

Changes in Japanese EFL Writing through a Native English Reader's Feedback

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Previous Studies

– Feedback in L2 Writing –

- Teacher feedback on L2 student writing has been focused on three major areas:

(a) The teacher's error correction

e.g. Truscott (1996, 1999), Ferris (1997, 1999)

(b) The teacher's response practices

e.g. Zamel (1985), Ferris *et al.* (1997)

(c) L2 writers' reactions to teacher feedback

e.g. Leki (1990, 1991), Hyland and Hyland (2006)

The Present Study

- Previous studies suggest that much remains to be explored about the ways L2 teachers and student writers can build collaborative and productive feedback relationships.
- Full cooperation was gained from a web-based English proofreading agency, '[Eigo-de-Nikki](#).'



Ten second-year students at Tokyo International University were given an opportunity to write three separate journals in English and obtain corrective feedback from a U.S.-based ESL teacher, a native English reader.

Research Questions in the Present Study

- (1) What will change, if anything, in Japanese EFL writing through short-term but continuous feedback from a native English reader in the U.S.?
- (2) What are the students' opinions about the corrective feedback they have received from the native English reader?

Data Collection (1)

➤ Study Participants

- Ten second-year students enrolled in my seminar course
- English proficiency of the students: 420 to 530 on the TOEFL ITP (456.8 on average)

➤ EFL Writing Data – 3 separate journals

- Three 150-170-word journal entries were written every two weeks during the spring holidays in 2006 and sent to a native English reader (an ESL teacher) who lives in the U.S.

Data Collection (1)

➤ Corrective Feedback

- The native English reader corrected grammatical errors in student journals, assessed the journals in two ways (grammatical assessment and quality assessment), and gave fairly detailed encouraging comments on problem areas.
- What the students obtained as corrective feedback from the native English reader was a combination of:
 - (a) His or her journal with direct error corrections
 - and
 - (b) A feedback sheet
 - grammatical assessment scores
 - detailed comments on his or her problem areas

Data Collection – Assessment Forms

➤ Grammatical Assessment

⇒ Three-point Assessment Form of Basic Grammar

Use of Articles	3	2	1
Use of Verbs	3	2	1
Sequences of Tenses	3	2	1
Use of Prepositions	3	2	1
Choice of Words	3	2	1

3: Excellent 2: Good 1: Fair

Data Collection – Assessment Forms

➤ Quality Assessment

⇒ Five-point Assessment Form of Writing Quality

Holistic Rating		5	4	3	2	1
Analytic Rating (Jacob <i>et al.</i> , 1981)	Content	5	4	3	2	1
	Organization	5	4	3	2	1
	Vocabulary	5	4	3	2	1
	Language Use	5	4	3	2	1
	Mechanics	5	4	3	2	1

5: Very Good 4: Good 3: Fair 2: Poor 1: Very Poor

Data Collection (2)

➤ Questionnaire for eliciting the students' opinions about the corrective feedback

- About a month after they received the third piece of feedback from the reader, the students were given a questionnaire and asked to describe their opinions about their experience with the reader and their satisfaction with her feedback.
- The questionnaire included the following questions:

- 1. Have you found any weakness(es) in your L2 writing? If so, describe your weakness(es).**
- 2. Do you think that corrective feedback on your writing will lead to the improvement of your English proficiency? Why?**
- 3. How could you take advantage of the feedback you received in your continued EFL learning?**
- 4. What, if anything, do you think has changed in your writing or in your attitudes toward L2 writing?**

Data Analysis

- Three separate journals written by nine participants were examined to see if the writing had ‘changed’ through short-term but continuous feedback from the native English reader.
 - ▶ **For Research Question 1**
 - Changes in grammatical and quality assessment scores were individually tracked.
 - Quality assessment scores were examined using paired *t*-tests and stepwise regression analyses.
 - ▶ **For Research Question 2**
 - The students' open-ended responses to the questionnaire were compiled and their opinions were compared where relevant.

Results – Changes in Students' Grammatical Accuracy (1)

➤ Use of Articles

Taking the students as a group, accuracy in the use of articles increased over time.

➤ Use of Verbs and Sequence of Tenses

- Many errors were observed in verb use and found to be closely correlated to poor sequence of tenses.
- A common error was mixing the present tense and the past tense in describing certain events.

Results – Changes in Students' Grammatical Accuracy (2)

➤ Use of Prepositions

Four of the nine students were evaluated as 'excellent' users of prepositions in their third entry compared with the only two in the first entry.

➤ Choice of Words

The students' problems with word choice persisted. Commonly misused words/phrases include:

- '(skating) players' instead of 'skaters'
- 'wear shoes' instead of 'put on shoes'

Results – Changes in Students' Writing Quality (1)

- The first and third journal entries of all the participants were compared in terms of the holistic and analytic scores using paired *t*-tests.
 - => No significant differences were found for any scores.
- The changes in analytic scores suggest that the continuous feedback from the native English reader had positive effects on certain aspects of student writing (individually varied, though).
 - e.g. The '*content*' and '*organization*' of the writing were better than the other aspects in the first entry, but this tendency was more apparent in the last entry, where five or six students received the maximum score.

Holistic Ratings on Writing Quality

Participants	1st Journal	2nd Journal	3rd Journal
Student #1	5	4	4.5
Student #2	3	3.5	3
Student #3	4	3	3.5
Student #4	4.5	4	4.5
Student #5	3	4	4
Student #6	4	5	4
Student #7	4	3.5	4.5
Student #8	4	4	4
Student #9	4	4	4
Mean	3.94	3.88	4.0

Results – Changes in Students' Writing Quality (2)

- A remarkable improvement for the group as a whole was found in '*mechanics*' in the last entry.
 - => Stepwise regression analysis revealed that this aspect made the greatest independent contribution to the holistic scores in the last entry.
- As for '*vocabulary*' and '*language use*,' it was hard to see positive changes in the group as a whole over time.
 - => Improper choice of words and inadequate vocabulary were key problems for the students.
 - => L2 vocabulary was difficult for the students when they chose to write about current news topics or sports events rather than about their daily lives.

Results – Students' Opinions about Corrective Feedback

- Have you found any weakness(es) in your L2 writing?
If so, describe your weakness(es).
 - => All the students answered positively. The weaknesses they highlighted include (a) poor sequence of tenses, (b) improper use of vocabulary, especially verbs, and (c) improper use of articles.
- Do you think that corrective feedback on your writing will lead to the improvement of your English proficiency?
Why?
 - => All the students answered positively. The reasons for their positive response include:
 - (a) because they can try to avoid the same mistakes or errors the next time they write.
 - (b) because they cannot identify their weaknesses without any corrective feedback from readers.

Results – Students' Opinions about Corrective Feedback

- How could you take advantage of the feedback you received in your continued EFL learning?
 - => The students want to overcome their weaknesses by reviewing the basic elements of English grammar and also by extensive reading.
- What, if anything, do you think has changed in your writing or in your attitudes toward L2 writing?
 - => The students enjoyed reading feedback from the reader and were encouraged to write a grammatically more accurate and enjoyable journal. They also expected a positive response from the reader.



The students' reactions to the reader's feedback were very positive.

Discussion – Changes in Student Writing

- No significant difference in writing quality was predictable at the start of the present study, but the findings suggest that signs of positive changes can be found individually in terms of certain aspects of student writing.
- “Untreatable errors” (Ferris, 1999) such as improper choice of words seem to persist.
=> L2 learners need to expand vocabulary, i.e., they need time, to be able to properly choose words.

Discussion – Positive Reactions to the Reader

➤ The students' positive attitudes toward L2 writing might have been guided by the reader's phrasing in her comments.

=> The reader's consistent stance as a reader, rather than as an authoritative evaluator, and her interpersonal considerations helped construct a feedback context that was easily acceptable to the students.

e.g. The reader almost always began her comments with high praise. She also included another kind of praise and/or encouragement in the middle of her comments. She even blurred the direct impact of her criticism on the writer by her careful phrasing.

Conclusion

➤ Research Question 1

- The reader's corrective feedback caused positive effects on student writing even in the short term.
- It is important, however, to consider individual diversity when we examine L2 'development' or 'improvement.'

(cf. Casanave (1994))

➤ Research Question 2

- All the students reacted to the reader's feedback positively. They came to a better understanding of their major areas of weakness through her feedback.
- The students' experiences increased their motivation as writers. => One of them said, **"I want to write in English more!"**

Pedagogical Implications

- L2 writing teachers need to create an interpersonal and pedagogical context in their classroom.
 - => facilitating the students' involvement in writing as a means of expressing themselves.
- To track the students' development or improvement in L2 writing, we need to examine their data as a group and to be alert to possible changes that may occur in individual students over time.
- Journal writing is expected to raise L2 writers' motivation to express themselves the way they want to, thereby leading to the expansion of their vocabulary and more proper use of English expressions.

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Appendix: The Reader's Comments on the First Journal of Student #1

Wow! What a wonderful essay! You have done a very good job with this.

The items you see marked are, for the most part, things I've changed to help improve the fluency of your writing. Some are not incorrect on a technical level, but the ways I have recommended you rephrase some items will bring them into line with how a native speaker of English would say something.

Your mastery of “a,” “an,” and “the” is impressive – using articles correctly is one of the most difficult aspects of English for many Japanese speakers. That you can use these small but important words so well really helps your writing to sound very fluent.

One final note – in American English, we encase punctuation marks inside of the quotation marks, “like this.”