

An Analysis of Some Japanese Students' English Interlanguage

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L1 only features are often thought to cause difficulties for students learning a second language. By analyzing the written interlanguage of some Japanese students of English, this paper attempts to demonstrate that L2 only items may be a greater source of difficulty than L1 only items. The paper concludes with an argument for teaching materials developed specifically for students based on an analysis of their performance errors and an understanding of their mother tongue.

Japanese is an isolate language. It is not a member of a large language family in the way that English is a member of the Indo-European group of languages, although it may possibly be related to Korean, Manchurian, Mongolian and Turkish. Japanese differs from English in several ways; there is no future tense, verbs and nouns are not inflected for number, adjectives have tenses, the pronoun system is more complex, the counting system is radically different and the conventional word order is SOV. The Japanese have also evolved a special form of polite language; all verbs may be ranked according to their relative politeness and there are many special deferential expressions. Finally there are many special forms that only men may use and many that only women may use. Given these differences between English and Japanese we might expect to find signs of L1 interference in Japanese speakers' interlanguage.

Yule writes: "Instead of treating the language of an L2 learner as the product of someone who is, in some way, competent in one language and incompetent in another, we should consider it as a type of language in its own right: which may, as it varies and develops, provide us with crucial insights into the very nature of that more general phenomenon called human language." (Yule 1985 p.155). Despite this definition it is difficult not to think in terms of 'competent' and 'incompetent': I will make use of the term 'error' when referring to learners' interlanguage but only for the sake of convenience and not wishing to imply any negative associations.

Swan & Smith (1985) suggests that Japanese learners' interlanguage may show L1 interference in the following areas:

- a. Word order.
- b. Verbs: tenses, passives, complementation.
- c. Pronouns.
- d. Nouns.
- e. Number and use of articles.
- f. Adjectives and adverbs.
- g. Determiners.
- h. Conjunctions and complex sentences.
- i. Vocabulary.

His analysis moves from a consideration of how Japanese differs from English to an explanation of interlanguage errors. In other words ways in which L1 influences L2. But is it possible that features found only in L2 are also significant? Perhaps we can think in terms of three categories:

1. Items present in L1 but not in L2.
2. Items present in L1 and L2.
3. Items present in L2 only.

For category (a) items I have chosen inflection of adjectives for tense. Japanese regularly inflects adjectives making a verb unnecessary. For example 'it was hot' may be expressed in Japanese by changing the adjective 'atsui' to its past tense form 'atsukatta.' To use the past tense of the Japanese copula *desu* and attach it to the adjective 'atsui' to produce '* atsui deshita' is a non-standard form. (However it may be found in English speakers' Japanese interlanguage). We may expect then to find attempts to inflect English adjectives in Japanese speakers' interlanguage and this would clearly be a case of L1 interference. To be more specific I would expect to find the form '* hotted' or '* yesterday it hot,' with the copula omitted, to use the above example.

For category (b) items present in both L1 and L2 I have chosen prepositions. Prepositional forms are found in both languages although their usage differs; nevertheless the concept of 'preposition' is understood by Japanese speakers. For example the English sentence: 'I work in this school.' may be expressed in Japanese as: 'Watashi wa kana gakko de hatarakimasu.' with the prepositions marked in both cases.

For category (c) items present in L2 only I have chosen the English definite and indefinite articles. Articles are not used at all in Japanese.

As material for analysis I used fifteen letters written to me by former students. These were of similar length and represented the students' original writing. Also the students are all the same age, gender and members of the same school. As a contrast I examined four students' assessed written work. This work was longer than the letters and would have been more carefully checked by the students for errors.

Analysis of the letters provide the data:

Table 1 (See appendix 1)

For category (a) items, inflection of adjectives, no errors of the kind specified were found. For category (b) items, prepositions, from 137 examples 12 errors were found. This represents an error percentage rate of 8.7%. The figures show clearly that category (c) items, definite and indefinite articles, were the commonest source of error. From 99 examples 27 errors were found. This represents an error percentage of 27.7%.

As a control another category of items (d) were chosen: plurals. Japanese nouns and verbs are not inflected for number and yet the concept of number is found in the counting system. We might expect the error rate to be similar to category (b) items, prepositions. The rate of error for plurals was found to be 10.1%.

How do these findings compare with an analysis of the students' assessed written work?

Table 2 (See appendix 2)

For category (a) items no errors were found. For category (b) items an error rate of 6.8% was found, almost identical with Table 1. For category (c) items errors were most frequent with a percentage figure of 16.4%. Finally the control category (d) was closest to category (b) with a percentage error rate of 7.4%. So the data in Table 2 supports the conclusions drawn from the data in Table 1. The error rate was highest among category (c) items found only in L2.

Conclusion and Implications for Teaching

The amount of material used for analysis was very small. To be more conclusive it would be necessary to include students from other age groups and backgrounds and to vary the discourse types chosen for study. An interesting contrast could be made between written and spoken language. The implications for teaching would be that much more work needs to be done in the area of L2 only features such as articles and, in spoken discourse, on the 'l' and 'r' sounds which are

not found in Japanese; those items found only in L1, (eg. inflection of adjectives), may interfere less with L2 learning than is generally assumed.

PART 2

In the first part of the assignment three specific grammatical categories were discussed with reference to students' letters and assessed written work. Errors which fell into these categories were noted but all other errors were ignored. In the second part of the assignment two students' letters have been examined and all the errors noted and commented on.

Letter 1:

Dear Stephen Davies,

1 Hello. How have you been in England? In Japan, it is
2 cool and vary comfortable season. The second semester has
3 started about a month ago. I have been very busy with the
4 exam, homework, and the school. I've become a sick just two
5 months ago, and the doctor said it would take 3 years or more
6 to get well perfectly. He also said not to sport, and I
7 decided to be a manager of tennis club, though I have been a
8 player of it since last spring. I would like to go to
9 Winbledon, and to watch the Winbledon tennis match.
(109 words) .

Line 1:

The sentence 'How have you been in England?' is grammatically and semantically accurate but is not 'natural.' This type of error is Common among Japanese learners. Another example is the unnecessary adverb 'perfectly' in line 6 and the unnecessary 'of it' in line 8. These failings to write 'natural' English are usually said to be the result of lack of exposure to authentic material, but this may not be the only reason because learners from other countries such as France, where there is a much greater exposure to 'authentic' material, still sometimes produce similar 'unnatural' English.

Line 2:

This line has a syntax error. The subject 'season' has been placed at the end of the sentence. Swan writes this about Japanese syntax: 'Japanese is a 'subject-object-verb' language. Qualifier precedes qualified, topic precedes comment and subordinate precedes main. What correspond to English prepositions follow the noun, and so do particles meaning too, either, only and even. Subordinating conjunctions follow their clause; sentence particles showing interrogation, affirmation and tentativeness and so on follow the sentence.' (Swan 1985 p.214).

From this summary it can be seen that Japanese syntax differs substantially from English: however based on my experience teaching in Japan, syntax errors are far less frequent than grammatical errors with articles, tenses and plurals.

Line 3:

The present perfect tense has been used rather than the simple past.

Line 4:

Two errors have been made with the article 'the he.' An error has been made with the indefinite article 'a.'

Line 6:

The noun 'sport' has been used rather than the more complex verb phrase 'to play any sport.'

Line 7:

The verb 'I to be' has been used instead of 'I become.' There are also two more mistakes with articles.

Line 9:

'Winbledon' is the first spelling mistake and 'the' has been inserted unnecessarily.

These errors may be summarized as follows: (a) Unnatural English. (b) Syntax (c) Wrong choice of tense. (d) Errors with articles. (e) Noun chosen in place of verb. (f) Wrong choice of verb. (g) Spelling.

Here is another letter written by a different student:

Dear Steve

1 How are you? Did you get my Christmas card? I also wanted

2 to get your card !!! (that's OK). Sachiyo showed me your

3 letter. I read them. Is it real that you have a mustache?

4 I want to see your face having mustache

5 terribly!

6 Well I'll be a student of university!! I have passed an

7 entrance examination. Thank you. Thank you. I can't believe

8 that I will not be a high school student. You must think that

9 too. Time really flies 7 March we'll have graduation

10 ceremony. I'll send to you pictures taken in my house. When

11 Sachiyo lodged my house, we took this pictures. Strange

12 face!!

(108 words).

Line 1:

There is some 'unnatural English.' The use of the adverb 'also' may show L1 interference as it is a literal translation of the Japanese 'Watashi mo' or 'I also.'

Line 3:

The adjective 'real' has been chosen instead of 'true.'

Line 4:

'Face having' is unnecessary.

Line 6:

In the sentence, 'I'll be a student of university,' the wrong future construction has been used. There is also a syntax error with 'student of university.' The article 'an' has been used in place of 'the.'

Line 9:

The preposition 'on' is missing.

Line 10:

The sentence, 'I send to you pictures taken in my house,' shows three errors. The present tense has been used where the present continuous is needed, the preposition 'to' is not needed and the article 'the' has been left out.

Line 11:

The wrong verb has been chosen. 'Stayed' is better than 'lodged.'

Line 12:

There is a mistake with plurals. The pronoun 'this' (singular) has been used instead of 'these' (plural). This also occurs in line 3 where the plural 'them' has been used in place of 'it.'

These errors may be summarized as follows: (a) Unnatural English. (b) Spelling. (c) Wrong choice of adjectives. (d) Errors with articles. (e) Syntax. (f) Wrong tense choice. (g) Preposition (h) Wrong choice of verb. (i) Plurals.

Both letter writers have made a range of errors of various kinds with article errors being the most common. It is also clear that they both have a grasp of many fundamental structures in English although their inter language shows that they are not yet completely accurate.

Conclusion

In this assignment two approaches have' been followed. In Part 1 adjectives, articles, prepositions and plurals were checked in fifteen letters and four pieces of assessed coursework. In Part 2 two letters were examined to determine the range and variety

of errors. It can be seen that the most frequent type of error is made with English articles; this would support the claim that L2 only items create the most difficulty for these students. Of course more material needs to be examined and other L2 only items checked. The ultimate aim would be to develop teaching materials based on a researched study of Japanese students' needs, developed from a direct analysis of performance errors. Finally it should be noted that the theory of interlanguage implied in this assignment is that interlanguage itself represents a transitional stage between L1 and L2: this perhaps implies a more unified and stable view of L2 than a sociolinguistic model suggests where language is viewed as a non-hierarchical system of dialects.

Reference

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Appendix 1

item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	TOT	%
#articles	10	6	11	14	16	6	0	9	3	2	5	4	7	1	5	99	27.7
#error	1	1	6	5	5	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	1	2	27	
#prep	10	5	5	26	8	10	4	22	5	7	1	5	9	6	14	137	8.7
#error	2	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	12	
#adj	3	2	3	7	3	2	2	8	1	0	2	2	0	3	3	41	0
#error	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#plurals	3	7	1	18	1	2	0	11	4	0	1	2	2	5	2	59	10.6
#error	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	

Appendix 2

item	1	2	3	4	total	%
#articles	26	11	12	36	85	16.4
#error	7	1	0	6	14	

#prep	43	11	18	40	112	8.6
#error	1	1	3	4	9	0
#adj	6	10	4	13	13	
#error	0	0	0	0	0	
#plurals	17	11	1	23	54	7.4
#error	1	0	1	2	4	