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Insight into Accuracy in Japanese EFL Learners' Writing Performance across Proficiency Levels

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Full Paper

Insight into Accuracy in Japanese EFL Learners' Writing Performance across Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

This study reports on and investigates writing performance by Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at university in terms of accuracy, with special focus on grammatical errors. Due to developments in internet technology, the spread of internet has provided people with places to interact with one another via writing, such as social network sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). Accordingly, in recent years, English as a school subject has placed heavier emphasis on writing as an increasingly effective communication tool in universities. Writing skills are by no means easy to acquire because of their complex nature; many students struggle to write properly at school as writing requires detail, clarity, and correctness in expression. Although grammatical accuracy is one of the most important features that comprises good writing, errors can be considered to be an unavoidable but essential part of the development in learners' language ability, and therefore a study of accuracy can make it possible to comprehend the language acquisition process and give potential implications for the teaching of writing. In this study, in order to examine accuracy in the written texts, 27 participants with three different language proficiency levels in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) levels of language proficiency were selected. A 25-minute writing task was assigned requiring their opinion on a given topic. After counting and categorizing errors in order to measure accuracy, the total number of errors per T-unit was calculated, and the results indicated no significant relationship between proficiency level and learners' accuracy in L2 writing; however, upon closer examination of errors for each part of speech, it was revealed that accuracy in the use of English article system seemed to vary with respect to proficiency level.

Keywords: Japanese EFL learners, writing performance, accuracy, errors, proficiency level

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1. Introduction

With the rapid rise of globalization, English has certainly held on to its dominating position as the most influential language for international communication. Like many other countries, there is a continuously growing demand for English proficiency in Japan where English is treated as a second language (L2). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has increasingly put more emphasis on English education at all stages of formal and full-fledged English language education programs from junior high school to university in hope of developing communicative abilities through English language. Moreover, the government has recently announced that in 2020 Japan will implement changes whereby starting with the the fifth grade English will become a mandatory regular subject area, as opposed to the current "foreign language activity" system whereby children are expected to learn English through fun programs such as playing games or singing songs. In conjunction with this, foreign language activities are to be newly introduced from the third year of elementary school. Early English education has a strong impact on Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at school: they are urged to feel the need to acquire English proficiency is more urgent than ever at each step in the learning process. In fact, Japanese EFL learners are spending a fair amount of time and money on learning English even outside school. However, it is questionable whether the educational policy agenda by the government for communicative skills has so far produced any productive results.

Table 1 shows the mean total and sectional score of some Asian countries on the 2015 Test of English as a Foreign Language internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT) for assessing the ability of a EFL learner within an academic context in terms of four basic language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Only those who are seriously thinking of studying in an English-speaking country or deeply interested in English learning take the TOEFL iBT, and compared to other popular English proficiency tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) or its Japanese counterpart, the Test for Practical English Proficiency (EIKEN), the number of people who take the TOEFL iBT in Japan is quite small due in part to its high test-fees and long duration of the test; therefore, the average scores on these tests do not necessarily reflect the average for all Japanese EFL learners. Still, it is true that Japan is ranked among the lowest scoring countries.

At school, most Japanese EFL students, low- and high-level learners alike, face many language barriers, especially when asked to speak or write English, as opposed to reading or listening, possibly because both speaking and writing involve productive and active use of English in communicative situations. According to a report released by MEXT in 2015,[2] in which a test was carried out to measure the four major skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing) at 480 randomly chosen high schools in Japan, it revealed that third-year high school students' English skills, especially in speaking and writing, were far below government targets; moreover, they reported writing scores were lower than speaking scores. That suggests that learners find it more challenging to produce language output (i.e., speaking or writing) than to comprehend language input (i.e., reading or listening), and that writing can appear more complex and difficult for Japanese EFL learners to acquire than speaking. Despite their lack of proficiency in writing English, once they enter university, there are many times when Japanese university students are required to write fluently and competently in English and improve their efforts to learn the target language, or the second language (L2) in pursuit of their current course of studies and future career. They need to acquire writing skills through proper instruction during a short period of their school life, but the reality is that sentence-level translation seems to be the conventional method of writing instruction.[3]

Table 1: TOEFL iBT Total and Section Score Means of Some Asian Countries in 2015[1]

	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
China	20	18	19	20	78
India	22	23	23	23	90
Japan	18	17	17	18	71
Malaysia	22	22	21	23	89
Shingapore	21	22	23	23	90
Taiwan	20	20	20	20	80

Needless to say, without knowledge of language syntax, writing practice would be impossible because it requires conventions and knowledge of grammar: grammar in this context is the backbone of any language, i.e. syntax (i.e., the arrangement of words in sentences, clauses, and phrases). Grammatically correct texts often lead to better writing. While writing can be the most difficult of the four basic language skills, it has an advantage of learners/instructors' being able to correct the written drafts: errors and other inadequacies can be captured and reviewed later. In the learning process, it is natural that L2 learners often make errors. Considering that errors could be regarded as a positive indicator of their learning development,[4] they should not be ignored instantly as just errors without a thorough analysis. Thus, reflecting more on their errors can provide students an insight to their learning process, but the intrinsic properties of errors in learners' language remain to be completely elucidated. Therefore, it is of great significance to analyze accuracy across different proficiency levels and further take a view of errors Japanese university students often make in writing, and then to explore the possible practical strategies to implement better writing instruction.

2. Review of the Relevant Literature

As for how L2 acquisition can be successful, numerous Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers have attempted to explore the mechanism for learning by deeply analyzing L1. In case of L1, in just a few years children naturally get to understand and make use of the language(s) by which they have been surrounded : they end up acquiring the language(s) with little or no explicit instruction. Concerning grammar development in L1 acquisition, two major theoretical approaches have been generally pursued; the innateness hypothesis[5] and usage-based theory.[6] The former maintains that humans are biologically and genetically pre-programmed to acquire any human language, and the latter claims that humans conceptualize the structure of language through actual usage, reflecting on human cognitive processes. Meanwhile, L2 acquisition, which needs a certain amount of instruction and learning, has to be explained from a different perspective. It has been a controversial issue and needs further investigation and deliberation, but research into learners' L1 language can be considered to give insight towards the L2 acquisition process and mechanism. The L2 acquisition process proceeds in gradual stages towards native-like proficiency of the target language. This intermediate-stage language system between their L1 between L2 is called "interlanguage,"[7] where there seem to be many linguistic features and systems characteristic to learners who are developing their language.

In the field of SLA, there has been a growing body of research evaluating learners' language performance and development in terms of three constructs of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF):[8] overall, more complex, accurate, and fluent production is often equivalent to better proficiency. As accuracy refers to "the ability to produce target-like and error-free language,"[8] an error has been regarded as a decisive factor in assessing the accuracy of learners' interlanguage. The definition of an error is "a deviation from the norms of the target language,"[9] and it has widely been acknowledged that identifying any and all types of errors could be more desirable than any specific example of error.[10] Much attention has been paid to how accuracy is measured, and three measurements for accuracy have often been used; (a) the number of error-free T-units; (b) the number of error-free clauses divided by the total number of clauses; and (c) the number of errors per T-unit.[11] As T-units are considered to be strongly correlated with language proficiency,[12] dividing the whole output into T-units is meaningful for examining written language. A clause typically consists of a subject and a predicate, and a T-unit is defined as "one main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures that are attached to or embedded in it."[13] Take *He'll help you if you are busy, but I won't* as an example: in this case, there are three clauses and two T-units in the sentence.

Of all the aforementioned measurements, (a) and (b) remain debatable as reliable indices of accuracy as it becomes quite hard to find error-free units especially in case of low-proficiency level learners' writing. Compared to these two indices, (c) is regarded as more appropriate and reliable when assessing accuracy, but to what extent this measurement really reflects learners' accuracy is still unclear. Other measures of accuracy have been proposed, yet none has achieved preeminence as the best measurement, each leading to mixed results.[8] The reason may be due largely to that it is quite difficult to identify and classify errors correctly and properly without any subjective judgment. That is, detecting errors and selecting error types could possibly be based on the annotators' arbitrary choice, suggesting that much research has yet to agree on general error taxonomy.[12] In fact, a variety of large-scale error tagging sys-

tems in learners' language have been proposed in the field of corpus linguistics. Strictly speaking, the concept of errors covers more than just grammatical errors (e.g., writing quality such as cohesion and coherence); however, a more narrow approach that focuses on grammatical accuracy is much more frequently taken in order to minimize subjectivity in evaluating an error.[12] Above all, the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology Japanese Learner English Corpus (NICT JLE Corpus),[14] a two million-word corpus based on approximately 1,200 Japanese EFL learners' spoken data, provides rich information about errors by way of a detailed guideline for coding error types for each part of speech.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the study was to examine actual learning conditions of Japanese university students' language use across proficiency levels in terms of accuracy that might offer some pedagogical implications for writing instruction. The following research questions were formulated to guide our study: (i) is there any significant difference in accuracy across different English proficiency levels; and more specifically, (ii) what grammatical errors have Japanese EFL learners often made in their L2 writing in the process of acquisition? All the statistical analysis was processed via the software package R 3.1.0 for Windows with an alpha level of .05.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The data analyzed in this paper were collected at a Japanese national university during the 2016 academic year. The participants, aged 19 and 23, were 36 non-English major Japanese EFL learners (21 females and 15 males) who enrolled in an English class led by the author/instructor at the time of the experiment. All of them were similar in terms of English language learning background. Prior to the experiment, Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)[15] was conducted to determine general English proficiency. OQPT corresponds to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) levels. According to its definition, CEFR "provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively."[16] The CEFR consists of three levels from A (Basic User) to B (Independent User), and to C (Proficient User), and is further subcategorized into two levels each (A1 through C2). Table 2 indicates the CEFR levels with corresponding levels for three major English proficiency tests.[17] According to the results of OQPT, it turned out that of all the students, fifteen students belonged to B2, sixteen belonged to B1, and five belonged to A2.

After they took OQPT, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and emphasized confidential nature of the study. Furthermore, they were told to receive feedback about their writing later. Subsequently, the selected topic for L2 writing was introduced, and they were given 25 minutes to write by themselves about a topic . To initiate their essay, the topic, "*People do many different things to stay healthy. What do you do for good health?*" was taken from a TOEFL iBT exam's independent writing section because this familiar topic was considered to be easy enough to allow them to organize their ideas into written form. The use of dictionaries or other reference books was not allowed while they en-

Table 2: CEFR and English Proficiency Tests

CEFR	EIKEN	TOEFL iBT	IELTS
C2			8.5-9.5
C1	Grade 1	110-120	7.0-7.5
B2	Grade Pre 1	87-109	5.5-6.0
B1	Grade 2	57-86	4.0-4.5
A2	Grade Pre 2	40-56	3.0
A1	Grade 3-4		2.0

Note. IELTS = International English Language Testing System

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Token Size across Proficiency Levels

CEFR level	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*Min.*	*Max.*
B2	10	174.90	37.97	132	225
B1	12	190.33	37.76	133	236
A2	5	163.60	40.02	127	226
Total	27	179.67	38.20	127	236

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, Min. = Minimum, Max. = Maximum

gaged in writing. In the meantime, the instructor was monitoring to see if they were on the right track in completing their essay. After 25-minutes, their finished essays were collected.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

To begin with, their handwriting was converted into computer text files so that the data could be processed easily. As in a previously mentioned study,[14] this study focuses on grammatical errors only; therefore, at this step of transcription, errors in spelling and punctuation were corrected. Here grammatical errors include lexical, morphological, and syntactic ones. Then, in order to get rid of the potential effects of the total number of words (i.e., tokens) on the outcome of accuracy, data screening was carried out to determine eligibility for analysis in a study: in general, the more words there are in a written text, the more errors can be found in a text. After automatically counting all the tokens using a computer program called 'v8an,'[18] and based on the average token count of 173.80, from the pool of all the submitted texts only those whose token size fell between 100 and 240 were chosen. Accordingly, out of 36 samples, 27 written texts were used in the final analysis, as shown in Table 3. Since the number of the participants was small and they were divided into three varying levels of English proficiency; a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was run to compare the token size of the three groups. The results revealed no significant difference in token size among three CEFR groups ($\chi 2$ (2) = 2.61, p = .27). In other words, the three CEFR groups were homogeneous in terms of token size in their writing.

As a means of measuring accuracy, the number of errors per T-unit appears to be among the most well established measures; therefore this was used to answer the first research question. Identifying and counting T-units and errors were a top of priority in measuring accuracy. Following detailed guidelines given in previous research,[14,19] the chosen texts were first segmented into T-units and checked for grammatical errors by an author/instructor who has more than ten years of experience teaching English in Japan, and parts for which forming a judgment seemed especially hard were much discussed with three other well-experienced instructors of English, including one native speaker. It is next to impossible to identify all errors of learners' language correctly and properly; therefore, the procedure was done with a focus on identifying the most recognizable errors so as to eliminate as much subjectivity as possible.[13]

Furthermore, the accuracy rate for various parts of speech (POS) was compared among the three CEFR groups to address the second research question, in which the common grammatical errors made by the participants were investigated. Basically, in accordance with a procedure given in a previous study,[20] each word of the input texts was first assigned automatically to its corresponding POS using a web-tagging service called CLAWS tagger,[21] and then each POS tag was modified manually if necessary. After obtaining the total numbers of each POS, each identified error was further categorized into its error category by referring to the NICT JLE Corpus error guidelines. The corpus includes 47 different types of errors, but this study dealt with only the most relevant and frequent error types with some modifications after analyzing the participant's actual writing. The error types relate with the following POS: nouns (n), verbs (v), adjectives (aj), adverbs (av), prepositions (prp), articles (at), pronouns (pn), and conjunctions (cn). The details and examples are presented in Table 4, with an asterisk (*) indicating ungrammaticality.

4. Results and Discussion

With regard to the first research question, accuracy across different English proficiency levels was measured by using the above mentioned method (i.e., the total number of errors divided by the total number of T-units). Table 5 presents the results of the descriptive statistics for accuracy. A non-paramet-

Table 4: Error Categories and Examples for Each Part of Speech

POS	Error Category	Examples
Noun	Inflection	There are *peoples in the park
	Number	It's one of the most important *thing.
	Countability	I never eat *meats.
	Lexical choice	I listened to his *speak.
Verb	Inflection	The sun was *setted.
	Subject-verb agreement	My sister *take our dog to the park.
	Form	I look forward to *lose weight.
	Tense	I'll go jogging if it *will be sunny tomorrow.
	Lexical choice	I *drink supplements every day.
Adjective	Quantifier	There is *few water in the bottle.
	Lexical choice	I spent an *entertainment evening at the park.
Adverb	Lexical choice	It rained *hardly last week.
Preposition	Lexical choice_1	I have coffee *on the morning.
	Lexical choice_2	I can make use *with the reading room.
Article	Article	Listening to *a music makes me feel good.
Pronoun	Lexical choice	I keep saying to *me that I shouldn't do it.
Conjunction	Lexical choice	My parents were away, *but I looked after my brothers

ric Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to find possible differences in accuracy among the three CEFR groups, showing in the end no statistically significant difference ($\chi 2$ (2) = .92, p = .63). In other words, accuracy did not depend on the learners' English proficiency.

This outcome was somewhat perplexing, because it would seem natural to think that lower proficiency learners would be likely to make more grammatical errors than higher proficiency ones under the controlled word-count. As mentioned above, accuracy is one of the three principal proficiency dimensions of language production, or CAF. Despite the increasing use of CAF in SLA research, the extent to which CAF components are related to one another remains an issue.[8] Nevertheless, it has been widely recognized that trade-offs may exist within the CAF triad[22]: as the limited scope of our attention or consciousness makes it almost impossible to attend to every component of CAF simultaneously, attending to one dimension of language performance could be at the expense of another. That is, this outcome may be due to a trade-off between accuracy and complexity.[23] Complexity means "the ability to use a wide and varied range of sophisticated structures and vocabulary in the L2."[8] In light of this trade-off hypothesis, it can be possible that learners with higher proficiency attempted to use more complicated structures and vocabulary without being afraid of making errors, or learners with lower proficiency attempted to avoid making errors by selecting more simple structures and vocabulary, accidentally leading to almost the same amounts of accuracy; therefore, further research is necessary to examine learners' interlanguage not only in terms of accuracy but also in terms of the remaining two dimensions.

With regard to the second research question, errors in the texts were further investigated. Table 6 above and Fig. 1 below indicate the total rank order of error rates for each POS and the average accuracy

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Accuracy across Proficiency Levels

CEFR level	*n*	No. of errors		No. of T-units		Accuracy	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
B2	10	15.50	9.16	13.70	5.21	1.14	1.01
B1	12	23.00	5.94	22.25	6.97	1.15	1.06
A2	5	17.40	9.74	15.60	2.70	0.97	0.86
Total	27	18.85	8.53	17.85	6.90	1.12	0.55

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

rate across different proficiency levels, respectively. The results show that errors in the use of articles have by far the highest error rate, which means that article usage is one of the most common sources of error for participants. Article-related errors include the incorrect omission of an article or the addition of an unnecessary article or the use of a wrong article. Although these similar accuracy percentages for most POSs mask differences between these three CEFR groups, article errors are worthy of special mention: the greater proficiency a student developed, the less article-related errors they tended to make in writing.

Table 6: Total Rank Order of Error Rate

1	Article (at)	50.00%
2	Conjunction (con)	14.05%
3	Preposition (prp)	13.95%
4	Verb (v)	12.64%
5	Adverb (av)	5.69%
6	Pronoun (pn)	3.61%
7	Noun (n)	3.44%
8	Adjective (aj)	2.59%

This is not a surprising outcome for an instructor who teaches in Japanese EFL settings, as article errors are the most frequently encountered in the teaching process. This may be due largely to the fact that the Japanese language does not have the grammatical category of articles. Generally, articles are divided into the definite article, *the*, the indefinite articles, *a* and *an*, and the zero article. Japanese has no equivalent to *a*, *an*, or *the*. Probably, errors within the article system are caused as a result of L1 interference. It is true that the rules that govern article usage are troublesome and confusing for Japanese EFL learners; therefore explicit instruction in the L2 system is all the more necessary. The results of the study suggest that the higher proficiency learners have more firmly entrenched knowledge of the article system in English and that type of knowledge about the English article system might be reflective of the development process of learners' language. This is consistent with previous research, which maintains that there is a significant difference in article choice across proficiency levels.[24]

When it comes to the other POS, considering that the error percentage depends largely on the total numbers of each POS, the total number of conjunctions (ranked second), adverbs (ranked fifth), and adjectives (ranked eighth) were each extremely small, yielding problematic results for their error rates: as these POS are not necessarily required in a given sentence structure, it was possible that learners were likely to avoid using them in their writing, which means that the error rate for these POS does not necessarily indicate their understanding. In contrast, nouns and verbs are required items in any sentence, and the total number of these POS was large. The reason why the accuracy rate for nouns is relatively high may be that they knew relatively well the correct usage of nouns or that this writing topic was easy enough for them to write with nouns they already knew. Regarding verbs, being influenced by tense, aspect, and mood, verb usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English language to master, and in this study students often made verb-related errors such as subject-verb agreement and form. The NICT JLE Corpus error guidelines divide prepositions into two categories (i.e., Lexical choice_1 and Lexical choice_2), or common prepositions and prepositions that play a subordinate role by following other POS (e.g., noun, verb, or adjective). Prepositions can make written work more colorful and detailed, and it would be well nigh impossible to avoid using them in either written or spoken language. The error percentage of these two kinds of prepositions is rather high, suggesting that preposition usage was generally troublesome to students. As for pronouns, this task required them to state their opinion from from

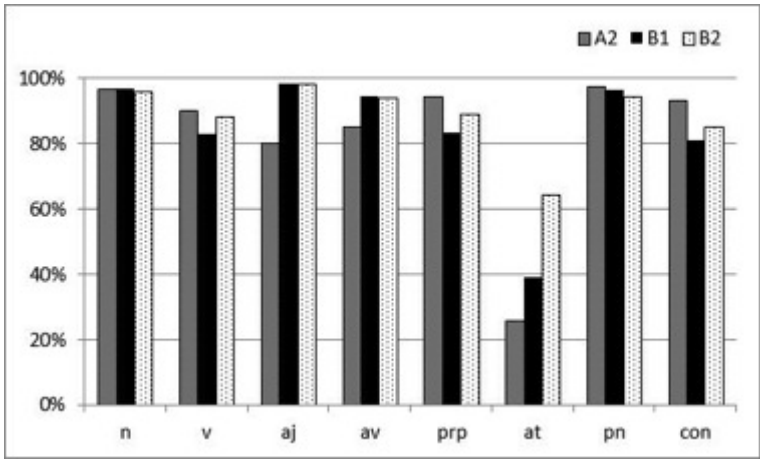

Fig. 1: Accuracy Rate for Each Part of Speech across Proficiency Levels

first person point of view (i.e., "*What do you do for good health?*"). Almost all the pronouns they used in the texts were first person pronouns, and they used them almost entirely correctly. In sum, the results measured for some POSs might be affected by the topic given and the total number of POSs they used. Regardless of topic type and sample size, however, the correct usage of articles, verbs, and prepositions did not seem to have become firmly established in students' memory.

5. Some Pedagogical Implications

Through investigation of the accuracy of their L2 writing, it was revealed that the participants on the whole presented no significant difference in accuracy across proficiency levels. Now that it has been shown that errors can serve as a guide to passage along the process of learning, in-depth analysis of errors has become a worthwhile and achievable research topic. Upon closer examination of errors in this study, students often tended to make errors regarding articles, verbs, and prepositions, showing the necessity of further instruction in their correct usage. Our findings also suggest that article-related errors by Japanese EFL learners can be an indicator of language proficiency. However, this study has also shown that it can not provide entirely sufficient or adequate information concerning Japanese EFL learners' accuracy in their interlanguage for the following reasons: the number of Japanese EFL learners who took part in the study was quite small, and the selected writing topic may have affected the the results. At the same time, accuracy in interlanguage has been the subject of controversy in SLA research, and there remain issues that need to be further discussed as to how accuracy is to be measured and how an error is to be counted and classified. Moreover, it should be hoped that students' writing performance will be carefully and comprehensively reanalyzed with respect to all the aspects of CAF, potentially opening up new possibilities for future research.

In the meantime, a review of the common grammatical errors made by the participants was sufficient for the author/instructor to understand the students' use of language and to get a clue asto what form-practical exploration of writing instruction should take. Writing, in itself, can trigger learners to notice the gap between their interlanguage and target language. The concept of noticing, which involves a process of attending consciously to linguistic features of a given output so that the output can become future intake, has been considered to be important and necessary in promoting the use of target language.[25] In addition, as noticing continues, the provision of effective feedback can contribute to the overall development of L2 learning and performance.[26] Feedback has been one of the important topics in teaching practice, and much research has tackled with the issue of what kinds of feedback have the greatest impact on improving L2 writing.

One month after the writing task was completed, the students were given feedback about their writing performance. There are roughly speaking two types of feedback: teacher feedback and peer feedback. For this study, peer feedback was introduced into the class in order to encourage them to engage in noticing through interactive peer-based learning. Furthermore, two strategies of error correction, direct feedback and indirect feedback, have generally received attention from researchers, and are illustrated in Fig. 2.[27] The former means that an instructor provides a learner with the correct form, and the latter means that an instructor provides a learner with some indication that an error exists in their writing.

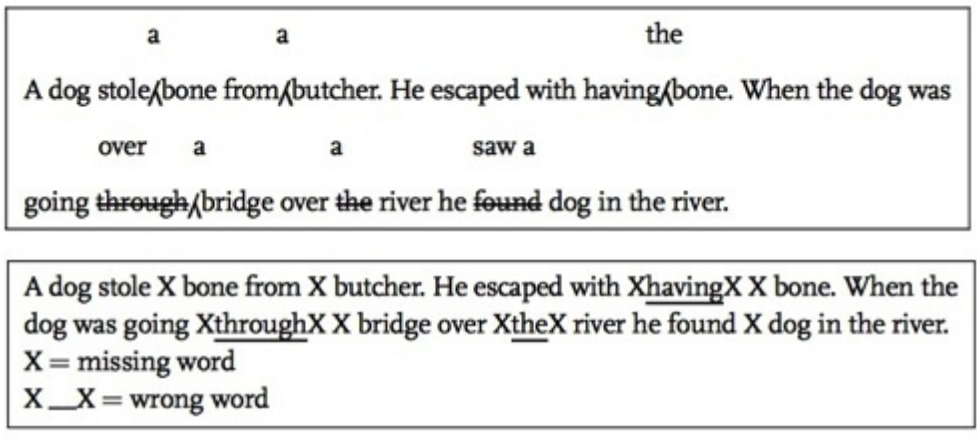

Fig. 2: Examples of Direct Feedback (above) and Indirect Feedback (below) in Ellis (2009)

As previous research stated that indirect feedback is more beneficial in improving accuracy in L2 writing,[28] the students in the class received indirect feedback, which means that the ill-formed parts were underlined with no correction. Of particular concern in their writing were the three POSs: viz., articles, prepositions, and verbs. Accordingly, a list of 12 erroneous sentences related to these POSs was distributed to each group and each group was told to correct the errors on their own. Based on their most common error types, each student received sentences from their own writing that addressed they most frequent type of error. Through mutual discussion, each group was instructed to reflect about the linguistic forms and express their opinions about error correction. Finally, the author/instructor elucidated the main points about the correct usage of these POSs in the form of teacher feedback. During the whole process, it seemed that the EFL learners engaged in their work more eagerly than usual. Although research into feedback was not the main focus of this paper and this feedback style was not comprehensively implemented, it is clear that its effectiveness of different types of feedback on L2 writing should be investigated thoroughly in order to engage learners in noticing and foster autonomy in their language learning, along with research into evaluating writing performance.

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