

Helping Learners Reduce Japanese English

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Japanese English is widely accepted as a term referring to errors caused by L1 interference in the spoken or written English of native Japanese speakers. As it can seriously interfere with comprehension, it is essential that the phenomenon be paid due attention by English teaching professionals with a view to alleviating the problem. This article describes a workshop during which the authors summarised the issue and existing scholarly research into the related fields of error categories, error correction and inductive learning, and presented three original, rigorously inductive activities which focussed on raising student awareness of a particular aspect of Japanese English that the authors term *idiomatic*. The results of a pilot study of one of the activities and feedback on student perceptions of the activity are also discussed.

EFL writing teachers use the term *Japanese English* informally to cover a range of error-types; in this article, it refers specifically to phrases or sentences that are grammatically sound, but pragmatically strange to the ear of the native speaker. Such Japanese English (hereafter referred to as JE) is produced when students translate a phrase that is idiomatic in Japanese, but unidiomatic in English. An example is the use of ‘I think’ (see Appendix), which lends Japanese writing an appropriate tone of formality and distance but which has very different connotations in English. There is something insidious about these ‘idiomatic errors’; they do not carry red flags in the way that grammar mistakes or, say, collocation errors do, and nor do they obviously impinge upon the intellectual standard of a piece of writing, and are thus less likely to be noticed by an instructor than problems of grammar, collocation or content. Of more concern, perhaps, is the fact that JE is not readily identifiable during the *self-editing* process, or in peer-correction, precisely because what has been written seems idiomatic to the writer and corrector.

The objective of the workshop was to help raise teachers’ awareness of the issue of JE, and of the theory and philosophy behind the activities discussed and developed in the body of the workshop. More importantly, by offering colleagues samples of successful activities, and the opportunity to start the process of developing their own, we hoped to show that the difficulties of helping students reduce JE are not insurmountable.

The Workshop

1. Background

a) Error categories Japanese students of English produce a variety of error types in their writing. We can categorise these in various ways, as indeed a number of researchers in the field have done (see, for example, Ellis 1994, Humphries 1996, Izzo 1998). The presenters' concept of JE comes under the broad category of L1 transfer errors, and the more specific category of pragmatic, idiomatic errors. That is, JE is caused by the learner using, in English writing, a phrase that, while idiomatically correct in the L1, loses its idiomaticity in the L2, and thereby causes pragmatic interference in the reader's attempt to capture the writer's meaning.

b) Error correction The frequency of references to error categories in the literature, and the variety of categories to be found, suggests both the importance of the issue *and* the difficulty of dealing with it. This difficulty is mirrored by an increasing scepticism about the value and effectiveness of actually treating errors. Indeed, a popular view now is that traditional error correction is unproductive for the teacher and unhelpful for the student (see Zamel 1985, Ferris et al. 1997, Gray 2000, Fazio 2000, Leki 1991).

c) EFL and ESL A related problem involves the EFL-ESL divide. English learners in Japan live in an EFL environment where opportunities for input, abundant in ESL contexts, are scarce. It follows, naturally, that in Japan opportunities for noticing, intake and restructuring are equally limited, and that the amount of practice required for automatization

is almost impossible to provide or find. Nevertheless, many teachers continue to use materials (such as the majority of commercially available textbooks) which do not take into account the needs of those who learn English in EFL conditions (Falkus 2004).

d) Inductive learning Given this complexity of problematic factors, what can be done about JE errors? The authors feel that the answer is to approach the matter from a long-term, preventative angle rather than relying on the search for an immediate cure. If we can help students develop strategies to understand their errors better, and thereby provide them with tools to help them avoid those errors, this may prove to be an effective approach. The best way to do this, it seems logical to conclude, is to appeal to the cognitive skills of our students. In other words, we should attempt to get them thinking, to *notice* the logic inherent in language, and to notice that they can apply the already considerable knowledge they have of English and—importantly—Japanese, to solve grammatical and pragmatic problems for themselves. (For more on inductive learning, see Nagata 1997, Rosen & Sasser 1997, Ferris & Roberts 2001.)

What we are describing here is covered by the umbrella term *inductive learning*, an approach to SLA which promotes self-discovery. The materials presented in the workshop follow the inductive style; that is to say, students are asked to consider a problem, find a solution and then come up with rules and general language patterns themselves, rather than to apply a given rule to a particular problem. Workshop participants were shown examples of materials which aimed at raising the awareness of language transfer error in the translation of idiomatic language from Japanese to English.

With reference to the issues discussed above and the results of the research shown below, the advantages of inductive learning seem indisputable.

2. Presentation of activities and results of research

The second stage of the workshop involved the brief presentation of three activities which were developed, piloted and researched by the presenters at Kanda University (Activity 1 is appended to this article). At Kanda, the activities were accompanied by a pre- and post-test, and were succeeded by a questionnaire designed to elicit students' feelings regarding the activities. The results of this research are reproduced in the seven charts below. An explanatory comment is provided beneath each chart.

Chart 1: Activity Results



Chart 1: These results were based on a comparison of questions 1 and 17 of the activity (see Appendix). The chart shows that, as a result of doing the activity, 61% of the 250 participating students became not only more aware of JE but more justifiably confident of their ability to perceive it.

Chart 2: Pre- and post-test results

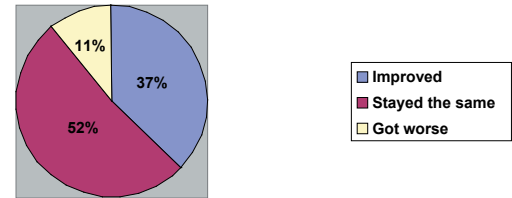


Chart 2: A comparison of pre-test and post-test results shows that a combined 89% of students improved their performance or maintained their level.

Charts 3-5 refer to information recovered from the questionnaire

Chart 3: This activity was enjoyable

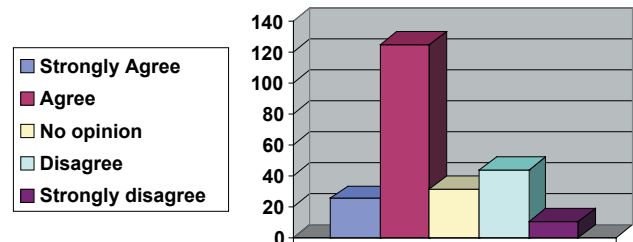


Chart 3: A large number of students had positive feelings about the activity.

Chart 4: The activity will make me more careful about translating 'I think' in the future

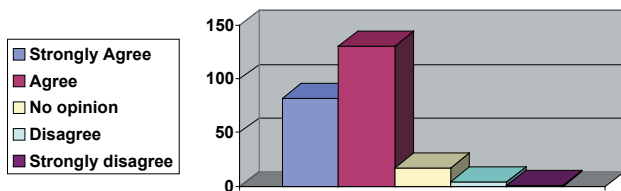


Chart 4: 91% of students felt the activity had made them more aware of this example of JE.

Chart 5: This activity will help my English writing

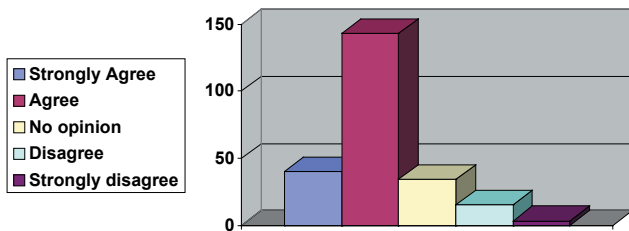


Chart 5: The overwhelming majority of students felt that doing the activity would have practical benefits in their future writing.

Chart 6: Have you done this kind of activity before?

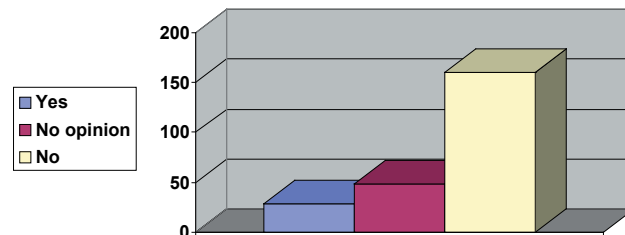


Chart 6: Most students said they had not done this type of activity before, which seems to justify our feeling that the activities presented represent a fresh approach to inductive learning.

Chart 7: Would you like to do more activities like this?

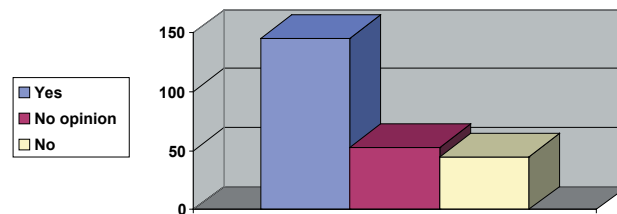


Chart 7: As far as the information in such questionnaires can be trusted, it seems that a large majority of students want more activities like this.

In summary, these results suggest that the 'I think' activity was fresh, practical, enjoyable, and successful in its aim of

helping to raise our students' awareness of the concept of JE. Significantly, a large majority of students indicated that they would appreciate more activities in a similar vein.

4. Participants' turn

The following six steps describe the final section of the workshop, wherein participants were asked to begin the process of developing their own activity, based on the principles outlined so far in this article. We feel it is important to include these steps here, since readers may be able to make practical benefit of the procedure.

Step 1: Individually, participants spent a few moments thinking of a JE error they had encountered in their own students' writing. Examples were put on the board to help jog memories. Examples of errors chosen by participants included 'touch' as in "*I want to go abroad to touch a foreign culture*" and 'challenge' as in "*We must challenge safe driving.*"

Step 2: Participants paired up, told each other about their chosen error, and decided upon *one* error on which to focus during the activity.

Step 3: Pairs spent 10 minutes working on the outline of an activity that would draw their students' attention to the chosen error in a manner discussed during the workshop. That is, the activity would be inductive in style, involve a degree of detection, and above all should engage the students' minds, should get them *thinking*.

Step 4: New pairings were formed: Participant 1 in Pair A joined up with Participant 1 in Pair B, Participant 2 in Pair A joined Participant 2 in Pair B, and so on.

Step 5: For 15 minutes, the new pairings worked on the *two* activities, exchanging ideas and advice. Participants were asked to concentrate on helping each other think of ways to make the activities flow, since a good structure is the essence of a motivating exercise.

Step 6: (Here, if time had permitted, we would have repeated Steps 4 and 5 with new partners, thereby increasing exposure to a variety of ideas, and multiplying opportunities to give and receive advice.) The original pairs re-formed, and spent 10 minutes discussing the feedback and advice they had received, and improving the activity.

To sum up, this part of the workshop helped participants realise that there is an alternative to the type of explicit error correction commonly used by writing teachers, and to so little effect. That alternative – an exciting one, given the encouraging results discussed above – is to design inductive tasks which lead students to notice the gap between the *Japanese English* they produce, and the more native-like English which is their goal.

5. Final remarks

Teachers are very familiar with the type of errors their students make. These errors are often a result of Japanese language interference in written and spoken English. The authors attempted to give insight into how errors can be pre-empted by using language awareness activities based on the principles of induction. The workshop demonstrated how an activity in this manner can be of profound assistance to learners of English because it helps them *notice* and understand the difference between (in this case) Japanese

English and idiomatic English. Above all, it was shown that such activities can be fresh, practical and motivating for students.

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Appendix: The 'I think' Activity

Step 1

Q1 i): Here are two sentences. One was written by a native speaker, and one by a Japanese speaker. Which was written by the Japanese speaker, A or B?

A: I think I really enjoyed it.

B: I think she's been to China before.

Q1 ii): How sure are you about your answer?

100%	80%	60%	40%	20%	0%
sure	sure	sure	sure	sure	sure

Step 2

Look at the following pairs of invented sentences.

Pair 1:

a) He came by car.

b) I think he came by car.

Pair 2:

- a) Kanda is an excellent university.
- b) I think Kanda is an excellent university.

Q2: In each pair, which sentence sounds stronger? Please circle a or b.

Pair 1: a b

Pair 2: a b

Q3: Here are two of the sentences again:

A: I think he came by car.

B: I think Kanda is an excellent university.

i): What is the main role of the phrase **I think** in sentence

A? Circle one answer.

I think...

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| shows that you are giving an opinion | shows politeness |
| shows uncertainty | has no important meaning |

ii): What is the main role of ***I think*** in sentence B? Circle one answer.

I think...

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| shows that you are giving an opinion | shows politeness |
| shows uncertainty | has no important meaning |

Q4: Look again at the sentences:

I think he came by car.

I think Kanda is an excellent university.

If we omit ***I think***, does the meaning of the sentences change substantially?

YES NO

Step 3

A: Translate this sentence into Japanese:

I think he came by car. _____

Q5 i): What is the main role of the Japanese phrase you used to translate ***I think*** in this sentence? Circle one answer.

It...

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| shows that you are giving an opinion | shows politeness |
| shows uncertainty | has no important meaning |

B: Translate this sentence into Japanese:

I think Kanda is an excellent university. _____

Q5 ii): What is the main role of the Japanese phrase you used to translate ***I think*** in this sentence? Circle one answer.

It...

shows that you are giving an opinion	shows politeness
shows uncertainty	has no important meaning

Step 4

Next, look at the six sentences below. They come from a concordance of native English writing.

- i) I think most women would be surprised.
- ii) But now, with many others, I think we have been wrong.
- iii) I think they are very interesting.
- iv) I think we all know her work, even if we didn't know her.
- v) She called from the car phone, I think.
- vi) But I think we will struggle forward here.

A: Choose **one** of the sentences, and copy it in the space below. You may choose any one of the six sentences.

Q6 i): What is the main role of *I think* in the sentence you chose? Circle one answer.

I think...

shows that you are giving an opinion	shows politeness
shows uncertainty	has no important meaning

B: Choose **another** of the sentences, and copy it in the space below. You may choose any one of the five remaining sentences.

Q6 ii): What is the main role of *I think* in the sentence you chose? Circle one answer.

I think...

shows that you are giving an opinion	shows politeness
shows uncertainty	has no important meaning

Q7: Were your answers to Q6i-ii similar to your answers to Q3i-ii ?

YES NO

Step 5

Now look at the following extracts from essays and diaries. They were not written by native English speakers; they were written by Japanese students at Kanda University.

1. *I went to Harajuku today to attend a concert by V6. Their concerts are held in summer every year. I'm always looking forward to watching them. I want to go to the concert next year. **I think the concerts are very big events during my summer vacations.***

2. *I listened to him for an hour and I really enjoyed his talk. **I think it was fascinating.***

3. *I had a wonderful time, and I didn't want to leave! **I think I want to go there again.***

Translate the last sentence of each extract into Japanese.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here are the three extracts again.

1. *I went to Harajuku today to attend a concert by V6. Their concerts are held in summer every year. I'm always looking forward to watching them. I want to go to the concert next year. **The concerts are very big events during my summer vacations.***

2. *I listened to him for an hour and I really enjoyed his talk. **It was fascinating.***

3. *I had a wonderful time, and I didn't want to leave! **I want to go there again.***

Q8: Which words have been omitted? _____

Q9 i): Do we still understand the writer's main point?
YES NO

Q9 ii): Has the omission of **I think** substantially changed the meaning of the sentences?

YES NO

Q10: Look carefully at your answers to Q8-10 again. Now answer this question: what is the main role of **I think** in the extracts? Circle one answer.

I think...

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| shows that you are giving an opinion | shows politeness |
| shows uncertainty | has no important meaning |

Q11 i): We have identified three different roles of **I think** (see Q3i-ii and Q10). What are they?

- 1 (Q3i): _____
2. (Q3ii): _____
3. (Q10): _____

Q11 ii): In which role does the omission of **I think** result in *no substantial change* to the meaning of the sentence ?

1 2 3

Q12: On the evidence of this worksheet, which of the three uses of **I think** could be described as 'Japanese English'? Circle one answer.

1 2 3

Step 6

- If your answer to Q12 was ‘3’, please go to Q13.
- If your answer to Q12 was ‘1’ or ‘2’, please go to Q16.

Q13: When you translated the extracts into Japanese at the beginning of Step 5, what phrase(s) did you use to translate ***I think***?

Q14: If these phrases have ‘no important meaning’, what is their function in Japanese writing?

Q15: Why do you think some Japanese students use ***I think*** this way when they are writing in English?

Please go to Step 7. Do **not** answer Q16.

Q16: Why do you think some Japanese students use ***I think*** this way when they are writing in English?

Please go to Step 7

Step 7

Q17 i): Here are two sentences. One was written by a native speaker, and one by a Japanese speaker. Which was written by the Japanese speaker, A or B?

A: I think I really enjoyed it.

B: I think she’s been to China before.

Q17 ii): How sure are you about your answer?

100%	80%	60%	40%	20%	0%
<i>sure</i>	<i>sure</i>	<i>sure</i>	<i>sure</i>	<i>sure</i>	<i>sure</i>