

# A Survey of Learners' Preferences about Teacher's Feedback on Writing

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## Abstract

This study investigates learners' preferences about a teacher's feedback on second language writing instruction. The subject English writing was introduced to Japanese high schools after the course of study was revised in 1989. Since then, the research of writing has been conducted by many researchers and teachers. First of all, this paper provides an overview of English writing in Japan. After that, this study surveys a learner's preferences about a teacher's feedback on writing instruction based on Leki's (1991) Questionnaire. This questionnaire was conducted among 101 university students majoring in English language and literature. As a result, it revealed the difference between ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' preferences of writing feedback. Finally, some suggestions are offered for future practice and research in the field of EFL writing.

## Keywords

Writing Feedback, Treatment of Error, Learner's Preferences

## 1. Introduction

Teacher's feedback of writing instruction has been considered as an important part of English language education. Firstly, previous studies explain actual condition of writing instruction and then introduce the background of the study of the teacher's feedback. The main focus of this paper is to examine learners' preferences about teacher's feedback on writing based on questionnaire.

## 2. Previous Studies

### 2.1 The Background of the study of the teacher's Feedback

There have been many studies on teacher's feedback on writing. Biber, Nekrasova and Horn (2011) analyzed the research of writing feedback using meta-analysis. This study shows that the period from 2000 to 2004 was a peak of publishing thesis about writing feedback. This can be rooted in debates between Truscott and Ferris. Truscott (1996: 327) strongly claimed that "grammar

correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned." In response to Truscott, Ferris (1999: 1) states that Truscott's argument "is premature and overly strong." This debate has been continued (Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2007). This debate resulted in many feedback studies.

However, the preferences of teacher's feedback are made light of. To examine learners' preference of teacher's feedback, this paper uses questionnaire.

### 2.2 Actual Conditions of Writing Instruction in Japan

This section introduces Miyata's (2002) survey and Takada's (2004) report for examining writing instruction in Japan. Miyata's survey is conducted among 300 university students and Takada's report is based on the survey of questionnaire conducted in 200 universities in Japan.

#### 2.2.1 Miyata's (2002) survey

Miyata et al. (2002) investigated actual condition of writing instruction in high school. 300 university students answered the questionnaires. This questionnaire asks students the focus of English education in their high school. Figure 1 is the result of this question.

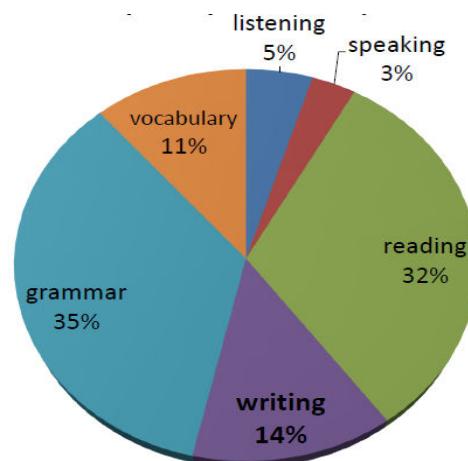


Figure 1: The Focus of Writing Instruction in the High School (Multiple Choices)  
(Based on Miyata et al. (2002: 12)

The main focus of English language education in Japan is reading and grammar. On the other hand,

learners feel that skills such as writing and speaking cannot be sufficiently treated in the classroom.

### 2.2.2 Takada's (2004) Report

This report was based on the survey of questionnaire conducted among 200 university teachers in Japan. This questionnaire revealed that there is a disconnection between ideal and reality of the time allocation of four skills.

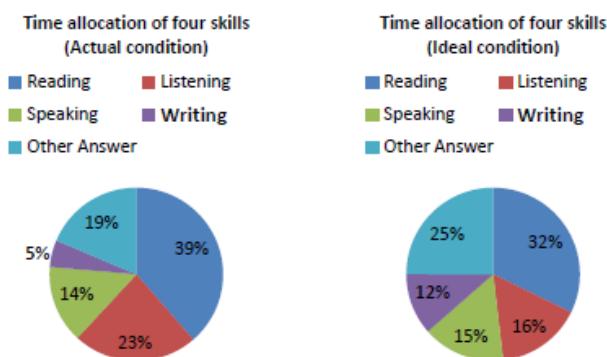


Figure 2: The Difference between Actual and Ideal Condition of the Time Allocation of Four Skills. (Based on Takada, 2004: 11)

This graph shows that the college teachers do not spare the time for writing even though they recognize writing skill is necessary. Moreover, this result shows that graph shows that teachers feel that listening time should be cut down on.

Both of these studies reveal that students and professors feel that writing instruction in Japan are not necessarily enough.

### 3. Methods

The item of questionnaire is mainly based on Leki's (1991) study. She investigated the preferences of ESL students for error correction. She examined 100 ESL students in freshman composition class. On the basis of Leki (1991), I compare ESL with EFL of learners' preferences about teacher's feedback.

Participants are 101 university students majoring in English language and literature. This questionnaire is conducted in freshman composition class.

This study adopts 5-Likert scale item (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) in the questionnaire. Moreover, this questionnaire is mainly composed of three sections: language ability, students' awareness about the importance of feedback and students' preferences about teacher's feedback.

### 4. Major Findings

This section presents the results of a survey of the questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> First of all, I would like to show the results of the subjective interpretation of the importance of structural errors in your written work.

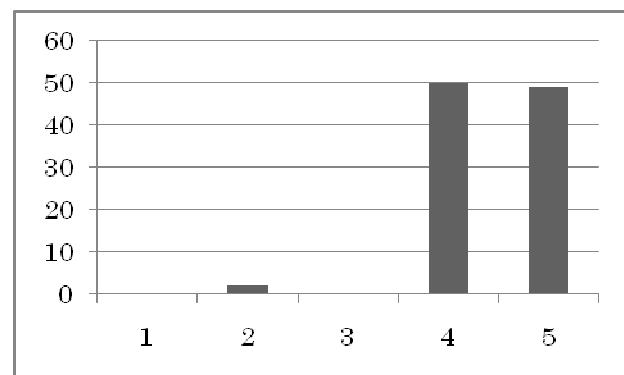


Figure 3: Students' Awareness about the Importance of Error in Structure

This result showed that students feel structural errors important. This is because students are not taught how to write in English. In other words, students would like to know how to write in English at the stage of freshman.

The other finding is students' preferences about direct feedback.

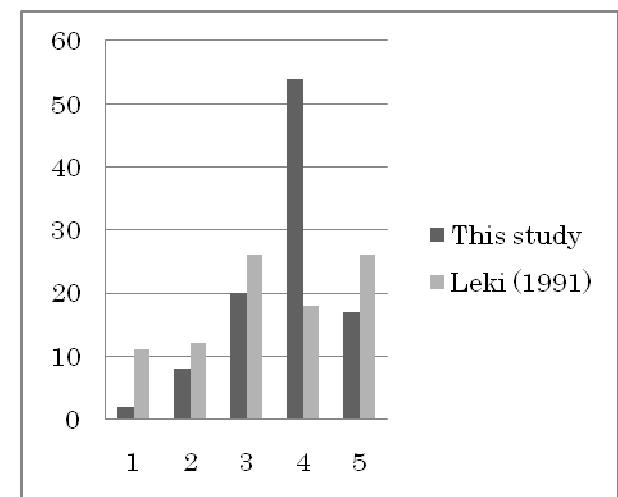


Figure 4: Students' Preferences about Direct Feedback

Figure 4 shows that EFL students prefer direct feedback compared to ESL students. This may be rooted from the learning environment. As Miyata's (2002) survey revealed, English education in Japan put emphasis on grammar. That is why students prefer direct feedback focusing on grammar.

<sup>1</sup> The entire questionnaire and response frequencies appear in the Appendix A.

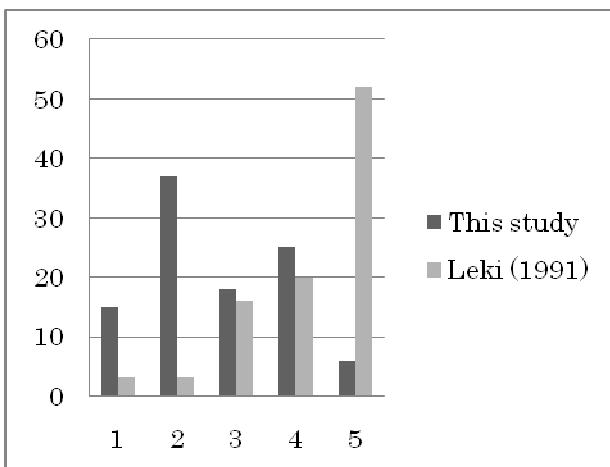


Figure 5: Students' Preferences about Telling the Page of Grammar Book.

Figure 5 is the result of students' preferences about telling the page of grammar book. When students made a mistake, they don't prefer telling the page of grammar book compared to ESL students. The difference between ESL and EFL of using grammar book has to be investigated.

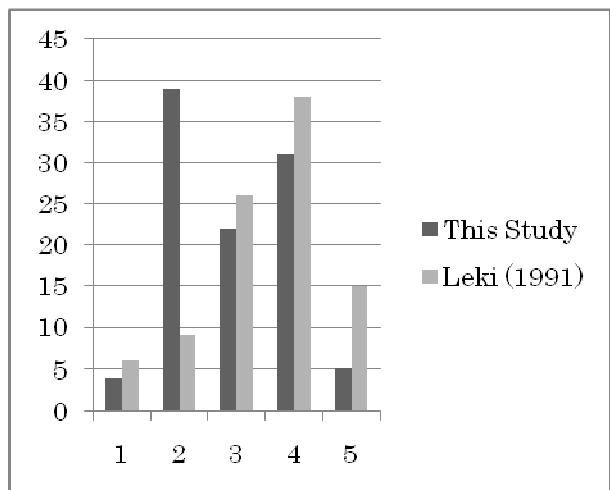


Figure 6: Students' Preferences about Pointing out the Type of Error

Finally, the result of pointing out the type of error is that ESL students prefer but EFL students don't. The reason why this result occurred is that EFL students in Japan are used to receiving a direct feedback. That is why EFL students don't like this kind of feedback.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The result of questionnaire revealed that English learners in Japan prefer direct feedback. This can be rooted in the teacher's instruction. This means that Japanese learners of English receive the direct feedback from the teachers. That is why they are used to getting direct feedback.

This study sheds light on learners' preferences about teacher's feedback on writing in the context of EFL. This study was conducted among university students majoring in English language and literature. That is why basically participants like English. Further study is needed to investigate preferences of learners who do not like or are not good at English.

While the study of feedback has increased, comprehensive study of writing feedback has not been pursued. Hyland and Hyland claimed that we have to investigate "the long term effects of feedback on writing development" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006: 96). With the increase of the study of feedback, the long-term effects of feedback have to be considered.

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**Appendix A. The Entire Questionnaire and Response Frequencies (Translated Version).**

**<About Yourself>**

1. Did you graduate from Japanese high school or foreign high school?

1. Japanese high school (96) 2. Foreign high school (5)

2. Have you stayed in foreign countries more than one year?

1. Yes (20) 2. No (81)

3. If you have chosen yes in the question 2, please tell me the country/region and period of your stay.  
(country/region : \_\_\_\_\_ period : \_\_\_\_\_)

4. Please self-evaluate your English skills

(1) Please evaluate your English skill on the five scale.

1 (very low)	2 (low)	3	4 (high)	5 (very high)
1	30	49	21	0

(2) Please evaluate your English writing skill on the five scale.

1 (very low)	2 (low)	3	4 (high)	5 (very high)
5	40	43	12	1

5. If you have taken any English proficiency tests before, please fill in the score.

Step test ( ) grade

TOEIC ( ) point

TOEFL iBT ( ) point

Other English tests ( ) • score/grade ( )

6. When you were a high school student, did you like English?

1. I liked English from the start till the end. (59)  
 2. I liked English at first, but came to dislike it later. (6)  
 3. I did not like English at first, but came to like it later. (16)  
 4. I didn't like English from the start till the end. (6)  
 5. I don't know if I liked it or not. (14)

7. What was the main focus of English language education in your high school? (Multiple Choices)

1. Listening (10 persons / 4%)  
 2. Speaking (4 persons / 2%)  
 3. Reading (89 persons / 37%)  
 4. Writing (32 persons / 13%)  
 5. Grammar (64 persons / 27%)  
 6. Vocabulary (36 persons / 15%)  
 7. Others (3 persons / 1%)

8. What kind of writing instruction did you take in your high school? (Multiple Choices)

1. Translation from Japanese to English (53 persons / 34%)  
 2. Free writing (22 persons / 14%)  
 3. Memorization of phrases (55 persons / 35%)  
 4. Paraphrasing (17 persons / 11%)  
 5. Others (9 persons / 6%)

9. What kind of writing instruction do you want the university to provide? (Multiple Choices)

1. Translation from Japanese to English (46 persons / 30%)
2. Free writing (74 persons / 49%)
3. Memorization of phrases (14 persons / 9%)
4. paraphrasing (8 persons / 5%)
5. Others (10 persons / 7%)

*<About your ideas of Writing Feedback >*

1 0. How often do you read over your composition again when your teacher returns it to you?

never	not very often	sometimes	usually	always
4	12	26	33	26

1 1. Do you check your teacher's comments and corrections carefully?

never	not very often	sometimes	usually	always
1	7	17	35	41

1 2. How important is it to you to have as few errors in English as possible in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
1	10	22	46	22

1 3. How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out grammatical errors in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
0	7	8	55	31

1 4. How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out your spelling errors in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
1	9	16	48	27

1 5. How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out errors in vocabulary choice in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
0	2	6	52	41

1 6. How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out punctuation errors in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
1	5	14	50	31

1 7 . How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out your errors in structure in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
0	2	0	50	49

1 8 . How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out your errors in content in your written work?

Not important at all	Not important	Neither	important	Very Important
3	16	25	38	19

1 9 . Directions: The following six sentences have the same error in English grammar. Each sentence has a different possible response to the error written in by a teacher. Look over the different possible responses and rate each response. If you think the mark is a very good way to indicate an error on a paper, circle 5. If you think the mark is a very bad way to indicate an error on a paper, circle 1. If you think the mark is somewhere in between a very good way to mark a paper and a very bad way to mark a paper, circle the number between 1 and 5 that best represents your opinion.

a. Direct Feedback.

(Example) He go to the cinema.

→ goes

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
2	8	20	54	17

b. Pointing out the error item of grammar.

(Example) He go to the cinema.

Third Person Singular

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
4	39	22	31	5

c. Directing students to a grammar handbook for an explanation.

(Example) He go to the cinema.

※See page 121 in grammar handbook.

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
15	37	18	25	6

d. Teacher's error code

(Example) He go to the cinema.

E-12

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
33	51	11	5	1

e. Simply underlining the error

(Example) He go to the cinema.

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
15	28	23	28	7

f. No feedback

(Example) He go to the cinema.

1 (very bad)	2 (bad)	3 (Neither)	4 (good)	5 (very good)
73	17	4	5	2