



The Use of University Students' English Essays and Reflection Comments to Provide More Effective Feedback

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Abstract. This paper outlines a university course utilizing students' English essays and reflection comments to help students develop their writing skills in English. It will show some preliminary results of the data collected and analyzed to discuss certain patterns that students preferred in terms of sentence structure and vocabulary. Based on the reflection comments submitted with the essay writing assignments in which the students were asked to describe what was the most difficult area for them, some of the students seemed to be aware of their dependency on using certain expressions or sentence structures but had not yet found a means to overcome this problem. In order to help students become more aware of their tendencies and to find ways to improve their writing skills, feedback based on the data analysis was used to provide valuable insights for the students to apply to their future essay writing. In this paper, the use of students' essay writing and reflection comments is discussed with the purpose of identifying common sources of difficulty and errors among learners of English to provide more effective feedback.

Keywords: ELT · Learner Corpus · Writing Feedback · SLA · EFL

1 Introduction

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), learners' errors are significant in the process of language learning as they are “evidence of how language is learned or acquired [and] what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language” [1]. In essence, learners make errors, which can be employed as a strategy to learn a language in a meaningful sequence. While Lado [2, p. 59] considers L1 “the major source of difficulty or ease in learning the structure of a foreign language”, others support natural acquisition order in the development of second language proficiency [3, 4]. The concept of “interlanguage” was defined by Selinker [5] in an attempt to account for L2 errors and explain their causes. Contrastive Analysis (CA) is defined by Gass and Selinker [6, p. 72] in order to suggest appropriate teaching solutions while seeking to identify “what needs to be learned and what does not need to be learned in a second language learning situation”. However, one of the major weaknesses of CA was the shortcomings of empirical research due to the lack of large-scale data and analysis tools.

With the development of computerized learner corpus data and sophisticated computer programs, Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA) has been playing a more important role in language transfer research. As Callies [7, p. 29] states, “Corpus-based research into learner language has yielded empirical evidence that texts produced by learners and native speakers in fact differ in terms of frequencies of certain words or structures, both in lexico-grammar and syntax”. In order to uncover the root of “non-nativeness” or “foreign-soundingness” [7], this approach is effectively utilized to investigate L1-related or L1-influenced language usage in second language learning as well as language development in SLA [8]. It is also aimed to show an example in which “a small learner corpus can assist the development of pedagogical material specifically suited for a particular learner group” [9].

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what makes students’ writing sound awkward and what makes writing in English difficult for Japanese learners of English in particular, while identifying some commonalities in their language usage and errors. Based on a learner corpus along with questionnaire data collected as part of the mandatory university English course work, this study attempts to suggest corpus and questionnaire-based feedback can be part of a more effective teaching approach and also as a potentially effective method to analyze and explain L1-influenced errors.

2 Research Methods

In the 1990s, Learner Corpus Research (LCR) flourished with some sophisticated computer software tools being developed and shared with researchers from corpus linguistics, SLA, and Foreign Language Teaching (FLT). As Granger [10, p. 339–40] states, “A learner corpus is a solid empirical basis from which to uncover the linguistic features that characterize the interlanguage of foreign and second language learners at different stages of proficiency and/or in a range of language situations.” CIA enables comparisons between native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNA) data in order to highlight certain features of “non-nativeness” in learner English [8]. Through this method, some common or unique uses of words, phrases, and structures as well as errors are to be investigated for the purpose of helping learners improve their proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where comprehensive language use and input is usually limited in the classroom environment. Not only by comparing NS and NNS but also by comparing two groups of NNS, it is expected to find certain L1-specific or L1-influenced uses of language [11–13].

In CIA, two types of research methods have been suggested: “NS/NNS Comparisons” and “NNS/NNS Comparisons”. This study adopts NS/NNS comparisons with the premises that a NS corpus will be compiled from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE) as a reference corpus [14]. The learner data was collected from essays by Japanese university students with L1 being Japanese. The comparison was made between these two data sets so as to explore the differences in the use of vocabulary and expressions.

A questionnaire using open-ended questions was organized and administered in Japanese in order to acquire some reflection comments about their opinions on English writing. To identify the potential difficulties students experienced and to reflect on them

Table 1. Learner Corpus Variables

Learner Variables	Task Variables
Age	Medium
Learning context	Field
Proficiency level	Genre
Gender	Length
Mother tongue background	Topic
Region	Timing
Knowledge of other foreign languages	Exam
Amount of L2 exposure	Use of reference tools

effectively in teaching, this questionnaire asked how their experience of the course impacted their language learning together with questions about each student's language learning experience and background. Combined with learner corpus research, the aim was to identify specific areas to be targeted in terms of future teaching instruction and materials development.

3 Data Collection

In order to facilitate the collection of a high-quality data set, it is necessary to control the learner and task variables as much as possible. According to Granger [10], learner variables and task variables in learner corpora are summarized as in Table 1.

One of the difficulties in data collection lies in the differences between process writing and written exams. For this data collection process, the overall objective was to balance these different learner and task variables.

3.1 Writing Conditions

The learner variables were strictly controlled, to the highest degree possible, with the learning context being in university English classes in Japan. Not only were the data collection variables well-coordinated but also some additional variables were added due to the nature of the data collection within the class-based setting in university. As for the time limit, the data collection was done within actual classes, so the time limit was based on the ninety-minute class time. Since this was also a part of the actual course assessments, the essay writing activities could also be considered as part of the course exams or assessments. Most importantly, it was necessary to organize the common tasks under the same or similar conditions across multiple university courses at multiple institutions to be able to capture useable and comparable data sets.

Although there were inevitably some wide variances in language proficiency and motivation levels, the learner variables were well controlled during the process. The

Table 2. Shared Writing Conditions

Writing Prompts	Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Use reasons and specific details to support your opinion. “It is important for college students to have a part-time job.”
Location	Classrooms in universities
Time	Class time (90 min)
Reference tools	Dictionaries
Word count	NA (4–5 paragraph essay style)

conditions that could be used for the writing tasks were defined to maintain a certain degree of consistency. Table 2 summarizes the shared conditions used in collecting the NNS data set for this analysis.

The writing prompt based on the ICNALE project was used as it was the aim of the research to make some comparative and contrastive analysis to the existing ICNALE corpora.

3.2 Basic Data Information

All the participants were in compulsory English classes at large private universities in the Tokyo area. Each class has between 25 to 35 students, none of whom are English majors. The proficiency levels of the students are considered to be intermediate to advanced based on their English test scores or previous experience of studying or living overseas. The total of 103 students submitted essays, which consist of the NNS data. The NS data is compiled from the writing data on the same writing topic from the ICNALE data set. The basic information on the data collected, which was subsequently analyzed, is summarized in Table 3.

Compared with the ICNALE reference corpus, the one significant difference was in the writing conditions. The ICNALE corpus has collected controlled essays, so the participants wrote the essays without any reference tools within a 20–40 min time limit, whereas the data for this study was collected as part of the regular course work in which students wrote the essays under conditions without such a strict time limit and without reference tool restrictions. However, the two data sets are deemed comparable because the essays were all written based on the same writing prompts and the number of the participants and the number of essays contributed is almost equivalent.

4 Findings

The collected data was analyzed using concordance software AntConc in order to make a comparison between non-native English speakers and native English speakers. The results show that the total number of words is slightly greater in the NNS data. This is probably because the students who had no strict time limit nor reference tool restriction managed to write more. However, as for the types, it is clear that the vocabulary size is

Table 3. Participants and the Collected Data Comparison

	NNS	NS (ICNALE)
Participants	Freshman, Sophomore, Junior students in universities in Tokyo	University students and adults
Native Language	Japanese	English
Writing Conditions	Essay Writing as part of mandatory course (90 min) without reference tool restriction	Writing with time (20–30 min) and reference tool restriction
No. of Participants	103 (Male 45 / Female 58)	100 (Male 56 / Female 44)
No. of Writings	103	100
No. of Token	25,361	22,623
No. of Type	1,709	2,085
Average No. of Words (SD)	246.2 (116)	226.2 (22.1)
Maximum No. of Words (SD)	604	302
Minimum No. of Words (SD)	58	200
Total No. of Sentences	1,928	878
Average No. of Words per Writing (SD)	18.7 (8.4)	8.78 (2.76)
Average No. of Words per Sentence (SD)	13.1 (2.9)	27.7
Average No. of Letters per Word (SD)	4.8 (0.30)	4.34 (0.33)

smaller in the NNS essays. Even though the number of the sentences is twice as large in the NNS data set, the average number of words per sentence is less than a half of that compared to the NS data. From these results, it is inferred that the students in the NNS data seem to have problems with composing longer sentences compared to the native speakers.

4.1 POS Analysis

Using part-of-speech (POS) tagged texts, a POS analysis was made in Table 4 in order to enable a statistical comparison.

According to the POS analysis results, both of the data sets prove to have similar frequencies in all categories. However, there are noticeable differences in the use of nouns, adverbs, articles, and conjunctions between the NNS and NS data sets (Table 4). While verbs, pronouns and adjectives display similar frequencies between the NNS and the NS data sets, nouns show higher frequencies specifically in the NNS data set. On

Table 4. POS Analysis

Parts of Speech	NNS		NS	
	No. of Words	Ratio (%)	No. of Words	Ratio (%)
Nouns	7,004	28%	5,298	23%
Verbs	5,788	23%	4,891	22%
Pronouns	2,179	9%	1,753	8%
Prepositions	2,358	9%	2,085	9%
Adverbs	1,364	5%	1,560	7%
Adjectives	1,758	7%	1,335	6%
Articles	1,392	5%	1,525	7%
Conjunctions	1,357	5%	1,722	8%
Others	3,192	13%	2,685	12%

the contrary, adverbs, articles and conjunctions appear to be less frequently used in the NNS essays. The omitting of articles by Japanese speakers has been discussed and the cause of this is reasonably summarized as the lack of articles in the Japanese language (ex. [15]).

The relative underuse of adverbs could be linked to an apparent lack of familiarity with using anything but the most common adverbs such as “first” and “finally” as transition signals along with some basic adverbs such as “well” and “really”. The less common use of conjunctions is evidence to support the fact that the average number of words per sentence in the NNS essays is less than half that of the NS data set (see Table 3). This suggests non-native learners have problems composing longer, compound or complex sentences compared to native speakers.

4.2 Keyword Analysis

The next table shows the keyword lists of the NNS data generated against the NS data using concordance software. The top 30 nouns and verbs were picked up from the list and compiled in Table 5. A high keyness means the words are characteristic in the NNS data compared to the reference NS data in the positive keyword list, whereas the negative keyword list shows the words which are more characteristic in the NS data (Table 6).

In the NNS essays, the high frequency use of nouns and verbs are characteristic. From these keywords and some cluster analysis, it can be pointed out that that NNS students tend to use three types of collocations as supporting ideas in their essays: “earn money”, “get communication skill(s)”, and “know society”. Most of the students argued that university students should work part time in order to earn money, to practice communication skills, and to learn about society, while the use of modal verbs or adverbs to moderate their opinions were not typically used in the NNS writings. Common errors also found in the use of nouns such as “part-time job” instead of “a part-time job” or “part-time jobs” and “college student” instead of “college students”. Proper use of

Table 5. Top 30 Positive and Negative Keywords

	Positive Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	Negative Keyword	Frequency	Keyness
1	money	393	123.337	that	280	112.75
2	they	621	118.064	would	26	96.818
3	job	743	87.677	s	7	88.805
4	society	98	85.559	and	447	76.708
5	can	488	75.642	just	6	67.873
6	importance	62	62.596	as	83	51.808
7	students	602	62.221	the	549	48.972
8	part	805	61.851	believe	8	48.023
9	earn	89	61.552	was	14	46.08
10	conclusion	65	56.663	or	70	46.079
11	second	65	56.663	then	16	44.004
12	university	100	51.568	could	3	38.059
13	communication	43	45.619	extra	1	35.698
14	study	138	45.329	well	10	35.42
15	get	149	40.777	financial	7	34.475
16	we	213	36.125	i	319	31.828
17	useful	27	33.674	really	6	30.971
18	third	40	32.733	studies	6	29.727
19	time	938	31.4	may	26	28.047
20	various	38	30.535	education	2	25.373
21	first	84	30.284	on	95	24.315
22	know	92	30.22	this	68	24.034
23	experiences	42	28.205	been	4	24.011
24	hard	77	28.03	more	56	22.01
25	nt	22	27.438	be	150	21.481
26	college	497	27.06	even	8	21.442
27	concentrate	31	26.644	quite	1	21.15
28	good	159	26.459	to	824	20.366
29	human	21	26.191	any	9	19.464
30	people	168	26.027	better	14	19.146

countable nouns together with natural collocations should be properly re-instructed as part of additional writing feedback to students. It is also suggested that re-introducing conjunctions along with more adverbs and some hedging language can be focused on in order to help students write longer sentences and express opinions.

Table 6. Keywords in Reflection Comments

	Words	Frequencies
1	write	206
2	think / feel	163
3	English	144
4	essay	95
5	I / my	83
6	sentences	82
7	difficult	80
8	word / vocabulary	75
9	Japanese	56
10	can write	53

5 Discussion

Reflection comments were collected using open-ended questions about the writing task. The following questions were used: (1) What did you find difficult to express in English? Please explain why you think so. (2) How did or did not this course help you improve your English proficiency and motivation to learn? Please explain why you think so. (3) Do you find English writing is easy or difficult? Please explain why you think so. As this was conducted in Japanese, the reflection comments were translated by the author before the analysis using KH coder in order to generate a keyword list and a co-occurrence network of words used in comments.

In the co-occurrence network of words, darker gray means higher frequencies (Fig. 1).

Using the frequency list and the co-occurrence network, it is possible to plot similar weaknesses shared by a majority of students, which are “lack of vocabulary”, “difficulty in writing both in Japanese and English”, and generally “poor English”. In the students’ comments, evidence can be traced regarding the difficulty they feel in writing as shown in the following reflection comments:

“I tried to express my opinion using the vocabulary I know but it was difficult.”
(S-T2)

“It’s good that I was able to finish within the time limit. I think I was able to explain concretely using two reasons. I feel I couldn’t paraphrase skillfully, so it would be nicer if I had been able to improve the paraphrased part. (...) In the beginning of April [i.e. the academic year], I couldn’t write much and didn’t know how to structure a writing, but in the end [of the year] I was able to present what I learned so far.” (S-M1)

“In order to follow the structure and rules of English essay writing, it was difficult to paraphrase sentences. Due to the seirous(sic) lack of vocabulary, I was not

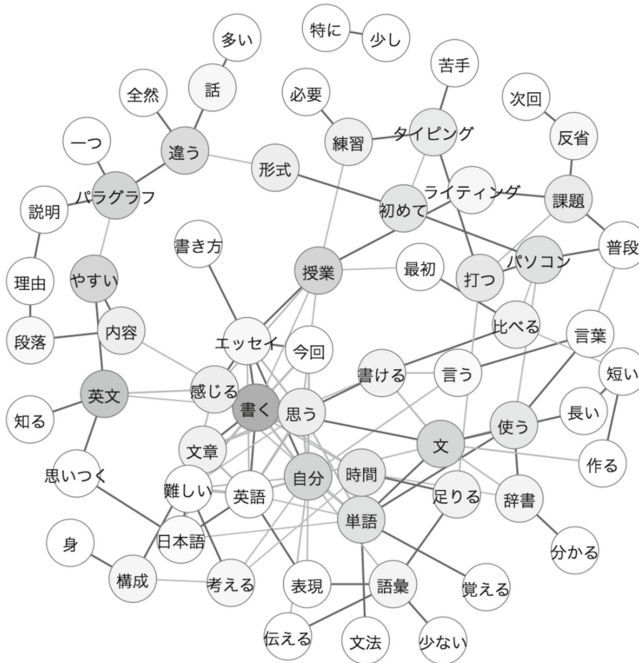


Fig. 1. Co-occurrence Network of Words in Reflection Comments

bale(sic) to increase the word count. However, I don't have strong resentments towards essay writing anymore. This is probably because I learned how to write a structured(sic) essay and how helpful it is to follow the structure(sic). (S-R3)

Interpreting the comments, the necessary feedback can be determined in terms of vocabulary levels and sizes, general writing skills in L1 Japanese as well as L2 English, and some specific English writing skills such as paraphrasing. These findings from the data analysis are to be utilized in the design of remedial teaching materials for the purpose of meeting students' needs and addressing their weaknesses more directly. Furthermore, the analysis also shows where students feel they need more practice or guidance, which can further provide insights to improve instructional topics and materials in more specific areas such as collocations, modal verbs, and conjunctions.

6 Conclusion

This paper has discussed the compilation and use of an English writing corpus and reflection comments for Japanese university students in order to provide more effective feedback to help improve learners' writing skills. The results based on the analysis suggest convergence and divergence in the use of some particular parts of speech and in the commonalities of sentence formation between the NNS essays and the NS essays. From these results, a corpus-based feedback approach has great potential to help students raise their language awareness as well as to help improve their writing skills with

specific lexico-grammatical instructions. In terms of the characteristic use of vocabulary and correlated errors, some specific areas to be focused on in teaching become clear according to the corpus analysis. With regards to reflection comments, the “lack of vocabulary” and the “difficulty in English language learning” seem to prevail among the participants. As Mackey [16] suggests, feedback based on students’ comments “can serve as a ‘priming device,’ or an initial step which sets the stage for learning, even if it does not appear to produce an immediate change in learners’ linguistic behaviour” (p. 43). Nevertheless, these empirical results provide important and valuable insights into more effective material development and more specific areas to be targeted in teaching.

In this way, it has been quite useful to use findings from data analysis for course and material development in order to meet students’ needs and to address their concerns as well as to improve teaching methods and materials. It is undeniable that “learner corpus research opens up existing pedagogical perspectives in a wide range of areas of language teaching pedagogy” [17, p. 270]. For teachers, this enables specific types of errors or weaknesses to be targeted and to find and evaluate solutions in order to create improved materials. By reflecting and responding to students’ comments, it is also possible to assist them more directly in completing tasks and thus building confidence in their writing. Furthermore, the target courses can be more effective for the students where the goal is to improve writing skills with a focus on English essay writing conventions in conjunction with some insights from the NS reference corpus analysis. With an aim to increase the motivation of students and to help the students engaged positively with the course work, this approach would appear to have several benefits, increasing learner motivation and aiding the development of pedagogically valuable materials that target the specific needs of learners, especially those who share the same L1 background. It is expected that a combination of writing data and reflection comments, if deftly employed, will prove useful to develop the students’ awareness as well as to prepare more constructive feedback in the teaching of English in EFL contexts.

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