

A Response to Japanese Students' Writings: The Key to Success for Writing Class

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Abstract

Writing is one of the four language skills. When people write letters, essays, novels, blogs, and comment on social media, writing skills are essential. Writing skill is not innate, so people have to learn how to write at school. As for English education in Japan, the curriculum and the style of teaching are not enough. Therefore, this paper shows how teachers should give feedback to students and handle writing classes.

Keyword

WCF (Written corrective feedback), Writing, EFL, English education, Japanese

1. Introduction

Writing is needed everywhere in everyone's daily life. Chomsky (2002) states that all human beings have LAD as an innate endowment so that it enables them to acquire and use language. Tomasello (2009), however, states that LAD does not exist and people acquire language through usage in social and cultural activity. Though the debate whether people have LAD or not is still ongoing today, Chomsky does not admit that reading and writing skills are innate. It means that people would not be able to read and write, unless someone teaches them in cultural activity.

Moreover, the order of acquiring writing skill is the last because people acquire listening skills first, then speaking and reading. It takes a certain amount of time before people come to be able to write. Therefore, they are required to be trained how to write in school at the appropriate stages for learning.

Speaking of English education in Japan, according to *course of study*, students are not taught enough to write some sentences or essays in the class. In reality, 79.0 % of Japanese students do grammar exercises in the class. On the other hand, 34.8% of Japanese students write about their opinion or idea in the class (Kamiyama, 2020:13). It cannot be denied that students need to gain grammatical knowledge because it helps students to convey their opinions and ideas. However, only doing grammar exercises does not help them to think critically and express their ideas theoretically. Consequently, Japanese students have to learn how to write and

Japanese teachers need to teach them. Japanese teachers have to know how to correct students' writing and give them corrective feedback. Therefore, this paper focuses on writing, including writing corrective feedback (WCF).

2. History of writing classes

A great number of international students have already been accepted in the U.S. However, the impact of this was not very significant until 1940. At this time, the English language institute (ELI) taught English to people from Latin American countries. Then they also taught the English language to international students from other countries after World War II (Matsuda, 2002:16-17).

According to Oi (2004), the field of writing has three different changes. Those are text-oriented teaching since 1960s, writer-oriented teaching since late of 1970s, and reader-oriented teaching.

Firstly, "The first approach focuses on the products of writing by examining *texts* in various way, either through their formal surface elements or their discourse structure" (Hyland, 2002:5). For example, "orthography, sentence-level structure, and discourse-level structure – and the way L2 student texts deviated from L1 norms" (Matsuda, 2003:21). The teaching method was based on the oral approach and the audiolingual approach (Oi, 2004:202; Matsuda, 2003:19). The aim of the oral approach and the audiolingual approach is that learners can create sentences precisely. Hyland (2002), however, states that text-oriented teaching does not help learners to deal with complicated human communication. In addition, Tanaka (2015) states that teachers gave feedback as linguistic features mainly to students but fail to provide comment about their content.

Secondly, Hyland (2002) states that writer-oriented teaching focuses on the writer not the text, adding that "the second approach, loosely divided into Expressivist, Cognitivist and Situated strands, focuses on the writer and describes writing in terms of the processes used to create texts" (Hyland, *ibid*:5). Therefore, writers' discovery and process are significant (Oi, 2004:202), which is called "process approach (process writing)". Process approach (process writing) is:

"an approach which emphasizes the composing processes writers make use of in writing (such as planning, drafting, and revising) and which seeks to improve students' writing skills through developing their use of effective composing progress" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002:422).

In addition, Hyland and Hyland (2019) states that:

"The 'process approach' gave greater attention to teacher-student encounters around texts and encouraged teachers to support writers through multiple drafts by providing feedback

and suggesting revisions during the process of writing itself rather than at the end of it" (Hyland, *ibid*:2).

"Peer feedback" means that not only teachers but also other students can give feedback to the writer to help support the writing. It also includes process approach wherein both the teachers and the other students also give content feedback to the writer (Tanaka, 2015:111-112).

Thirdly, reader-oriented teaching is "the third approach emphasizes the role that *readers* play in writing, adding a social dimension to writing research by elaborating how writers engage with an audience in creating coherent texts" (Hyland,2002:5). Oi (2004) states that reader-oriented teaching is based on content-based approach. Writers have to consider the purpose of the writing, genre, and the reader, for example, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) (Oi, 2004; Tanaka,2015). EAP and ESP cause the increase in the number of composition classes for international ESL students and higher demand for writing instruction for Non-native English-speaking graduate students (Matsuda, 2002). Hyland and Hyland (2019) recently shed light on "genre-oriented approach", wherein they stated that "sociocultural theories of scaffolded instruction and learning as social practice are of consequence" (Hyland, *ibid*:2). Genre-oriented approach defines as "a framework for language instruction' based on examples of a particular genre. The genre framework supports students' writing with generalized, systematic guiding principles about how to produce meaningful passages" (Byram, 2004: 234).

Polio (2001) states that the research of second language writing is investigated widely such as the writing itself, the writing process, some factors both learning and teaching writing, the social context including the classroom context. In this paper, it focuses on Written corrective feedback and how Japanese learners improve their writing skills and what English teachers bear in mind.

3. Types of WCF

Feedback means "comments or other information that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teacher or other people" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002:199). Lyster and Ranta (1997) categorized six types of feedback as follows:

a)Explicit correction

As the teacher provides the correct form, he or she clearly indicates that what the student had said was incorrect (e.g., "Oh, you mean," "You should say").

b)Recasts

The teachers' reformulation of all or part of a students' utterance.

c)Clarification requests

When the utterances are not understandable or grammatically incorrect, a repetition or a reformulation is required. Clarification requests are needed phrases such as “Pardon me” and, may also include a repetition of the error as in “What do you mean by X?”

d)Metalinguistic feedback

It contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student’s utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form. Metalinguistic comments generally indicate that there is an error somewhere (e.g., “Can you find your error? “No, not X,” or even just “No.”)

e)Elicitation

Teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from the student.

f)Repetition

It refers to the teacher’s repetition. In most cases, teachers adjust their intonation so as to highlight the error. (ibid: 46-49)

It can be used both oral and written feedback, however; based on this categorization, the types of WCF is shown in next chapter.

3.1.1. Feedback for contents

Teachers can give feedback about writers’ content or grammatical features. According to Sheppard (1992) and Kepner (1991), content feedback is effective for learners to improve their English proficiency. Sheppard (1992) states that content responses lead to grammatical accuracy improvement. Kepner (1991) also mentions that content feedback has significant effect on learner’s production, however, he states that error correction feedback has no effect on learners’ production.

Ashwell (2000), for example, focused on content feedback and error feedback, and investigated the order when teachers should give content-focused feedback and form-focused feedback to students. He concluded that there were no significant differences whether teachers give content-focused feedback first or form-focused feedback first to students. His study also revealed that students rely on more form-focused feedback than content-focused feedback. Therefore, he concluded that the content feedback has no significant effect on writing.

3.2.1. Feedback for linguistic features

To improve learners’ linguistic accuracy, teachers can give linguistic feedback to learners: (a) Direct feedback, (b)Indirect feedback and (c) Metalinguistic feedback: (1) coding (2) Grammar description.

3.2.2. (a) Direct feedback

According to Bitchener and Ferris (2012), the definitions of direct written corrective feedback is

as follows:

Direct written CF has typically been defined as that which provides some form of explicit correction of linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic error and usually involves the crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, and or/ the provision of the correct form or structure. (Bitchener & Ferris, *ibid*: 65)

In addition, direct WC includes “written meta-linguistic explanation (the provision of grammar rules and examples of correct usage)” and “oral form-focused instruction (to further clarify the written meta-linguistic explanation)” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012: 65). Table 1 shows an example of direct written feedback.

a	a	the
A dog stole \bone from \butcher. He escaped with having \bone. When the dog was		
over	a	a
going through \bridge over the river he found dog in the river.		

Table 1: An example of direct written corrective feedback. (adapted from Ellis, 2009:99)

3.2.3. (b) Indirect feedback

Indirect written CF has been defined as that which indicates an error has been made but it does not provide a correction or explicit meta-linguistic information. Typically, it has been provided in one of two ways: (1) underlining or circling an error; (2) recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line. Rather than the teacher providing direct feedback, writers are left to resolve and correct the problem that classroom, that is drawn to their attention.

(Bitchener & Ferris, 2012: 65)

Table 2 shows an example of indirect written corrective feedback.

<p>A dog stole X bone from X butcher. He escaped with X<u>having</u>X X bone. When the dog was going X<u>through</u>X X bridge over X<u>the</u>X river he found X dog in the river.</p> <p>X = missing word</p> <p>X __X = wrong word</p>

Table 2: An example of indirect written corrective feedback. (adapted from Ellis, 2009:100)

Chandler (2003), for example, stated that direct feedback by teachers was preferred by students because “it was the fastest and easiest way for them to revise. “(*ibid*:291). Though indirect feedback such as marking or underlining errors does not take much time for teachers

and students feel self-correction helps their learning, students are not sure whether their hypothesized corrections are accurate or not (Chandler, 2003). According to Truscott and Hsu (2008), indirect feedback is effective for students to revise their writing compared with students without any feedback, however, when they write a new text, they cannot find the differences between the two. Van Beuningen (2008)’s study shows that only direct feedback has effects in improving learners’ accuracy in the long run, though both indirect and direct feedback has effects in improving learners’ accuracy for a short time. Bitchener et al. (2005) found that combination, which direct written corrective feedback with individual conference with teachers and students, is the most effective.

3.2.4. (c) Metalinguistic Feedback

According to Ellis (2009), there are two forms to give explicit comment on writing. “By far the most common is the use of error codes” (Ellis, 2009:100). Table 3 shows an example of the use of error codes.

art.	art.	WW art.
A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone. When the dog was		
prep.	art.	art.
going through bridge over the river he found dog in the river.		

Table 3: An example of the use of error codes. (adapted from Ellis, *ibid*:101)

The second type is “providing students with metalinguistic explanations of their errors” (Ellis, *ibid*:101). Table 4 shows an example of the metalinguistic explanation.

(1)	(2)	(3)
A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone. When the dog was		
(4)	(5)	(6)
going through bridge over the river he found dog in the river.		
<i>(1), (2), (5), and (6)—you need ‘a’ before the noun when a person or thing is mentioned for the first time.</i>		
<i>(3)—you need ‘the’ before the noun when the person or thing has been mentioned previously.</i>		
<i>(4)—you need ‘over’ when you go across the surface of something; you use ‘through’ when you go inside something (e.g. ‘go through the forest’).</i>		

Table 4: An example of the metalinguistic explanations. (adapted from Ellis, 2009:101)

Although Bitchener (2008) states that corrective feedback is effective for learners, his study shows that “The study also found that students who received direct corrective feedback on the targeted features as well as written and oral meta-linguistic explanation (group one) and those who received direct corrective feedback but no meta-linguistic feedback (group three) outperformed the control group (group four) who did not receive corrective feedback” (Bitchener, *ibid*:115). In addition, Bitcher and Knoch’s study (2008) compared 4 groups (direct corrective feedback, written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only; no corrective feedback). Their studies show that corrective feedback is effective for learners, however, no significant difference was found (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a; 2009b) among direct corrective feedback, written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written meta-linguistic explanation; and direct corrective feedback only. They concluded that “the provision of error correction alone may be sufficient for learners at a low intermediate proficiency level” (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009: 322). Sheen (2007), for example, compared two types of correction. One is “direct-only correction” (Sheen, *ibid*:262) and another is “direct metalinguistic correction” (Sheen, *ibid*:262) which shows errors, correct form and explanations for correct form. The study shows that a group with direct metalinguistic correction outperformed than the group with direct-only correction. Sheen concluded that “written CF targeting a single linguistic feature improved learners’ accuracy, especially when metalinguistic feedback was provided and the learners had high language analytic ability” (Sheen, *ibid*:255).

4. WCF research in Japan

Whether teachers should focus on the contents or grammatical features is still undecidable, especially Japan, where in EFL context Oi (1986) and Duppenthaler (2004), for example, state that content feedback is effective for learners. Providing feedback helps students convey their ideas more organically. Japanese and English are completely different languages in terms of structure, rhetoric, and cultural undertones. If one aims to hone English writing proficiency, Oi (1986) emphasizes the importance of giving feedback not just on syntax, but also on other nuances of the language such as rhetoric and tone. Teachers should therefore be proficient in all aspects of the language in order to provide a more holistic feedback to their students. Duppenthaler (*ibid.*), for example, divided students into 3 groups: a) meaning-focused feedback group, b) positive comments group, and c) error-focused feedback. His study shows that the students who belong to meaning focused group performed better than the students who belong to positive comments and error-focused groups. He, as a facilitator, gave the students feedback. He talked with the students and helped the students make their essay understandable, coherent, and clear. Both Oi (1986) and Duppenthaler (2004) agree that giving feedback to the contents is more effective for Japanese learners rather than correcting grammar errors. In contrast, Ellis et al. (2008), Sumida (2005; 2013) state that correcting grammar errors is effective for learners

and WCF is effective both focused and unfocused feedback in EFL context. Sumida's (2015) study shows that unfocused and focused feedback are effective for Japanese learners to decrease errors for sentence structures or syntactic errors. Additionally, Sumida (2005) states that whether Japanese learners can correct their errors depends on which types of errors they made. Teachers can underline verb errors if the students are beginners; however, teachers should use codes if the errors are nouns. Additionally, beginners cannot correct their syntactic errors by themselves even when they receive indirect feedback such as underlining and coding feedback from the teachers (Takayama and Oikawa, 2001:69). Therefore, teachers have to look at their errors carefully and decide which types of feedback are the best for the students.

Whether teachers focus on contents or grammar errors, WCF is a helpful tool for learners (Shizuka,1996; Baba,2018). Baba (ibid.) states that direct feedback from the teachers during the class is effective especially for slow learners. This is because they do not know how to correct their errors by themselves. Additionally, slow learners do not study outside of the class. Moreover, students also consider WCF as a meaningful tool for their studies (Shizuka, ibid). In addition, Shizuka (ibid.) states that teachers should tell the importance of WCF to the students as it is one of the best information tools to learn from.

5. The key to success for improving writing skills

It is undecidable so far whether teachers should focus on WCF for contents or linguistic features. However, in my opinion, considering results of researches, both of them are essential for Japanese learners to write an essay in ESL context. In this chapter, therefore, stating that comparing essays written in Japanese and English, learning how to make a writing composition, being aware of linguistic errors are required for Japanese learners in terms of improving their writing skills.

5.1. Rhetoric

Cultural background and the way of thinking affects writing compositions (Kaplan, 1966). He compared writings which international students such as Arabic, French, Korean, and Russian wrote, then finds that there are patterns for each country. Unlike the essay written in English, for example, Oriental writing such as Korean or Japanese, they prefer to write an essay indirectly, and their writing compositions are "turning and turning in a widening a gyre" (Kaplan, ibid:10). It cannot generalize that all international students have patterns for each culture, but Oi (1986) also mentions that the importance of learning rhetoric. She shows the difference of writings between NS and NNS (Japanese), stating that writing compositions, discourse markers, and cultural back ground affect their writing style. Without noticing the differences, essays which NNS (Japanese) wrote would be unclear for NS (Oi, ibid.). Although national writing style cannot be generalized, it is possible that L1 interferes with L2 writing. As Oi (ibid.) mentioned, if learners write essays based on L1, some words and phrases would be not understandable

and acceptable for NS. Therefore, it is worth teaching in the classroom how and why writing compositions are different between English and Japanese.

5.2. Critical thinking

Critical thinking means “a level of reading comprehension or discussion skills when the learner is able to question and evaluate what is read or heard” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010:147). When it comes to Japanese education, it is insufficient for students to be taught critical thinking (Mineshima and Chino, 2013) as MEXT (2006) states that Japanese students are not good at analyzing, evaluating texts and expressing their opinions in terms of the result of PISA requiring students critical reading. Oi (2006) shows an example of essays written by Japanese and American students, which tells that Japanese students wrote an essay subjectively, on the other hand, American students wrote an essay objectively. Oi (ibid.) states that writing an essay for Japanese people means to express their feelings, preferences, and experiences. For Japanese people, an essay means “*zuihitsu*”, which does not have any writing formats and writes can express there whatever they feel and think, such as “*Makuranosoushi*”, “*Houjouki*”, and “*Tsurezuregusa*” (Oi, ibid:105). Therefore, Japanese students need to be trained what critical thinking is and how to make their writing persuasive and coherent. However, Atkinson (1997) for example, casts a doubt on applying critical thinking in L2 classroom, stating that “critical thinking is cultural thinking” (ibid.:89). Additionally, Tomasello (2009) states that “Different individuals have different experiences, and different cultures have different values and social norms—these have an impact” (ibid:28). Historically speaking, Nisbett (2003) states that East Asia values harmony and solidarity, “were concerned less with issues of control of others or the environment than with self-control” (ibid:5), therefore, they try to “minimize friction with others in the family and village and to make it easier to obey the requirements of the state, administered by magistrates” (ibid:5). Hattori (2018) also states that because Japanese culture includes “the interdependent construal of the self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991:227) and self-effacing as their social norm, it is hard for Japanese students to grasp the concept of westernized critical thinking. As Hattori (ibid.) concludes, the best solution for this problem so far is that balance between westernized critical thinking and the critical thinking which suits Japanese culture are taken into consideration for English education in Japan.

5.3. Error correction

It cannot deny the efficacy of WCF for linguistic features. Opposed to Truscott (1996;2007), Takayama and Oikawa (2001) states that giving linguistic feedback is effective for Japanese learners if teachers can choose and give appropriate feedback depending on their errors. Sumida (2005), for example, giving indirect feedback for verb errors can work even for beginners, however, it does not work for syntactic errors. Likewise, teachers also agree that indirect feedback such as the codes cannot be applied to syntax level errors (Lee, 2004). This is because indirect feedback such as underlining and coding is not enough comprehensible feedback for students to understand why the sentence is wrong or appropriate and how their errors can be

corrected. In reality, the students state that thanks to the WCF, they could know the errors but they do not have any idea how they can correct them (Oikawa and Takayama, 2001). Therefore, variety types of feedback are needed depending on students' linguistic errors and levels. In addition, teachers should know students' level and what kind of grammar they use when they give feedback to students' writing. According to Pieneman's (1984) teachability hypothesis, children only can learn new grammatical features when they reach a stage to learn them. In other words, even if teachers give feedback either direct feedback or indirect feedback to the students, it would be meaningless if students do not reach a stage. Therefore, teachers are required to how much they correct students' errors and what kind of grammar they use when they give feedback to them. Overall, WCF for linguistic features enables students to realize their grammatical errors but teachers should bear in mind that what to correct and what to teach.

6. What NNS teachers should bear in mind?

Reliability defines: "Reliability refers to the consistency of measurement. It refers to the extent to which an assessment will produce the same pattern of scores with the same population of students on two different occasions" (Cox and Harper, 2000:89) Correcting feedback for linguistic errors is effective for learners to improve learners' writing skills and Ferris (2002) states that teachers should handle with the problematic grammar of NNS students. For examples, commas, apostrophes, semicolons, pronouns, and informal usage, which have never been a problem for NS. In short, teachers should recognize and identify those their errors (Ferris, *ibid.*). It would not be a problem if the teachers are NS, therefore, it is doubtful that NNS teachers can correct learners' errors and give them appropriate WCF. According to Lee (2004), the accuracy of NNS teachers' WCF was almost half. In other words, although teachers correct students' errors, half of the teachers' WCF was inaccurate, which leads to students' misunderstandings. When learners receive WCF from their teachers, the WCF must be accurate and appropriate so that it will be useful for learners (Masaki:1989). In terms of reliability, it would be a serious problem for NNS teaches in EFL countries. As far as I research, no study was conducted to show that there is any direct connection between NNS teachers' English proficiency and the efficacy of WCF. Though it is no concrete evidence that NS teachers or NNS teachers is effective for NNS learners, there is no doubt that NNS teachers are required to know and handle learners' problematic grammar. As Lee (2004) states, teachers are required to join workshops for teaching writing and giving FB to students. Likewise, universities should provide teaching a writing course for students who want to be a language teacher, as writing is one of the essential skills in learning a language.

6.2. Validity (Testing and assessment)

After students practice to write an essay, teachers give students a test to determine how much they can understand and write an essay. Teachers have to consider whether the test is valid or

not. Newton and Nation (2009) states that “A test is valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure and when it is used for the purpose for which it is designed” (ibid.:167) and Messick (1995) shows six aspects of validity: a) The content aspect of construct validity; b) The substantive aspect refers to theoretical ration for the observed consistence in test responses; c) the structural aspect; d) generalizability aspect; e) external aspect and f) consequential aspect (ibid:21). Teachers could check the validity based on the framework. When it comes to writing tests, Heaton (1975) states that leaners need four skills to be a good writer.

- (i) Grammatical skills: the ability to write correct sentences;
 - (ii) Stylistic skills: the ability to manipulate sentences an use language *effectively*;
 - (iii) Mechanical skills: the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language – e.g. punctuation, spelling;
 - (iv) Judgement skills: the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize and order relevant information.
- (Heaton, ibid:138)

Teachers have to consider these four skills and the validity of the tests. It is significant that the tests should be appropriate to the parameters the teacher wants to measure. Through writing tests, it is possible to know: a) proficiency; b) diagnosis; and c) achievement (Weigle, 2002:40) but after that, Hyland (2003) fractionalized them into the following: a) placement; b) diagnosis; c) achievement; d) performance; and e) proficiency (ibid.:214).

There are two types of assessment to measure writing skills. One is indirect assessment which are “typically multiple-choice measures that test students’ grammar, vocabulary, and written expression knowledge” (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:396) and another is direct assessment which is “the production of controlled students writing samples” (ibid:397). According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), many researchers casted doubts on the reliability of indirect assessment to measure writing skills so that the popularity of indirect assessment was replaced by direct assessment. In Japan, it is not an exception. Writing tests such as entrance examinations for high schools and universities has changed over the past few years, which leads to writing creative essays and paragraph essays.

Consequently, “developing clear rubrics, monitoring reliability with the help of the peers, reviewing students writing in portfolios, and using consistent, explicit marking practice” (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2004:309) are required for teachers. Additionally, in classroom context, teachers also need to use different criteria to asses writing skills by using holistic assessment, analytic assessment, or CEFR-J as there are a variety of writing topics and genres.

7. Conclusion

As a conclusion, both of the contents and linguistic feedback are essential and effective for Japanese learners in terms of improving their writing skills. Content feedback helps in writing compositions, which is acceptable for NS. On the other hand, WCF for linguistic features helps learners' grammatical accuracy. The reliability and validity are also required to give efficient feedback to students. When writing tests of the validity is high and WCF works well, it would have a great impact on students' writing skills. Though correcting and giving feedback is time-consuming, it is vitally important and the key to effective and productive teaching.

8. References

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