Properties of Japanese Learners' English in Written Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of language produced by Japanese EFL learners, with a focus on some of the pitfalls awaiting them in their written discourse. The first half of this investigation presents a quantitative overview of the trouble spots that appeared by computer search of a spreadsheet corpus of learner English. The latter half concentrates on some qualitative aspects of lexical items which hampered or escaped the learners' successful acquisitional process. To this end, the present study proceeds to scrutinize some particular types of verbs that the learners have trouble with, taking advantage of Tarone's (1977, 1983) proposal on communication strategies as a guideline. This investigation also yields some practical implications for instruction as well as materials development.

1. Purpose

Use of a word involves multiple components of one's communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. In order to use a verb appropriately in a given situation, for example, a learner not only needs to know the correspondence between the form and the meaning of the word but also needs to be able to manipulate its syntactic, discourse and pragmatic properties and store them in his / her mental lexicon. The present study delves into the nature of the language that Japanese university EFL learners produce when they communicate in writing, based on a categorization of the problems they experience. In particular, attention is drawn to trouble spots they encountered with respect to the properties of verbs, as they constitute the pivot of a sentence structure and need to be acquired as the most important groundwork for building learners' communicative competence.

The goal of this study, though focusing on learners' use of communication strategies in writing, is therefore to explicate the nature of the problematic lexical items that learners have in common, aiming at drawing suggestions for effective instruction in class. For this purpose, a corpus of learner English with error keys was developed for computer text searches.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the historical background of the study of learner English. Section 3 describes the procedure for building the learner corpus and some computer search techniques for that purpose. Section 4 presents an overall picture of the search results and moves on to explore details of the trouble spots

identified regarding several types of verbs in relation to communication strategies. Lastly, section 5 recapitulates the entire discussion and addresses some implications for instruction.

2. Researches on learner English: historical background

Learners' language errors are rich repositories of hidden or implicit clues that may lead to improvement in instruction and materials development in EFL settings. Most language teachers probably already notice this from their own teaching experiences, but it is by no means an easy task to answer questions such as what types of errors EFL learners produce and with what frequency in a given setting, how readers / listeners who are not familiar with the learners' first language perceive their problems and, lastly, how to approach those problems.

Investigations into errors by language learners began with a series of papers by Pit Corder on Error Analysis during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Corder, 1981), and a number of other analyses were subsequently undertaken. However, Error Analysis made very little progress and virtually remained out of mainstream research in second language acquisition studies. In the early 1990s, as methodological innovations were made in the field of corpus linguistics, researchers started to pay more attention to analyzing learner language with computers. One notable work in this trend is Granger's (1998) *Learner English on Computer*, which presents a number of studies on the grammar, lexis and discourse in learner English and on pedagogical applications of learner corpora. At present, we also find new approaches to learner English such as Asao's (2002) work on communication strategies and pragmatic aspects of language learning based on his own learner English corpus. This has created a motivation for investigating the inherent properties of individual lexical items that must eventually be acquired.

3. Method

3.1 The source of the texts

The present analysis is based on a small corpus of texts extracted from a larger collection of student writings. The original texts, each of which is made up of approximately 150 words, were biweekly writing assignments submitted by 20 second-year EFL students in a writing course at a Japanese university during the academic year 1999. In that course students were required to complete six tasks and send them to the present author via email each time. The topics for those assignments included the gun shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado and school bullying.

3.2   Text annotation and data retrieval

The examples used for error annotation were collected with the collaboration of a Canadian EFL professional working at a Japanese university, selecting the areas that he determined to address communication problems in the learners' essays. This procedure produced a set of some 270 portions. The collected texts were then entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for searches to be carried out. Each of the identified trouble spots was assigned a classifying tag from a set of 46 keys that indicate the types of problems, as illustrated in Table 1. This was made possible by joint work with an American ESL professional at a college in the United States. The classification by means of these keys includes: Word Form, Word Choice, Redundant Structure, Missing Structure, Punctuation, and Spelling. As the primary interest of this investigation was not in the content or progression of a given theme but in the constituents of a sentence, most of the keys employed thus represent troubles with lexical items rather than discourse elements.

Table 1: Keys and their descriptions

Keys	Descriptions	Keys	Descriptions
ACT / PAS	Active / Passive Voice	NEGP	Negative Particle
ADJ-CH	Adjective Choice	N-EX	Noun-Extra (unnecessary)
ADJ-CL	Adjective Clause	N-F	Noun Form (sg. / pl.)
ADJ-DEL	Adjective Deletion	N-PH	Noun Phrase
ADJ-EX	Extra Adjective	PC	Parallel Construction
ADJ-F	Adjective Form	POSS	Possessive
ADJ-P	Adjective Placement	PREP	Preposition
ADV-CH	Adverb Choice	PREP-PH	Prep Phrase
ADV-CL	Adverb Clause	PRO	Pronoun
ADV-DEL	Adverb Deleted	PUNC	Punctuation
ADV-P	Adverb Placement	QF	Question Form
ADV-PH	Adverb Phrase	QT	Quantity
ART	Article	RED	Redundant
COMP	Comparison	ROS	Run-On Sentence
COND	Conditional	SUB	Subject
CONJ	Conjunction	T	Transference
F	Fragment	V-CH	Verb Choice
LOG	Logic Pattern	V-DEL	Verb Deleted
M	Modal	V-EX	Verb Extra
N	Noun	V-F	Verb Form
N-CH	Noun Choice	VOC	Vocabulary[1]
N-CL	Noun Clause	V-P	Verb Placement
N-DEL	Noun Deleted	V-PH	Verb Phrase

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1   The reader may find the term *Vocabulary* among the keys to be somewhat confusing. In this special context, it refers to cases in which the NS called for a replacement of a word / phrase with a word judged as more suitable for the contexts in which they appear. To give a few examples: *living people* → *residents*, *rainfall* → *precipitation*, and *acts* → *behavior*.

4. Search results and discussion

4.1 An Overview

Table 2 shows the results of the searches conducted for each of the keys.[2] They are also presented in bar charts in Figure 1.

Table 2: Types of errors

Types	Occurrences	%			
Preposition	88	9.1	Noun Extra	11	1.1
Article	80	8.3	Adverb Clause	9	0.9
Verb Choice	74	7.7	Active / Passive	7	0.7
Verb Form	73	7.6	Possessive	7	0.7
Noun Form (sg. / pl.)	66	6.9	Adjective Deleted	6	0.6
Pronoun	59	6.1	Comparison	6	0.6
Vocabulary	54	5.6	Noun Clause	6	0.6
Fragment	44	4.6	Verb Extra	6	0.6
Punctuation	32	3.3	Conditional	5	0.5
Conjunction	28	2.9	Logic Pattern	5	0.5
Verb Deleted	28	2.9	Negative Particle	5	0.5
Adjective Choice	24	2.5	Verb Phrase	5	0.5
Adverb Choice	24	2.5	Adjective Extra	4	0.4
Redundant	24	2.5	Adverb Deleted	4	0.4
Prep Phrase	22	2.3	Noun	4	0.4
Noun Choice	21	2.2	Adjective Placement	3	0.3
Subject	18	1.9	Adverb Phrase	3	0.3
Noun Deleted	17	1.8	Parallel Construction	3	0.3
Transference	16	1.7	Verb Placement	2	0.2
Noun Phrase	15	1.6	Question Form	1	0.1
Adverb Placement	14	1.5	Quantity	1	0.1
Modal	14	1.5	Run-On Sentence	1	0.1
Adjective Form	12	1.2	Total	963	100.0
Adjective Clause	12	1.2			

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2 To this end, Excel's "Advanced Filter" option was particularly useful for extracting the relevant fields containing a given search key.

Figure 1: Frequencies of errors
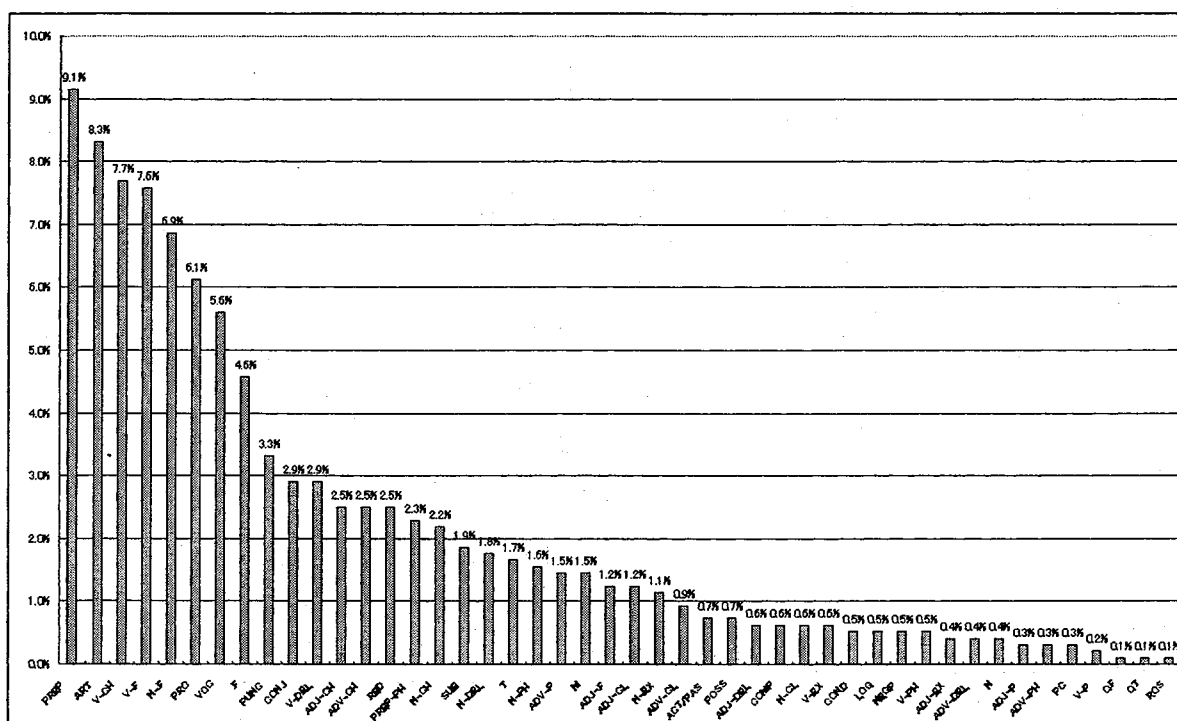
The total number of the identified trouble spots is 963. The greatest part is accounted for by errors of preposition use and they yield a rate of 9.1 %. This rate, if combined with 2.3% for the errors of prepositional phrases, produces 11.4%. The second largest is represented by the errors in the use of articles at 8.3%. This is followed by problems with Verb Choice and Verb Form at 7.7% and 7.6% respectively. On the next layer stand Noun Form at 6.9% on singular / plural forms, Pronoun at 6.1%, and Vocabulary at 5.6%. Slightly less common at 4.6% is Fragment in relation to abrupt use of such conjunctions as *but* and *and* as often found in sentences missing a logical connection with their immediately preceding parts. The rates for other items drop to percentages smaller than 3. Among those with a percentage greater than 2 are Conjunction at 2.9%, Verb Deleted at 2.9%, Adjective Choice, Adverb Choice and Redundant at 2.5% respectively, followed by Noun Choice at 2.2%. It should be pointed out that the errors relating to verbs (15.3% [Verb Choice: 7.7% and Verb Form: 7.6%]) outnumbers the errors in nouns (9.1% [Noun Choice: 2.2% and Noun Form: 6.9%]) and those in adjectives (3.7% [Adjective Choice: 2.5% and Adjective Form: 1.2%]). Thus, we see that verbs serve as the major source of trouble spots to which the learners are most susceptible.

4.2 Learners' trouble spots: a case study

4.2.1 Difficulties with verbs

This section examines the observed problems with the choices and forms of verbs that the learners made in their writings. Though the occurrences of Verb Choice or Verb Form

errors total 147 (Verb Choice: 74 and Verb Form: 73), the present discussion concentrates on the 100 cases that have been identified and sorted out.

Table 3: Verbs retrieved based on Verb Form and Verb Choice

be	21	begin	1	get	1	overflow	1
have	10	become	1	give	1	protect	1
think	4	belong	1	go	1	reach	1
make	4	bury	1	happen	1	refuse	1
come	4	carry	1	hold	1	regret	1
say	3	control	1	increase	1	respond	1
feel	3	contain	1	insist	1	see	1
take	3	company	1	kill	1	seem	1
do	2	doubt	1	know	1	study	1
look	2	fill	1	lead	1	suggest	1
want	2	find	1	like	1	teach	1
wonder	2	float	1	meet	1	treat	1
associate	1	forgive	1	occur	1	visit	1

Note that all the items in Table 3, except *overflow*, belong to the vocabulary specific to the Japanese junior and senior high school levels.[3] Yet, Japanese EFL learners are quite likely to get stuck even on the use of these apparently simple lexical items. In the following examples, errors are marked by boldfaced letters.

(1) Speaking of Wiener, I **associate** music.

(2) In spring vacation, I **have been** to Canada for fine weeks.

(3) But when he moved to Kochi City, he **was better than before**.

It should be pointed out that a further examination of these 100 verbs makes it clear that there are several subtypes into which they are classified.

Table 4 : Subtypes (n=100)

a. Replaced by another word / expression	50
b. Tense / Aspect	25
c. Concord	9
d. Complement	8
e. Form	4
f. Modality	3
g. Negation	1

3　The items were checked against Sugiura's (2002a, b) High School English Textbook Word Lists, which were complied from 48 'English I' textbooks and 50 'English II' textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for the academic year 2000.

The rest of the discussion is intended to establish the link among this observation, the nature of those lexical items, and the sources of the problems the learners failed to manage.

4.2.2 Relationship between communication strategies and use of lexical items

Let us turn to a qualitative analysis of the identified trouble spots, with a focus on how the verbs in the first column in Table 3 are used in the original texts and what expressions the NS suggested as alternatives. To this end, the taxonomy of the communication strategies suggested in Tarone (1977, 1983) proved to be helpful as a frame of reference in approaching the qualitative characteristics of those pitfalls. Her proposed communication strategies include *avoidance, paraphrase, transfer*, and *appeal for assistance.* Among these, the device of *paraphrase* is further divided into *circumlocution, approximation*, and *word coinage.* In particular, circumlocution and approximation are of the greatest relevance to the present discussion. Circumlocution can be defined as a description of the characteristics or elements of the objects or action instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure, and approximation is the use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure that shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker.

First, use of circumlocution seems to be employed both in speech and in writing. It appears that learners do use this method even for simple, basic words that they usually have no trouble with for reading comprehension. In addition, circumlocution has two patterns of realization. One is replacing a simple target lexical item with a combination of words that are more complex and harder to figure out. The other is a substitution of a notionally condensed single word with a chunk of simpler words. This appears more frequently in spoken discourse. The former pattern is a salient feature of written discourse and actually invites more serious communication problems.

Regarding approximation, on the other hand, its typical realizations in a given text are attained by means of synonyms. The following subsections examine the semantic and pragmatic properties of several types of verbs that are manifested in Japanese learners' reliance on circumlocution and approximation, whether the act is conscious or unconscious.

4.2.3 Circumlocution

Each of the examples in (4) and (5) is paired with its counterpart rendered by the NS. I intend by the use of the symbols here that those in angled brackets need to be eliminated and those in square brackets need to be supplied. The symbol ϕ indicates a null element, whereby the expression "<their>[ϕ]" means elimination of *their* and "< ϕ >[Maybe]" means addition of *Maybe.*

(4) When parents put <their>[ϕ] too much <hopes>[pressure] on their children, <the

children> [they] will <take refuge in somewhere>[*avoid* them]

(5) < φ >[Maybe] <He>[he] <maybe>[φ] hopes that I will learn to <insist on my thought> [*think for myself*].

These examples show bulky, roundabout expressions the learners used to convey their ideas. Those ideas in fact can be expressed in much simpler language with a single lexical item or phrasal verb.

4.2.4 Approximation

4.2.4.1 Causative verbs

The examples in (6), (7), and (8) are cases showing that learners have difficulty with differences in synonymy among causative verbs with varied contextual meanings and pragmatic force.

(6) If I <will be>[become] < φ >[a] mother, I < φ >[will] <have>[*let*] my child live <freely>[as he/she chooses].

(7) The academic <background>[φ] oriented society will <makes>[*force*] children <have no>[not to develop] <substance>[φ].

(8) However, his father <made>[*let*] him go to Nagoya <for answer>[to satisfy] the son's <demand>[desire]

Generally, Japanese EFL students have been taught about verbs of this type such as *have, make, let*, and *force* at some earlier stage of learning before they take EFL classes in higher education. They in fact know the syntactic requirements these verbs require: [Subject+{*have, make, let*}+Object+V] and [Subject+{*force*}+Object+*to*-V] and their meanings on the conceptual level. Nonetheless, these examples clearly show the students' confusion about the pragmatic implications of the verbs in question. In other words, their learning remained at the level of the lexical meaning and syntactic structure that those synonyms share and therefore lacks in the information of the situation or context where they are to be used appropriately.

In (6) and (8), *have* and *make* are used respectively. Note that what was required of the student in each case was to make sure that the person expressed by the subject noun solicits an action by the person expressed by the object noun. Therefore, the students should have selected the verb *let* instead of *make*, because *make* carries the implication that the person was plunged into the action. We see that the context in (7) invites the same locutionary force, and it is probably for this reason that the writer chose *make*. However, the verb nonetheless fails to create an implication of forcedness. This is primarily due to the use of a subject noun representing a non-animate abstract situation but not a human being, as this point is succinctly explained in commonly used dictionaries for

Japanese EFL learners such as Konishi and Minamide (2001). This accords with the NS's suggestion of choosing the verb *force* as a suitable alternative in this context.

4.2.4.2 Verbs of perception

The computer search also identified another set of students' trouble spots with respect to perception verbs.

(9) It is <φ>[in] Memphis that we <feel> [*experience*] <φ>[the] **roots of America.**
(10) I <felt>[*saw*] **his father's gentleness** <by>[through] this <happening>[event]
(11) Now I <found>[*understand*] <his mean>[what he meant].
(12) I came to <know>[*understand*] **the world['s] people.**

These examples show how difficult it is for the student writers to make a decent choice among synonymous verbs of perception such as *feel, experience, see, find, understand,* and *know.*

4.2.4.3 Verbs of occurrence

The example in (13) is a student's description of the area of her interest.

(13) I [especially] like the history from the 14th century to the 16th century<in special> [φ]. <In>[During] <the>[that] time, **the French Revolution** <happened> [*occurred*].

She employed the verb *happen* in reference to the French Revolution, but the use of *happen* in this context creates some oddity because the verb *happen* has a connotation of an event or situation taking place especially without being planned first. This is absolutely necessary for the learner to acquire in order to build up communicative competence and it is indeed well explained in learner dictionaries like *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* which says: "if an event or situation happens, it exists and continues for a period of time, especially without being planned first."

5. Conclusions

This study, using a body of writings by Japanese university EFL learners, has examined the quantitative and qualitative aspects of their problems in view of the learning of lexical items, into which all sorts of information associated with communicative competence are loaded. Regarding the quantitative aspect, the learner English database with its error keys and corrections or alternative expressions was found to be highly useful for retrieving data to provide an overview of the trouble spots Japanese EFL learners face in written discourse. In approaching the second qualitative aspect, the

database has made it easier to focus on particular problems by exploring relevant types of communication strategies used by learners. Such examination of the learners' strategies should provide insights into the degree to which they have learned the complex properties of individual lexical items, and therefore may also offer some practical implications for the design of effective EFL materials and the way teachers present those materials in class.

In more specific terms, these implications can be summarized as follows. First, the findings suggest the possibility of associating a learner's lexical knowledge and language skills. In other words, the development of a learner's communicative competence must be interwoven with the learning of words. Such a connection can be made in combination with reading and writing activities. Given a word liable to elicit learner difficulties, it is highly expected that its locutionary force can be best explained and rendered most understandable to the learners when the word is supplied with an appropriate context, and this can be made possible by means of various computer corpora as authentic text resources. This process may be enriched by preparing writing activities in which the learners are encouraged to use the same items. Use of a learner English corpus thus may pave the way for grammar teaching / learning through examples.

Finally, further consideration must be given to how learners' lack of experience in handling dictionaries, especially English-English dictionaries for ESL / EFL learners, can be overcome and how it is possible to encourage self-access to the information in need. In this respect as well, the present learner corpus can serve as a good source of illustrative examples of contextualized impediments for learners to review in their dictionaries.

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