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Teachers' perceptions of error: The effects of first language and experience

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Abstract

This study investigates raters' identification of errors in the writing of an EFL student. Drawing on data collected from a correction task and a questionnaire, we examine the beliefs and practices of three distinct groups of 16 participants in each: native English speaking EFL teachers, Japanese speaking EFL teachers and educated native English speaking non-teachers. Participants were asked to identify and correct the errors in an authentic text written by a Japanese university student, judge which errors they considered the most serious, and to give reasons for their choices. The results confirm earlier studies that non-native English speaking teachers are generally more severe in grading errors and rely more on rule infringement rather than intelligibility in judging seriousness. In addition, we discovered that the Japanese teachers were far more likely to regard stylistic variations as errors, although the native English speaking teachers were sensitive to features of formality and academic appropriacy. We argue that these differences are a result of the participants' experiences and discuss the issues surrounding error identification for teachers.
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1. Introduction

Responding to student errors is one of the writing teacher's most enduring and difficult tasks. Despite shifting perceptions on the importance of 'accuracy' and current pedagogies which reject 'grammar practice' orientations to writing instruction, error correction is widely seen by teachers as crucial for writing development and generally expected and welcomed by L2 students (e.g. Ferris, 2002; Hyland, 1998).

While the positive effects of grammar correction have been questioned (e.g. Truscott, 1996), recent research has sought to establish the importance of attending to students' writing errors (see Ferris, 2006; Hyland and Hyland, 2006 for reviews). This research shows that L2 students attend to and make use of teachers' corrections to their drafts and that, combined with instruction and repetition, correction facilitates student writing improvement both in the short and medium term (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002). The effectiveness of such correction, however, can be undermined by the inconsistent or uninformed assessment of errors and teachers vary enormously in their marking practises. While Ferris (2006) found teacher feedback to be overwhelmingly accurate, for example, Lee (2004) reports that half her sample of Hong Kong teachers corrected errors inaccurately.

In practice, error correction involves a threefold process of identification, evaluation and correction, and the majority of studies have focused on the latter two areas. So while research has explored the strategies and treatments teachers use for error correction and the effects these have on students' revisions and writing development, the important issue of how teachers recognise and judge errors has received less attention. This study contributes to the research into teacher beliefs and practices concerning grammar correction by focusing on the reactions of Japanese and English EFL teachers and a group of native English speaking non-teachers to a single text by an EFL learner.

2. Error perception and rater viewpoint

Research shows that error is the key factor in ESL writing evaluation (e.g. Homborg, 1984), and that essay grades rise dramatically when sentence level errors are corrected (Sweedler-Brown, 1993). Given this importance, discussions of error evaluation have often focused on creating criteria to ensure clear and consistent correction and to avoid overwhelming both teachers and learners with red ink. Ferris (2002), for instance, suggests that teachers might usefully choose to correct errors which are specific to the genre being produced, those which most disturb readers, those which most interfere with text comprehensibility or those which are made most consistently by the student.

Many teachers may be unaware of the relative merits of these different practices, however, and have rarely received specific training in error evaluation. More importantly, correcting errors depends on detecting them in the first place, and while language awareness has been identified as the core component of a teacher's professional competence (e.g. Andrews, 2003), studies have found significant gaps in both NES and NNES teachers' knowledge about grammar and about language use (Borg, 2003). Andrews (1994), for example, found great disquiet among 82 trainers on initial TEFL training courses about the grammatical knowledge of new teachers and Brumfit et al. (1996, p. 86) concluded that teachers' knowledge of language was in general so 'patchy and idiosyncratic' that it had a negative impact on their classroom practices.

In addition to grammatical knowledge, teachers' evaluations of student writing seem susceptible to the influence of a variety of factors, including stereotyped expectations of students' ethnolinguistic identities (Rubin and Williams-James, 1997), their training in ESL instruction (Sweedler-Brown, 1993) and even their perception of whether writers are native or ESL students (Janopoulos, 2002). A number of studies have focused on the characteristics of the evaluators themselves, examining how different judges assess the gravity of different kinds of errors. In particular, these have compared the perceptions and practices of native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers (e.g. Porte, 1999; Schmitt, 1993; Takashima, 1987) and occasionally also native English speakers who are not teachers (Hughes and Lascaratou, 1982; Davies, 1983).

These studies suggest a connection between perceptions of error and rater background. Generally, findings show non-native speakers to be more severe, to be more obviously oriented towards accuracy and more likely to differ as a group in their recognition of the relative seriousness of individual errors. These broad patterns are largely attributed to 'the native speakers' better knowledge of the target language and especially of the wide scope of its norms' (Hughes and Lascaratou, 1982, p. 177), implying a lack of sensitivity, consistency or training on the part of the NNESs (e.g. Kobayashi, 1992; Takashima, 1987). Other writers argue that non-native teachers' judgments are not inferior to those of NESs, but result from a shared native language with their students (Davies, 1983) or the experience of working under specific institutional constraints with them (Schmitt, 1993). These studies form the background of our interest in offering a wider perspective in seeking to understand how teachers' judgments may reflect their experiences and not only their explicit knowledge of language.

3. Participants and methods

The present study partly takes its inspiration from Hughes and Lascaratou (1982), sharing with that paper the ideas of an experimental correction task and the contrastive composition of subject groups. However, rather than constructing isolated sentences containing errors typical of the target learner writers as in other studies, we sought to make the correction task closer to a genuine marking activity by asking participants to respond to an authentic text, and then followed this up with a questionnaire concerning error correction.

The participants comprised three groups of 16 members each: a Japanese teacher group (JT), a group of native English speaking non-teachers living in London with little experience of Japan or the Japanese (NES), and a group of native English speaking teachers from the UK (NST). Most of the 48 participants were female (36), all had been educated to Bachelors level or above and the teachers all worked with EFL/ESL students at university level, the JTs in Japan and the NSTs in the UK. The English non-teachers were a similar age, class, gender and educational profile to the other groups, although were not teachers or English majors, and were included to determine the extent of teaching experience and training on the marking decisions.

All participants were given a 150 word text on the topic of 'beauty' written by a freshman student (pre-intermediate level) at a Japanese women's university (see Appendix). It was decided to use a single, short text as this seemed to be a familiar text type for teachers of intermediate level students and we wanted to facilitate comparisons across raters and to avoid burdening participants with a lengthy task. The text was selected from 26 on the

same topic as it contained a range of errors common to this group of students. We identified 11 errors in the text from 9 categories: subject–verb agreement, article, singular–plural, tense, word order, spelling, verb form (other than agreement), word-choice, and punctuation. Subjects were asked to evaluate the text holistically on a scale of 1–10, to identify and correct all the errors, to select and rank the three most serious errors (from 3 – most serious – to 1), and to give reasons for their choices. The tasks provided no hints concerning the number of errors or where to find them. Following the task, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire which gathered biographical data and their beliefs on error correction.

4. Results: responses to errors

The results show extraordinary agreement on an holistic evaluation (five out of 10) and that the NES and NST groups recognised more than 80% of the target errors. The Japanese teachers identified slightly less, often failing to pick up the article omission, a result which supports Takashima's (1987) findings in this regard. All the groups gave least attention to the punctuation error, with only four subjects correcting this and perhaps suggesting uncertainty in a time of changing norms about punctuation use.

The findings also provide further evidence of the tendency for native English speakers to be more lenient in grading errors than non-native speakers and for non-native English speaking teachers to employ *infringement of rules* in judging error gravity far more than native English speakers, with the NES group stressing *unintelligibility* in their judgements and the NST group drawing on both criteria. We used *infringement of rules* to refer to raters' statements which focused on grammar, mentioning the inappropriate application of a rule or a failure to grasp a previous teaching point, while *intelligibility* referred to statements mentioning ambiguity, flow hindrance, confusion, fluency, etc. A third category, *other*, included comments referring to non-native deviance, un-naturalness, and so on, but no participants gave reasons in this category in judging what they saw as the most serious errors.

There was a certain amount of agreement across the groups on what actually constituted the most serious error types, with four features attracting the attention of more than six members in any one group. Table 1 summarises this information. In the first column are the four features attracting most attention from the graders: agreement, word form, tense and word order. The second column indicates the number of raters in each group identifying each of these features as the most serious. The third column shows the total number of points given to that feature by each group of raters (from 3 – most serious – to 1), and the

Table 1
Recognition of most serious features by group

Feature	No. of raters			Gravity			Rule violation			Intelligibility		
	JT	NES	NST	JT	NES	NST	JT	NES	NST	JT	NES	NST
Agreement	12	4	3	27	7	4	12	2	2	0	0	0
Word form	12	6	8	20	8	12	11	3	9	0	3	0
Tense	7	6	8	16	6	10	3	2	3	4	7	5
Word order	2	12	8	3	20	17	2	4	0	0	7	8
Totals	33	28	27	66	41	41	28	11	14	4	17	13

final two columns indicate the number of times raters gave either rule violation or intelligibility as a reason for judging it as an error.

As can be seen, more Japanese teachers regarded agreement and word form errors as serious and scored them far more highly in terms of their gravity, justifying their decisions by referring to the fact that these infringed basic grammatical rules. Clearly, agreement ("cosmetic surgery have good points") and word form ("if we become beauty") are grammatical errors and perhaps ones which the Japanese teachers expect students to notice themselves and to get right as a result of the emphasis they are given in classroom teaching. The errors of tense ("by having cosmetic surgery, our faces looked worse than before") and word order ("the same face people increase") also infringe grammaticality but differ from the other two types. They have a greater impact on the intelligibility of the sentences, with many of our native English speaking participants expressing confusion about the intended meanings. Interestingly, the word order error, which was highly scored by the native English speaking participants and which had perhaps the greatest impact on intelligibility, received low scores for both frequency and gravity from the JT group.

In other words, the Japanese speaking and English speaking groups each showed relatively consistent judgements and these differed considerably from each other. It is also worth noting that the different points given for gravity corresponded to the reasons for making those judgements in terms of rule violation and intelligibility, and that these were also supported by statements concerning error correction beliefs in the questionnaire. Overall, this shows that the participants did not just employ a certain criterion more often than another, but also that they used them in judging seriousness, indicating the different orientations of the groups in judging error gravity.

5. Widening the frame: non-target errors

Undoubtedly the most interesting feature of the study was that participants identified far more items as errors than those we had noted ourselves. While the task directions asked participants to 'underline every error', they did not specify where to find errors or how many there were, so while we had expected some additions, we were completely unprepared for the 42 different cases noted by participants! Not only did each group identify far more of these 'non-target features' than the errors we had predicted but, in contrast to the identification of target errors, there were considerable inter-group differences. Once again, the patterns suggest that the Japanese teachers were the most severe markers and the NS teachers the most lenient with the NES non-teachers falling between them. Table 2 shows the total number of errors identified by each group, the number of different features identified as errors and the average number of errors identified by each marker in the group. As can be seen, the JT group made over two and a half times as many corrections as the native

Table 2
Recognition of 'non-target errors'

Group	Total marked errors	Different features	Average per marker
JT	151	38	9.4
NES	98	22	6.1
NST	59	16	3.7
Overall	308	42	6.4

English speaker teachers and identified twice as many different features as errors, suggesting less consistency as a group in what they perceived as errors.

It should be pointed out that these non-target items are quite different from the target errors. This is because they violate participants' judgements of *acceptability* rather than *grammaticality*, relating less to objective criteria of 'well-formedness' than to more subjective, individual assessments of how language 'should' be used in a particular setting and for a particular purpose. Our target features were 'overt' in the sense that they were both ungrammatical and unacceptable, while the features identified by the graders were less explicit, being grammatical but unacceptable. These latter judgments are therefore 'errors' in the eyes of the beholder, so it is not surprising that participants differed considerably in their perception of them.

We recovered participants' understandings of why they saw features as errors from their corrected versions and from the questionnaires, and grouped these into three main categories:

- Stylistic focus, addressing issues of formality or appropriacy, for example, by questioning the use of '*I think*', objecting to repetition or word choice ('popular *among* → popular *with*), expressing a preference for *firstly*, *secondly* over *first*, *second*, etc.
- Discourse focus – raising issues of cohesion, organization and paragraph structure by referring to matters such as pronoun reference, breaking one sentence into two or combining sentences, etc.
- Semantic focus – where participants indicated a lack of clarity. This addresses meaning rather than expression and corrections largely involved inserting words or phrases and changing tenses.

In marking particular uses as 'errors', participants tended to select those which fell into our *semantic category*, while the JT group also concentrated on those which had a *discourse* focus and the native English speaking group on those which violated their *stylistic* expectations. The features attracting the most disapproval were the use of *And* to begin a sentence, the wording 'that face is one type' (both with 19 participants marking these as errors), and the choice of 'looking good is very *good*', rather than *important* (with 16 mentions).

6. Discussion: error perceptions and correcting practices

Overall, the frequency and patterning of corrections suggest that the native English speakers were more tolerant of variation and more prepared to accept non-standard alternatives to those expected (see also Hughes and Lascaratou, 1982). The Japanese teachers not only corrected far more features, for example, but reacted strongly to cases such as students' use of the present tense following a conditional ('if we become *beauty, we feel happy…') while none of the native English speakers reacted to this. The Japanese teachers' concern with correctness is also seen in the fact that they overwhelmingly identified serious errors as those in the target group, which to our mind represent far more grammatically clear-cut examples of error. So, the Japanese teachers identified just two errors as serious from the 151 non-target features they corrected (1.3%), the NES group found 9 serious errors from their 98 (9.2%), and the NST group 8 from 59 (13.6%).

The reluctance of the Japanese teachers to accept alternative uses reflects a fundamental difference among the participants' attitudes towards marking and errors in gen-

eral. Teachers often have clear intuitions about grammar and the relative weight of different types of error which they draw on when grading students' writing. This may not be true for NNS teachers working in EFL contexts with little contact with the language or opportunities for professional development. Such teachers often lack confidence in their English and are uncertain about appropriate usage, frequently expressing such anxieties through a prescriptive attitude to correctness and a reluctance to accept non-standard forms. Their isolation from language models can also mean that they lack exposure to a variety of different registers which reduces their sensitivity to stylistic nuances which, while not grammatically 'wrong', could perhaps be improved for greater effect.

We should also recognise that Japanese teachers regard finding and correcting errors as a central part of their role. Error-free work tends to be a great concern to Japanese students, is fundamental to Asian social and institutional conceptions of what it means to 'know a language', and represents a key element of instruction and assessment in Japan. As a consequence, Japanese teachers of English tend to focus on grammatical accuracy in their classes rather more than their overseas trained colleagues. Their questionnaire responses underline the importance these teachers attach to a comprehensive approach to error correction, perhaps reflecting both a professional preference and an institutional imperative to correct every mistake.

This orientation to grammaticality has been maintained in Japan despite the emergence of communicative language teaching in the last decade or more. The fact that the Japanese teachers share the learners' first language, however, might also account for this reluctance to make judgements on the basis of intelligibility simply because they are far more likely to be more familiar with the deviant structures of their students and to understand constructions which might originate in the transfer of first language structures (cf. Davies, 1983). For instance, while nine NES teachers and non-teachers, reacted strongly to the expression *the same face people*, only one Japanese teacher did so. The Japanese teachers perhaps saw this as an understandable mistake for students to make under test conditions given that the grammatical complexity of possible standard alternatives (people with similar types of face/people who all look the same?) would impose considerable demands on learners.

In contrast, the native English speaking teachers appear to be drawing on different resources and experiences. Questionnaire responses from members of this group showed that they were more selective in their marking preferences and more familiar with a range of correction strategies which avoided an 'error hunting' approach. These teachers exhibited considerably more agreement on what constituted an error, with a narrower range of non-target items identified as errors, and on the features considered to constitute serious errors, with sentence-initial *and* and the choice of *good* rather than *important* being the main ones. The fact that the NST group identified far fewer 'non-target errors', used intelligibility as an additional criterion to grammaticality for judging both errors and their gravity, and marked more leniently overall, suggests a greater readiness to think of rhetorical contexts where alternative uses might be possible. This tendency to search for a meaningful interpretation of the text and to 'accentuate the positive' can be seen in some of the NST holistic comments:

> *There has clearly been an attempt to organize the ideas in the text and this helps the reader despite being undermined by poor English at times*

… the original meaning could be inferred from the forms used, so I would not say that they are the most serious of errors in terms of successfully conveying meaning.

Clumsy mistakes with plurals and articles but got the writer's views across.

These teachers were, however, relatively more strict in their judgements of appropriacy in academic writing contexts. Such issues of style or 'appropriateness' refer to items which are not exactly incorrect but nor are they 'precisely the way a native speaker might say it' (Ferris, 2002, p. 50). This, perhaps, reveals something of their experience of teaching in university situations where students' writing is ultimately judged by their content tutors and where issues of rhetorical appropriacy assume great importance (e.g. Jenkins et al., 1993).

Conceptions of style and acceptability are particularly difficult for both L2 learners and teachers, especially as there is a growing tendency towards informality in current scholarly writing. Chang and Swales (1999), for example, found that features such as the use of first-person pronouns and sentence-initial conjunctions 'have already been legitimized in English scientific/academic writing'. Our results show that their acceptance, however, is patchy at best. All participants reacted strongly against the use of 'And' at the beginning of the sentence 'And I will tell you about good points', where it is prominent in a topic-announcing sentence, for instance. They did, however, largely accept it in the last sentence where it is far less conspicuous as a sentence fragment ('And cosmetic surgery does not give people true confidence'). There was also almost unanimous acceptance of sentence-initial 'but', with only one participant marking this as an error.

The extent to which the three groups judged features as academically appropriate differed markedly, with only the Japanese teachers responding negatively to the three instances of 'I think', for example, and only the NES group objecting to 'first' and 'second', offering 'firstly' and 'secondly' respectively. Participants indicated that they believed these uses to be 'informal and unacceptable', perhaps because of a relatively limited exposure to academic writing in English. It is clear that the trend towards informality in academic writing has undermined old certainties and accepted conventions and this not only adds to the 'burden' of non-native speaker writers of English, as Chang and Swales discovered, but also to the difficulties of non-native speaker teachers too.

The views of the educated native English speakers who were not teachers offer another dimension of difference and help highlight some distinctions between the other groups. Interestingly, this group typically fell between the teacher groups in most of the variables we examined such as the number of non-target features identified, judgements of severity and employing intelligibility more consistently as a criterion of evaluation. Unlike the Japanese teachers, for example, none of whom made a single positive comment on the text and pointed instead to poor grammar, lack of logic, and other defects, the non-teachers tended to view the student's efforts positively and were largely indulgent about the errors they found:

It was easier to read and the sentences were better constructed. That is why I have given it higher marks

… having learned foreign languages myself, I understand that running clauses together with the correct grammar linking them up can be very difficult.

It is possible that these raters, unlike the teachers, saw the exercise as something unfamiliar and enjoyed the novelty of the experience. Their inclination towards intelligibility may just reflect a layman's orientation to language use and the lack of a vocabulary to discuss syntactic and lexical errors, so that, as non-teachers, they are unaware of whether an error is due to carelessness, conceptual difficulty, or the time which has lapsed since it was taught.

7. Conclusion and implications

This study of error perception has highlighted a number of differences between the three groups. Although the questionnaire data indicated that all the teachers viewed error correction as a positive pedagogic strategy, they performed the task in different ways. Like a number of earlier studies, we have found that our sample of Japanese L1 teachers of English are less lenient in correcting errors, find more errors, and employ *infringement of rules* as their main criterion in judging error gravity. The native English speaking teachers, in contrast, drew on both grammaticality and intelligibility in identifying errors, were more selective in correction by identifying far fewer errors, and saw appropriacy as a basis of error judgements. The relatively consistent patterns of recognition and decision making *within* each of the three groups compared with those *between* them suggests that fundamental differences inform their decisions based on their prior experiences.

Whether we understand a stretch of language as acceptable or not depends on our prior experiences with the language and our familiarity in using it to achieve different purposes. Each of us comes to a text with a certain competence in the language and a particular set of expectations for grammaticality, organisation, style and so on given our understandings of the writer's goals and abilities, and these influence our reading of a text. In other words, we contextualise it in different ways and this determines our judgements about acceptability. The fact that our study has asked raters to evaluate an authentic text designed to communicate meaning, rather than lists of decontextualized, researcher constructed sentences written to highlight error, means that we are able to show that there are general patterns of judgements about grammaticality which are based on the broad experiential backgrounds of teachers and the immediate situation in which evaluation occurs.

There are a number of pedagogical implications of this research, but we only have space to mention two of the more obvious ones. First, it seems important to us that teachers should be aware of the distinction between grammatical error and stylistic difference to better inform both their teaching and marking. Students can easily be confused by the fact that a perfectly grammatical and comprehensible choice might be identified as an error in a particular genre and should be made aware of the effects of different choices. Because of this, consciousness raising activities, which expose students to different kinds of texts and explicitly draw their attention to features such as sequencing words, conjuncts and first-person pronouns, should be part of our teaching repertoire. Students can then be given guided, scaffolded tasks to develop their confidence in using these features before they are asked to write longer texts independently. These tasks thus both extend students' awareness that a piece of writing must be both grammatical and appropriate for the message and audience; and develop their competence in employing the devices which can help ensure this.

Second, the high degree of inconsistency among the Japanese teachers in their perceptions of error might be a cause for concern if it is replicated in actual teaching contexts. A

relative consensus on what counts as error is necessary for the reliability of assessment so that all assessors agree on the rating of the same performance and assess the same performance in the same way on different occasions. Minimizing variations in scores caused by factors unrelated to the test is an issue for all teachers, not just L2 instructors working in EFL contexts, as raters marking independently of each other may well be influenced by their own experiences and preferences as much as by variations in writing quality. While there may be no objective, agreed upon norm for determining the acceptability of stylistic features in all cases, it is important that the same standards are applied across students, and greater consistency can be achieved only through rater training and benchmarking sessions prior to grading exercises.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of this research and the fact that more participants, a longer text, and a different research context might have an impact on the results. It is unclear, for instance, how far a group of NES teachers working in Japan might have responded to the text or the extent to which a larger teacher base may have produced different patterns of response. We also recognise that in reality teachers respond to students as well as texts, so that their knowledge of a particular learner can often help them to see an error as a rare lapse or a recurring inability to grasp a rule and lead them to mark differently. Not only did the participants in this study not know this student, but the situation was an experimental one which may have led them to feel under pressure to identify more errors than usual.

This exploratory study however points to the fact that error perceptions closely relate to the experiences teachers bring to the classroom. While we believe that our results reflect wider practices, we recognise the need for further studies in this area. In other words, we call, with Borg (1998, p. 9), for more research into 'teachers' personal pedagogical systems – stores of beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes – that play a significant role in shaping teachers' instructional decisions'. In this way it might be possible to follow up some of the issues we have raised to learn more about the ways teachers perceive errors and the relationship of these perceptions to their backgrounds, experiences and teaching contexts.

Appendix 1. Text (target errors underlined)

I think cosmetic surgery have good points and bad points. And I will tell you about _ good points. There are two points. First, if we become beauty, we feel happy and second, we become popular among people at school or works. I think, especially for women, looking good is very good. They can make many friends or may get a better job. But, there are two bad points. First, by having cosmetic surgery, our faces looked worse than before, and second, the same face people increase. They want _ pretty face, but that face is one type. This is because people are afected by the media. Especially young people want to look like a movie star. I think there is no meaning to look good if people look _ same. They should have confidence.

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