touch with him/her (e.g., e-mail). Thank you once again.

Sincerely yours,
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Mikio Kubota
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APPENDIX 2: Results of Questionnaire – Part II

Item No.	Difficult	Easy	Serious	Not serious	Persistent	Not Persistent
01	1	2	0	3	3	1
02	2	1	3	0	2	1
03	2	1	1	2	2	1
04	1	1	0	2	2	0
05	0	3	0	4	1	2
06	1	1	1	1	1	1
07	0	4	0	4	3	1
08	1	1	0	2	2	1
09	2	1	1	2	4	0
10	1	2	3	0	1	2
11	0	3	0	3	0	3
12	0	3	2	1	0	4
13	1	2	0	4	2	2
14	2	1	1	2	3	1
15	3	0	2	1	2	0
16	2	1	2	2	3	1
17	2	1	2	1	3	0
18	1	2	3	0	3	0
19	2	1	3	0	3	1
20	2	1	2	1	3	0
21	3	0	1	2	2	1
22	1	2	0	3	3	0
23	1	2	0	4	3	1
24	1	2	1	2	4	0
25	0	3	1	2	3	0
26	3	0	0	3	3	1
27	2	1	0	4	3	0
28	1	2	2	2	3	0
29	3	0	2	1	3	0
30	0	3	0	3	2	1
31	2	1	2	2	2	1
32	1	2	0	3	3	1
33	2	1	2	1	2	1
34	2	1	1	3	3	1
35	2	1	1	2	3	0
36	2	1	2	1	2	1
37	2	0	1	1	2	0
38	2	1	0	3	2	1
39	3	0	1	3	3	0
40	3	0	2	1	2	1
41	1	2	4	0	3	1
42	1	2	0	3	2	1
43	2	1	0	3	3	0
44	3	0	1	2	4	0
45	1	2	1	2	3	1