第二言語の学習・教授可能性：日本人英語学習者の自由英作文
Learnability and Teachability of Second Language: Preliminary Analysis of Japanese EFL Learners' Free Writing in English

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to shed a new light on the learning mechanism of second language knowledge in Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). The present study addresses a new research question in consideration of child first language acquisition with only positive evidence: do grammatical error rates of Japanese EFL learners decline gradually with no negative evidence at all? To answer this question, 71 Japanese EFL learners participated in an experiment of free English writing with no corrective feedback. The results showed that within one academic year, the grammatical error rate was lower in their writing in the second semester compared to the first. This tendency was found in determiners and number agreement, but not in prepositions or tense. This suggests that (implicit) learning happens even without explicit teaching, and that the question of to what extent it is the case should be further examined.

Keywords — second language knowledge, teachability, learnability, Japanese EFL learners, free English writing

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to shed a new light on the learning mechanism of second language knowledge. In cognitive sciences, language and its learning mechanism have been of significant importance to pursue human nature [1], [2]. Our particular interest is in the following difference: children acquire their native or first language successfully without any training, while many adults struggle to learn their second language even with intensive instruction [3], [4]. This discrepancy is a long-standing issue leading to two problems: (i) variability in ultimate attainment and (ii) learnability or teachability of language. For (i), there is no variability in ultimate attainment in child/first language acquisition, guaranteeing that no child fails to acquire his/her native language in a normal environment. Contrastively, there is inevitable variability in ultimate attainment in second language learning, resulting in the fact that quite a few adults struggle to master a second language and many of them fail to reach a native level of proficiency. Regarding (ii), no teaching is needed for first language acquisition because every child acquires his/her native language despite of the fact that he/she is not always taught about that language in a given environment [5] (cf. [6]). On the other hand, much teaching of second languages is practiced in language education, especially in a foreign language environment where the target language for learning is not used in learners' daily life[1].

To explain the above discrepancy between first and second language acquisition, some theories have been proposed. For first language acquisition, one account is based on the genetic endowment (or Universal Grammar) as language acquisition device shared in our mind/brain, resulting in no variability in ultimate attainment and thus a strong argument for no learning or teaching at all (e.g., [7], [8], [9]). Another account refers to statistical learning motivated by a general cognitive capacity given to humans (e.g., [10]). Still another account is attributed to the human sentence processing mechanism and its relationship with learning (e.g., [11], [12]). The latter two accounts also posit no variability in ultimate attainment but assume some efficient learning driven by the innate mechanism, not by teaching. On the other hand, there are various ideas for variability in ultimate attainment and teachability/learnability in second language acquisition. One account argues for no access to the innate language acquisition device used in first language acquisition (e.g., [13], cf. [14], [15]). Another account is based on learners' factors such as motivation, learning strategies, age of learning (e.g., [16], [17]). For teachability/learnability, there are some claims that teaching is effective for second language at the appropriate stage of learning (e.g., [18], [19]). The purpose of this paper is

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[1] Note that there is also a second language environment where the target language is used in the daily life. In such situation, teaching rarely happens as in child/first language acquisition. The scope of this paper is a foreign language environment where there is much teaching of the target language in a formal setting like language education at school.

not to evaluate each of the above accounts but to explore a still-remaining question of whether second language is indeed teachable/learnable or not, compared to first language.

As an approach to the problem of variability in ultimate attainment of second language knowledge, the present study focuses on Japanese EFL learners and investigates whether English is learnable/teachable as a second language to them. We particularly examine whether Japanese EFL learners can still learn English without any negative evidence or teaching about their grammatical errors or not.[2]

2. Input or Evidence in Language Acquisition

Input or external experience is indispensable for language acquisition, whether first or second. The notion of input is called evidence in language acquisition and categorized into three types: positive evidence, direct negative evidence, and indirect negative evidence [8: pp. 8-9]. Positive evidence is the information about grammatical sentences in a given language to determine the characteristics of that language. Direct negative evidence is corrections, i.e., the information about what is wrong with a sentence in a given language produced by learners of that language. Indirect negative evidence is the information that no ungrammatical sentences would be provided in a given language and thus that only experienced data are grammatically permitted in that language. In this paper, we focus on direct negative evidence and examine the effect of corrective feedback, particularly explicit corrections, on language acquisition.[3]

In first language acquisition, it has been assumed that direct negative evidence is not necessary [24]. In fact, it has been reported that a parent's corrective feedback (i.e., teaching) does not lead to a child's immediate correction of his/her ungrammatical utterances as demonstrated in (1).

(1) corrective feedback (explicit corrections) [25: p. 69]
     Child: Nobody don't like me.
     Mother: No, say 'Nobody likes me.'
     Child: Nobody don't like me.
     [Eight repetitions of this dialogue, then]
     Mother: No, now listen carefully. Say 'Nobody likes me.'
     Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

In second language acquisition especially in a foreign language environment, on the other hand, direct negative evidence is pervasive as seen in language teaching at school. The effect of corrective feedback on second language learning has, however, been inconclusive yet. There are two types of previous findings. One type implies that the effect of corrective feedback is limited or no effect as in first language acquisition in (1), concluding that direct negative evidence is not necessary to the learning of a second language [26], [27], [28]. The other type of findings suggests that corrective feedback is indeed effective but the effect is not retained for a long period [29], [30], [31] (see [32], [33], [34], [35], [36] for a summary of the effects of corrective feedback).

Then, some questions still remain for the effect of direct negative evidence (i.e., explicit corrections) on second language acquisition. Whether is corrective feedback indeed effective to second language learning or not? If so, to what extent is corrective feedback useful and helpful to learners' development of second language knowledge? To which grammatical items could corrective feedback be effective? The present study focuses on second language acquisition in a foreign language environment because in such environment, second language is learned typically in the classroom where teachers often make explicit corrections to learners. We particularly examine whether learning would still happen if no direct negative evidence were given in the classroom.

3. The Present Study

We address the following research question:

(2) Research Question
     With no corrections at all, would grammatical error rates of Japanese EFL learners decline gradually?

In many practices of language teaching, second language learners produce grammatical errors in their speaking and writing and receive explicit corrections given by their teachers. Then, could learning take place even when learners write constantly but no corrections are provided? Here, we define learning as learners' noticing their grammatical errors and correcting those errors by themselves. If we can find a "Yes"

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[2] In error analysis in second language acquisition research, two distinct terms are defined as follows: *errors* as "the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of language to date" and *mistakes* as the unsystematic "errors of performance" (i.e., his use of language) [20: pp. 166-167]. In this paper, however, we consistently use the term *errors* partly because

errors and mistakes are not always easy to be distinguished.
[3] In this paper, we use the terms direct negative evidence and corrective feedback interchangeably (cf. [21]). For corrective feedback, there are a variety of types from implicit feedback like recasts to explicit feedback like corrections (see [22], [23] for a summary of the types of corrective feedback).

answer to the question in (2), it is the case that (implicit) learning happens even without explicit teaching, i.e., that second language is learnable.

The rationale behind our research question is child language acquisition. Children do not know in advance about which sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical in a language to be acquired even when they produce errors. They just receive input (positive evidence) about grammatical sentences from their surrounding external environment, notice gaps between what they say and what others say, and finally correct their errors by themselves to achieve the mastery of their native language. If first language acquisition proceeds in such a situation that no explicit correction (direct negative evidence) is provided, could second language also be developed like this? Given that no corrections are provided, learners should notice gaps by receiving input (positive evidence) and correct their errors by themselves [37]. To investigate this possibility related to the research question in (2), an experiment of free English writing was conducted.

4. Experiment
4.1. Method
Participants

The participants were 71 Japanese EFL learners. They were all Japanese-speaking university students. Their level of English proficiency was estimated as CEFR A1 (basic user of English) on the basis of their TOEIC scores (Mean = 380).

Materials

Free English writing was conducted in a general English course at a university for one academic year (the instructor was the author of this paper). Twenty-five general topics were provided for free English writing as shown in (3).

(3) 25 topics for free writing in English
1st Semester
1. Write freely about yourself.
2. What do you want to be in the future and why?
3. What did you do during Golden Week?
4. For what are you going to use English in the future?
5. Which English skills are you good at and why?
6. Which English skills are you NOT good at and why?
7. Which country do you want to go and why?[4]
8. Are you going to watch the Tokyo Olympics and why?
9. How do you improve your English ability?
10. What do you think of your life under the COVID-19

pandemic?
11. What did you do during the last summer vacation?
12. What are you going to do during the summer vacation?
2nd Semester
13. What did you do during this summer vacation?
14. What is the most shocking news to you so far?
15. Do you want to marry in the future and why or why not?
16. How was your weekend (Oct. 30 & 31)?
17. Did you participate in the school festival (on-line) and why or why not?
18. What will you do in five years?
19. What will you do in ten years?
20. What would you do in 50 years?
21. How did you change your behavior from summer to now under COVID-19?
22. Would you like to work even if you had much money and why or why not?
23. What are you going to do in the winter break?
24. How were your 2021 and winter break?
25. What are you going to do during the spring vacation?

The first 12 topics were assigned in the first semester, and the remaining 13 ones were in the second semester.

Procedure

For the 25 topics in Materials above, the participants were given one topic as one homework assignment of free writing in English. They were required to write about a given topic with about 150 words using a word processor software (Microsoft Word), and instructed to write as a speech script, which is described below, and not to be careful about their grammatical errors too much. Moreover, they were facilitated to write as many sentences as possible because one point was assigned to one sentence for their grade of the writing part. There was no time limit for free writing, but the submission deadline of each topic was within one week after assigned. No corrective feedback was given to the participants' writing.

The data collection was carried out in a series of lessons in a general English course for one academic year, 2021. The basic structure of each 90-minute lesson was roughly as follows: attendance check, speaking activity, reading activity based on the textbook, listening quizzes on the contents of the textbook, and homework information. The speaking activity was based on homework assignments of free English writing. The purpose of this writing was the participants' preparation for the speaking activity in the next lesson, and thus they wrote about a given topic as a speech script. The lessons were conducted almost in English by a non-native English

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[4] This question sentence should have been as follows: Which country do you want to go *to* and why? This shows that the

instructor of the class sometimes produced nonnative-like English, which the participants were exposed to in class.

instructor (the author of this paper). The textbook was about business English which was relatively understandable to the lower-intermediate learners of English [38]. For one academic year, the participants were exposed to English mainly through this business English course because they did not take any other English courses. In class, they were able to receive input or positive evidence from the instructor and their classmates during speaking, reading, and listening activities. Reading and listening were based on the textbook, while speaking was based on the writing assignment. In the speaking activity, the participants were able to listen to their classmates' talks about the same topic for writing. The speaking activities were up to about 15 minutes and carried out in groups of three or four members. Each member of the group was given approximately two minutes for his/her talk, and after that, there was an about one-minute Q&A session in which he/she responded to his/her classmates' comments and questions.

Data Treatment

First, we examined the overall tendency of error rates in the grammaticality of the sentences produced by the participants. The total number of sentences collected from all the 71 participants was counted and, out of them, the total number of ungrammatical sentences including grammatical errors such as determiners, prepositions, and number agreement was counted. Then, error rates were calculated for 25 topics by dividing the number of sentences including grammatical errors by the total number of sentences. Our particular interest is in analyzing the participants' error rates over a period of one academic year to judge whether they declined gradually or not. Concretely, the results of the first and second semesters were compared by a chi-square test.

Second, we investigated whether there were those types of grammatical items whose error rates declined gradually or not. The participants' errors were categorized into morphosyntactic items, and the number of errors in each topic was counted for each item. The results of the first and second semesters were analyzed by a series of chi-square test.

Note that in the present data analysis, we focus on local errors, not global ones (e.g., [39]). Local errors are those which are tolerable in communication to understand the meaning of an utterance, whereas global errors are those which severely interfere a listener or reader's comprehension of the overall meaning of a speaker or writer's sentence. The former type includes errors in determiners, number agreement,

verb inflections and so on, while the latter type contains errors in word order, conjunctions, and so forth. Also note that the error analysis was conducted by the author of this paper.

4.2. Results

First, the total number of the collected sentences was 13643. Out of them, the number of ungrammatical sentences including morphosyntactic errors was 2335. The participants' error rates for 25 topics are summarized as in Table 1.

Table 1. Error Rates for 25 Topics

Topic	1	2	3	4	5
Er	173	131	138	98	92
Tl	785	611	611	518	524
%	22.04	21.44	22.59	18.92	17.56
Topic	6	7	8	9	10
Er	54	139	139	90	93
Tl	532	635	556	507	469
%	10.15	21.89	25.00	17.75	19.83
Topic	11	12			1st
Er	149	120			1416
Tl	623	514			6885
%	23.92	23.35			20.57
Topic	13	14	15	16	17
Er	100	73	60	59	89
Tl	638	477	565	559	510
%	15.67	15.30	10.62	10.55	17.45
Topic	18	19	20	21	22
Er	54	46	39	90	46
Tl	432	379	428	613	461
%	12.50	12.14	9.11	14.68	9.98
Topic	23	24	25		2nd
Er	65	79	119		919
Tl	467	717	512		6758
%	13.92	11.02	23.24		13.60

Notes: Er: Number of sentences including grammatical errors; Tl: Total number of sentences; %: Error rate in percentage; 1st: Total results of the first semester; 2nd: Total results of the second semester

The first topic was given at the beginning of the first semester, and the last one was at the end of the second semester. The total numbers of sentences were 6885 and 6758 in the first and second semesters, respectively, and the numbers of sentences including grammatical errors were 1416 and 919 in the first and second semesters, respectively. The error rate of the first semester was 20.57%, whereas that of the second semester was 13.60%. A chi-square test with Yates correction indicated that the number of erroneous sentences was lower in the second semester compared to the first ($X^2 = 82.32$, $p < .001$).

Second, the identified errors were categorized into 35 morphosyntactic items, but here we analyzed four items for which relatively high numbers of errors were found (the information in square brackets could be corrective feedback): determiners (e.g., *My father was [an] employee.*), number agreement within a noun phrase (e.g., *I have two reason[s].*),

prepositions (e.g., *In [For] those reasons, I don't want to get married in the future.*), and tense (e.g., *In spring vacation, I try [tried] it because I was free.*). The results of these four items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Errors for 4 Items in 25 Topics

Topic	1	2	3	4	5
Det	63	51	48	24	18
Num	35	24	15	22	21
Prep	21	10	21	13	7
Tns	10	11	11	5	7
Tl	173	131	138	98	92
Topic	6	7	8	9	10
Det	14	45	40	18	26
Num	13	34	35	22	14
Prep	4	23	8	12	13
Tns	2	10	10	2	8
Tl	54	139	139	90	93
Topic	11	12			1st
Det	66	54			467
Num	18	14			267
Prep	21	20			173
Tns	11	6			93
Tl	149	120			1416
Topic	13	14	15	16	17
Det	39	24	17	23	36
Num	11	10	7	7	8
Prep	21	16	6	6	15
Tns	8	7	4	6	4
Tl	100	73	60	59	89
Topic	18	19	20	21	22
Det	23	8	10	33	12
Num	4	3	3	13	4
Prep	7	5	4	11	4
Tns	2	3	4	3	0
Tl	54	46	39	90	46
Topic	23	24	25		2nd
Det	21	29	86		361
Num	10	3	2		85
Prep	3	15	12		125
Tns	4	9	0		54
Tl	65	79	119		919

Notes: Det: Determiners; Num: Number agreement within a noun phrase; Prep: Prepositions; Tns: Tense; Tl: Total number of errors including those of other items

The total numbers of errors were 1416 and 919 in the first and second semesters, respectively. Out of those, the numbers of errors in the first and second semesters were 467 and 361 for determiners, 267 and 85 for number agreement within a noun phrase, 173 and 125 for prepositions, and 93 and 54 for tense. A series of chi-square test with Yates correction showed that the number of errors was lower in the second semester for determiners ($X^2 = 4.39$, $p = .036$) and number agreement ($X^2 = 29.59$, $p < .001$), compared to the first semester, but no statistical differences were found for prepositions or tense.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

There are two major findings from the above results. One is the overall decline of grammatical error rates in the participants' free writing without corrections from the first to second semesters. This leaves the possibility of a "Yes" answer to our research question in (2), suggesting that second language is (implicitly) learnable even without explicit corrections or teaching. Particularly in writing, learners think and re-think about what to write, which is not possible in time-pressured speaking, and this would have led to the participants' noticing of their own use of English and thus their (implicit) learning. Also, in the speaking activity in each class, the participant had an opportunity to talk about what they wrote with his/her classmates who also wrote about the same topic. This could have provided relevant input or positive evidence to notice the participants' erroneous utterances, resulting in the decline of grammatical errors in their subsequent writing.

Another finding is that the decline of error rates varied depending on morphosyntactic items in question. The results of determiners and number agreement within a noun phrase showed the gradual decline of error rates, while those of prepositions and tense did not. A possible reason for this difference might be related to the form-meaning distinction. Errors of determiners and number agreement are related to grammatical forms in that those errors may be tolerable in our understanding in communication. On the other hand, errors of prepositions and tense are more likely to be related to meaning and thus interfere the comprehension of communication. In this sense, the former type of errors is considered form-related errors, while the latter type meaning-related errors. This may be consistent with the argument that in second language writing, local errors which do not disrupt the overall meaning do not have to be corrected because those errors are self-corrected by learners [39].

Taken together, these two findings have theoretical and educational implications. A theoretical implication is that there remains a possibility that like first language acquisition, second language acquisition proceeds based on only positive evidence. Our finding of the decline of errors without corrections is consistent with this view. An educational implication is that in language teaching, the effect of corrective feedback should be reconsidered as to what second language learners can do by themselves (i.e., learning) and what language teachers should do for them (i.e., teaching). Explicit corrections have been reported to facilitate accuracy development [27], [28], but accuracy (or the decline of errors)

might be developed even with no corrections. This does not deny the importance of teaching which surely facilitates learning [33], but further research on to what extent learners do by themselves contributes to the division of labor between teachers and learners in language education at school. The issue of learnability and teachability matters not only in child language development but also adult language learning.

For further research, one reviewer suggested that the frequency and type of errors could be different depending on two situations in which the participants were evaluated higher when the number of sentences they wrote was larger even with grammatical errors, and in which they were assessed higher when the number of sentences they wrote with no errors was larger even if that number was small. In this experiment, there was an incentive for the grade to those participants who wrote the larger number of sentences even with errors. This could have influenced the presented results in this paper. The manipulation of an incentive for the participant's writing is a future issue. Another issue is that some participants did not submit their writing about all 25 topics because the free writing task in the present study was conducted as homework assignments. Thus, in this paper, we did not analyze the individual differences in the pattern of grammatical errors depending on the participants and the topics. More detailed data analysis based on by-participant and by-topic perspectives is needed to answer our research question more clearly.

Acknowledgments

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