

Errors made by First-year Seinan Gakuin University Students

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Abstract

This is a pilot study in preparation for a larger-scale survey to be carried out at the start of the 2011 school year. A class of fifty first-year students from the Education faculty were asked to write self-introductions, first in Japanese and then to re-write them in English. They were asked to use natural, colloquial language and to avoid formality.

Twenty English-version manuscripts were chosen at random for the purposes of the study. These were scrutinised and all errors of vocabulary, article use, verb form and tense, singular/plural forms, preposition use, conjunction use, word order, adverb use and possessive use were recorded.

The largest single group of errors was article use, although verb form and verb tense formed a larger group if counted together as "verb errors". The adverb use group contained the fewest errors.

From a practical point of view, the study is encouraging in the main: errors that actually affected the reader's comprehension were minimal (only two out of a total of 254), but persistent omission of articles and verb tense errors are evidence of deeply-ingrained problems which, if students are hoping to reach a reasonable level of fluency, need to be addressed.

Introduction

When designing any teaching programme it is obviously important to be aware of students' needs, both in terms of what they hope to take away at the end of the course and also what they fail to bring with them at the beginning. All experienced teachers will, to certain extent, know more or less instinctively what areas are going to cause trouble for their students, but it is worthwhile checking these assumptions.

This is described as a "pilot study" for two reasons: the students were surveyed approximately half-way through the second semester of their first year, rather than at the very beginning of the first semester, which is necessary to ascertain what knowledge students arrive with (and without) at Seinan Gakuin University, and the students involved were all from the same faculty, which might skew the results to a certain extent. The follow-up study next year will address these limitations.

Method

Students were asked to write a self-introduction in Japanese at first, with no explanation as to how it would be used in a later class. They were specifically instructed to use colloquial language and not to feel limited as to the contents of the introduction: family, friends, school, hobbies, part-time jobs, any topic was acceptable. This was done for two main reasons: one was to ensure that the students wrote what they wanted to say. Had they been asked to write an introduction in English from the start, their lack of linguistic ability may well have resulted in trite, half-remembered junior high school phrases rather than a genuine attempt to communicate information about themselves. Secondly, students may have avoided grammatically difficult structures in order to produce an error-free piece of work, which would obviously have defeated the whole purpose of the exercise.

One week after completing the Japanese versions of their self-introductions, students were asked to produce an English version of what they had written. They were asked not to translate, but to express the same thoughts as best they could in colloquial English. They were given half an hour during class to do this, and were not allowed to use dictionaries.

Twenty manuscripts were selected at random and the errors identified and collated. Spelling errors were not included on the grounds that the class concentrated on conversation, rather than written English.

All errors could be categorised into one of ten categories: vocabulary, articles, verb form, verb tense, singular/plural forms, prepositions, conjunctions, word order, adverbs and possessives. Sometimes a single phrase yielded two or more errors. E.g. the phrase "... when I am elementary school student, " included both an article error and a tense error. It would therefore appear twice in the results tables.

Results

There were a total of 254 errors. Categories, possible causes and examples are listed below:

Vocabulary (49 errors)

The influence of Japanese was clear in some cases.

"I challenge various sports..." and "My hate drink is milk" are both examples. The first is an example of importing *wasei eigo* into English and the second a result of over-literal translation.

There were also errors due to confusing parts of speech.

"I entranced this school...." and "...my hometown is country" are examples.

Perennial favourites include confusion between "see", "watch" and "look at", and "every day" and "everyday" (although many native speakers have trouble here too).

"A lot of star can be watched...." and "I come from Kitakyushu everyday."

Articles (60 errors)

These were overwhelmingly errors of omission.

"... when I was high school student." "I love flute."

There were only two examples of articles being inserted erroneously.

"... we always have a dinner together." "There is a (NAME) high school near my house."

Verb Forms (47 errors)

Simple first person/ third person forms were often confused.

"She make a cake." "I belongs to...."

Talking about the past caused particular problems.

"... I was belong to...." "...I became to prefer it."

Verb Tenses (24 errors)

Again, the past caused considerable difficulty.

"I like badminton, which I had played for eight years." "I have been reading in junior high school"

The use of the present tense with "recently" was a problem.

"Recently, I cook...." " Recently, I'm interested in travel....."

And tenses were sometimes mixed.

When I was a child, I think...." "I am called... since I was a child."

Singular/Plural Forms (25 errors)

Lists were introduced with "is".

"My favourite country is the UK, Spain, Italy...." "My favourite subject is maths and Japanese history."

Interestingly, the innocuous-looking word "game" twice caused a problem.

"I look forward to playing game...." " "... he can't play game."

It might be suggested that the error here is cause by the Japanese word "geemu", which, of

course, has no plural form.

Prepositions (31 errors)

There were errors of omission...

"I belonged baseball club...." "Now I live far my home."

... unnecessary inclusion...

"...the team won in Pacific league." "...I feel in bad when I eat it."

... and simple wrong choices.

"I love shopping at holiday." "I'm good of running and swimming."

The remaining groups contained fewer than twenty errors between them. One example of each is given below.

Conjunctions (4 errors)

"... I was regret to I couldn't speak...."

Word Order (4 errors)

"I want to study hard English."

Adverbs (3 errors)

"Particular I like baseball."

Possessives (7 errors)

"I went to hers concert."

Special cases

There were only two sentences whose meaning was actually incomprehensible on first reading, but a moment's thought soon cleared the problem up.

"... the team won in Pacific League that the team couldn't play in Japan Series." (Should be "but", not "that")

"When I'm sad my friends spend their time together...." (Should be "...spend time together with me....")

Discussion

Given that there were only two truly incomprehensible (initially, at least) sentences produced, the results as a whole are encouraging. It would appear that the majority of errors were caused by the influence of Japanese: Articles (which do not exist in Japanese), verb forms and tenses (which are simpler in Japanese) and singular/plural forms (which Japanese dispenses with) accounted for 156 errors, or over 61 per cent of the total. The influence of the native language would account for the fact that such errors are so deeply ingrained and so difficult to "unteach." The good news, though, is that these errors have almost no effect on the listener/reader's comprehension, and may indeed not be noticed.

Conclusion

This survey offers two hints as to the way we should approach practical classroom teaching in future.

1) Our first-year students arrive with sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to be able to express their thoughts in a comprehensible, if not elegant manner. The errors they make routinely are deeply ingrained and mostly a result of the influence of Japanese. One aim, therefore should be to accept that certain errors are almost inevitable, and to avoid concentrating on mistakes which do nothing, or very little to harm the listener/reader's comprehension.

2) The corollary to 1) above is that we should seek to draw out students' knowledge and communicative abilities, given that we know that they are basically competent. If a student can write a page about their family, hobbies, friends etc. in comprehensible English, then they can do it orally. The problems are shyness and an unwillingness to risk making mistakes, rather than a lack of ability.

Appendix

Complete List of Errors Made

Some sentences have been changed or (Name) inserted to protect student anonymity.

Vocabulary

1) ... he joined to (Name) Marathon recently.
2) ... I went to Exile's live this year.
3) ... when I was a two grades high school student.
4) ... I was regret....
5) My town gives us dust bag....
6) ... living people money is not expensive.
7) My family sum is six human family....
8) My house's colour is orange.
9) I have five family....
10) My old sister
11) My old sister likes stepmother in Cinderella. (is like)
12) A lot of star can be watched....
13) ... Miyawaka is country.
14) Please call me help yourself.
15) ... when I'm only.... (lonely)
16) First, I.... (At first)
17) I challenge various sports...
18) My hate food is....
19) Food is ... and so on. (among others)
20) I entranced this school....
21) I want he to....
22) ... care not to be sick. (take care not to get sick)
23) My home isn't town (urban)
24) It is very happy for me to....
25) I want to challenge a lot of things.
26) ... terrible dialect....
27) When I'm sad, music makes me cheer.
28) ... per a week.
29) I active....
30) ... how to speech English.
31) Everyday is wonderful....
32) Until now, I telephone almost everyday.
33) ... everyday....
34) ... our baseball club was victory.
35) ... by a week.... (once a week)
36) ... challenge is important....
37) I will try everything.... (anything)

38) I have a lot of appetite.
39) I come from Kitakyushu everyday.
40) My hate food is corn....
41) My love love love singer is
42) My tall is 156.
43) I'm forward to it. (looking forward)
44) My hate drink is milk....
45) I take them too many homeworks (give)
46) ...when I have a little money.... (have little money)
47) ...I can get home more earlier.
48) I'm interesting abroad....
49) ... cloudy train.... (crowded)

Articles

1) ... he joined to (Name) Marathon recently.
2) ... at P.E. Festival....
3) ...the team couldn't play in Japanese Series.
4) Handball is not famous sport....
5) ... there is bad point....
6) ... there was stranger
7) My mother is nice cook.
8) ... likes stepmother in Cinderella.
9) I like beautiful cloud.
10) I have seen "twelve colours cloud"....
11) Song's word is very important.
12) I have mother, father and brother.
13) My brother is high school student.
14) ...when I was high school student.
15) I like members of club....
16) I like members of club....
17) Food is famous....
18) I belonged baseball club....
19) ... when I was junior high school student.
20) I was pitcher.
21) I can't be regular member.
22) I didn't belong baseball club
23) My high school is boys' school.
24) I belong baseball club....
25) We play game....
26) He was playing baseball when student.
27) ...belong to softball team.
28) He is good father.
29) ...work in day.
30) She is good mother.
31) ... sea is very beautiful.
32) ... in school library.

33) ... use library.
34) Country I want to go to is Australia.
35) I have more terrible dialect....
36) I'm a member of ESS.
37) ... we always have a dinner together.
38) I was a captain of tennis club
39) ... I was junior high school student...
40) ... I was... high school student.
41) ... I was high school student.
42) I was belong to wind orchestra....
43) I love flute.
44) ... I want to be kindergarten's teacher.
45) I am elementary school student.
46) I ... go to library every week.
47) ... and ... is best songs.
48) I don't like cold....
49) I want to belong volleyball circle.
50) ... it has beautiful sea.
51) It was first time for me....
52) It looks like foreign country....
53) I have pet.
54) ... when he hits homerun
55) ... listening to the music.
56) I have father, mother....
57) My father is high school teacher....
58) My mother is yoga instructor.
59) We are very nice family.
60) There is a (NAME) High School near my house.

Verb Form

1) She make a cake.
2) ... I'm not good at play sports.
3) ... people is very kind....
4) ...I want to I can speak..
5) ... I brought up there.
6) By the way, introduce my good points. (let me)
7) I likes make people happy....
8) I likes make people happy....
9) ... I was belong to....
10) ... and now, manager of lacrosse. (I am)
11) Now talk about lacrosse. (I will)
12) The song is very like.
13) My birthday is in August and nineteen.
14) I like play...
15) Better than watch.... (watching)

16) I look forward to play...
17) He was playing baseball when student.
18) He belong....
19) What I like is play the piano
20) I have been learning since four years old.
21) ... brother belongs to baseball club and some lessons.
22) I talk about how a day.... (... how my day was)
23) I want to say my gratitude....
24) My dream is kindergarten teacher.
25) I'm looking forward to play sports....
26) ... I'm not good at speak English.
27) I have a dream. It's go and see....
28) ... I'm keeping to save money.
29) I was belong to....
30) ... when I'm junior high school
31) My hobby is reading, music and sleeping.
32) ... and ... is best songs.
33) ... it be able to play volleyball.
34) Piano is playing from four years old.
35) I was played the piano in concert.
36) My dream is children's teacher.
37) I'm found.... (I found)
38) I'm able to cooking now.
39) I became to prefer it.
40) I could... take relaxing.
41) The island have....
42) I'm interested in travel to foreign countries. (travelling)
43) I dislike food which have....
44) I'm often mistaken my name. (People often get my name wrong)
45) My dream is teacher
46) I wanted... but I couldn't it.
47) I belongs to....

Verb Tense

1) The other day I complete it.
2) ... I'm not good at talking with boys.... (I wasn't)
3) I like badminton, which I had played for eight years.
4) I had belonged to tea club when I was high school student.
5) I had played basketball.... (I used to play....)
6) Recently, I cook....
7) ... if we can ... our wish is come true.
8) I can't be regular member. (wasn't able to be)
9) High school is boring, but sometimes it was interesting....
10) He was playing baseball when student.
11) My mother got up.... (gets)

12) My mother got up...to washing....
13) When I was a child, I think....
14) Recently, I always cook....
15) We went to Okinawa. It's very interesting.
16) I am called ... since I was a child.
17) This is my dream when I am elementary school student.
18) I have been reading in junior high school.
19) I had played volleyball for seven years.
20) I was born and grow in Fukuoka.
21) Recently, I'm interested in travel....
22) ...my fifth grade teacher teaches me Japanese....
23) He has played baseball since he is six years old.
24) I had played the horn.... (I played...)

Singular/Plural Forms

1) ... my family's birthday.
2) ... my town gives us dust bag....
3) My favourite colour is sky blue, white....
4) My favourite famous people is Hanejima Yuhei....
5) My favourite country is the UK, Spain, Italy....
6) I love shopping at holiday.
7) A lot of star....
8) Song's word is very important.
9) My hobby is drawing picture....
10) I'm not good at computer.
11) My favourite subject is maths and Japanese history....
12) This club member are....
13) ...I look forward to play game....
14) ... he can't play game.
15) ... I don't like vegetable.
16) ... three day....
17) ... our baseball club member was victory....
18) I make a friend soon.
19) It has many shopping mall.
20) My favourite food is croquettes and hamburger.
21) I dislike ramen and udon because that are....
22) ... too many homeworks.
23) My hobby is watching movie and DVD
24) ... every times.
25) Please tell me many English!

Prepositions

1) ... the team won in Pacific League....
2) I love shopping at holiday.

3) ... I often take a picture by mobile phone.
4) I have seen "twelve colours cloud" at the sky.
5) ... I moved in Chikushino....
6) ... play with myself.... (play myself)
7) I belonged baseball club....
8) I didn't belong baseball club.
9) I belong baseball club....
10) He is in Sapporo on work....
11) ... work in day. (work during the day)
12) My home isn't town than Fukuoka.... (as urban as....)
13) I thought it was very difficult for me....
14) I borrow books in school library.
15) Now I live far my home.
16) When I'm sad, my friends spend their time together. (...with me.)
17) I'm listening her song....
18) ... I went... to cheer them. (cheer for them/ cheer them on)
19) ... when I'm junior high school.
20) April, I came Fukuoka....
21) I came Fukuoka....
22) ...I was born summer.
23) I telephoned her long time.
24) I want to belong volleyball circle.
25) I'm good of running and swimming.
26) I transferred Seinan University....
27) When I was Fukuoka University....
28) ... I feel in bad when I eat it.
29) I work six days of week....
30) When I was five and six grade....
31) I'm interesting abroad

Conjunctions

1) the team won in Pacific League that the team couldn't play in Japanese Series.
2) ... I was regret to I couldn't speak....
3) My favourite character is Rilakkuma, which there are many dolls in my room.
4) I went to her sports festival. So she played the big taiko.

Word Order

1) ... I want to know it everybody!
2) The best sport I like is volleyball....
3) I want to study hard English
4) My sister is older than me two years.

Adverbs

1) There is beautiful nature....
2) Particular I like baseball.
3) I'm interesting abroad

Possessives

1) ... blood type is O.
2) I'm from Saga and high school was....
3) Piano is my treasure.
4) ... brother belongs to baseball club....
5) The blood type is A. (My blood type....)
6) Little sister is two years younger than me.
7) I went to hers concert...