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Abstract

This preliminary study investigates what grammatical errors are most frequently observed in Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners even after the six years of English learning. By a series of free writing tasks, 2691 English sentences were collected from 28 Japanese EFL learners. We identified 882 grammatical errors in the dataset with respect to five major types: determiner, preposition, subject-verb agreement for *be*-verbs, subject-verb agreement for general verbs, and number agreement within a noun phrase. The ratios of the number of grammatical errors to that of obligatory contexts in which those particular grammatical items must occur were 61.1%, 10.9%, 2.6%, 5.7%, and 18.2%, respectively. There are three major findings: (i) Japanese EFL learners make errors in the determiner most frequently, (ii) they make errors in subject-verb agreement more frequently for general verbs compared to *be*-verbs, and (iii) they make errors in the determiner more often compared to agreement. Their theoretical implications are discussed.

Key Words: grammatical errors, error analysis, Japanese EFL learners, free writing tasks, cross-linguistic differences

アブストラクト

本研究は、6年間の英語学習を経てもなお、日本人英語学習者に最も頻繁に観察される文法的誤りを調査する。一連の自由英作文課題によって、28名の日本人英語学習者から2691個の英文を収集した。データセットの中で、冠詞、前置詞、*be*動詞に関する主語動詞の一致、一般動詞に関する主語動詞の一致、名詞句内の数一致という5つの主要な文法項目について、882個の誤りを同定した。それらの文法項目が出現しなければいけないという義務的文脈の数に対する文法的誤りの数の割合はそれぞれ、61.1%、10.9%、2.6%、5.7%、18.2%であった。三つの主要な発見は、日本人英語学習者は(i)冠詞について最も多くの誤りを犯し、(ii)主語動詞の一致について*be*動詞よりも一般動詞に対してより多くの誤りを犯し、(iii)一致よりも冠詞についてより多くの誤りを犯す、というものであった。これらの発見から得られる理論的含意を考察する。

キーワード: 文法的誤り、誤り分析、日本人英語学習者、自由英作文課題、言語間差異

1. Introduction¹

Six-year-old children produce adult-like sentences with few grammatical errors in their native language. On the other hand, Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (hereafter Japanese EFL learners) persistently suffer from grammatical errors in their use of English even after the six-year learning. What makes this difference? Do Japanese EFL learners produce grammatical errors in a systematic (or predictable) fashion? Or do they produce them in a totally random (or unpredictable) way? These questions are of particular interest to the present study.

Previous research on native/first language acquisition has shown that children learning a particular language make grammatical errors systematically in that language, and that the analysis of those errors provides us with insights into grammatical knowledge being acquired (e.g., Brown, 1973; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Error analysis of the sentences produced by second language learners has also contributed to explicating the nature of grammatical knowledge being learned (e.g., Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972; Richards, 1974; Selinker, 1992; Eubank, Selinker, & Sharwood Smith, 1997; Han & Tarone, 2014). In particular, error analysis of the sentences produced by Japanese EFL learners has demonstrated that they tend to make errors in the determiner and preposition more frequently compared to the other grammatical items (Showa Women's University's Research Group of Learner Corpus, 2007; Tono, 2007).

The present study investigates what grammatical errors are most frequently observed in Japanese EFL learners and discusses the question of why some particular type of grammatical errors occur more frequently compared to other types and its theoretical implications. Section 2 reports the method and results of a series of free writing tasks in which sentences for error analysis were collected from Japanese EFL learners. Section 3 discusses the results with respect to their theoretical implications that the reason for why some particular type of grammatical errors are observed most frequently is related to the cross-linguistic difference between learners' native language and the target language. Finally, Section 4 concludes the paper with the future directions proposed.

2. Data Collection

To investigate which grammatical errors Japanese EFL learners are most likely to make, the current study conducted a series of free writing tasks. This section describes the method and results of the tasks.

2.1. Method

Participants

Twenty-eight freshmen from the School of Education at Gunma University took part in data collection as a part of the course credit. Their proficiency level of English was estimated by their scores on the TOEIC IP (Test Of English for International Communication Institutional Program). The participants' mean score on the TOEIC IP was 428 out of 990 ($SD = 76$). The participants were considered pre-intermediate learners after the six years of English learning from junior high to high schools.

Materials

There were 10 topics in (1) for free writing tasks.

- (1) a. Write freely about yourself.
- b. What did you do during the spring vacation?
- c. What are you going to do during the “golden week”?
- d. What did you do during the “golden week”?
- e. What do you think about your university life?
- f. How was the Sports Festival last Saturday?
- g. What is/are your memory/memories of high school days?
- h. What is/are your memory/memories of junior high school days?
- i. What is/are your memory/memories of elementary school days?
- j. What are you going to do during the summer vacation?

Procedure

The data were collected in an English course as follows. First, the experimenter/teacher explained about a topic for writing. Second, each participant/student was given a sheet of paper with horizontal lines in order for him/her to write one sentence on one line. Third, seven minutes were provided to the participants for their free writing about the topic in question. The experimenter instructed the participants not to use paper or electronic dictionaries in writing.

The target data and data treatment

By a series of free writing tasks, 2691 English sentences were collected from the 28 participants. These sentences were then examined as to whether they included grammatical errors or not. In this paper, we focus on five major types of grammatical error: determiner, preposition, subject-verb agreement for *be*-verbs, subject-verb agreement for general verbs, and number agreement within a noun phrase as in (2) (an asterisk* indicates that a given string of words is ungrammatical or judged as unacceptable by a native speaker of a language in question).²

- (2) a. Determiner
*It was first time in my experience.
- b. Preposition
*I want to go disney sea now.
- c. Subject-verb agreement for *be*-verbs
*Her words is very interesting.
- d. Subject-verb agreement for general verbs
*It make me happy.
- e. Number agreement within a noun phrase
*For example, I can study many thing that I can't study before.

Based on the notion of “obligatory context” in which a particular grammatical item must occur (e.g., Brown, 1973), whether there was an error in that context or not was examined. For example, in (2a), a determiner must appear before the underlined word *first* and thus the data is analyzed as including an error in the determiner. In (2b), a preposition does not exist even in a context that requires it obligatorily (*to* must occur after the word *go*). In (2c-d), the subject and verb must agree in terms of number, but there are errors in agreement for *be*-verbs and general verbs, respectively (*are* and *makes* must be used instead). In (2e), number agreement must be realized within a noun phrase, but *thing* does not agree with *many* in terms of number.

For data treatment, first, the number of obligatory contexts was counted for each of the five grammatical items. Second, the number of errors in obligatory contexts was counted for each grammatical item. Third, the ratios of the number of errors to that of obligatory contexts were calculated and compared among the five grammatical items.

2.2. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the numbers of obligatory contexts and errors and of the error ratios in percentage for each of the five grammatical items.

For the determiner, the numbers of obligatory contexts and errors were 963 and 588, respectively, and the

Table 1 The numbers of obligatory contexts and errors and the error ratios in percentage

	Obligatory contexts	Errors	Error ratios
Determiner	963	588	61.1%
Preposition	1465	160	10.9%
Subject-verb agreement for <i>be</i> -verbs	1196	31	2.6%
Subject-verb agreement for general verbs	618	35	5.7%
Number agreement within a noun phrase	374	68	18.2%

error ratio was 61.1%. This error ratio was the highest among the five grammatical items. Out of the 588 errors, 580 errors were related to the drop of determiner as in (2a) above. The other eight errors included, for example, the double use of determiners like **in the a year*.

As for the preposition, the number of obligatory contexts was 1465 and that of errors was 160, and thus the error ratio was 10.9%, which was the third highest among the grammatical items examined. There were 117 errors related to the drop of preposition as in (2b) above and 43 errors for other reasons, for example, the use of inappropriate preposition like **in May 5th* (cf. *on May 5th*).

Regarding subject-verb agreement, we compared *be*-verbs and general verbs. In the case of *be*-verbs, the numbers of obligatory contexts and errors were 1196 and 31, respectively, and the error ratio was 2.6%. On the other hand, the numbers of obligatory contexts and errors were 618 and 35, respectively, for general verbs, and the error ratio was 5.7%. A chi-squared test indicated that the number of errors against that of obligatory contexts was significantly higher for general verbs compared to *be*-verbs ($X^2 = 9.2815$, $df = 1$, $p = .002315 < .01$).³

Finally, for number agreement within a noun phrase, the number of obligatory contexts was 374 and that of errors was 68, and the error ratio was 18.2%, which was the second highest among the five grammatical items.

3. Discussion

There were three major findings. A first finding is that the participants made errors in the determiner most frequently compared to the other four grammatical items. This finding is consistent with the previous one as shown by Tono (2007), for example, that Japanese EFL learners are most likely to produce grammatical errors in the determiner. A possible reason for why Japanese EFL learners make quite a few errors in the determiner is related to the cross-linguistic difference between their native language, Japanese, and the target language, English. For example, consider the following sentence (GEN stands for a genitive case marker and TOP for a topic marker):

- (3) Sore-wa watasi-no keiken-de hazimete datta.
 it-TOP I-GEN experience-in first time was
 'It was the first time in my experience.'

In Japanese, the word *first* can occur independently, but in the English translation, the determiner *the* accompanies with the word *first* obligatorily (cf. *It was first time in my experience). This difference in the determiner system for nouns is attributable to Japanese EFL learners' errors in the determiner in English, in particular their drop of determiner. What makes the situation more complicated is the fact that in English, nouns do not always co-occur with determiners as shown in (4).

- (4) I like cats. (cf. *I like cat.)

In the case of (4), a determiner does not appear before the word *cats*, but notice that a determiner, *a* or *the*, must occur if a singular noun *cat* is used. This fact about the English language makes it difficult for Japanese EFL learners to use the determiners grammatically.

A second finding is that the participants made errors in subject-verb agreement for general verbs more frequently compared to *be*-verbs. This is possibly related to the poverty of the change in general verb forms. Compare the sentences with *be*-verbs in (5a-h) and with general verbs in (6a-h).

- (5) a. I am playing with a ball.
 b. You are playing with a ball.
 c. He is playing with a ball.
 d. She is playing with a ball.
 e. It is playing with a ball.
 f. We are playing with a ball.
 g. You are playing with a ball.

h. They are playing with a ball.

- (6)
- a. I play with a ball.
 - b. You play with a ball.
 - c. He plays with a ball.
 - d. She plays with a ball.
 - e. It plays with a ball.
 - f. We play with a ball.
 - g. You play with a ball.
 - h. They play with a ball.

As seen in (5f-h) and (6f-h), the verb forms do not change when the subject is plural. In the case of singular subjects, however, *be*-verbs and general verbs behave differently. *Be*-verbs change their forms depending on the subject's person information (i.e., the first, second, and third), whereas general verbs change their forms only when the third-person subject is used. Based on this difference, it may be the case that Japanese EFL learners memorize *am*, *are*, and *is* as they are in their mental dictionary, or lexicon, instead of the base form, *BE*. On the other hand, they store the base forms of general verbs such as *PLAY* in their lexicon and compute the merger of them and the tense information for externalization like *plays*. Then, the reason for why the participants made more errors for general verbs may be related to their failure in this computation.

Finally, a third finding is that the participants made more errors in the determiner compared to (subject-verb and number) agreement. These two grammatical items differ in terms of their relatedness to meaning. Subject-verb agreement is purely grammatically required as seen in (5) and (6) that the information important to the change in verb forms is provided from the subjects. This also holds in number agreement within a noun phrase as shown in (7).

- (7) I have many books.

The singular-plural information which is crucial to the change in noun forms is provided from the degree words like *many*. In subject-verb agreement and number agreement within a noun phrase, then, changes in verb or noun forms are redundant information as to meaning. It may be the case that Japanese EFL learners can change verb and noun forms mechanically without considering the meaning in question and thus are less likely to make errors in agreement compared to the determiner. As for the determiner, on the other hand, its correct use is related to meaning. For example, compare the sentences in (8a-b).

- (8)
- a. It was the first time in my experience.
 - b. I like cats.

In (8a), a particular time is being referred to, not other times, and thus the determiner *the* is needed to limit the referents of times that the person in question is talking about. The sentence in (8b) means that the person

in question likes not a particular kind of cat but cats in general, and this is why no determiner is used. Hence, Japanese EFL learners have to consider the meaning in question, which may be a burden on their correct use of the determiners, leading to more errors compared to agreement.

Based on the above three major findings, we now discuss their theoretical implications. The cross-linguistic difference between the learner's native language and the target language can be a crucial factor in explaining or predicting his/her errors in particular grammatical items such as determiners, as having been repeatedly pointed out in error analysis (e.g., Han & Tarone, 2014). Since the Japanese and English languages are said to be mirror images with each other (e.g., Chomsky, 1981), error analysis of the sentences produced by Japanese EFL learners is a useful tool to identify the differences and similarities in the grammatical systems of the two languages. Japanese EFL learners' different behaviors for *be*-verbs and general verbs may tell us about how differently learners memorize these two types of verb in their lexicon and compute them for externalization. The different mechanisms, if any, of merging the tense information and the verb's base form can be a factor in predicting errors in the two types of verb. The higher error ratio of the determiner compared to agreement possibly implies that grammatical items can be divided into two types, meaning-based and purely grammar-based, and that this difference may be a factor in explaining errors in each type of grammatical item.

3.1. What second language learners' grammatical errors can tell us about the innate knowledge of human language (first step)

In this section, we briefly discuss the importance of error analysis in explicating the innate knowledge of human language. In both first/child and second/adult language acquisition/learning, grammatical errors themselves are mysterious because language acquirers/learners rarely receive ungrammatical sentences in their input. Then, why do the first language acquirers (hereafter L1ers) and second language learners (hereafter L2ers) produce particular types of ungrammatical sentence? Since L1ers and L2ers both use their knowledge of language in their mind/brain to produce sentences, error analysis of their sentences can tell us about what they know about language.

In error analysis of L1ers, there is an interesting proposal that children acquiring a particular language can access to grammars of other languages. For example, consider the following data which is frequently observed in two-to-four-year-old children acquiring Japanese:

- (9) *akai-no kaban
 red-GEN bag
 'a red bag'

In adult Japanese, the expression in (9) is ungrammatical (cf. *akai kaban* 'a red bag'). In child Japanese, however, a genitive case marker is incorrectly inserted between *akai* and *kaban*. It is curious that children acquiring Japanese often produce such expressions as in (9) although those ungrammatical sentences may never occur in their input. An interesting analysis is proposed that the incorrect use of a genitive case marker as in (9) reflects children's attempt at using an English-like relative clause (e.g., Murasugi, 2014). That is, the string of words in (9) can be interpreted as 'a bag that is red,' and the genitive case marker in (9) can be

analyzed as a relative pronoun, *that*, which does not exist in Japanese grammar. Although other analyses are possible, this proposal is intriguing because it suggests that Japanese-speaking children can use English grammar even without receiving any input from English. If the proposal is on the right track, it follows that L1ers can access to the innate knowledge about every human language, which has been theorized as Universal Grammar/UG (e.g., Chomsky, 1981). This is consistent with the empirical fact that humans are born with the ability to acquire any particular language. The proposal is insightful in both that ungrammatical sentences produced by L1ers of a particular language can be grammatical in other languages, and that error analysis can contribute to explicating the nature of what L1ers innately know about human language.

If the same kind of error analysis is possible for L2ers, it may be demonstrated that they can also use the innate knowledge of human language in learning second languages, which contributes to the discussion on the long-standing theoretical question of whether L2ers can access to UG or not (e.g., Flynn & O'Neil, 1988; White, 1989; Eubank, 1991; Huebner & Ferguson, 1991; Eckman, 1993; Flynn, Martohardjono, & O'Neil, 1998; Klein & Martohardjono, 1999; Herschensohn, 2000; Kaltenbacher, 2001; White, 2003; Thomas, 2004; Leung, 2009; Whong, Gil, & Marsden, 2013). For example, if a Japanese EFL learner has received input from only Japanese and English languages and his/her ungrammatical sentences in English cannot trace back to his/her knowledge of Japanese grammar but can be analyzed as grammatical in other particular languages, then it may be the case that he/she can access to the innate knowledge of language and thus use the grammars of particular languages from which he/she never receives input. Few studies have been attempted for this kind of possibility, which may be an interesting future research question.

4. Concluding Remarks on Future Directions

In this preliminary study, we collected 2691 English sentences from 28 Japanese EFL learners by a series of free writing tasks, and analyzed whether there were grammatical errors in obligatory contexts or not. We found 882 errors in the five major grammatical items: determiner, preposition, subject-verb agreement for *be*-verbs, subject-verb agreement for general verbs, and number agreement within a noun phrase. There were three major findings: (i) Japanese EFL learners made errors in the determiner most frequently compared to the other grammatical items, (ii) they made errors in subject-verb agreement more often for general verbs compared to *be*-verbs, and (iii) they produced more errors in the determiner compared to agreement. Yamada (2017) proposes that the phenomenon called 'grammatical illusion' that people erroneously accept ungrammatical sentences (e.g., Phillips, Wagers, & Lau, 2011) can be applied as a diagnostic of which grammatical items Japanese EFL learners have difficulty in learning. That is, the more errors a learner make in a particular grammatical item, the more likely it is for him/her to accept ungrammatical sentences with errors in that item erroneously. If this proposal is on the right track, the present study's findings make the following predictions: (i) Japanese EFL learners should be most likely to accept ungrammatical sentences with errors in the determiner compared to other types of grammatical item, (ii) they should be more likely to accept ungrammatical sentences with errors in subject-verb agreement for general verbs compared to *be*-verbs, and (iii) they should be more likely to accept ungrammatical sentences with errors in the determiner compared to those with errors in agreement. These are the directions to be explored in future research for better understanding of Japanese EFL learners, which leads to more effective and efficient teaching and learning for

them.

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Notes

1. This paper is an extended version of the Technical Report (Yamada, 2018) presented at MT3 (Mental Architecture for Processing and Learning of Language (MAPLL), Tokyo Conference on Psycholinguistics (TCP), the technical group of thought and language of the Institute of Electronics, Information and Communication (TL), and Theoretical Linguistics at Keio (TaLK)) 2018 at Keio University on July 28th, 2018. I would like to thank the audience for their constructive comments on the earlier drafts.
2. See Appendix for a small corpus of grammatical errors collected in the present study.
3. The statistical values were calculated by using the R function of *chisq.test*.

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Appendix

The following is a small corpus of the sentences with grammatical errors collected in this study.

Determiner (drop)

- 1 I want to tell children that Japanese history is so exciting subject.
- 2 It was good match, and I enjoyed it.
- 3 But I thought that our team is very good and wonderful team.
- 4 I started to play piano.
- 5 Second reason is that I have many friends in Gunma university.

Determiner (other reasons)

- 6 I read more zoo books in the a year.
- 7 A good memory was practising the table tennis over enjoying it.
- 8 My house is near The Gunma University.
- 9 So, I'm going to enjoy having a abura [oily, TY] soba.
- 10 ... Nobunaga was the first in the Japan.

Preposition (drop)

- 11 First, I'll go lunch with my friends.
- 12 I can meet and talk someone ….
- 13 I will go the library and read a lot of books.
- 14 We listened a story of War II.
- 15 I enjoy playing a lot of children.

Preposition (other reasons)

- 16 will go to shopping during my holiday.
- 17 tried to them many times.
- 18 felt bad because I concentrated to games.
- 19 ne day, I visited to USJ in Osaka.
- 20 want to books.

Subject-verb agreement for *be*-verbs

- 21 My club activities is soft tennis.
- 22 My favorite sports is basketball.
- 23 All my high school memories is great.
- 24 People of Japanese major is very kind and interesting.
- 25 My memories of high school days is club.
- 26 My high school days was very good.
- 27 My teammates was more than 50.
- 28 There was a lot of shops.
- 29 I can receive some new information which are from the place I don't live in.
- 30 But I were very tired.

Subject-verb agreement for general verbs

- 31 I belongs to basketball club in Gunma University.
- 32 My friends said "you looks pare [pale, TY]."
- 33 So, May holiday weeks makes me fat.
- 34 I think that these days makes me happy.
- 35 So, my dream come true!
- 36 But my basketball teammate live in Tokyo ….
- 37 He play archery well.
- 38 Our running way have eleven kilometers.
- 39 My friend like katayose ryota who is a member of Generations.
- 40 But tetsuko don't like me.

Number agreement within a noun phrase

- 41 I took many picture.
- 42 I want to read a lot of book ….
- 43 There are many kind of flowers.

- 44 She is one of my good friend.
- 45 We will meet five person.
- 46 So, we have a good friends.
- 47 So I went to practice basketball every days.
- 48 Our club activity is singing a songs ….
- 49 This memories is very important for me.
- 50 I swam at swimming school every nights, ….