

Verbs in the Essays by L2 Learners of English in Japan and the Pedagogy

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze and assess the textual functions and uses of verb phrases used in the essays written by 35 L2 English learners of Japanese university students from the perspective of world Englishes. First, we will analyze the textual functions and uses of five types of verbs: linking verbs, public verbs, private verbs, suasive verbs, and expecting/wanting/tentative verbs. Secondly, we will consider the frequency of the present tense and the past tense and that of the progressive aspect and the perfect aspects. Finally, we will argue that sufficient output and input is necessary for a discourse-based focus on grammar to be effective.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and assess the textual functions and uses of verb phrases and nouns used in the essays written by 35 L2 English learners of Japanese university students from the perspective of world Englishes, more specifically in the followings:

- (1) the textual functions and uses of five types of verbs: linking verbs, public verbs, private verbs, suasive verbs, and expecting/wanting/tentative verbs [10] [11] [14] [19];
- (2) the frequency of the present tense and the past tense and that of the progressive aspect and the perfect aspect;

Moreover, we will argue that L2 grammar instruction should include opportunities for learners not only to receive meaningful input but also to produce meaningful output in order for a discourse-based focus on grammar to be effectively taught, even though there is some restrictions by the entrance examinations for universities in Japan.

2. Procedures

2.1. Designing questionnaire and writing assessment task

In order to investigate the characteristics of L2 English learners of Japanese university students, we constructed the whole questionnaire in English,

which is composed of general information, multiple-choice items, rank order items, and the writing assessment task. First, the half part of the questionnaire is composed of the questions about the learning

Secondly, the writing assessment tasks were designed on the basis of Cumming and Okaura [1] [2] [3] [4] [17]. Cumming suggests that skilled multilingual writers tend to use their first or dominant language (L1) frequently, extensively, and effectively while they compose in a second language (L2) [1] [2]. Cumming also points out that they do so in episodes of mental decision making that I have called heuristic search strategies because they help writers systematically solve problems they encounter when formulating or editing their written texts [4]. Moreover, the writing assessment task conducted in Okaura was as follows [17]:

- (4) Please write an English essay in one paragraph to explain three most important aspects of Japanese culture to people in other countries without using dictionaries or asking your teacher for advice. The time limit is 40 minutes.

The writing assessment task in (4) was partly worked well, but it partly did not. That is to say that some students couldn't write many words because they had little knowledge of the words and phrases to express their ideas in English, even though they have sufficient time allotted to the writing assessment task.

Therefore, we revised and improved the writing assessment task for this current research. Considering heuristic search strategies, we adopted the combination of the timed in-class writing assessment tasks in (6) and (7), so-called linked assignments [6]. Cumming insists that heuristic search strategies involving language switching for choices of words and phrases while composing help writers systematically solve problems they encounter when formulating or editing their written texts [3] [4]. Thus we combined the writing assessment task in (6) with that in (7), to facilitate heuristic search strategies:

- (6) Please write an English essay about "My Favorite Thing(s)" in 100-200 words without using your dictionaries or asking your teacher and classmates for advice. The time limit is 20

minutes.

- (7) Please write an English essay about “My Favorite Thing(s)” in 100-200 words. You can use the word list for reference but cannot use your dictionaries or ask your teacher and classmates for advice. The time limit is 20 minutes.

As described in (7), the word list was introduced in order to help L2 English learners of Japanese university students write more words per essay. This is because Weigle insists that the introduction of the word list will also lead to more words per essay, which is provided as a stimulus material [20]. Therefore, we decided to introduce “The General Service List,” which the respondents can refer to while they are working on the writing assessment task, and which I expect will work better than “The Academic Word List” [13].

2.2. Data collection

We collected the data of the writing in the classroom of the Faculty of Pharmaceutics at A University (anonymous). Okaura collected data through the email; first, Okaura sent an email message with the attached file to a teacher working at a university in Japan; she emailed it to the students of three classes; then the students filled in the blanks of the questionnaire and wrote an English essay; and finally they sent it to me by email [15] [16]. This way of collecting data mostly worked well, but there was some trouble with the Internet. The current research employed another way of collecting data in order to prevent such a problem from happening. This means that we conducted the questionnaire and writing assessment tasks in class so that we could surely collect data.

The number of the students who signed up for my English course was 35, and the total number of the respondents is also the same. All of them entered the university just one month ago. There was no problem happening in collecting data for this research. The number of words used in the essays in (7) is 4,130 in total, in which respondents can use the word list. This means that the average number of the words that the respondents wrote in order to explain “My Favorite Thing(s)” is 118 words per essay.

3. Discussion

In this chapter, we will mainly analyze the verbs, and also the nouns used in the essays written by L2 English learners of Japanese university students.

Kirkpatrick insists that a native speaker model is disadvantageous, not only because it is unattainable, but also because it is inappropriate for all but a minority of students [10]. Moreover, Okaura suggests that it is very difficult to clarify the borders between acceptability and unacceptability from the perspective of World Englishes [15] [16]. Furthermore, as Honnna points out, standards of acceptability and correctness are not absolute but variable and negotiable, and that the bottom line is mutual intelligibility and communicability [9]. Okaura proposes that the characteristics affected by the Japanese language or features of Japanese English are acceptable as English of L2 learners from the point of view of optimal relevance and explicature in the framework of Relevance Theory, which is an approach to the field of pragmatics originated by Sperber & Wilson [15] [16] [18].

This is closely related to the difference between global errors and local errors. Local errors do not impede comprehension but global errors cause a reader to misunderstand what the author is trying to say. It is important for student writers to correct global errors and less important to correct local errors. On the other hand, local errors like subject-verb agreement or verb tense problems might be things that subject matter teachers find annoying so that they affect their grading of students, as Birch points out. Therefore, we put less emphasis on local errors and the analysis of errors, and hence this paper will deal with the characteristics of L2 learners of Japanese students observed in the essays. Therefore, we will not go into the details of local errors such as third person singular present suffix –s, plural noun suffix –s, the definite articles and the indefinite articles, misspelling, and so forth in this paper.

Table 1. Features with significantly higher median frequency rates in NNS and NS texts

Interpretive nouns	Predicative adjectives
Vague nouns	Amplifiers
Assertive pronouns	Other adverbs
Public verbs	Adverb clauses of cause
Private verbs	Phrasal-level conjunctions
Expecting/ tentative verbs	Sentence-level conjunctions(transitions)
Modal verbs of necessity	Exemplification markers (for example)
Be as a main verb	Emphatics

Hinkel summarizes findings for NS (native speaker) and NNS (non-native speaker) data in broad strokes [7]. Table 1 enumerates the features with NNS median frequency rates significantly greater than those in NS text across all L1 groups.

On the other hand, Table 2 presents the features with NNS median frequency rates significantly lower than those in NS text across all L1 groups:

Table 2. Features with significantly lower median frequency rates in NNS and NS texts

<i>It</i>-cleft	Present participles
Perfect aspect	Past participles
Progressive aspect	Reduced adjective clauses
Predictive modal <i>would</i>	Reduced adverb clauses
Passive voice	Fixed strings (idiomatic phrases and collocations)

Then, we will deal with the functions and usages of five types of verbs in the essays written by L2 learners of Japanese students. The total number of the verbs used in the essays amounts to 869 of 4,130 words. We will divide these verbs into five types and the others and analyze them: that is to say, linking verbs, public verbs, private verbs, suasive verbs, and expecting/wanting/tentative verbs.

Linking verbs accounted for 25.6%. The function of the verb the second most frequently used of the five was private verbs such as *feel, find, forget, hear, know, learn, listen, see, think, and understand*, which accounted for 14.2%. Moreover, the use of expecting/wanting/tentative verbs accounted for 12.4%.

On the other hand, the use of public verbs was quite limited to some basic ones such as *say, tell, and write* (3.7%). The use of suasive verbs was also quite limited; only verbs such as *ask, encourage, and recommend* are used, accounting for no more than 0.05%.

Table 3. Five types of verbs

	Linking verb	Public verb	Private verb
Total number	222	32	123
%	25.60	3.70	14.20
	Suasive verb	Expecting verb	Other verbs
Total number	4	108	380
%	0.05	12.40	43.70

We will go into the details of each verb type. First, only three kinds of linking verbs are used in the essays: *be, become, and sound*. The number of examples of linking verbs amounts to 222 in total. Moreover, all of the 35 respondents used linking verb *be* at least twice in the essays, and the reason for this is that the title of the writing assessment tasks is “My Favorite Thing(s)” and that all the 35 respondents use the sentence beginning with “My favorite thing is” or “My favorite things are.” The L2 writers used the linking verb *be* with predicative adjectives and made statements that were simplistic and not dense or complex. The total number of the linking verb *be* used in the 35 essays is 216, as is shown in Table 4 below, which means that the total number of the use of *be* accounts for 24.86%, and that the average number of *be* used in each essay is 6.17.

Table 4. Linking verbs

	<i>be</i>	<i>become</i>	<i>sound</i>
Total number	216	7	1
%	24.86	0.81	0.12

We will cite an essay in which the use of the linking verb *be* is characteristic. Example 1 below is an exactly 100-word essay, in which *be* are used no fewer than twelve times.

Example 1. The essay written by Student AE

I like music very much. I listen to music every day. My favorite singer are “miwa” and “Good Coming.” Miwa is a Japanese singer. She is very cute. Her voice is nice. I think that the best song of hers is “Jexxxa.” This song is mixed her voice and guiter. Good Coming is a Japanese band. It makes two person who are vocal and guiter. They are always kind to funs. Their songs makes me happy and moving every day. “Nakama” is their song which is notice importance of friendship. “Birdman” is also their song which makes me always excited.

Next, we will consider the use of public verbs in the essays. Public verbs consist of speech act verbs introducing indirect statements, and they are also used for introducing direct speech [19]. They accounts for 3.70% of the total use of verbs in the essays, and the number of its use is only 32 in total. Furthermore, only 6 kinds of public verbs are used in the essays: *express, say, sing, tell, talk, and write*, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Public verbs

	express	say	sing
Total number	2	2	10
%	0.23	0.23	1.15

tell	talk	write
3	14	1
0.35	1.61	0.12

The verb *talk* is most frequently used of the six public verbs, the reason for which is that the title of the essay the students worked on is “My Favorite Thing(s)” which they want to talk about. Here is the example in which the public verb *talk* is most frequently used:

Example 2. The essay written by Student Z

My favorite thing is talking with my friend and family. I have three reasons. First, I can always enjoy talking with them. They always talk funny things to me. Especially I like to talk about fashion and clothes the best. They teach information which I don't know. Second, even if I don't feel good, they always make me fun. So I can forget things which I don't want to think. Third, they always give me good advice when I have a trouble. Their advice is the best. If I think a trouble by alone, I'm not able to come up with a good advice. So I always thank for them. Thus, I like to talk with my friend and family.

In this 120-word essay, the public verb *talk* is used five times in total. Moreover, this example includes such private verbs as *feel*, *forget*, *know*, and *think*.

Private verbs are the type of factual verb and express intellectual states such as belief and intellectual acts such as discovery [19]. Hinkel states that in both non-native speaker texts, the frequency rates of private verb uses greatly exceeded those of public verbs, particularly in the case of native speakers [7]. In the essays written by L2 English learner of Japanese university students, private verbs are the most frequently used second to linking verbs and more frequently used than public verbs, as is obvious from Table 3.

We found out that they are used 123 times in total, and the 17 kinds of private verbs are used in the 35 essays. The private verb most frequently used is *feel*. Furthermore, *listen*, *read*, and *think* are also used frequently, and the *think* is especially the private verb which not only L2 English learner of Japanese university students but also junior high school students and senior high school students in Japan are most likely to use both in writing and speaking English. In fact, they tend to use the private verb *think* too much frequently, because they will of

course express their ideas and thoughts in the writing and speaking English. For the detailed use of private verbs, see Table 6 below:

Table 6. Private verbs

	check	feel	find
Total number	3	20	3
%	0.35	2.30	0.35

forget	hear	hope	imagine
3	7	2	1
0.35	0.81	0.23	0.12

know	learn	listen	notice
8	5	13	1
0.92	0.58	1.50	0.12

see	read	remember	think
9	12	1	12
1.04	1.38	0.12	1.38

understand	watch
3	20
0.35	2.30

We will cite the essays here in which private verbs are prominently used:

Example 3. The essay written by Student W

My favorite thing is Ice Hockey. There are two reasons for this.

First, when I watch the sport, I feel moving and exciting. When I was five years old, I went to Canada with my family. Canada is one of famous countries by Ice Hockey. Thus, my mother said that we should see the sport. At that time, I didn't know the sport and I disagreed with it. However, when I saw the sport games, I couldn't see it without exciting. Thus, Ice Hockey games are so great.

Second, when I play the sport, I feel very fun and exciting. After I saw the game in Canada, I've played Ice Hockey for twelve years. Since I played it first, I've never felt the sport was boring or not good. I can play it with smile and try hard.

For those reasons, I like... love Ice Hockey and I can't imagine without Ice Hockey life!!

Table 7. Private verb uses in Example 3

	feel	imagine	know
Total number	3	1	1

see	watch
4	1

In this 154-word essay in Example 3, the private verbs are used ten times in total, as is shown in Table 7.

Moreover, expecting/wanting/tentative verbs are used three times in Example 3: *like*, *love*, and *try*. 108 examples of expecting/wanting/tentative verbs can be observed in the essays written by the 35 L2 English learners of Japanese university students, and their use accounts for 12.40% of all the verbs.

Table 8. Expecting/wanting/tentative verbs

	<i>hate</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>love</i>
Total number	3	60	13
%	0.35	6.90	1.50

<i>try</i>	<i>want</i>
4	28
0.46	3.22

One characteristic of expecting/wanting/tentative verbs is that the use of *like* amounts to 6.90% of all the verbs, and that it accounts for no fewer than 55.6% of all the expecting/wanting/tentative verbs. It is clear that this is closely related to the title of the writing assessment tasks which 35 respondents worked on, “My Favorite Thing(s).” Another characteristic is that *want* is used 28 times in total, but that *wish* is not used at all, although they learn both *want* and *wish* along with infinitives and the subjunctive mood at junior and senior high schools in Japan and the meanings of both verbs are almost the same.

Example 4 shows the characteristics that the expecting/wanting/tentative verb *like* is used seven times and that the linking verbs are used 8 times:

Example 4. The essay written by Student Q
My favorite thing is my pet named “Muffin.” He is cat. His kind is British short. He is one years old. His color is bright brown. He likes food. He eats cat food at seven a.m. and seven p.m. he cry before 7 everytime. He likes ball. He plays with it. He likes my mother too. He follows her everytimes. He doesn’t like big noise. If he heard big noise, he ran and he goes to under the sofa. He also doesn’t like my pufume.

I like him very much so I take a picture of him so much. He is more cute than any other cat. His eyes are like juwery. His hands are very soft. My family also like him very much. I want him to sit on my leg. But he doesn’t.

This example consists of 135 words, and includes some local errors: for example, in the third person

singular present -s, countable nouns or uncountable nouns, singular nouns or plural nouns, the spelling of the words. However, this paper will not deal with these errors.

The example below indicates that the linking verb *be*, private verb *feel*, and expecting/wanting/tentative verb *like* are used frequently:

Example 5. The essay written by Student T
I like food. My favorite food is “ebifurai” and sweets, sushi. Eating my favorite food feel me happy and forget bad things. Especially, I like sweets very much. Sweets are very cute and have a lot of kinds/ girls like sweets because sweets shops are very cute or beautiful. I feel happy when I eat cake and tea in Afternoon tea. And I like cooking sweets. But cooking sweets is very difficult so I cook easy sweets. I feel happy even when I cook sweets. I think sweets are very perfect. Just no sweets no life. Eating your favorite food is very good think, feel you happy. But don’t eat that too much because you will may be fat. I recommend you that you eat your favorite food when you feel sad and negative. That can change you. That’s all. Thank you.

This 142-word essay includes eight uses of linking verb *be*, five of private verb *feel*, and also four of expecting/wanting/tentative verb *like*.

Suasive verbs can be followed by a *that*-clause either with *should* or with the mandative subjunctive, and, though largely restricted to British English, by a *that*-clause with an indicative verb [19]. As is clear from Table 3, the use of suasive verbs extremely limited to only the three verbs: *allow*, *decide*, and *recommend*.

Next, we will discuss the results of the tenses, aspects, the infinitives or gerunds used in the essays written by L2 English learners in Japan. If we divide the total use of finite verbs into the present tense and the past tense, the results are as follows:

Table 9. Use of present tense and past tense

	Present tense	Past tense
Total number	502	139
%	78.30	21.70

Table 9 shows the overwhelmingly frequent uses of the present tense, accounting for 78.3% of the total uses of finite verbs.

Hinkel argues that although in research on the acquisition of tenses and tense inflections, the progressive aspect in the present tense has been noted as relatively easy for NNSs, in the NNS essays, the issue of progressive aspect use is not so

much the acquisition of this aspect as it is contextual meanings uses in academic text [7]. She also mentions that the majority of NNSs did not use the progressive aspect a great deal, which differed significantly from the frequency rates of NSs. This applies to the result of the current research, which means that only 3 examples of the progressive aspects can be observed, and 12 of the past aspects can, as is shown in Table 10:

Table 10. Use of progressive aspect and perfect aspect

	Progressive aspect	Perfect aspect
Total number	3	12
%	20.00	80.00

In general, the perfect aspect and the passive voice constructions are hard for NNSs to acquire and use in appropriate contexts, and they avoided using them in the texts they wrote (14). In addition, we can say that the progressive aspect is very hard for L2 learners of Japanese university students, as is shown in Table 3.

Table 11 shows that the infinitives accounted for 12.36%, and the gerunds 7.62%:

Table 11. Use of infinitive and gerund

	Infinitive	Gerund
Total number	99	61
%	61.90	38.10

Here is the example in which 9 infinitives and 4 gerunds are used:

Example 6. The essay written by Student P

I like **to play** tennis. When I was 10 years old, I played tennis at the first time. I was not able **to play** tennis very well, but I enjoyed **playing**. I belonged to tennis club in junior high school, because I love tennis. I was glad **to play** tennis. But I couldn't play every day. I was made **to run** every day teacher said "Run and you will be strong!" I regretted **to belong** to tennis club. In high school, I didn't belong to any club. I love tennis but I hate **training**. I didn't want **to run** any more! Now, I'm 19 years old and college student. I decided **to join** "Squall." "Squall" is tennis club. They love tennis and enjoy **playing** it. And they didn't make me **to run**! I'm happy **to enjoy playing** tennis.

The author of this 138-word essay makes use of both infinitives and gerunds. Especially, some usages of infinitives can be observed in this essay: causative verb *make*, both the active voice and the passive voice, followed by the infinitive, adjectives *able*,

glad, and *happy* followed by the infinitives, and other usages.

4. Suggestions

In this paper, L2 English learners of Japanese university students used only limited verb phrases and noun phrases, namely linking verbs and expecting/wanting/tentative verbs, and vague nouns, although they learned many more verb phrases and noun phrases in junior and senior high schools in Japan.

In Japan, students have to learn 2,000 English words on average before graduating from high school. Moreover, students who try to go on to one of the most prestigious universities have to learn more than 5,000 words; in fact, their meanings, but not their usages. That is because they do not have enough opportunities to use words they learned actively in writing and speaking.

Ferris points out that L2 readers and writers in academic settings are well aware that they lack an adequate English vocabulary, and that it may thus be enlightening to them to learn that there are different general types of vocabulary and that certain words tend to occur frequently or infrequently in different types of texts [6]. Furthermore, Nassaji & Fotos insists that it is now acknowledged that learners need to acquire chunks of speech, formulaic utterances, and frequently occurring collocations through communicative usage [12]. Therefore we introduced "The General Service List" as a stimulus material, which L2 learners of English can refer to while they are working on the writing assessment task. This helped them produce meaningful output and promoted them to write more words per essay.

Hyland notes that advanced L2 writers are handicapped more by a lack of composing competence than linguistic competence. The opposite is true for lower-proficiency learners. It is now widely acknowledged, as Nassaji & Fotos suggests, that formal instruction on grammar forms is necessary to promote L2 learner accuracy and high levels of target language attainment [12]. Thus, it is now recognized that it is essential to make the target language structure obvious to the learner, whether through formal instruction or through manipulation of communicative input, in ways that call attention to target forms and allow learners to process them, or a combination of these methods [12].

Based on the recognition, Nassaji & Fotos insists on the need for a discourse-based focus on grammar [12]. They propose that L2 grammar instruction, either explicit or implicit, should take place in extended contexts rather than in isolation, and should include opportunities for learners to receive

meaningful input and to produce meaningful output containing the target form, because only discourse-level input can provide learners with repeated authentic examples of these important forms and only discourse-level output can give learners the necessary chances to produce the new forms.

Furthermore, Hinkel demonstrates that the contextualized teaching of grammar can expose learners to ways in which language is used in real life and heighten their awareness of its conventions and complexities [8]. She insists that it is important to supplement the explanations with ample practice to allow learners to produce writing.

In Japan, the entrance examinations for universities have effects on the teaching of English writing in senior and junior high schools. Most of the private universities in Japan receive a lot of applicants every year, but they have only about one week before the announcement of successful applicants. This is not enough for universities to impose writing English essays in the entrance examinations on their applicants. As for the national universities, the applicants usually have to take two examinations: the National Center University Entrance Examination and then the examinations held by each national university. The National Center University Entrance Examination, for which 573,344 applicants of 1,092,543 prospective graduates applied in 2013 academic year, employs multiple-choice form in all questions. That is to say, even if L2 grammar instruction should include opportunities for learners to receive meaningful input, they suffer from the lack of opportunities to produce meaningful output in English education system in Japan. This is true of the applicants for admission to both national universities and private universities, because the primary purpose is to pass the entrance examinations for universities. It is crucial that we should provide L2 English learners with the sufficient opportunities for output and input, because only discourse-level input can provide learners with repeated authentic examples of the new forms and because only discourse-level output can give learners the necessary chances to produce them.

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