

Common English Errors: Causes and Corrections

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要 旨

日本人の英語学習者には、特有のエラーがある。このようなエラーの原因は生徒の不注意からではなく、二つの言語に基本的な違いがあることによるものであろう。授業中に頻出したエラーを分析したところ、日本語にはない英語の文法と単語のニュアンスなどが主な原因となることがわかってきた。他にも、日本語からの直訳や和製英語などもエラーの原因と考えられ、英語教師は生徒のエラーの原因を理解して、適切な訂正を施すべきであろう。

Keywords: common errors (特有のエラー), English (英語), error correction (エラー訂正), Japanese (日本語), language differences (言語の違い), loanwords (和製英語), translation (翻訳)

Abstract

Certain kinds of errors are often made by Japanese students of English. These common errors occur not because of students' inattention, but because of fundamental differences in the way the two languages are structured. An analysis of common errors collected from students' classroom work over a period of several years showed that these errors were overwhelmingly the result of grammatical forms and distinctions between words that are not present in Japanese. Other factors included the direct translation of Japanese phrases into English and the use of English loanwords where the meaning has shifted upon addition to the Japanese lexicon. An understanding of the reasons behind the errors students make can help teachers choose appropriate and effective responses and correction methods.

Introduction

An observant instructor will notice that different Japanese students will often make similar errors when speaking or writing in English. This is due not to a lack of care or intelligence on the students' part, but to underlying differences between Japanese and English. Although instructors are often aware of these repeated errors, without knowledge of the reasoning behind them it can be difficult to help students correct them.

While a variety of books are available to explain common English errors for students, there is a lack of similar material aimed at teachers. The best of the student books contain clear and thorough explanations for a variety of grammar points as well as exercises or workbooks to allow for practice of the relevant material. The book *An A-Z of Common English Errors for Japanese Learners* by Barker (2010) contains generally good explanations, abundant examples, and an extensive list of material. It is a useful reference for students or teachers, although the exercise section is a bit basic. Webb (2006) has also compiled an extensive list of common errors; although his explanations are a bit undeveloped, consisting mainly of examples, the associated workbook allows for extra practice. Muto and Aoki (2009) follow a more textbook-like style; instead of lists of errors, their book is divided into chapters situated around common themes and situations. It also divides errors into categories, taking into account the type of error, and is therefore one of the few books to acknowledge the cause of each error. However, many of the “Expressional Errors” (for example, those on p. 20) seemed overly prescriptive. This book was also the shortest of the three.

There are many more books focused on common English errors, each with various strengths and weaknesses. What seems to be lacking is a volume for teachers: one that not only lists errors, but provides suggestions on how to approach different corrections; one that contains exercises useable in or outside of class, with clear, simple explanations that can be understood by students of all levels. Of course, this is a monumental undertaking, and any such book would inevitably be a permanent work-in-progress. This study was devised both to show the need for such a volume and to test the effectiveness of simple exercises designed to teach students the correct way to use difficult grammar.

Method

Common errors made by students were collected during the course of several years of classwork and in-class conversation. Students were almost all first year university students enrolled in compulsory communication classes, and their English abilities were between false beginner and low intermediate level. The range and scope of the errors produced was likely limited by both student levels and the course content; they are not necessarily representative of all common English errors made by Japanese learners. However, the results should still be applicable to a wide range of students in Japan.

The errors collected were then analyzed to determine the cause. The three main categories were: use of grammatical constructs that do not exist in Japanese; words and phrases produced via direct translation, resulting in unnatural or incoherent phrasing in English; and use of English loanwords that have come to carry a different meaning or nuance in Japanese.

Two examples were chosen to represent each type of error. In the first category (distinctions that do not exist in Japanese), *together* vs. *with me* and *well* vs. *often* were selected; in the second (direct translation), *what* vs. *how* and *know* vs. *hear (about)* or *meet*; and in the final category (loanwords), *come here* vs. *come on* and *safe* vs. *safety*.

Students were asked to complete a short survey to determine the prevalence of each of the six selected errors. Two versions of the survey were created; each had a slightly different set of questions. Approximately half of the students took Survey A at the start of the term; the other half took Survey B. (Both surveys are included in Appendix A.) During the term, students will perform exercises and activities designed to help them become aware of and learn to correct some of these errors; at the end of the term, they will take the other survey (A or B, whichever they did not take at the beginning of the term). The results can be averaged to check overall improvement as well as compared for each individual student. These results, designed to determine the effectiveness of the planned in-class activities and lessons, are forthcoming.

Analysis and Discussion

Thirty-one common errors were identified and analyzed in this study. These were separated into three groups: (1) English vocabulary and grammatical structures that either

do not exist or are not distinct and separate forms in Japanese; (2) errors that are likely derived from a direct translation of a Japanese word or phrase; and (3) errors stemming from the use of English loanwords when the Japanese meaning is not the same as the original English definition. There were 16 common errors that fell into the first category, seven in the second, and six in the third. Two of the errors were difficult to categorize. Table 1 shows the six errors that were later chosen for student surveys and lessons as an example. A full explanation of each common error, including speculation on the cause of the final two errors, is included in Appendix B.

Table 1
Explanation of Errors Chosen for Surveys

Difference Not Found in Japanese	Direct Translation	Loanwords
With me vs. Together Let's go with me together. 一緒に is used for both <i>with me</i> and <i>together</i> .	What vs. How How What do you think? どう思いますか？	Come on vs. Come here Hey, John! Come on! Come here!
Well vs. Often I go well often. よく means both <i>well</i> and <i>often</i> .	Know vs. Hear about When did you know hear about this band? このバンドはいつ知りましたか？	Safety vs. Safe I am a safety safe driver.

Note. The first two columns contain: (1) Words or phrases that are often confused; (2) A corrected example sentence; and (3) A Japanese translation of the word, phrase, or sentence in question. The third column does not contain a Japanese translation.

Over half of the total errors (approximately 52%) stemmed from English grammatical forms and words that had no exact Japanese equivalent. This is no surprise, considering that such distinctions are likely to be the most difficult for students to understand. They are the grammatical equivalent of the consonant sounds /l/ and /r/; these sounds are difficult for Japanese speakers to produce, in part because they often cannot hear the difference.

Of the remaining errors, nearly 23% came from incorrect direct translations and almost 20% were loanwords. The remaining 6% were unsorted. Translation is tempting for students of foreign languages, but, as Barker (2010) put it, “no matter how useful or common an expression or word might be in your native language, there is no guarantee that translating it will produce an equally useful and common expression in the language you are trying to learn” (p. 11). Many words and phrases cannot be translated directly, and even those that

can are not necessarily used with comparable frequency. As for loanwords, it is easy to assume that because a word is originally from English, it can be used in English the same way that is it used in Japanese. However, many English loanwords in Japanese have taken on different nuances or even completely different meanings as they have become commonly used in Japan.

In the second part of the study, students were given surveys containing commonly confused words and phrases and asked to choose those that were correct. The pair with the highest error rate was the loanword *safety* versus the English *safe*; the lowest was the loanword *come on* versus the English *come here*. See Table 2 for the complete numbers and percentages.

Table 2
Error Rates

	With me vs. Together	Well vs. Often	What vs. How	Know vs. Hear/Meet	Come on vs. Come here	Safety vs. Safe
Total number of errors	57	109	103	71	46	184
Percentage of students answering incorrectly	26%	49%	46%	32%	21%	82%

Note. A total of 224 students answered the surveys; two students did not answer the question regarding *with me* vs. *together*.

There were not enough questions on the surveys to generalize about which type of errors might occur at the highest rates. This initial analysis considered only how many common errors of each type were made, not how many times each error had been made.

Pedagogical Implications

The goal of this study is, ultimately, to aid teachers in their correction of these types of common errors. How can instructors help students to recognize and correct errors without making them feel discouraged or ashamed of Japanese-style English? Knowing the genesis of a particular error is the first step.

For a simple careless mistake, simply pointing out its location to the student is often

enough. The student will often quickly recognize and fix the problem. Many spelling mistakes and problems with grammatical forms that students already know well fall into this category.

For an error involving a direct translation, more explanation may be helpful. Students may not have encountered the fact that not all language is able to be fully translated. For example, they may be surprised to learn about the futility of trying to translate 「いただきます！」(a required pre-mealtime exclamation in Japan with no functional English equivalent), or the rarity of 「懐かしい！」(which means something like “That’s nostalgic!”) in English. Students must learn to be aware of their audience; phrases that would be perfectly comprehensible to a Japanese person may be inscrutable to an American, and vice versa. Of course, teaching students the set phrases and rules (“In English, we say WHAT do you think about X, not HOW do you think about X”) is perfectly acceptable, and sometimes all that can reasonably be done in class. However, a deeper discussion or explanation is more likely to leave a lasting impression.

Errors involving English loanwords could benefit from a bit more delicacy in the correction. If students have grown up using a word in one way, they may be reluctant to change; they may even doubt the veracity of the correction. Even a short sentence or two can help give students perspective. They may be more receptive to the teacher saying not “this is wrong,” but “this is different in American/British/Australian/other variety of English.” For some students, it may be appropriate to introduce a model of World Englishes, establishing Japanese English as a legitimate variety with word usages distinct from other World English varieties. The example worksheet in Appendix C orients students to this perspective via the two simple sentences on the top, explaining the meaning of “Come on!” in Japanese English and preparing them to examine the variety of possible meanings in American English.

Finally, errors that occur due to a distinction that does not exist in Japanese are likely to be some of the most pervasive and difficult for students to correct. These errors do exist on a spectrum of difficulty, from simple phrases that students learn early in their education and are likely to be able to fix by themselves to entire grammatical constructs that have no Japanese equivalent and are difficult even to explain. For errors on this more difficult side of the spectrum, clear explanation and repetition is key. It can help to have a visual aid or picture to explain exactly what the difference is, if possible. Even then, it can take time for students to understand and correctly produce a difficult grammar point. Developing exercises that provide ample examples and allow plenty of practice is necessary, but time-

consuming as well.

Of course, when choosing to correct students' work, teachers must consider a variety of factors. It is important to distinguish between errors that are understandable and those that would likely render a student's speech or writing unintelligible. It is important not to correct so much that students feel overwhelmed and discouraged. It is important to let students think and speak without unnecessary interruption. In addition, the decision to implement these sorts of discussions and activities would depend on available class time, student level and interest, and more. However, it may well be worthwhile, especially if a teacher notices students continually repeating the same sort of errors and failing to learn from the teacher's standard correction process. Even with a lower level class, a quick and simple explanation or 10-minute activity can help students master a grammar point or see things from a different perspective.

Conclusion

As this study is still a work in progress, there are ample opportunities for improvement and further study. The selection of common errors would benefit from a more standardized approach; for example, the use of an online corpus such as the NICT Japanese Learners of English (JLE) corpus (as introduced in Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004) to identify a greater number of common errors among a larger group of learners and with a higher degree of accuracy.

In addition, although Japanese colleagues provided invaluable assistance in the categorization of the common errors in the study, it would be best to have a larger pool of people analyzing each example to see if a consensus can be reached. It is possible that the first and largest category could actually be broken down into more specific groupings. Further research is also necessary to show the efficacy of the proposed methods of error correction.

At the moment, the most important point is that most common student errors have quite understandable causes. Repeated errors are not necessarily due to a lack of care, but may be a symptom of a learned loanword or a difficult grammatical problem a student has yet to grasp. Teachers should aim to help students not to be ashamed of their errors and varieties of English, but instead help them learn about other varieties of English. They should help students discover a variety of international English that will be understandable when talking

with someone from outside their national circle, with an emphasis not on perfection, but comprehension.

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Appendix A: Surveys

Survey A

Please circle the best word you think is best for each sentence.

Example: Please answer these questions early / quickly.

1. Could you come here / come on?
2. I am a safety / safe driver.
3. I go to Tokyo Disneyland well / often.
4. Let's go to the movie together / with me.
5. What / How do you think about English class?
6. When did you know / hear about One Direction?

Survey B

Please circle the best word you think is best for each sentence.

Example: Please answer these questions early / quickly.

1. Please come here / come on!
2. Nagoya is a very safety / safe city.
3. Do you come to Kyoto well / often?
4. Let's have some cake together / with me.
5. What / How did you think of the new movie?
6. Where did you first know / meet him?

Appendix B: List of Common Errors

Difference not in Japanese	Direct Translation	Japanese loanwords
(Article +) Singular vs. Plural I like dog dogs. / I like a dog dogs. All are 犬が好き in Japanese.	High vs. Tall This building is high tall. このビルが高いです。	Challenge vs. Try I will challenge try this problem.
Use of Article (a/the vs. null) There is house. / There is a house. 家がある No article in Japanese.	It's vs. It It's sounds It sounds fun. 楽しそうです。	Fight vs. Don't give up / Do your best I will fight do my best!
Use of Article (a vs. the) A house The house is there. Both are 家がある in Japanese – there is no article.	Know vs. Know where Do you know my bag? know where my bag is? 私のかばんを知道吗？	One Piece vs. Dress I bought a new one piece dress.
Early vs. Soon I want to fix it early soon. Both are 早く in Japanese.	Teach vs. Tell Please teach tell me your name. 名前を教えてください。	Pierce vs. Earring I have many pierce earrings.
-ed vs. -ing The game is interested interesting. Both are 面白い in Japanese.	Use of It /Them Where did you see? see it? どこで見ましたか？ (Object is omitted in Japanese)	
Use of future tense (Don't vs. Won't) I don't go. / I won't go. Both are 行きません in Japanese.	Other/Unknown	
Use of future tense (Will) I fix it. / I will fix it. Both are 直します in Japanese.	Word order What do you like food? What food do you like? 食べ物は何が好きですか？・好きな食べ物は何ですか？ Word order is more flexible in Japanese; students may be translating the question 「何が好きですか？」 (“What do you like?”) and attempting to add “food” on the end, as they would add it to the beginning of the question in Japanese.	
Look vs. Watch vs. See I looked watched/saw the game. All are 見る in Japanese.		
Me too vs. Me neither I don't like it. → Me too neither. Both are 私にも in Japanese.	Lend vs. Borrow Could you borrow lend me your pen? Could I borrow your pen? ペンを貸してくれますか？ペンを借りてもいいですか？ The subject is unspecified in Japanese, so the confusion between “lend me” “borrow your” most likely stems from students not realizing the direction in which the lending/borrowing is occurring.	
Many vs. Much/A lot of I ate many a lot of food. Both are たくさん in Japanese.		
Narrow vs. Cramped/Small This campus is narrow small. 狭い is both narrow and small.		
Other vs. Another Here is the another other book. Both are もう一つ in Japanese.		
Use of “to” Go to the store. / Go to there. Both ~へ行く in Japanese.		
Wish vs. Hope I wish hope he will win. 願う includes both hope and wish in Japanese.		

Note: The first category encompasses a broad range of difficulties; the easiest are words that include more meanings than in English (for example, 早く can mean both early and soon), while the most difficult are based on concepts that don't exist in Japanese (such as the use of articles a/the).

Appendix C: Sample Exercise

Come on!

In Japanese English, “Come on!” often means “Come here!”

In American English, the meaning is a little different:

	Meaning	Example
Come here!	Come to me	Hey, John! Come here!
Come on!	Come with me	Come on, let’s go to the station.
	Hurry!	Come on! Class is starting!
	Please; Why don’t you...?; You should...	Come on, tell me the answer! or A: Let’s go out tonight! B: I should go home ... A: Come on, I want to do karaoke!
	Don’t joke; Be serious	A: I am a genius! B: Come on, even my grades are better than yours.
	Do your best; You can do it	Come on, Alice! You can win the race!

Also, pay attention to the pronunciation and intonation: Come **ON** or c’**MON**

What does “come on” mean in these sentences?

1. ____ Come on, the café is over here.
2. ____ Go, Dragons! Come on, team!
3. ____ Come on, this isn’t funny.
4. ____ Come on, we’re late for the movie!
5. ____ A: Can I borrow a pencil?
B: No.
A: Come on, I really need one!

Meaning:

- A. Come with me
- B. Hurry
- C. Please
- D. Don’t joke
- E. You can do it

Choose two different meanings for “come on” and write a sentence or conversation for each.

Example: Hurry – Come on, the train leaves in 5 minutes!

(1)

(2)