Writing and feedback in the EFL classroom:

Providing effective feedback for Japanese university students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the efficacy of written corrective feedback for Japanese learners. The study focuses on explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback, which were compared to determine which type of feedback would improve students' writing most significantly. The participants are 36 Japanese university students, freshmen, whose English proficiency levels range from A2 to B1 on CEFR levels at an English grammar class. They are separated into two groups: a) explicit feedback group; and b) metalinguistic feedback group. The result shows that the mean score for explicit feedback group is higher than that of metalinguistic feedback group in the second writing task. Moreover, the effect size is 0.4, which is very significant. The result indicates that explicit feedback is more effective than metalinguistic feedback for Japanese learners simply because explicit feedback would be more understandable than metalinguistic feedback.

Keywords

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

1.Introduction

English education in Japan has been undergoing a constant process of change. Though there is no ultimate way to teach and learn the language, Japan has been looking for the most effective way to teach English among Japanese people. Currently Japanese English education is focused on CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), which is based on communicative competency by Dell Hymes (1972). As Saito (2007) suggests, this idea and teaching method is best used in a setting when students have different nationalities especially when their English teachers come from America or Britain.

Before Japan focused on communicative teaching method, GMT (Grammar Translation Method) was popular in English classroom in Japan, however, it had been criticized because English proficiency of Japanese students did not improve as Saito (Ibid.) states. Therefore, Japanese government changed the teaching method to communicative learning teaching (Saito,

ibid). It is believed that if students are exposed to English and have more opportunities to speak and write during the class, their English proficiency would be improved, Saito (ibid) also mentioned. Teaching English through CLT is a borrowed methodology from other countries, but there are doubts whether it is the most suitable method of teaching English in Japan. At one of the high schools I worked at previously, the Japanese teachers had already opened English classes followed new *Course of Study* in advance, however, they seemed to pay more attention to fluency rather than accuracy during the class. Students discuss some topics or interact with their teachers and classmates instead of having grammar practices during the class. It was noted that in an effort to develop the students' ability to interact in English, the teachers relied on Communicative Language teaching Approach. While it did help boost the confidence of students and enabled them to communicate, I had observed the lack of guidance in terms of accuracy of the language they made.

Generally speaking, in Japan, a person's English proficiency is measured by their ability to communicate with foreigners. The person who can use English does not mean that he/ she has a wide vocabulary bank, he/ she has good reading comprehension and writing ability, but how much he/ she can speak English with a foreigner. When people see someone speaking English to foreigners, they think of that person as someone who can use English. Needless to say, however, writing in English is essential. People submit essays at school, write reports at work, write emails, and make advertisements, so writing is needed everywhere in everyone's daily life. Without knowledge of grammar, word order, or proper word use, people cannot covey any messages effectively even if they have a great idea. Therefore, effective feedback on students' writing is very important for their development and future careers as writing will always be part of their lives.

2.Unconcluded controversy

Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004) states grammar correction is ineffective and harmful for learners. He even states "grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned" (Truscott, 1996, p. 327). On the other hand, Ferris (1999, 2004, 2011) opposes Truscott's idea (1996). She contradicts Truscott's idea by stating that the quality of feedback should be considered but corrective feedback is effective for learners. Though Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004) denies the efficacy of grammar correction, he (2007) states that "correction most likely has small harmful effects on students' ability to write accurately and that we can be reasonably confident that if it does have any genuine benefits, they are so small as to be uninteresting" (p. 256). If it is effective for learners to improve writing skills, there would be some questions. When should teachers give feedback to learners? How should teachers respond to the students' writings?

There are two ways to correct students' errors: one is implicit learning, and another is explicit learning. There are some ways to make students realize their errors. For example, teachers can correct their sentences and proper vocabulary on their writing paper. Teachers can

also correct mistakes by underlining the words or phrases without any other comments or use some marks so that learners can realize what kind of errors they made on the paper. In addition, should teachers respond to the contents which students wrote? How to evaluate or assess is also controversial. Additionally, it is also a question as to whether written corrective feedback is also effective for other skills such as listening, reading and speaking.

Then, I would like to answer these questions in the study:

a) Is WCF effective for Japanese learners?

b) Which types of feedback are the most effective for Japanese learners?

3.Methodology

In the study, I have investigated the types of corrective feedback that are effective for learners. Additionally, an *intervention* (mini-lesson) was also applied to help explain feedback to the students and to help leaners to improve their writings.

Subjects

36 Japanese undergraduate freshmen in a Grammar 1 class, who are studying English and American literature at Tsuru university are the subjects for the study. Their English proficiency levels are A2 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Procedure

The subjects were asked to write one paragraph in English before the *intervention* and a second one after the *intervention*. Two paragraphs written by subjects are analyzed in this study, one is for explicit feedback group and another is metalinguistic feedback group. The topics the participants wrote on were:

1) What are you doing to improve your English? Write about at least three things. Use the present progressive and the simple present in your writing" in the first writing. (Appendix1)

2) Write about something that used to be different. How is life now? How was life different before? Use past forms, *used to* and *would*, and time clauses" in the second writing. In the 2nd writing, the subjects could choose an item from a) to f). (Appendix 3).

After the subjects wrote their paragraph, I collected them and gave two ways of feedback to them. One was direct feedback and another was metalinguistic feedback. I did not concentrate on specific grammatical feature such as articles, therefore, she corrected all their errors, which is called "unfocused CF" (Ellis *et al*., 2008, p. 356). They were divided into 2 groups based on which types of feedback the subjects received: a) Direct feedback and Oral feedback (mini-

lesson) group, b) Mata-linguistic feedback and oral feedback (mini-lesson). Each group has 18 students each. During the *intervention*, I conducted a mini-lesson, which was oral grammar explanation for the subjects' common errors. It should be bear in our mind that I explained based on which types of feedback she gave the subjects' writings: Group (a) received direct feedback on their paragraph, therefore, I picked up their common errors and showed correct forms to the subjects. On the other hand, Group (b) received metalinguistic feedback were explained their common errors by using grammar explanations without showing correct forms. I used grammatical clues until the subjects fixed correct forms. After the intervention, the subjects were told to write a new paragraph for the following week. Then, I collected them and analyzed which types of feedback is effective and whether the *intervention* also works for WCF.

Time schedule

Group A (Direct feedback group) 10:50 - 11:20 (30 mins)
・10:50 – 11:00 (10mins): Introduction of this lesson
・11:00 – 11:15 (15mins): Mini-lesson
・11: 15 – 11:20 (5mins): Explanation of the assignment for next week.

Group B (Meta-linguistic feedback) 11:30 - 12:00 (30 mins)
・11:30 – 11:40 (10mins): Introduction of this lesson
・11:40 – 11:55 (15mins): Mini-lesson
・11: 55 – 12:00 (5mins): Explanation of the assignment for next week.

4.Findings

Table 1 and Table 2 show the comparison between explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback after the *intervention* by t-test (see table 1 and Table 2). Table 1 indicates that there are no differences between explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback. Mean score for both explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback is 5.77, therefore, mean difference is 0. On the other hand, table 2 shows that mean difference is 0.44. The mean score for explicit feedback is 6.0 and metalinguistic feedback is 5.55 in the 2nd writing. In addition, the effect size followed by Cohen is 0.43, which is between 0.2 (small) and 0.5 (middle).

When it comes to assessment, we graded the subjects' writings followed by the rubric (Appendix 2 and 4). For explicit feedback group, the we showed correct forms in their writings when there are grammatical errors or spelling mistakes. On the other hand, we showed grammar tips and used explanations instead of showing correct forms for metalinguistic feedback group. Additionally, Table 4 shows the score for contents which includes both explicit and metalinguistic feedback group. There are 36 subjects in total (explicit feedback group has 18

subjects and metalinguistic feedback group has 18 subjects). The subjects who got 1 to 1.5. are 4 and the subjects who got 5 are 3. Rest of the subjects (29 subjects) got 2.5 to 3 in the section of the contents. On the other hand, the subjects who got 1 to 1.5 are 3 and rest of the subjects (33 subjects) got 2.5 to 3. There are no subjects who got five in the section of grammar. Lastly, Table 6 indicates that there is no correlation between the score of the contents and grammar.

Table 1. 1st writing both explicit and metalinguistic feedback group

Independent Samples T-Test

| | t | df | p | Mean Difference | SE Difference | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | Cohen's d | 95% CI for Cohen's d | |
						Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Total	0.000	34	1.000	0.000	NaN	−0.855	0.855	0.000	−0.653	0.653

Note. Student's t-test.

Group Descriptives

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Total	Explicit feedback	18	5.778	1.517	0.358
	Metalinguistic feedback	18	5.778	0.943	0.222

Table 2. 2nd writing both explicit and metalinguistic feedback group

Independent Samples T-Test ▼

| | t | df | p | Mean Difference | SE Difference | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | Cohen's d | 95% CI for Cohen's d | |
						Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Total	1.288	34	0.206	0.444	0.345	−0.257	1.146	0.429	−0.235	1.087

Note. Student's t-test.

Group Descriptives

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Total	Explicit feedback	18	6.000	1.188	0.280
	Metalinguistic feedback	18	5.556	0.856	0.202

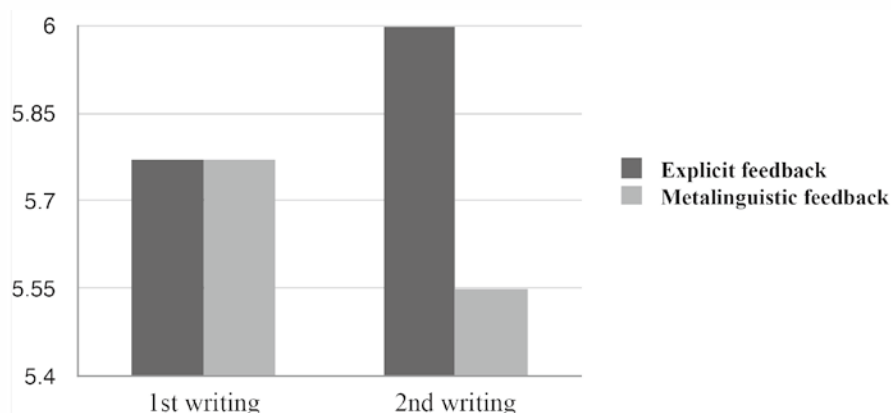Table 3 The Mean Score for explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback
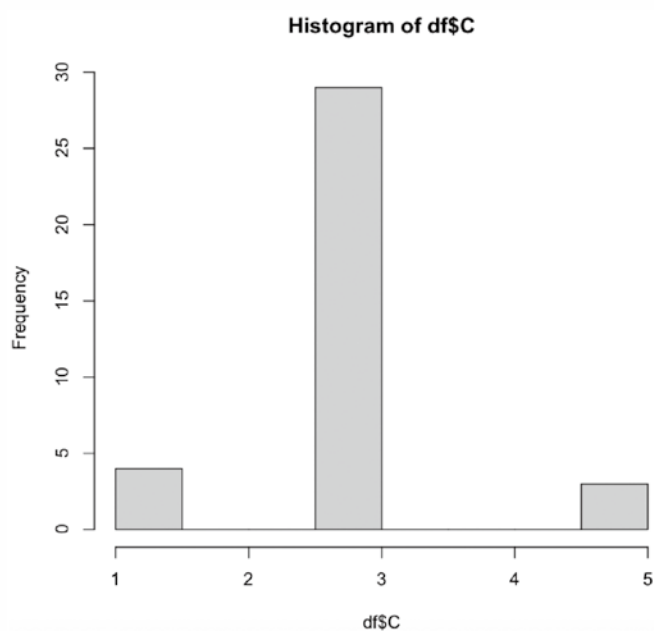
Table 4. The score of contents
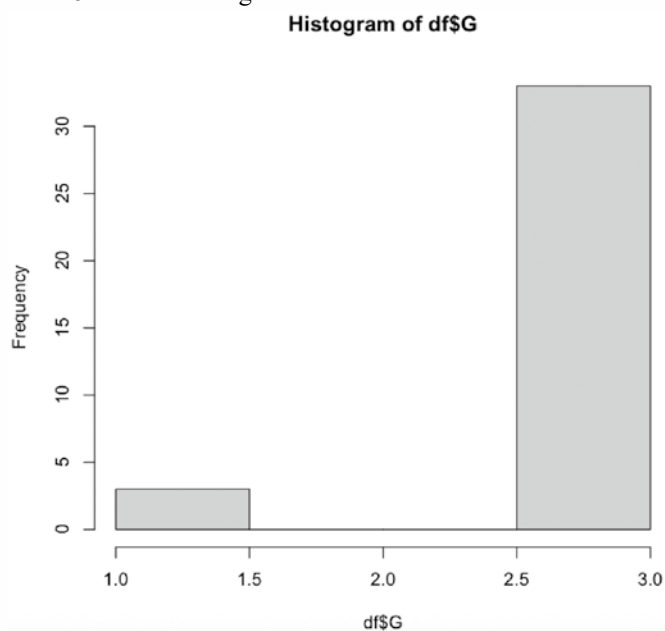

Table 5. The score of grammar

Table 6. Correlation between contents and grammar

Variable		C	G
1. C	Pearson's r	—	
	p–value	—	
2. G	Pearson's r	−0.019	—
	p–value	0.912	—

5.Discussion

The result shows that the mean score for explicit feedback group is slightly higher than that of the metalinguistic feedback group. Additionally, the effect size is not small. I gave feedback, both written and verbal (the *intervention*) to the subjects. I only gave feedback to the subjects twice in this study. However, if the subjects continue to receive explicit feedback in the long run, one may hope that they would develop into great writers. As the effect size is not small, they are going to improve their writing skill gradually.

In addition, when it comes to the feedback for contents and grammar, there is no correlation between them. The grammar knowledge does not affect their writing compositions (Raimes,1985), as opposed to Hirose and Sasaki (1994)'s work. Considering the result from this study, it is needless to say that the feedback for contents and grammar are necessary to improve learners' writings (Fathman & Whalley, 1990). As writing paragraphs and essays in L2 would be different from writing them in L1 (Oi,1986; Duppenthaler, 2004), the feedback for both *contents* and *grammar* are required to improve learners' writing skill, like the *intervention* I did.

To analyze and compare the difference between explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback, t-test was used. Then, JASP was used to calculate the data. As the result shows that the mean score of the explicit feedback group is 6.0 out of 10, and the mean score of metalinguistic feedback group is 5.5.out of 10 (*p*=0.26). Although the possibility is 0.26 which is less than 0.05, the number of samples affects the possibility. According to Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2010), large number of samples make the possibility small. If there are 136 subjects in this study, the possibility is going to be less than 0.05. As for this reason, the possibility is not a significant issue in the study. On the other hand, the effect size does not affect the number of samples. As the result shows that the effect size (*d*=0.43) is not small. Therefore, it can be said that the written explicit feedback and the *intervention* (verbal feedback) affects the students' writings positively. Rubric and t-test are reliable materials and writings were also valid and fair.

Table 2 shows the result of the efficacy of explicit feedback. Written explicit feedback and the *intervention* (verbal explicit feedback) is likely to be effective in improving the subjects' writings. The topic is different for the 1st writing and 2nd writing, however, the effect size is not small. As for the reason, it can be said that written and verbal explicit feedback would have "backwash" (Hughes, 2003, p. 1) on the subjects. Explicit feedback would be more effective than metalinguistic feedback simply because the former would be more understandable than the latter. Explicit feedback shows correct forms so that the participants who belong to explicit feedback group know what kinds of errors they made and how to correct their writings. Furthermore, I did the *intervention* in L1. Considering the subjects' English proficiency, it would be also understandable for them. Using L1 makes them understandable and clear as to why some of their sentences are wrong, which helps the subjects to improve their writings.

On the other hand, metalinguistic feedback indicates the participants' errors. However, the participants would not know the correct forms in which they made errors. Therefore, the participants who belong to metalinguistic feedback group do not know the correct forms. They

would be unsure of the correct forms which they corrected by themselves. Subjects who belong to metalinguistic group could notice the errors. However, some of them did not know what the correct form is and how to correct those errors. In short, for beginners, they cannot correct syntax level errors (Lee, 2004; Oikawa and Takayama, 2001; Sumida, 2005). In addition, the subjects received feedback twice (written and verbal) before they wrote the 2nd task. The number of occurrences and the opportunities to notice their errors would also be important to improve their writing skill. Overall, as opposed to Truscott (1996, 1999), giving feedback to learners seems to be effective.

6.Conclusion

The study reveals that explicit feedback group got higher score than metalinguistic feedback group in the 2nd writing, however, the duration of the study was short. The effective size is not small but there are many factors to consider. For example, the relation for *contents* and *grammar*, how much they improve after receiving explicit feedback depends on their types of errors, and the descriptors and scale for the rubric. In addition, I compared explicit feedback and metalinguistic feedback in the study, further studies can be done on the effects of indirect feedback and peer-reviews on students' writing.

7.References

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1. The topic for the first writing

What are you doing to improve your English? Write about at least three things. Use the present progressive and the simple present in your writing.

Appendix 2. The rubric for the first writing

Rubric	English ver		
Score	**Contents (5)**	**Grammar (5)**	**Total (10)**
5	be able to write about 3 things in detail about what you are trying to do to improve your English skills.	be able to use simple present and present progressive tense. No gramatical errors.	
3	be able to write about 3 things about you are trying to do to improve your English skills but it is lacking of details.	be able to use simple present and present progressive tense but there are some errors except for word order.	
1	be able to write about 1 or 2 things about what you are trying to do to improve your English skills.	be able to use either simple present or present progressive tense. There are word order errors.	
0	did not write anything. / You wrote about a different topic.	be able to use neither simple present nor present progressive tense. There are word oreder errors.	

Rubric	Japanese ver		
Score	**Contents (5)**	**Grammar (5)**	**Total (10)**
5	英語力を向上するためにしていることを3つ挙げている。向上するためにしていることが詳細に書かれている。	現在形と現在進行形が使われている。文法ミスがない。	
3	英語力を向上するためにしていることを3つ挙げているが、詳細な説明がない。	現在形と現在進行形が使われている。文要素以外で間違いがある。	
1	英語力を向上するためにしていることが3つ書かれていない。	現在形と現在進行形のどちらかが使われている。文要素で間違いがある。	
0	テーマと違うことが書かれている/何も書かれていない	現在形と現在進行形が使われていない。文要素で間違いがある。	

Appendix 3. The topic for the second writing

Write about something that used to be different. How is life now? How was life different before? Use past forms, *used to* and *would*, and time clauses. You can choose and write about one of these below.

a) the Internet, b) MP3 players, c) text message, d) social networking sites,
e) Internet dating, f) air travel

Appendix 4. The rubric for the second writing

Rubric	English ver		
Score	Contents (5)	Grammar (5)	Total (10)
5	be able to compare and contrast the changes for the past and present. The essay is written in detail and coherently.	be able to use simple past tense, used to, would, time clauses. No gramatical errors.	
3	be able to compare and contrast about the changes for the past and present, but it is lacking of details.	be able to use simple past tense, used to, would, time clauses, but there are some errors except for word order.	
1	be able to write about the changes either the past or now .	be able to use one of these grammar: simple past tense; used to; would; time clauses. There are word order errors.	
0	did not write anything. Is written about a different topic.	be able to use neither simple present nor present progressive tense. There are word order errors.	

Rubric	Japanese ver		
Score	Contents (5)	Grammar (5)	Total (10)
5	過去と現在で変わったことが論理的かつ詳細に書かれている。	過去形とused to, would, time clausesが使われている。文法ミスがない。	
3	過去と現在で変わったことが書かれているが詳細な説明がない。	過去形とused to, would, time clausesが使われてる。文要素以外で間違いがある。	
1	過去と現在のどちらかしか書かれていない。	過去形とused to, would, time clausesのどれかが使われている。文要素で間違いがある。	
0	テーマと違うことが書かれている/何も書かれていない	過去形とused to, would, time clausesが使われていない。文要素で間違いがある。	