The Mirage of Progress? A Longitudinal Study of Japanese Students' L2 Oral Grammar

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This study examines the grammatical errors in Japanese university students' dialogues over an academic year. The L2 interactions of 15 Japanese speakers were taken from the JUSFC2018 corpus (April/May 2018) and the JUSFC2019 corpus (January/February 2019). The corpora were based on a self-introduction monologue and a three-question dialogue; however, this study examines the grammatical accuracy found in the dialogues. Research questions focused on a possible significant difference in grammatical accuracy from the first interview session in 2018 and the second one the following year, specifically regarding errors in clauses per 100 words, the frequency of global errors and local errors, and the five most frequent kinds of errors. Results showed that error-free clauses/100 words decreased slightly from 8.78 clauses to 7.89, while clauses with errors/100 words increased by nearly one clause, from 3.16 to 4.05 clauses. Global errors showed a remarkable decline from 22 to 15, but local errors increased from 76 to 112. A t-test confirmed there was not significant difference between the two speech corpora in regard to global and local errors. The five most frequent errors were (a) lexical phrasing (71), (b) article omissions (41), (c) plural errors (19), (d) preposition omissions (19), and (e) verb usage (9). This data highlights the difficulty in having students self-edit themselves.

　本研究は、日本人大学生の英会話における文法上のエラーを、1学年間追跡調査したものである。15名の日本語話者の第2言語でのやり取りは、JUSFC2018コーパス(2018年4月/5月)と JUSFC2019 コーパス(2019年1月/2月)から取得された。これらのコーパスは、自己紹介の独白と3つの質問に答える会話に基づいているが、本研究は会話における文法上の正確さに焦点を当てて調査をした。研究課題は、2018年の最初のインタビューと翌年の2回目のインタビューとの間に、文法上の正確さにおいて有意な相違があるかどうかに焦点を当てた。特に、100単語ごとの節におけるエラー、グローバル・エラーとローカル・エラーの頻度、そして最も頻度の高い5つのエラーに注目した。調査結果は次の通りである。100単語ごとのエラーのない節は、8.78　節から7.89節へと若干減少した一方、100単語ごとのエラーのある節は1節以上増加し、3.16節から4.05節となった。グローバル・エラーは22から15へと著しく減少し、ローカル・エラーは76から112へと増加した。t-テストによると、グローバル・エラーとローカル・エラーに関しては、2つのスピーチコーパスに有意差は認められなかった。5つの最も頻度の高いエラーは次の通り、語彙の言葉づかい(71)、冠詞の省略(41)、複数形の間違い(19)、前置詞の省略(19)、そして動詞の使い方(9)、である。このデータは、学生が彼ら自身で校正することの難しさを浮き彫りにしている。

The issue of students' poor English speaking and writing skills has repeatedly gotten the attention of local media (Osumi, 2019) with an annual test conducted for sixth-grade students and third-year junior high school students across the nation; students attained an average score of 68.3% in listening and 56.2% in reading, but they scored only 30.8% in speaking and 46.4% in writing. The survey that followed this test data found that 90% of the students reported having lessons on reading, listening, and writing skills, with speaking skills being addressed only through presentations. Only 65.6% reported that they had learned how to express their thoughts and deliver speeches without notes. The attitudes of these elementary and junior-high students likely reflect the attitudes of many first-year university students.

Part of this dissatisfaction stems from the fact that, as teachers, we naturally assume that students are benefiting from our lectures, assignments, projects, and weekly classroom interactions. Moreover, it only seems logical that from a sound and coherent syllabus, carefully chosen textbooks, MEXT directives, meaningful homework, and an engaging and motivated teacher, students would eventually produce more coherent L2 speech and writing over an academic year. However, test or quiz scores that measure reading comprehension, listening skills, or grammatical forms often do not provide a robust picture of student performance and output; furthermore, educators often do not understand and monitor the rate of improvement of students' oral output and pragmatic and interactive competence over time. The reason for this is related to the difficulty of objectively recording, gauging, and evaluating students' output as well as giving adequate and meaningful feedback. Students will have little chance to improve unless they receive this feedback and are aware of their errors or know how to correct them. Error identification, however, is vital. As Corder (1967, p. 167) notes, "learners' errors can also provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures

the learner is employing in the discovery of the language."

In short, this paper will focus on the issue of grammatical errors and repetition in spontaneous speech, as it is perhaps one of the most critical issues for educators. This kind of feedback on oral accuracy shows students which language forms they are effectively able to use in their L2 conversations and which ones they consistently use incorrectly. The focus of the study is to examine the production of grammatical accuracy over an academic year: How (if at all) do students improve in their level of accuracy, in particular with global and local errors? More specifically, do error-free clauses and clauses with errors in students' output significantly become more or less frequent over one year, and do global and local errors improve over this time?

Review of Literature

Reasons for Errors

Error correction in interlanguage has a long history within applied linguistics, with two types of errors being distinguished: performance errors (which are made by learners who are rushed or tired) and competence errors (i.e., mistakes that are caused by inadequate learning). Selinker (1972) was the first to discuss the learner's interlanguage and the problem of fossilization, mainly how the L2 can be influenced by the learner's native language, interlanguage, and target language. This interlanguage, however, can result in errors that can—to various degrees—impact understanding. Gefen (1979) later termed performance errors as mistakes.

Shumann and Stenson (1974) compiled only three reasons for errors: (1) incomplete acquisition of the target grammar, (2) exigencies of the learning/teaching situation, and (3) errors due to the typical problems of language performance, such as both inter- and intra-lingual difficulties. The beginning stages of learning a second language are characterized by a good deal of interlingual transfer from the native language. Xie and Jiang (2007) observed that in the early stages, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which the learner can draw, so these kinds of errors can be found in all aspects of language learning. Similarly, Touchie (1986) postulated that these interlingual errors occurred due to the simplification of a rule, overgeneralization, hypercorrection, faulty teaching, fossilization, avoidance, inadequate learning, and hypothesizing false concepts. The overall problem with such categorization is that it is very subjective, so other researchers have provided other conceptualizations of error formation.

Identification and categorization of errors

Burt and Kiparsky (1978) made a distinction between global and local errors, with global errors being defined as those that hinder communication and prevent the learner from comprehending some aspects of the message. On the other hand, local errors, or mistakes, were seen as impacting a single aspect of a sentence but not adversely affecting comprehension. According to Hendrickson (1978), local errors need not be corrected so long as the message is clear, whereas global errors do need to be corrected if they interfere with meaning. While Vercellotti (2012) recommended that identifying *any* and *all* types of errors is more beneficial than identifying specific examples of errors, there has been a great deal of dispute on this one issue regarding the ability of students to process too much feedback and to use it properly. Research on error correction then begins to focus on the number of error-free T-units and the number of errors per T-unit (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998), as T-units are viewed as meaningful for written language. In short, errors relevant to in-class tasks and pedagogical issues should be highlighted; however, the issue of teacher correction has been divisive. It becomes clear from these studies and from experience that while students can be classified as higher proficiency students based on a test score, in actuality, the accuracy of their spoken and written output is still in question.

The Study

Preliminary Research

Preliminary research by Long and Hatcho (2018) focused on the grammatical accuracy of Japanese EFL learners. One aim of the previous study was to investigate the prevalence of L2 errors and which, if any, gender had more grammatical accuracy in their English output. A second aim was to see whether English teachers can identify errors as being intralingual or interlingual and which type of error was more common. The database for the errors came from the Japanese University Student Corpus (JUSC 2016), comprising 61 transcripts containing 51,061 words (Long, 2016). An inventory of errors was compiled based on this corpus, which included 400 sentences containing local and global errors that were shown in context to teachers. The primary errors in these sentences were as follows: incorrect use of articles (381), incorrect verb tense form (162), incorrect use of prepositions (158), verbs omission (152), modifier errors (111), and incorrect subject-verb agreement (76). The results highlighted the commonality of particular errors and the issue of fossilization. Furthermore, the results related

to the impact of L1 on error formation showed that 35% of the 400 errors were deemed as being intralingual, 51% were seen as interlingual, and 12.5% were undetermined. When categorizing these errors, teachers showed a high level of agreement in categorizing the misuse of articles, plurals, subject-verb agreement, and prepositions as being interlingual due to the grammar of Japanese. As for the types of errors that Japanese EFL learners make in speaking and writing, research shows articles, verb tense, prepositions, modifiers, and subject-verb agreement to be the most frequent.

Rationale

This study aimed to examine the issue of student improvement in grammatical accuracy in actual spontaneous output over a school year. This paper investigates the issue of grammatical accuracy in L2 dialogues to determine how error-free clauses, clauses with errors per 100 words, and global and local errors change over an academic year. The aim of presenting this longitudinal data is to help teachers better understand the nature of spontaneous speech and the challenge of actually improving students' output. In short, does the battery of tests, tasks, and homework assignments that students often receive over a school year have any positive impact on actual student output?

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there any change in the number of error-free clauses and clauses with errors per 100 words?

RQ2: Is there any significant change in the number of global and local errors over the year?

RQ3: What are the five most frequent kinds of errors that students make over the entire year? What should teachers be focusing on?

Participants

Although there were 28 participants in the 2018 Japanese University Student Fluency Corpus (JUSFC) (Long, 2018), only 15 of them also participated in the 2019 JUSFC (Long, 2019), so the data for this study are limited to those from these 15 students. Of these participants, six were female. All of the participants were Japanese, aged 18 to 19, and all had agreed to be interviewed and to have their conversations transcribed and studied; university and national procedures (and documentation) for obtaining student permission in this regard were all followed. The participants were all first-year university students (at a national university that focuses

on engineering); the participants came from various majors and were selected based on their TOEIC scores.

For sorting purposes only, TOEIC scores were used to identify these participants so as to represent beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels in order to see how errors might possibly change with increased proficiency. The first group had scores that ranged from 150 to 370, the second from 371 to 570, and the third from 571 to 770. In the interview, each student was asked to give a self-introduction monologue, which was then followed by a three-question dialogue. Student consent was obtained with the aims of the study being reviewed by a university committee beforehand. The purpose of the research and permission forms were written in both Japanese and English. Students were aware that their monologues and dialogues were to be videotaped, transcribed, and used for research purposes. Participants knew they had the right to withdraw from the research once it started and that, by learning about their fluency and grammatical accuracy, it would benefit them in future interactions. The names of the students were abbreviated in the final corpora that were uploaded to the research website (Long, 2018).

Discussion Topics

Each student's self-introduction monologue ranged from two minutes to twenty (depending on the student's proficiency) and covered issues like school, family, friends, and goals, whereas the dialogue was based on three questions and prompts: (1) Have you made any friends here at this university? (2) Tell me about your family, and (3) What is your major, and why did you choose it? In order not to repeat the exact questions at the end of the academic year, the questions were slightly altered to (1) Have you made many new friends here at this university? (2) What is new about your family? (3) What is your major, and how do you like your studies?

While the students were able to read these prompts out beforehand, they were given no time to prepare statements; the reason for showing the prompt was to avoid any communication breakdown due to incomprehension, which would then affect fluency ratings. For purposes of this study, only the data from the dialogues was used in order to focus on the interactive proficiency of the students.

Transcripts

The interactions were videotaped and transcribed, and the transcriptions make up the JUSFC2018, which has 12,796 words, and the JUSFC2019 (see Ap-

pendix for sample dialogues), which has 8,142 words. The dialogues (without analysis) were extracted to form two smaller corpora—a 2018 corpus of 3,275 words and a 2019 corpus of 3,532. These videotaped interviews were started in April and May 2018, with the second session in January of the following year.

For this study, only the transcripts of students who participated in both interview sessions were used, limiting the data to 15 students. Furthermore, these data are based only on the dialogues that took place after the self-introductory monologues to investigate the students' interactive competence. These students did not know of the contents or questions of any topics beforehand. Students were only able to familiarize themselves with the questions for a few seconds before the interactions. Students were not paid for their interviews; the coding of the transcripts reflects the Conversational Analysis Conventions. The dialogues included questions about their friends at the university, followed by information regarding their family and, finally, about their major and why they chose it.

Procedures

To identify both global and local errors, the transcripts were examined twice by both authors; global errors were identified as errors interfering with meaning. A web-based L2 syntactic complexity analyzer (Haiyang, 2010; Haiyang & Xiaofei, 2013; Xiaofei, 2010, 2011; Xiaofei & Haiyang, 2015) was used to count the number of clauses. The challenge was to separate dysfluency forms and issues from identifiable grammatical errors.

Global error examples

1. Interviewer: What is your major and how are you liking in your studies this year?
   Participant: Ah, my major is Chemical, Um, Um . . . (1.8) my major is Chemical, so I have to study Chemical harder, so **I fear Chemical is different,** Un, Yea, Chemical is, (.) Chemical is, Ah, . . . (5.3). I now I . . . (3.4) I have two experiment. Experiment? Experiment class, and Chemical experiment class is little bit dangerous because, Ah, medical, I have to use a lot of medical, so medical is little bit dangerous. Ah, Um, . . . (3.6).Un, **if I touch dangerous medical subscribe?** Ah, sub, medical . . . (2.9) if I touch **dangerous medical**, Ah, **my skin death,** so medical experience ex . . . (2.2) medical class is little bit dangerous. Un.

2. Interviewer: Have you made many new friends at this university?

Ah, yes. Uh (4.2) When I, **when live in this school** I don't have a lot of friends, but ↑ but they are friendly and sometimes speaking to me. Uh (13.2) To me ↓ , and I have a lot of friends in now. ↓

3. Interviewer: Ok, let's go on to the next issue I'd like to know. What is your major and why did you choose it?
   Participant: My my major is (3.2) machine intelligence. Uh: (.) The reason is (5.0) **I I like control machine** and (.) think (3.9) why this machine is moving, and so I want to make new machine which which ↓ (4.5) surprising many people. Uh: (10.9) so I want to study this major.

Local error examples

1. Interviewer: Have you made any new friends? (Japanese)
   R: Uh, I have three three (.) three friends. Uh. (6.3) Hm: (5.5) Um: (7.3) We go, we went to uh, **we went to (.) game center** with **their uh** and (.) uhm: (6.0) eat lunch **with there.** (7.6) watching baseball game.

2. Interviewer: OK. Tell me about your family. (12.2)
   K: Uhm: (11.6) uh I have a sister and (3.5) and **I and my sister** are very close. (2.3) and (.) uh for example last week we went **to shrine.** ↑ (2.3) And and we prayed (4.6) for (5.6) **not to occur traffic accident.** (1.8) (laugher).
   Interviewer: That's important.

3. Interviewer: Ok, tell me about your family.
   A: Eto I have a mother and father and **two brother**. Um: (5.9)
   Interviewer: The oldest.

4. Interviewer: Tell me about your family.
   H: Ah:, my (4.1) eh four four people. Eh eh: old sister, one older sister, **eh she is (4.1) Shimonoseki (Japanese) University**, (3.1) eh: (11.6) my father works (16.2) to (Japanese). (3.1) I **have (.) cat**. Eh:.

Results

To answer the first and second research questions, as the descriptive statistics in Tables 1 and 2 show, error-free clauses per 100 words decreased slightly from 8.78 clauses to 7.89, while clauses with errors per 100 words increased by nearly one clause from 3.16 to 4.05 clauses. While global errors showed a remarkable decline from 22 to 15, local errors increased from 76 to 112. Participants with higher TOEIC scores tended to make fewer global errors, as would be expected. For errors related to parts

of speech, a paired-samples t-test confirmed there was a significant difference between the two speech corpora, with more error frequency occurring in the 2019 corpus (see Tables 1 and 2, and Appendices A, B, and C); thus, no significance was noted for both global errors (t (14) = 1.13, p < 0.28) or local errors (t (14) = 1.60, p < 0.13). It was also interesting to note that there was minimal change in errors concerning verb phrases and noun phrasing and modifiers. As for the final research aim, relating to the five most frequent errors, they were as follows: (a) lexical phrasing (71), (b) article omissions (41), (c) plural errors (19), (d) preposition omissions (19), and (e) verb usage (9).

Table 1. *Phase 1 Analysis: Clause Analysis*

	2018 Interview Total clauses: 281	2019 Interview Total clauses: 283
Total clauses with errors	75	96
Error-free clauses per 100 words	8.78 clauses	7.89 clauses
Clauses with errors per 100 words	3.16 clauses	4.05 clauses

Table 2. *Phase 2 Analysis: Global / Local Errors*

Subjects	TOEIC Score	2018 Interview 2,901 words		2019 Interview 2,369 words	
		Global Errors	Local Errors	Global Errors	Local Errors
H.A.	375	3	6	1	5
C.N.	490	3	4	4	20
T.N.	290	2	2	2	9
S.T.	295	2	6	0	4
W.H.	290	2	0	1	0
K.T.	705	1	8	3	11
M.A.	280	3	4	0	6
N.I.	475	2	6	0	16
S.O.	575	1	7	0	6
K.O.	470	2	5	0	10
A.S.	770	0	3	2	4
K.M.	385	1	3	0	10
S.M.	470	0	6	1	4
Y.T.	620	0	6	0	4
Y.A.	470	0	10	1	3
Total		**22**	**76**	**15**	**112**

Discussion

This longitudinal study examined the grammatical errors of Japanese university students' dialogues with a native speaker over an academic year. As shown by data related to error-free clauses per 100 words and global errors, it is apparent that grammatical errors continue to be made with little awareness on the part of the student (and often the teacher), thus pointing out the importance of helping students to become more aware of their output and of the errors that they continue to make. The data suggest that many of the types of repeated errors are interlingual, and so teachers need to continually highlight this issue throughout the year, particularly the need for subject/verb agreement and the use of articles. It should be pointed out that the frequency of error *rates* can easily impact how the message is viewed, which in turn can affect issues related to the speaker's status and the acceptance of the message. Thus, the impact of

both global and local errors cannot be understated, as they can cause the most confusion.

Recommendations for raising awareness and improving students' self-editing include techniques such as videotaping and showing pair or group discussions, commenting on error formation, using second-person realistic gambits (e.g., directed role-plays with students writing down their partner's responses to various questions and opinions), and using multiple-choice responses to hypothetical discussions. In short, this analysis shows that educators and students need to develop greater understanding as to what kinds of errors are being made in L2 output. More focused feedback to students is also needed, as knowledge itself does not necessarily improve self-awareness or impact day-to-day usage. These data, in short, indicate the importance of error awareness and analysis based on actual L2 output. Finally, because oral grammatical accuracy worsened over the academic year, it seems that the issue of fossilization requires far more attention, with educators more effectively monitoring their students' output to see if actual gains are being made.

Conclusion

While the field of error analysis has not gained much attention in the overall spotlight on second language acquisition, educators need to become far more aware of learners' psychological process in language learning and how much progress, if any, their students are making. The overall lack of progress in grammatical accuracy in these students' speech can mostly be attributed to a lack of awareness of their spoken errors, the teachers' inability to catch and highlight those errors in classes of more than 30 students, and the fact that most English classes in Japan (at the university level) are generally held once a week and often have to address other skills such as grammar, reading, presentation, listening, and grammar. The results indicate the need for teachers to help students become more aware

of their output and the errors that they continue to make. It is essential that teachers be more aware of their teaching objectives, techniques, and reviews as well as their students' linguistic competence, output monitoring ability, and affect. Indeed, these data highlight the difficulty in getting students to self-edit and to pay more attention to being more accurate with their speech.

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ARTICLES

JALT PRAXIS

JALT FOCUS

Appendix A

Phase 3 Analysis: Lexical Phrases, Article Errors, and Preposition Errors

| | Lexical Phrase Choice | | Article Errors | | | | Prepositions | | | |
| | Phrasing | | Incorrect Insertions | | Omissions | | Misuse | | Omissions | |
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
H. A.	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
C. N.	3	10	0	1	0	3	0	0	1	1
T. N.	2	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
S. T.	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
W. H.	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
K. T.	5	6	0	1	1	3	0	0	1	1
M. A.	1	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0
N. I.	2	3	0	0	3	4	1	1	0	3
S. O.	3	1	4	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
K. O.	3	2	0	0	3	4	0	0	1	2
A. S.	1	4	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
K. M.	3	2	0	0	0	5	0	1	0	1
S. M.	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Y. T.	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Y. A.	3	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total	**30**	**41**	**5**	**2**	**16**	**25**	**2**	**3**	**6**	**13**

Appendix B
Phase 3 Analysis: Verb Formation Errors

	Tense		Omission		Agreement		Form		Omission Inc.		Verb Usage	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
H. A.	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
C. N.	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
T. N.	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
S. T.	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
W. H.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
K. T.	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
M. A.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
N. I.	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
S. O.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
K. O.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A. S.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
K. M.	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
S. M.	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Y. T.	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Y. A.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	**3**	**8**	**0**	**1**	**10**	**3**	**4**	**3**	**0**	**1**	**2**	**7**

Appendix C
Phase 3 Analysis: Noun Phrasing/Modifiers

	Plural Errors		Subject Formation		Adjective Errors		Adverb Errors		Personal Pronouns	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
H. A.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
C. N	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
T. N.	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
S. T.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
W. H.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
K. T.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
M. A.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
N. I.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
S. O.	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
K. O.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A. S.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
K. M.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
S. M.	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Y. T.	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Y. A.	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**8**	**11**	**2**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**4**