

An Examination of Effective Instructional Strategies for EFL Compositions by Japanese EFL University Students: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The effectiveness of feedback to improve EFL students' writing skills is the subject of intense debate (Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2007). The current study concerns the effectiveness of written feedback in the development of the correct selection of articles. Two groups of students received feedback on their written assignments. The first was a class of nine Japanese EFL students who received grammatical feedback and feedback on content, to weekly essays which had been set for homework. The second group consisted of two students who completed emailed diary entries in English and received feedback from the teacher in the form of replies and not on grammar.

Although the feedback concerned general areas of grammar and content, the focus of this study is limited to progress in the correct choice of articles. Neither study demonstrated an improvement in this respect apart from one student in the second group who only received feedback on content. This suggests that unfocused feedback has little influence on the correct choice of articles. Further study could investigate the effectiveness of focused corrective feedback, as has been successfully demonstrated by Ellis et al. (2008), and supplemented with written and oral meta-linguistic explanations, as has been suggested by Bitchener (2008).

Introduction

Learning English in an environment with no chance to use it in a meaningful context could be compared to learning to swim without having the chance to jump in the pool. The swimming analogy is highly unlikely but unfortunately the experience of learning about the English language without having the opportunity to use it is all too common.

Is the method of learning about the English language without having the opportunity to use it useful, or is it counterproductive? Japanese classrooms typically focus on grammatical instruction. Certainly the role of grammar instruction in second language acquisition is strongly supported:

Recent second language acquisition (SLA) research on Focus on Form (in both written and spoken language) strongly suggests that adult second language acquirers in particular need their errors made salient and explicit to them so that they can avoid fossilization and continue developing linguistic competence (Ferris, 2004, p. 54).

The element that is lacking in English instruction in Japan is massive exposure. McDonald (1987, p. 397) identifies this as a critical feature of successful second language acquisition (SLA). Massive exposure, along with grammar instruction, could facilitate the production of grammatically acceptable writing, as well as listening and speaking skills. Studies of naturalistic SLA without grammar instruction demonstrate fossilization (e.g., Schmidt, 1981). The question is whether grammatical instruction alone with the absence of naturalistic interaction in the second language (L2) can ever be adequate.

The importance of grammar instruction in the development of writing skills is widely accepted. While there are appeals for fostering better writing skills at the tertiary level (e.g., Funakura, 2005), Mancuso (1997) also notes the importance of writing to communicate. Mancuso criticizes writing instruction in Japan as being ineffective, because “Japanese language teachers and institutions focus solely on the grammatical level. In Japan, structure over substance and components over communication is

paramount” (p.73).

Undoubtedly, instruction in L2 writing should foster long-term writing skills. However, there is still no resolution on the debate of whether grammar instruction in terms of corrective feedback (CF) is effective. Studies, such as Ashwell (2000) in which some of her students preferred feedback whereas others did not; suggest that a mixed approach may be more appropriate. Shin (2008) suggests that grammar correction from the teacher is the only obvious source of feedback. Thus, a need arises to investigate the long-term effects of CF on writing skills for communication.

The present study is twofold. First, we conduct an error analysis of articles in the weekly essays of nine Japanese EFL learners over a semester. Subsequently, and based on our error analysis, we measure the effects of CF on articles through a case study of e-mail diary writings of two participants. One participant is from the class we conducted our error analysis, and the other participant is a student outside the class who received no writing instruction.

We set out to investigate the effects of CF on participants’ micro linguistic skills on subsequent communicative writings. Our independent variable of CF is operationally defined as direct and unfocused grammatical feedback on essays written during an L2 English writing course. We also operationally define our dependent variable of linguistic micro skills as errors in indefinite and definite article usage. We analyzed the accuracy percentage of article usage on subsequent communicative writings over a period of four weeks to determine the effects of CF.

Can an Inner Circle model of Writing be Imposed on Learners?

In the sphere of pronunciation, ‘native’ speaker forms no longer necessarily serve as models for learners: “the focus on what the ‘natives’ do, which is a predominant feature of EFL pronunciation teaching, appears backward-looking and inappropriate for an international language” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 13). This is because pronunciation is inextricably linked to identity. However, in the case of writing, conforming to an international standard is empowering. Wallace (2002) argues that the task is to prepare students for

the “forms of language which have currency beyond the particular and contingent... which will offer tools to resist, not English itself but meanings which are frequently conveyed through English” (2002, p. 107). Rather than imposing native speaker norms on learners, the teaching of writing serves to empower them in the age of English as a lingua franca. Wallace continues to stress the importance of literate English over communicative English to achieve this goal:

This is not an imposition from the centre; it requires not the acquiescence of subordinated groups but their participation, if English is to be constantly recreated to serve emancipatory rather than oppressive goals. An attenuated, reduced English cannot serve this purpose. Literate English is also creatively more flexible than the restricted, horizontally embedded English of CLT (p. 111).

Language Distance and Transfer

Language distance can be seen as one of the predictors of relative difficulty. Van Parijs (2008) explains the barriers posed by language distance:

Obviously, the cost of learning a completely alien language – as English is for the Chinese – can be expected to greatly exceed, for any indicator of oral or written proficiency, the cost of learning what is just a variant of one’s own – as English is for the French (p. 77).

Kirkpatrick (1997) identifies language distance as the reason why Japanese is one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn, and logic implies that the reverse is also true. McLauchlan (2006, cited in McLauchlan, 2007) presents a comparison of the relative difficulty of Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Latin, and Spanish for English speakers. Japanese and Chinese are the clear frontrunners, and McLauchlan’s research places them as more than two and a half times more difficult than French and Spanish. Language distance is equal across both directions, thus

arguably this research could be extended to imply that language distance presents an additional obstacle for Japanese learners of English. Furthermore, language distance is the source of challenges in writing in English, if we accept that language transfer is the source of language errors, and that greater language distance leads to a higher frequency of written errors. This is especially pertinent in the instance of articles which do not exist in the Japanese language.

Corrective Feedback: L2 Writing Research

The debate on pedagogical instruction, namely CF, for writing skills centered on Ferris (2004) and Truscott (2007) is unlikely to be resolved soon (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Ferris views CF as beneficial, especially when given directly. Though Ferris (2004) admits evidence in CF research is not conclusive and further research is needed, her review of research findings of whether or not CF helps L2 writers clearly shows more studies in support of CF (Ferris, 2004, Table 1, p. 51).

On the other hand, Truscott (2007) maintains CF is ineffective and even harmful, citing flaws in interpretations of research conclusions that support CF. For instance, Truscott and Hsu (2008) concluded that CF did not result in improved writing on two writing tasks performed at a weekly interval of their 47 EFL graduate students. The CF group had their errors indicated by a marker, and had to revise their paper, and the control group had to revise their paper without it having been marked. When these rewritten assignments were marked the treatment group performed significantly better than the control group; “error feedback had a significant effect on students’ rewrites” (p.298). The second writing assignment showed no positive influence of the correction of their drafts; “Whether students received corrections on their drafts did not seem to influence their writing performance on the subsequent assignment” (p.298). Hence, Truscott and Hsu claim that revising errors does not imply long-term learning had taken place.

However, Burton (2009) criticizes Truscott’s argument (2007) for not having pedagogical significance, calling it “a rather tedious sterile

academic debate on limited levels of grammatical correctness in studies with marginal ecological credibility and an abundance of inferential statistics“(p. 611). Thus, researchers, such as Hu (2007), Qian (2010), and Hyland and Hyland (2006), are undecided, arguing it is difficult to draw conclusions with current literature because of the varied research designs.

The literature on CF has shown positive effects on accuracy by combining CF and individual conferencing (Bitchener et al., 2005) and using coded feedback alone (Chandler, 2003). Finally, O’Brien (2004) suggests from her meta-analysis on writing research in L2 that each type of feedback should serve different purposes. In addition to the above, Bitchener (2008) has highlighted the effectiveness of supplementing CF with both written and oral meta-linguistic explanations.

Until the debate is resolved, Guenette (2007) suggests CF is important, and we should perhaps continue its use seeing that students prefer CF (Chandler, 2003; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994), with some students specifically asking for CF on grammar and mechanisms (Cohen & Cavalcatu, 1990). Although the results of studies on feedback vary because of differences in design and methodology, Guenette urges teachers to continue providing feedback, and advises:

Teachers must not lose sight of the fact that second language acquisition is slow, gradual and often arduous, and that corrective feedback is only one of the many factors that contribute to that process (p. 52).

Guenette (2007) stresses that there is no clear evidence that feedback directly contributes to long term accuracy; studies yield varying results because of differences in design and student proficiency: “research so far has not been able to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that providing corrective feedback is a decisive factor in the attainment of language fluency and accuracy” (p. 41). Guenette argues that many studies do not indicate the proficiency level of the students claiming it is not clear whether the response of students to this feedback was due to the feedback itself or the proficiency

levels. Guenette contrasts studies of feedback in the short- and long-term, and indicates a trend for superior results for the former: "From these results, we would be tempted to believe that feedback on form does not play a role in the development of accuracy over time" (p. 45). However, she argues these results may be attributable to elicitation tasks and feedback techniques. Student responses may depend on whether the feedback concerned content or form, whether students self-correct or whether they copy the teacher's correction, and whether students receive grades for their writing.

Finally, research concerning CF from the students' perspectives is also divided. For instance, Arndt's (1993) and Zamel's (1985) students demonstrated negative opinions of feedback, whereas positive feedback was evidenced by students in studies by Engiarlar (1993), Jacobs, Curtis, Braine and Huang (1998), and Nagasaka (2005).

L2 Writing Studies in Japan

L2 writing research in Japan, as far as we know, started with Ross (1982) who found that direct correction and coded feedback resulted in no short-term changes. This was supported by Hatori et al. (1990) who concluded direct correction had negative effects and discouraged students from writing. On the other hand, Oshita (1990), later, found peer-feedback having short-term effects. His investigation two years later, by adding teacher indirect feedback to peer feedback, proved to attain optimal results (Oshita, 1992).

Shizuka (1993), while stating that in Japan "one of the most common forms of feedback still seems to be direct written feedback with red pens" (p. 139), divided her 120 high school students into four conditions: direct teacher-feedback of grammar and spelling mistakes, coded teacher-feedback on error location, indirect teacher-feedback on errors, peer-feedback, and self-correction. Results over three drafts explored immediate and long-term effects. Shizuka concluded that direct teacher correction was overall the most effective for higher and lower proficiency students.

In more recent research, Sasaki and Natsukari (2004) investigated

the effects of CF over six weeks on essays in the form of letters to their teachers. The topic was prescribed and the students were divided into two groups; one group which received feedback on four grammatical items, and another group which received feedback on the contents of their letters. In addition, both groups received feedback on spelling and letter writing. After examining perceived topic difficulty, interest, and resistance to writing, they found that the rate of essay submissions declined with the grammatical feedback group speculating that the pressure of the topic on top of accuracy led to the decline. They also feared the fossilization of the group who received content feedback noting the reoccurrence of the same mistakes.

Toff and Yamamori (2007) suggest that the type of feedback given should depend on proficiency levels. For instance, for high school students at the basic level should be given confidence to write more, and more advanced levels need to have a clearly defined purpose for writing. In line with purposes for writing, Kondo (2005) pointed out that his university students wrote for instrumental purposes such as getting good grades, a better job, or a higher salary, and rarely for enjoying writing for its own sake.

Ellis et al. (2008) conducted a study investigating the effectiveness of providing CF to the writing of Japanese university students of EFL. They contrasted the provision of focused and unfocused feedback. The former consisted of feedback in relation to errors of article choice, and the latter to more general grammatical feedback. There was also a control group which received feedback which excluded linguistic areas. All three groups demonstrated improvement in the first post-test. However, on a delayed post-test, the control group demonstrated a poorer performance, the unfocused group maintained their standard, and the focused group demonstrated continued improvement. Ellis et al., therefore, argue that CF can lead to improvements in the use of articles over time. Furthermore, when contrasting focused and unfocused feedback, Ellis et al. suggest that the former may lead to better retention than the latter. However, they acknowledge that teachers “may feel that they do not have the luxury of focusing exclusively on a single error when they correct their student’s

written work. Clearly, if CF is effective when it addresses a number of different errors, it would be advantageous to adopt this approach” (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 367). Ellis et al. furthermore acknowledge that despite the effectiveness of feedback on articles, it may not necessarily be effective in regard to complex grammatical elements, as Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007, cited in Ellis et al., 2008) has suggested. Ellis et al.’s (2008) rigorous investigation with pre, post, follow-up test design supported the effectiveness of CF with Japanese university EFL students on indefinite and definite articles for first and anaphoric references on narratives.

Duppenthaler (2004) found that meaning-focused feedback enhanced positive motivation and quantity but not accuracy in journal entries of high school students. Similarly, Peloghitis (2010) measured the effect of CF on subsequent quality of writing and accuracy of his two groups (one receiving CF and the other no-feedback) of students. Both made gains, but the group receiving no feedback gained in quality of essays, and the accuracy of the CF group improved. Their conclusions are consistent with Baba and Nitta (2010), though not researching feedback *per se*, found that after a year of 10-minute free writing, improved grammatical complexity with only content-feedback with their first-year English majors was evident.

Study One: Error Analysis

Researchers have been examining ‘what works’ for improvement on student’s article usage (Ellis et al., 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005). Bitchener and Knoch (2008) suggest “it is important that corrective feedback be provided on the use of articles when students reveal recurrent difficulties with correct usage” (p.206). Similarly, errors in article usage were chosen for the present study.

Participants

The participants were eight third-year and a fourth-year Japanese university students in a Comparative Culture Department. The students were enrolled in a writing class and were required to write a weekly essay. CF was provided each week and students were encouraged to write corrections.

The class was compulsory and consisted of students who were majoring in EFL, and those majoring in other subjects. The essays under consideration were produced over a fifteen-week semester. Students were encouraged to write out corrections of all errors each week but not all complied. Students 4 and 7 included essays that had been submitted in the semester of the previous year in a course taught by the same instructor. The course implemented CF as well as class-conferencing. The quantity of the writing varied, but the topic was prescribed. The instructor chose the topic based on the chapter that was covered in the lesson from Zemach and Rumisek (2003). All nine participants have studied English for six years at junior and senior high school, and have successfully completed an entrance exam, including an English section, to a prestigious regional university.

Method

This first study investigated errors in article usage made in compositions by Japanese EFL university students. We collected their weekly written assignments for a total of 108 essays. The first author was the instructor in the class, and received written consent from the students concerning the study. Nearly all errors were corrected, not just article errors. However, the focus of this current research simply concerns the choice of articles.

Results and Discussion

The numbers of errors each student made are presented in Table 1a and 1b. Of the 108 essays we collected and analyzed, we found 203 errors in article usage (Table 2). Out of all 203 errors of article usage 119 (58.62%) were errors of definite article usage. The anaphoric *the* (i.e. 'I wanted a convertible. I drove *the* convertible.') was mistaken 16 times (7.89%), where as *the* necessary before an adjective (i.e. '*the* only example', '*the* first reason', and '*the* best man') was mistaken 98 times (82.35%). There were also three mistakes of the usage of *the* for places (i.e. '*the* bathroom'), and one mistake not using *the* after the preposition *of* (i.e. 'one of *the* third graders').

The usage of indefinite articles *a* and *an* (i.e. ‘I went to *a* rice field.’) was incorrect on 65 occasions (32.01%). Interestingly, most of these mistakes were when there was an adjective preceding the noun (i.e. ‘I was *a* natural warrior. It was *a* happy time.’) This accounted for 61 mistakes (93.85%) of the indefinite article mistakes. The indefinite article meaning *one* (i.e. ‘We have *a* BBQ party every year.’) was missing the other four times.

There were also 19 (9.36%) over-generalization of articles in which an article was not needed (i.e. ‘I have played *the* many kinds’, ‘we can have *a* responsibility’), and there was one mistake of using *a* for *an* (0.49%).

Table 1a. Error Count from Student Essays 1-10 (S = student, E = essay)

S	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10
1	1	0	1	0	1	3	1	6	1	4
2	5	0	2	2	0	2	1	3	5	
3	3	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	1
4	0	2	0	2	1	2	0	0	2	
5	0	2	2	0	1	2	4	0	1	3
6	1	0	4	2	2	0	2	0		
7	4	1	0	1	0	1	2	2	5	
8	7	3	1	4	4	8	2	5	2	8
9	0	1	0	0	6	1	2	1	1	3

Table 1b. Error Count from Student Essays 11-20 (S=student, E=essay)

S	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
5	2	2	2	0	0	4				
8	1	5	1	3	3	0	0	2	0	3
9	1	0	5	0	3	2				

Researchers, such as Ellis et al. (2008), usually conduct research during a course, thus, we decided to follow-up the effects of CF on writing

skills after a course. In argument against Ellis et al. (2008), Xu (2009) stated that “the participant’s previously existing learned system of articles (learned as a result of former explicit classroom instruction) might have been activated by the perceived research focus to monitor their writings consciously rather than a clearer article system emerging as a result of CF treatment” (p. 270-271). Likewise, the errors in article usage were directly given in all 108 essays. Therefore, our second study examined the effects of CF after the course with Student 8, who had 42.18 words per mistake (wpm)¹ in the first ten essays and seemed to show the biggest improvement with 80.17 wpm in the second half, as well as the highest motivation as observed by the number of essays written.

Table 2. Error Type from Student Essays

Error type	Number of misuses (out of 203)
Definite article <i>before adjective</i>	98
Definite article for the anaphoric <i>the</i>	16
Definite article for obvious places	3
Definite article for usage after preposition <i>of</i>	1
Indefinite article referential <i>a</i> (first mention)	60
Indefinite articles in which <i>a = one</i>	4
Indefinite articles in which <i>a = another</i>	1
Indefinite article <i>an</i> for subsequent vowels	1
Over-generalizations	19

In sum, Japanese EFL university students did seem to have trouble with articles (203 errors in 108 essays). Interestingly, we saw a pattern of incorrect usage when there was an adjective between the obligatory article and noun (60 cases out of 203), and for definite articles necessary before adjectives (98 cases out of 203). These results led to our second study; a pilot study examining the effect of CF on article usage after a writing course.

Study Two: Pilot Investigation on Corrective Feedback

Merrier and Dirks (1997) advocate e-mails as effective forms of communication. Mei (2003) citing Matsumoto (1989) distinguishes diary studies into those that involve the researcher who is also a diarist (introspective diaries) and those which the researcher analyzes the diaries of the learners (non-introspective). Our investigation consists of the latter.

Research in diary writings has shown positive results for communication and enhancing motivation (cf. Gonzalez-Bueno & Perez, 2000) Furthermore, in Japan, Kim and Miller (2006) found that writing with computers for university students helped rather than hindered performance. In addition, McGuire (1999) states e-mail journals resembles authentic communication in that there is no trace of paper making it more “conversation-like” (p.174). Thus, the current study adopted this form of written communication to measure article selection.

Participants

To measure the effects of CF on subsequent written communication, two participants who were in their third year at a national university were chosen. Both participants wanted to become English teachers and were considered highly motivated due to their daily visits and amount of time spent in the self-access center of their universities. They also had similar proficiency levels with Test of English for International Communication¹ (TOEIC) scores of 630 (Student 8) and 650 (Student 10). Student 8 attended the course from Study One above in which she produced essays and received CF on grammatical errors. Student 10 did not receive CF or attend any English courses before starting her email diaries.

Both participants wanted to continue their English studies in which we advised them to write a diary without mentioning the present study. Consent for using their diaries was received from both students after each had written a month of entries. The diaries were all read and occasionally commented on in a natural form of communication without any corrections by the second author. Student 8 was chosen for the comparison because she showed the most improvement in article usage (42.18 wpm to

80.17 wpm). Most teachers would regard her progress as gaining a better understanding of article usage at the end of the course. Thus, we decided to measure if an understanding of article usage had been achieved.

Method

The two participants were asked to write and email daily diary entries to the second author. To ensure a more natural form of communication, the second author did not reply to every entry and did not correct any grammar directly or indirectly. The second author occasionally replied to show the writer had an audience to maintain a high motivation to continue writing.

After collecting a month of entries, we analyzed the linguistic micro skills, namely article usage, by using obligatory occasions analysis and calculating mean accuracy percentages (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Ellis et al. 2008). In other words, in each diary entry the number of obligatory articles were identified and inspected for correct article supplementation. The mean accuracy percentage was calculated by dividing the total number of correct times the article was supplied by the number of times an article was obligatory. For instance, if there were ten obligatory occasions and the student supplied the correct article five times the mean accuracy percentage would be .50.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of both participants' weekly mean accuracy percentages from the diaries written once a day for four weeks. Student 8 started writing one week after the end of her writing course in which her writing was checked for grammatical accuracy, whereas Student 10 did not attend an English class before starting her email diary. Figure 1 indicates that Student 8 started with a higher mean accuracy percentage ($M = 0.76$, $SD = 0.25$), but the percentage gradually declined each week. Contrastingly, Student 10 who did not receive CF, started off with a lower mean accuracy percentage ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 0.32$). However, her mean accuracy percentage gradually increased slightly declining in the

final week of the study. The dramatic change in Figure 1 motivated us to further our investigation.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Obligatory Occasions Analysis

		Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4	
S	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
8	7	.76	.25	.59	.17	.56	.20	.55	.17
10	7	.69	.32	.77	.09	.84	.04	.82	.09

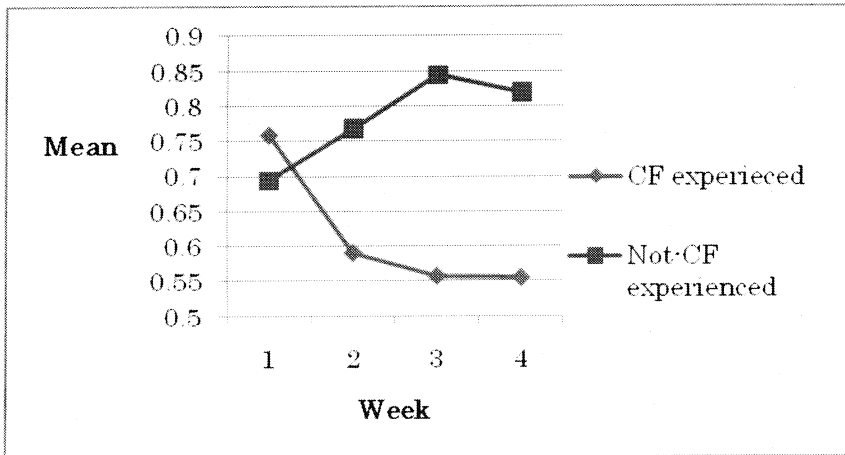


Figure 1. Weekly Mean Accuracy Percentages

An independent two-tailed *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in accuracy between the two students in the first week of their diary writings. This was not the case, as the results of the independent *t*-test indicate the two students started their diaries at the same level of accuracy in article usage (Student 8: $M = 0.759$, $SD = 0.248$; Student 10: $M = 0.694$, $SD = 0.316$; $p = 0.66$) (Table 4). Interestingly, their last week of writings differed significantly (Student 8: $M = 0.555$, $SD = 0.173$; Student 10: $M = 0.818$, $SD = 0.093$, $p = 0.01$).

As Bitchener and Knoch (2008) and Ellis et al. (2008), we measured the factors of condition (CF or no CF) and time (four weeks) with

a two-way repeated measures ANOVA and post hoc repeated measures t-tests and an one-way ANOVA. Table 5 confirms the difference between the participants in accuracy ($F(1, 6) = 468.027, p < .01$). In other words, the results showed that the students' individual performance differed over the four weeks. On the other hand, the within-subjects analysis suggested the difference was due to condition ($F(1, 6) = p < .05$) but not time ($F(3, 18) = .201, p = .895$). There was no significant interaction between time and condition ($F(3, 18) = 2.970, p = .059$).

Table 4. Comparison of First and Last Mean Accuracy Percentages

		Week 1 (N=7)				Week 4 (N=7)			
S	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	7	.759	.247	.454	.66	.554	.173	3.555	.01
10	7	.694	.316			.819	.093		

We delved further into the differences between conditions. Our post-hoc analysis with a repeated measures two-tailed t-tests comparing weekly changes did not confirm any significant difference within the students' weekly writing (Table 6). On the other hand, subsequent one-way ANOVA showed that by the fourth week the two students writings were significantly different ($F(1, 12) = 12.635, p < .01$) as did our independent t-test results (Table 4). The one-way ANOVA, also, showed the groups were not significantly different in the first week ($F(1, 12) = .183, p = .676$).

In sum, the mean accuracy percentage of Student 8 who experienced CF declined gradually whereas Student 10 who did not receive CF improved gradually. Nevertheless, repeated measures t-tests of each participant resulted in the weekly changes being insignificant. However, a comparison of the two students who were statistically at the same level in week one significantly differed after four weeks and 28 diary entries.

Because of the insignificance in individual improvement, we cannot make conclusions as to whether CF is effective or ineffective to students' selection of articles. Additionally, and due to our small number of participants ($N = 2$), we do not intend to reject our null hypothesis of no

changes in mean accuracy percentage of articles after CF. However, this study, as expected, prompts further investigations of questions concerning the effects of CF towards improvement of article usage. Nevertheless, we tentatively conclude that unfocused CF during a course provides no effect on selection of articles.

Table 5. Two-way ANOVA Results

Source	df	F	<i>p</i>	Eta squared
Between Subjects				
Group	1	468.027	.000	.987
Within Subjects				
Condition (CF or not)	1	9.606	.021	.616
Time (each week)	3	.201	.895	.032
Condition X Time	3	2.970	.059	.331

Table 6. Weekly Differences in Mean Percentage Accuracy

time	Student 8				Student 10			
	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
week 1-2	.169	.212	2.098	.081	.074	.342	.571	.589
week 2-3	.022	.113	.777	.467	.077	.113	1.797	.122
week 3-4	.002	.300	.021	.984	.025	.093	.714	.502
week 1-4	.204	.289	1.872	.110	.125	.339	.975	.367

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations of our study was the small sample size. The first study had nine participants and the second study only two. Though we chose two students with similar motivations, goals, and proficiency levels, a study with more participants would give better insights into the effects of CF.

Second, though we double-checked our work, our failure for not reporting an inter-rater reliability could put the study in jeopardy. Inter-rater reliability would provide validity in our error analysis and obligatory occasions analysis when analyzing and identifying errors in article usage in

the essays and email diaries.

Conclusions

Selecting articles in English presents a formidable challenge for many Japanese EFL students. Students tended to demonstrate errors when placing articles before adjectives in front of nouns and for definite articles used for identifying cases of ‘only one’. However, whether or not CF is the best method for helping Japanese EFL students’ gain a better understanding of article usage is in question. Our study suggests that unfocused instruction on these articles might not be the best method to foster an understanding of article usage.

Though one participant in Study Two showed improvement of article usage during the course, we could not see any significant improvements in written communications after the course. This suggests that for her, a motivated English student, CF did not have an effect. Experiences of students like this participant, whose accuracy in article usage was not maintained after the course, support Xu (2009) who argues that during a course, students have only an over-consciousness of grammar application and not a clear understanding of the rule. Put simply, students have not actually learnt the rule.

In response to our initial question as to whether CF was adequate in enabling students to produce grammatically acceptable phrases, the present study indicated that CF did not succeed in helping our students improve their proficiency in selection of the correct article over the course.

On the other hand, our study could also give insight into Truscott’s (2007) arguments against CF, in which our other participant gradually, though not significantly, improved in article usage over time without CF. As Ray Bradbury states “Quantity gives experience. From experience alone can quality come” (1990, cited in McGuire, 1999, p. 169). However, it could also be argued that article usage might have already been fossilized for the student receiving CF (see Schmidt, 1981).

Finally, if ‘massive exposure’ in SLA is essential as McDonald (1987) posits, a better definition is needed. The linguistic micro skills of our

participant who had grammar instruction in the course along with exposure to English everyday for over three hours did not seem to produce more grammatically acceptable writing, as our investigation of the effects of CF on her subsequent communicative writings has shown. Could Truscott and Hsu's (2008) claim that revising errors results in no long-term learning be true? Ellis et al.'s (2008) study, which argued that CF was effective, was conducted during a course without examining the effects after the delayed post-test. On the other hand, the results of our study, which examined the effects of unfocused CF, showed no improvement in article usage after the course.

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Footnotes

¹Words per minute was calculated by dividing the number of mistakes in each essay by the total number of words written that each essay.

²For a detailed explanation concerning the TOEIC test view Gilfert (1996).