

Frequent Errors in English Grammar: Articles and Possessive Markers

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1. Introduction

During past decade or so, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been making increasing efforts to shift the focus of EFL pedagogy from “correctness and accuracy” in English to “communicative ability” (MEXT 1998). In response to this, much emphasis has been placed on students’ ability to express themselves orally in class. This has, however, had the (undesired) effect of grammar and lexis being minimised in schools. We are now at a stage whereby the overwhelming majority of students enter universities with an insufficient knowledge of grammar and lexis.

This paper will examine two error patterns committed by Japanese studying English as a second language: the genitive markers *of*’s indicating possession; and the English article system *a/an/the*. The former is concerned with the misuse of the English preposition *of*, which I consider to originate in the L1. The analysis shown below manifests that it is difficult for Japanese students to distinguish between *of* and ’s: a comparison of this will ensue. The latter originates in the misuse/overgeneralisation of learning strategies: the usage of articles: *a/an/the*. The Japanese language lacks an article system, making this, “one of the greatest problems for

Japanese learners [and this] is vividly revealed in the high frequency of mistakes,...” (Kimizuka 1968:78). After analysing the two error patterns, an attempt to identify the causes of them will be determined. Finally, a method of helping students deal with these error patterns is proposed.

2. Literature Review: Two Error Patterns

2.1 Possessive Forms: *of*'s

The distinction between *of* and 's usage is complex not only for L2 learners but also L1 learners. The reason is that they are sometimes both interchangeable, for example, “the man's name” can be changed to “the name of the man.” Considering, however, naturally occurring data in a corpus, it is possible to find a habitually preferred pattern by native English speakers. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983) introduce a study conducted by Khampang in which they tested native English speaker preference for the 's possessive versus the *of* form as follows:

...the native speakers preferred the 's form whenever the head noun was animate. Moreover, the native speakers preferred the 's form even with inanimate head nouns when the noun could be viewed as performing as action, e.g.:

The train's arrival was delayed.
was preferred over

The arrival of the train was delayed.

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983:126)

This indicates that it is possible, to some extent, to find common rules of *of*'s among native speakers and teach it to L2 learners, even though they are sometimes interchangeable. On the other hand, flexible usage like this causes confusion among Japanese teachers and learners of English. In fact

there is a tendency for Japanese to prefer simplified rules of grammar. Corresponding to their desires, “many ESL/EFL texts will inform the learner to use the *'s* form with human head nouns and the *of* form with nonhuman nouns” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983:125). Oversimplified grammar, however, cannot be applied to actual communication, because there are often many exceptional cases. It can be considered that simplified grammar texts are one of the reasons why L2 learners commit this type of error.

2.2 Articles

According to Huebner (1983), his “uninstructed Hmong subject overused and overgeneralised the article *the*.” Master (1987) found a similar result with speakers of languages with no article system (e.g. Japanese), but not with speakers of languages that have article systems (e.g. German)...” (Master 1994:231–232). With reference to the Japanese situation, Kimizuka states that “[t]he use of articles belongs to the new category [for Japanese students]” and reports article usage as “one of the greatest problems for the Japanese learner” (Kimizuka 1968:78). Bertkua (1974) used fifteen adult Japanese subjects and found that of eleven error types, errors in the deletion of articles came second in frequency. Bertkua suggests that L1 interference may be responsible here. Bryant analysed 200 English essays written over a three-year period by different groups of Japanese university students who attended an Intensive English summer programme at an American university, and he reports that errors of articles were frequently encountered especially “among Asian and Slavic students” (Bryant 1984:3) with no article system. Cohen pointed to errors of articles seen in writing by her students in a Japanese university and states that the error derived from “a deep misconception of the article system” (Cohen 1998:156).

Learning articles means not only knowing the grammatical definitions of

articles as prescribed in Japanese high school texts, e.g. *alan* being indefinite, and *the* definite. The usage of articles is very spontaneous depending on situations and speakers. “Several researchers consider the article system to be unlearnable and therefore unteachable, because it can only be acquired through natural exposure to the language” (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982; Master 1994:229). Indeed, as a result of surveying English compositions written by Japanese students, Kimizuka states that “[i]t is comparatively simple [for a Japanese student] to learn the rules, but it is not equally simple to apply the rules to actual situation” (Kimizuka 1968:79). That is, it is necessary to learn the articles under the situation where they are actually used by native speakers. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983) state that “...to a great extent, we depend on discourse context to determine what is definite and what is indefinite” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983:172). Rutherford (1987) further argues that just as the subject of a sentence is not governed by syntax but by discourse (i.e. anaphora), determiner choice comes from an interaction between grammar and discourse (Rutherford 1987:59). Studying the article system from discourse instead of from isolated sentences should help alleviate this confusion.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Subjects

The data for the written tasks was collected from 36 university freshmen (male and female) from an Extensive Reading class, in Nagoya, Japan. All subjects are English majors and are generally motivated to learn English. In total, 144 written tasks (consisting of 200–250 words each) were investigated. Although all 144 written tasks were used in identifying *off*'s errors, due to time and space constraints only 32 written tasks (chosen at random) were used in order to investigate article usage.

3.2 Written Tasks

Students were first required to read a short story entitled, “The Lady, or the Tiger?” and then produce four written tasks (200–250 words each). These consisted of: (i) making a summary; (ii) answering a question; (iii) creating an original sequel; and (iv) writing a critique. Upon task completion, students were able to receive feedback from the author. All written tasks were typed by the students and e-mailed to the author for analysis.

3.3 Marking

All written tasks used in this investigation were read and checked for grammaticality concerning the possessive markers *of*'s and article usage *alan/the* by two EFL lecturers: one Japanese (female), the other British (male). The written tasks were then tagged manually and fed through a concordancing software programme (Conc. 1.76) in order to identify patterns of article/possessive marker usage.

4. Discussion

4.1 Analysis of *of*'s

General statistics of the possessive markers¹ are as follows:

	<i>of</i>	's
Errors	64	23
Proper use	334	178
No. of possessives investigated	398	201
Total no. of possessives	586	201

The errors found below have been classified into five types: (i) confusion

¹ Note that cases involving idioms were omitted from the study.

over usage, (ii) grammatical mistake, (iii) unnecessary insertion, (iv) wrong word order and (v) wrong use of pronoun. The number of errors for each is shown below:

Categorised Errors

	<i>of</i>	's	TOTAL
Confusion over usage	21	16	37
Grammatical mistake	24	2	26
Unnecessary insertion	9	2	11
Wrong word order	6	3	9
Wrong use of pronoun	4	3	4
TOTAL	64	0	87

4.1.1 Confusion Over Usage

The examples below, taken from the written tasks, have been tagged with square brackets [] to indicate the markers' corrections.

- (i) I thought that the thought of people of this time is completely different ... [people's way of thinking at this time]
- (ii) Just as the king was severe about love of his princess, ... [his princess' love]
- (iii) She loved a young man who lived in the castle of the king. [the king's castle]
- (iv) And if I am a country's king, I wanted a lot of things. [a king of the country]
- (v) Readers must think about story's ending, and create story's future. [the ending of the story, the sequel of the story]
- (vi) I did not know this title's mean, but I could understand it in a minute with reading. [a meaning of the title]

It can be considered that the errors shown above derive from an insufficient understanding of *of*'s. Thinking that the total number of this kind of error is the most abundant, it seems to be fairly difficult for students to distinguish between them.

4.1.2 Grammatical Mistakes

- (i) Based on many informations of the daughter gathered, ...
[much information **which** the daughter gathered]
- (ii) But on the whole, words of I didn't know were a little.
[words I didn't know / words **which** I didn't know]
- (iii) But the mystery of behind the door still remained.
[the mystery hidden behind the door/the mystery **which** is hidden behind the door]
- (iv) The king glad that worries of she taken away by her lover.
[a worry **that** she might be taken away]
- (v) There was the princess's room of the side of a courtyard in the second floor. [room next a courtyard]
- (vi) ... they could enjoy the law's event which was fight of man and tiger and a man got marry other beautiful lady.
[the effect of the law by watching the fight]
- (vii) I want to do away with a tiger's way.
[the way to punish a man for letting him fight with a tiger]

(i–iv) show the most frequent error pattern in this type. Students tend to believe that *of* can make a relative clause, and that any words/phases can be added to the previous part of a sentence by placing *of*. They neither comprehend the grammatical functions of *of* nor relative clauses, though have a vague idea that both can be used as some sort of connecting device (see (v)). Errors involving 's in (vi–vii) also expose students' beliefs that it can connect any words, but that the 's, used here, does not produce

any meaning.

4.1.3 Unnecessary Insertion

- (i) After finish of reading the story, I have some thoughts.
- (ii) He could not think life of without him lover. [his life without his lover]
- (iii) In his arena, the people could watch the workings of the First of the Law of Chance.
- (iv) By semi-barbaric's law, he had to marry with a women.
- (v) The semi-barbaric's low worked at his arena.

Both *of* and *'s* shown above are unnecessary in each sentence.

4.1.4 Wrong Word Order

- (i) Because there was not written story of end in this book... [the end of the story]
- (ii) When continuation of this existed, I wanted to read. [this continuation]
- (iii) I think the king of this country's idea not good one.
[an idea of the king of this country / the king's idea of this country]
- (iv) One's the course of life is change ... [the course of one's life]
- (v) I think the king of this country's idea not good one.
[the king's idea of this country / an idea of the king of this country]

These errors also show students' insufficient understanding of *off's* such as those in 4.1.1.

4.1.5 Wrong Use of Pronoun

- (i) If the man already got married, the wife of him felt sad. [his wife]

- (ii) She chose the death of him. [his death]
- (iii) She more than did'nt want death of him. [his death]
- (iv) The feeling of her which she don't want him to die ... [her feeling]

Here, students try to make possessive pronouns with *of* + objective pronoun construction.

4.1.6 Result of Error Analysis: *of*'s

As mentioned above (Section 2.1), *of* and 's are interchangeable. This can be considered to be one of the causes of all errors surveyed in error samples. In the case of errors by Japanese students, however, there is another cause of errors involving *of*'s usage. This is related to the fact that Japanese possessive constructions are made by inserting the particle *no* between two nouns. *no* can link the previous noun to the next noun, as 's does in English. For example, the phrase "a friend's car" would be *tomodachi-no-kuruma* [friend-no-car]. The phrase "a friend's car" can be changed to "the car of a friend" by exchanging positions of the two nouns by placing *of* in between, but in Japanese, a possessor cannot come after the possessed. A Japanese-English dictionary, designed for English students of Japanese, explains that the possessive form *no* indicates that "the noun or other words preceding it modifies or restricts in some way the noun following it" (The Japan Foundation, 1986:541). It is also worth mentioning here, that in Japanese it is possible to construct very long strings of the pattern NP+*no*+NP, albeit informal, as in the following example:

Japanese:	anata	<i>no</i>	gakkou	<i>no</i>	tomodachi	<i>no</i>	Ken	<i>no</i>	tesuto	<i>no</i>	kekka	<i>no</i>	youshi	
Lit. Trans.:	You[r]	<i>of</i>	school	<i>of</i>	friend	<i>of</i>	Ken	<i>of</i>	a test	<i>of</i>	the result	<i>of</i>	a paper	
English:	a	paper	telling	the	result	of	a	test	which	your	school	friend	Ken	took.

It is clear that the errors concerning *off*'s (see above) reveal that the students investigated are strongly influenced by the Japanese possessive marker *no*. Errors in 4.1.1 and 4.1.4 show the influence of *no* which always links a preceding word to a following word. Students tend to believe that both *of* and 's can make a preceding word modify the following word in the same way that *no* always does, without understanding the grammatical difference between *of* and 's. This vague understanding permits students to place either *off*'s after a possessor and before the possessed. In 4.1.1 (vi), for example, “this title’s mean [the meaning of this title],” stems from “*kono-taitoru-no-imi* [this-title-’s-mean]” and 4.1.4 (i), “story of end [the end of the story],” stems from “*hanashi-no-owari* [story-of-end].” The sample, “the king of this country’s s idea,” shown in both 4.1.4 (iii) and (v), is an interesting case because it represents the strong confusion of *off*'s. There are two possibilities in understanding what the student wanted to express here. One is “an idea of the king of this country,” which stems from “*kono-kuni-no-ou-no-kangae* [this-country-of-king-of-an idea].” The other is “the king’s idea of this country,” which stems from “*ou-no-kono-kuni-no-kangae* [the king-of-this-country-of-idea].” Such confusion means that this student could not realise where *off*'s had to be placed.

Since Japanese *no* enables students to string together as many noun phrases as they like, they tend to connect any words/phrases with the possessive form *off*'s. This kind of error can be seen in 4.1.2. of seen in 4.1.2 (i–iv) is expected to work as a relative pronoun. *of* in 4.1.2 (iii, v–vii) connects a preceding word and a following word, but produces no meaning. On the other hand, Japanese *no* produces in students a misconception of the necessity to always place either *off*'s between words. As students are used to placing *no* to connect words, *off*'s often ends up being inserted

in the wrong place (e.g. 4.1.3 and 4.1.5). *of* in examples 4.1.3 (i–ii) were unnecessary and seem to be placed from force of habit. In particular, *of* seen in 4.1.3 (ii) is interesting, because the influence from Japanese *no* also can be seen here. This unnecessary *of* came from the Japanese expression “*kareno-koibito-nashi-no-jinsei* [his-lover-without-of-life] meaning “his life without his lover.” *of* in 4.1.5 (i) expresses a strong interference from Japanese *no*. Students use *of* to connect two words instead of using possessive pronouns. This means that they translate the Japanese phrase to the English one in their minds before actually writing. For example, 4.1.5 (i) stems from “*kare-no-tuma* [he-of-wife] meaning “his wife.” Since students were aware that *of* should be placed before a possessor and after the possessed, they went on to construct a strange phrase “wife of him” without using the possessive “his.”

Consequently, it is clear that errors concerning *off*'s in writing by Japanese students are very strongly influenced by their native language. It appears difficult for them to distinguish one from the other. This is caused by oversimplified texts from which students used to learn *off*'s (See 2.1)². Their vague understanding of the usage of *off*'s results in the misconception that both can be replaced with *no*. Thus, students make errors by using *of* and 's in place of *no*. This is one of the reasons why Japanese students of English cannot write with accuracy and fluency.

4.2 Analysis of Article Errors

The total number of words used in the 144 written tasks investigated in this paper was 110,340, which included 2,923 articles. Out of the 144

² For example, a grammar book, which was recommended to the author (Japanese) by an English teacher (Japanese) whilst in high school, introduces ‘possessive’ first by saying that “it makes the meaning of ‘no’” [translation mine] (Takanashi 1985:58).

written tasks, 32 were chosen at random in order to investigate article usage. The following chart shows this breakdown in detail:

	144 written tasks (total)		32 written tasks (random sample)	
	Total number of articles	Percentage of articles to total (%)	Total number of articles	Percentage of articles to total (%)
a/an	758	26	212	28
the	2,165	74	526	72
Total	2,923	–	738	–

The range of articles used in the 32 random written tasks is very close to that of the total 144 written tasks. As mentioned above, the written tasks were written based on the reading of a short story. Since, at the time of writing, they were using *given information*, students preferred the definite *the* (n=526, (or 2,165 in 144 written tasks)) over the indefinite *a/an* (n=212 (or 758 in 144 written tasks)). This does not mean, however, that students committed fewer errors concerning the articles when writing in a controlled situation, even though the frequency of errors might be lower than that of the free compositions. The controlled written tasks also can be used effectively enough to determine error patterns of articles.

The Discussion of Article Errors is in six parts. After a brief analysis of the error numbers in (4.2.1), it will be necessary to examine the three rules of grammar ('Usage') that were most problematic for the students in this study (4.2.2). These 'Usages' will then be used in the following three sections relating to error types (Omission (4.2.3), Unnecessary Insertion (4.2.4), and Confusion (4.2.5)), ending in a brief conclusion (4.2.6).

4.2.1 Analysis of Errors

The analysis of the 32 written tasks is as follows:

	Omission	Unnecessary Insertion	Confusion	Total number of errors
a/an	74	16	33	122
the	128	17	34	179
TOTAL	201	33	67	302

Here, errors of articles are categorised into 3 types: (1) omission, (2) unnecessary insertion, and (3) confusion³. Before continuing, a definition of these terms will be necessary. Omission refers to the lack of an article (zero article). This type of error had the highest frequency (n=201). Unnecessary insertion indicates articles which were placed where they were not needed (n=33). Confusion expresses situations in which *a* was used instead of *the*, or vice versa (n=67).

4.2.2 Usages Relevant to Errors

The errors committed by the students in this study fall mainly into three categories: (i) Basic Usage; (ii) Anaphoric Reference; (iii) *the* with Superlative/Unique Adjectives.

Usage 1: Basic Usage of the indefinite article and the definite article

The articles (*a/an* and *the*) are determined mainly by nouns. Therefore, the nature of nouns (count/uncount) and the form of them (the singular or the plural) are significant in choosing which article to use. Referring to

³ All articles including the zero article were categorised by the two graders introduced in 3.3 above.

Cobuild (1991), the relation between the articles and nouns is thus:

	Singular Noun			Plural Noun	
	Ø	a/an	the	none	the
Count Noun	–	a book	the book	books	the books
Uncount Noun	music	–	the music	–	–
Count/Uncount	cake	a cake	the cake	cakes	the cakes

Here, count nouns can have any article (*Ø/a/an/the*), while uncount nouns take only *the*. Singular nouns can take any article, while plural nouns take only *the*. In addition to this, it is necessary to recognise that *a/an* is used with an unspecific word and *the* is used with a specific one.

Usage 2: Anaphoric Reference

The definite article is used when identifying the thing being referred to, regardless of whether it is first mention (Cobuild 1991:23). Observe the following:

- (i) A word which has been said earlier in a conversation or text is repeated later.
e.g. She bought a radio, but she returned *the* radio because it was defective.
- (ii) “You can also use ‘the’ and a noun when you are referring to someone and something closely connected with something you have just mentioned.” (Cobuild 1990:45)
e.g. She stopped and lit *a* match. The wind almost blew out *the* flame.

Usage 3: the with Superlative/Unique Adjectives

the is determined not only by nouns but also by particular adjectives. Superlative adjectives tend to come with *the*, like “*the* highest,” “*the* best,” and “*the* most beautiful.” There are also some other adjectives which behave in the same way to “identify unique things” e.g. “*the* same,” “*the* last,” and “*the* right” (Cobuild 1991:33). The following symbols have been used in subject samples to show errors:

1. [] indicates an omission,
2. * * indicates an unnecessary insertion, and
3. * *[] indicates a confused articles

4.2.3 Omission

4.2.3.1 Omission of a/an

- (i) ... who is killing by [a] tiger, because, it is unpleasant ...
- (ii) And he took out [a] knife that he hid in his pocket.
- (iii) ... front of citizen[s] in [an] arena. One of the doors is in [a] very dangerous wild tiger.
- (iv) I think, it is not [a] good idea for the people. If the ...
- (v) ...the king should build [a] peaceful country. But sometimes ...
- (vi) However [an] unhappy day happened to the king ...
- (vii) ... he became unhappy. [A] Few decades later, the brave man ...
- (viii) ... strong man [men]!!” [A] few days later from the day ...
- (ix) ... they lived together [a] few decades. So, she changed her ...

Errors involving ‘omission’ reveal students’ lack of fundamental understanding of the articles. (i–v) shows the lack of understanding for Usage 1 type errors. 29 errors related to *a/an* + singular count noun such as (i–iii) were found, and 33 errors related to *a/an* + adjective + noun, such as (iv–v) were found in total. It seems that adjectives in particular confuse students

when it comes to correct article selection. (vii–viii) show exceptional cases. Sentences involving omission of *a* can make sense as they are. Considering, however, that each sentence was based on the short story, it has to be assumed that students wanted to express “a few” instead of “few” here. Finally, university freshmen tend to overgeneralise when using articles, and one reason for this is probably attributable to the fact that the L1 not only lacks an article system, but also lacks any morphemic system of marking noun singular/plural distinction, noun count/uncount distinction. For example, “paper,” “a paper,” “the paper,” “the papers,” and “papers” are all written using the same word *kami* in Japanese, and both “water” and “the water” are written by the same word *mizu*. This shows the tremendous challenge that L1 learners are up against when learning EFL.

4.2.3.2 *Omission of the*

- (i) ... calls on her father, [the] king, [the] lady’s future is ...
- (ii) ... a man who [a] crime. Usually [the] criminal was put into a prison
...
- (iii) ... they give a bribe to [the] nation in order to banish [the] king to
[the] arena, ...
- (iv) ... is decided by us and [the] people decide for all judgment ...
- (v) I couldn’t understand [the] fine parts. Especially I couldn’t ...
- (vi) ... was pleased. He liked [the] brave and strong man.
- (vii) ... called by the people “ [the] most greatest king in this ...
- (viii) I couldn’t understand [the] third paragraph. I couldn’t ...
- (ix) Finally, He opened [the] left door. Because he knew that ...
- (x) ... went to the arena to [the] punishment, because they never...
- (xi) ... a little better than [the] compulsory death penalty.
- (xii) ... story, I remember [the] Coliseum [the] ancient Rome period.

Errors related to Usage 2, such as (i–vi), were the most abundant. They

express old information which has already been told (anaphoric reference). This is further evidence that students have a serious lack of understanding concerning article usage, as mentioned above (Section 4.2.3.1). (vii-ix) are related to Usage 3, and (x-xii) to Usage 1.

4.2.4 Unnecessary Insertion/Overuse

4.2.4.1 *Unnecessary Insertion of a/an*

- (i) I think that politician are should get on *a* people.
- (ii) ... people could watch *a* fighting which included soldiers...
- (iii) ... law. This law was *a* fairness and clear. So the wrong ...
- (iv) ... treated people as *a* slave[s]. He abolished the arena ...
- (v) They got right as *a* human[s]. His wife was semi ...
- (vi) But this law is *a* severe for the princess.
- (vii) ... because the lady is *a* very beautiful and ...
- (viii) I think this story is *a* very interesting in many points ...
- (ix) ... judge them such *a* in this story's way. Surly the king ...
- (x) ... of I didn't know were *a* little [few]. And grammar were ...
- (xi) And grammar were a *a* little [few] too. Before I red this ...

(i-v) are strongly related to Usage 1. (i-iii) show that ‘unnecessary insertion’ occurred when it came before plural/uncount nouns (“people,” “fighting,” and “fairness”). As mentioned in Section 4.2.3.1, plural/uncount nouns are difficult for Japanese students to learn, due to the lack of such a system. Even though it would be easy for students to identify words with the plural marker -s, it is difficult for them to identify that words without it. (iv-v) are also related to students’ recognition of plural nouns. They could not identify that the words “slave” and “human” were mentioning other words followed by them (“people” and “They”). (vi-ix) reveal that errors are caused not only by students’ insufficient understanding of the articles but also by their lack of understanding the grammatical structure

of English. There was a high proportion of this error type (n=7, from a total of 16 errors committed), exemplified in (vi–viii). Finally, (x–xi) are also exceptional cases as mentioned in Section 4.2.3.1. Both “little” and “a little” can make a sense in the sentences. Assuming, however, what students were going to express from the context, it can be considered that “a little” should come here.

4.2.4.2 *Unnecessary Insertion of the*

- (i) ... of his country and *the* people.
- (ii) ... in this country are *the* eccentric characters.
- (iii) ... the sight of blood. *The* criminal[s] who was[were]...
- (iv) ... barbarity but he had *the* modern idea[s].
- (v) ... people liked to see *the* blood. Perhaps, it was excited...
- (vi) ... him and get him into *the* prison. I don't treat the people...
- (vii) ... from the arena, *the* guilty against his will because...
- (viii) ... love and he threw *the* her lover into prison. She had...
- (ix) ... dare chose another *the* door what she told him.
- (x) And he gave [a] sign, *the* opposite him. He could choose...

(i–iii) show students' misunderstanding of Usage 1 type errors. The confusion concerning plural nouns also can be seen here again (see 4.2.4.1). (iv–vii) do not have anaphoric reference, so it can be said that these are due to insufficient understanding of Usage 2. (viii–x) reveal that students do not understand where the could be used.

4.2.5 *Confusion*

4.2.5.1 *a/an used instead of the*

- (i) ...princess selected *a* [the] tiger's door. And the young...
- (ii) And the princess and *a* [the] worker got married and...
- (iii) ...of his eyes. When *a* [the] young man looked at ...

- (iv) ...king didn't know that *an* [the] accused worker was ...
- (v) ...built up wealth. *A* [The] new king was very brave...
- (vi) ...is a woman behind *a* [the] right door, and I would give...
- (vii) ...one of the doors was *a* [the] wildest, biggest and...
- (viii) ...that this book is like *a* [the] Japanese "otogibanasi" ...

(i–v) are related to Usage 2. *the* used in (i–v) have anaphoric reference. Therefore, *the* should replace the incorrect article *a*. (vi–viii) exemplify the misunderstanding of Usage 3.

4.2.5.2 *the used instead of a/an*

- (i) ...interested in *the* [a] criminal, the criminal went to...
- (ii) ...if I was *the* [a] criminal, I do not thinking that...
- (iii) ...is difficult for *the* [a] king to govern his country.
- (iv) ...there was *the* [a] king who had semi-barbarism.
- (v) The king had *the* [a] very beautiful daughter and he...

All errors found are caused by the insufficient understanding of Usage 2. There seems to be a tendency for students to place *the* even before words of first mention.

4.2.5.3 *Pronouns Used Instead of Articles/Articles Used Instead of Pronouns*

- (i) ...in such *this* [a] way. Although it was [a] very interesting story...
- (ii) ...beautiful in *this* [the] castle, her lover must marry ...
- (iii) One of *the* [his] modern ideas was a large...
- (iv) ...man and he arrested *the man* [him]. After ward, he went...

(i) shows that usage of the grammatical construction "such + a + noun"

is not understood correctly. (ii–iv) are not caused by grammatical misunderstanding. Each sentence has no grammatical mistake at sentence-level, but it does at discourse level. This means that students need practice in applying their grammatical knowledge to discourse. In (ii) *this* is used in conveying old information to the reader in the same way the definite article would, however, it seems informal and consequently somewhat inappropriate. (iii–iv), on the other hand, involve some sort of definiteness being anaphorically referred back to a person.

4.2.6 Result of Error Analysis: Articles

The analysis shown above reveals that there are two main causes for article error. One cause is students' insufficient understanding of articles. It is probable that this cause stems from the way that students learnt the articles at school. As mentioned above (See 4.2.4), it is possible to say that grammar books used in Japanese high schools are oversimplified. For example, in the grammar book (Takanashi 1985:96), the following table is shown before any explanatory passages:

THE	A/AN
Definite article	Indefinite article
Precedes any word	Precedes count word
Precedes both single and plural nouns	Precedes single nouns
Translated into “ <i>sono</i> ” (that)	Not translated

(Takanashi 1985:96 [translation mine])

As this table exemplifies, an oversimplified explanation or an avoidance of explanation of articles can be seen in grammar books used in Japan. The

other cause is that students have little practice using articles in discourse. There were cases that articles were used correctly at the sentence-level, but they became erroneous when they were seen in passages. Their lack of experience in using articles at the discourse level compounds their confusion in using them. This means that students probably need more practice to use articles in discourse.

5. The Devising of Teaching Procedures

5.1 Aim of Writing Activity 2

The errors analysed in Section 4 reveal that students need to understand the usage of *off's* and articles to make their English more accurate grammatically, as well as the need for more exposure to it through writing at the discourse level. Hopefully, this will improve the overall fluency in their writing.

Regarding grammatical accuracy, feedback provided by teachers can be very effective to help students deal with error patterns (Frodesen 2001). Moreover, to improve the fluency in writing, exposure to reading could be considered an effective method. Some researchers consider the use of reading in the writing class as one of the ways to resolve problems in writing (Widdowson 1978; Hedge 1988; Knoll 2001). Given that feedback and reading could help students deal with the problematic areas discussed above, another writing activity was designed for students to resolve these issues in their writing.

5.2 Procedure

Error corrections were made in two ways: a read aloud activity in the classroom and written correction by e-mail. Students investigated were required to read, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and then write 100–150 word

written tasks concerning the story in English. Finally, a questionnaire was given to students for feedback on the attitudes towards the activities outlined in Sections (5.2.1) and (5.2.2).

5.2.1 In Classroom

After finishing writing their written tasks in English, students were requested to read the original text aloud. The aim of this practice is to listen to the natural rhythm of English passages. Through it, students can learn habitual patterns in grammar used by native English speakers. Students were then requested to read their written tasks. “Many students find that slowly reading their drafts aloud to listen for errors can help them in making corrections” (Frodesen 2001:245). In the case of this activity, however, they were not requested to let their friends listen to their reading. After making their own corrections, students exchanged their written tasks with their friends’. They then began reading and correcting their friends’ written tasks in pairs.

5.2.2 By E-mail

After error correction in pairs, students submitted their first drafts to the author by e-mail. Grammatical error correction, in the form of underlining and/or bracketing, was provided to the students by the author. A message was given telling students to find and correct more errors of the same kind by themselves. The first three errors of both articles and *off*'s were corrected by the teacher in order to demonstrate, by way of example, what was expected by the task. The first written tasks were then returned to the students by e-mail.

5.3 Comparison of Errors

Following the return of the first drafts, students made a second error correction in the same way as they had the first time in the classroom: reading the original text, correcting errors by themselves, and finally correcting errors in pairs. The students then submitted their drafts by e-mail a second time. In all, the activity of error correction in the classroom and the teacher’s correction by e-mail was repeated twice. That is, their third drafts were considered as the final written tasks. It can be seen clearly that the number of errors in the final written tasks on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* had changed, compared with the written tasks about “The Lady, or the Tiger?.” The change in the percentage of grammatical errors, seen in five random written tasks, is as follows:

Possessive Noun Phrase and Article Errors

	“The Lady, or The Tiger?” (First Writing Activity)					<i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> (Second Writing Activity)				
	Words	Numbers of errors <i>off’s</i>	Percentage of error <i>off’s</i> in written task	Numbers of error articles	Percentage of error articles in written task	Words	Numbers of errors <i>off’s</i>	Percentage of error <i>off’s</i> in written task	Numbers of error articles	Percentage of error articles in written task
A	219	8	3.8	19	22.6	95	0	0	6	13.5
B	216	5	2.3	22	18.3	156	2	1.1	8	11.8
C	216	7	2.7	32	26	136	2	2.5	11	17.1
D	199	11	5.5	28	28.1	81	0	0	5	8.5
E	204	3	1.5	17	15.2	152	1	0.8	13	15.7

Here, four out of five students’ written tasks in the second activity had fewer article errors, and all students could reduce errors concerning *off’s* in the second activity. This means that the activity for error correction in the classroom and the teacher’s error correction through e-mail exchanges could help lessen the number of grammatical errors committed.

5.4 Result

Error corrections by themselves, those in pairs with their friends and feedback from the teacher by e-mail focused on correcting grammatical errors. However, without understanding why *off's* or the articles in their written tasks were corrected, students' grammatical competence cannot be promoted. Here, reading the original text aloud could be exploited sufficiently. One student remarked that she could feel the natural rhythm in writing by native English speakers after having practiced reading the original text aloud. In fact, from the questionnaire given to students after the final written task, it was found that 29 of the 36 students answered "Strongly agree" (n=17) or "Agree" (n=12) in response to the question "Do you think reading the original text aloud helped your writing?" Hence, it can be said that this reading activity was an effective tool in improving students' awareness of article usage in their target language.

The teacher's feedback was also perceived to be effective in error reduction. Since errors except the first three errors per error pattern were not corrected, students had to find other errors to correct by themselves. This forced students to apply their knowledge of the usage of *off's* or articles to actual writings at both the sentential level as well as at the discourse-level. Moreover, not only the teacher's corrections but also the comments added to them could encourage students to polish their written tasks. It has been said that the role of teachers must be not an instructor of grammatical rules but a fellow writer (Quinn 1996; Brown 2001). Therefore, grammatical error corrections in this writing activity were provided to students along with suggestions/comments to plot designs, rhetorical expressions and so on. As a result, the teacher's corrections could raise not only the grammatical accuracy but also the rhetorical fluency in students' writings.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, written tasks written in English by 36 students were investigated in order to analyse two frequent error patterns. *off's* is one of the most frequent errors which could be seen in their written tasks. The analysis of this type of error indicated that it derived from their native language Japanese (L1 transfer). The other error analysed here was articles, the result of which revealed that the difficulty arose in students' insufficient understanding, a lack of experience in using them, and reliance on oversimplified textbooks. Consequently, students used articles almost arbitrarily and therefore tended to overgeneralise.

The difficulty of both types of error showed that students could not avoid such mistakes relying on their knowledge of grammar alone. They need practice in writing at the discourse-level. The experimental error correction exercises discussed above (Section 5.4) could decrease errors in students' written tasks. Moreover, the grammatical accuracy students gained brought fluency to their writing, which in turn raised their communicative competence.

Considering English as a means of communication, it is no wonder that writing with perfect grammar is not the final product for L2 learners. Communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, as well as sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. For the purpose of gaining accuracy and fluency in writing, it is necessary to recognise that grammar is “a resource to be accessed for effective communication, not just an isolated body of knowledge” (Frodesen 2001:234).

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