An Experimental Study of Intelligibility of English Spoken by Non-Natives*

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I. Introduction

Error analysis has often been employed in second and foreign language classrooms to suggest instructional priorities. The idea here is to organize instruction around errors which the learners actually commit, rather than around an arbitrarily selected list of structures. In this approach the aim of instruction is to have the learner of the target language (Lt) approximate the speech ability of native speakers of the Lt.

One odd and, we think unsupportable, implication of this view is that communication between native speakers and learners cannot be attained until the linguistic ability of the learner approaches that of the native speaker. Thus, according to this position, the important goal of language learning, i.e., communication, can be achieved only when the learner's errors have been eradicated. In this sense, error analysis may be regarded as a study which supports a native level of proficiency in the Lt.

It is important to note, however, that error analysis also considers

learner error to be a natural product of the language learning process. Based on this notion, we could insist that ideal language teaching provide the learner with situations in which he/she can communicate with native speakers of the Lt using the learner's transitional competence with the Lt and thereby eliminate errors little by little.

To attain such a goal, we first need to know what kind of learner error is significant in the communication situation and thus to undertake an experimental study which investigates the intelligibility of the learner's language by directly exposing it to native speakers of the Lt. Through this kind of study, we will be able to set up certain norms which distinguish significant and non-significant errors in verbal communication. Then we will be in a position to examine the error characteristics of so-called "Japanese English" and pursue the possibility of its unmodified use as a means of communication.

In the present study we first analyze English spoken by Japanese college students in order to highlight characteristics of their transitional English, and then attempt to show to what extent their English is intelligible to native speakers of English. The objectives of our study are as follows:

- (1) to see what characterizes English spoken by Japanese university students,
- (2) to clarify statistically how their English is intelligible to the native speakers of English,
- (3) and to locate factors which affect the intelligibility of learner English.

II. Procedure

Eighty Japanese college students majoring other than English were asked to make a five-minute speech in English with the title of "The

past, present and future of my life" in a language laboratory where each speech sample was tape recorded. Out of more than 2,000 sentences they produced, we focused on 50 which included typical mistakes Japanese often make.

Then we prepared a form on which those 50 sentences were typed out and we directed the native speakers to correct or paraphrase each of the sentences. In addition, we sent all copies of the completed forms to 60 Americans living in Portland, Oregon and obtained 40 answer sheets evaluated by the native speakers in return.

The present study is limited by the fact that spoken English was transformed into written forms and that non-verbal aspects of the language were disregarded.

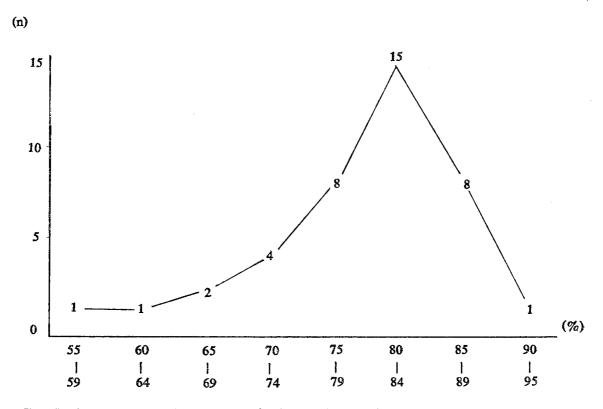
III. Results

The errors committed by the subject students fell into five categories: omission (missing items), addition (extra items), tense (tense errors), word order (incorrect word order) and vocabulary (misuse of lexical items). Some sentences include more than one of these different error types at the same time. Based on preliminary inspection we could not specify which category of error is most crucial to the intelligibility of each sentence, although it seems that each category produced some degree of difficulty in understanding.

Each of the 50 sentences written (paraphrased or corrected) by the native speakers was classified into four types: Correct Understanding, Partial Understanding, Misunderstanding and No Understanding (See Material 1). This classification represents the American judges' level of comprehension over what the learners tried to deliver in English.

To indicate the intelligibility of each sentence in numerial form, we awarded 3, 2, 1 and 0 points to each of the above classifications

respectively. The accumulated points for each sentence were converted into percentages. As a result we were able to obtain an average intelligibility rate of 79.2%, which we considered very high (See Graph 1).



Graph 1 Range of Natve Speaker's Understanding of English by Japanese Students (n=40)

If each sentence were put in a context or if its non-verbal aspect were included, the intelligibility rate would be still higher. Moreover, the 50 sentences which were used in this experiment were chosen as fatal errors — errors of the most outstanding sort — among more than 2,000 sentences produced by the Japanese students.

However, we must also note that this high rate does not necessarily show the learner's actual speech competence. We can surmise that the learners avoided saying what they found difficult to express in English, i.e., that they did not say everything that they really intended

to say. In this sense, we believe that the learners' speech was quite restricted. On the other hand, if they had been challenged to talk about more difficult topics, the intelligibility rate would probably have been lower.

IV. Analysis

Sample sentences spoken by the Japanese subjects were grouped into three categories in accordance with intelligibility judged by 40 native speakers of English. Sample sentences with high intelligibility (90% to 100%) were grouped as "Most Intelligible," those with 70% to 89% were grouped as "Intelligible." Sentences which showed low intelligibility with less than 69% were categorized as "Least Intelligible."

Each number preceding the sample sentences below shows the order of intelligibility among the total of 50 sentences.

LEGEND

1st line: Sample

2nd line: Correct answer

8: The order of phrases by intelligibility

No mark: Correct understanding

@: Excellent guessing

?: Partial understanding

*: Misunderstanding

(15): Number of responses

(95.5%): Percentage of correct responses

 ϕ : No answer

A. Omission

Most Intelligible:

The first line in the example above shows the sentence produced by the Japanese subject. Indicated in the second line is the sentence paraphrased correctly from the sample. This model answer was composed carefully to match exactly the Japanese translation made by the subjects themselves.

The number in parentheses after each sentence indicates the number of native informants who gave each answer. The percentage of total correct response is also shown following the last subtotal.

The above sentence, ranked first in the order of intelligibility, was correctly understood by all informants. Omission of the verbal particle 'up' did not hinder the understanding of native speakers of English. If we were to say the same sentence in Japanese we would tend to repeat the word 'Kobe', which, of course is redundant in English. We note that the subjects' mother tongue seems to have interfered with production of the grammatically correct sentence.

3. I'm now ——mandolin club. →
I'm now in the mandolin club. (100.0%)

This example, where the preposition 'in' and the article 'the' are missing, is one of the three instances of 100% understanding by the American judges. In this case 'in' and 'the' were the only words to be chosen and no alternative word could be found by the natives.

8. But I wonder — I can go to China. →
But I wonder if I can go to China. (97.5%)
@I wonder if I can go to China in the future. (1)
? I sometimes wonder if I will be able to afford to visit China. (1)

The conjunction 'if' is missing here. The @ mark indicates an excellent guess by the informants, who succeeded in speculating on

connotations from the ill-formed sentences. The '?' mark here is awarded to the interpretation which is not quite right but is very close to the intended meaning of the students. We shall refer these as 'partial (or fair) understanding.'

9. I could not — high school life, so I want to enjoy college life. \rightarrow

I could not enjoy high school life, so I want to enjoy college life. (92.5%)

?I took high school too seriously. Now I want to achieve in college but allow time for fun. (1)

?I did not like high school. But I do enjoy college. (1)

Though the verb 'enjoy' is missing in the above instance, the presence of another 'enjoy' in the latter half of the sentence apparently facilitates understanding, which accounts for the high percentage of understanding. Two sentences with partial understanding above show a slight difference in meaning from the original; for instance, 'enjoy' is replaced by 'like.'

Numbers 14 and 15 below are instances in which the verb 'go' and the article 'the' are missing, respectively.

- 14. I want to back to my high school days. \rightarrow
 - I wish I could go back to my high school days.
 - @I long to be back in the era of my high school days. (87.5%)
 - I like to think of my high school days. (1)
 - ?I enjoyed my days in high school. (1)
 - I would like to live through my youth once more. (1)
 - *I would like to be back in high school. (1)
- 15. (I can go to this college for eight minutes.)

Perhaps I am — nearest. →

Perhaps I live the nearest.

..... I am the nearest.

- @..... I am the nearest student living off campus.
- @..... I live the nearest of all the students. (82.5%) (4)

In what follows will examine the examples categorized as 'intelligible.'

Intelligible:

```
I want to — myself more great. →

I want to make myself more great.
..... to improve myself. (6)
@..... to be the best I can be. (2) (75.0%)
?..... to do better. (3)
*.... to become famous. (1)
*.... greater things for me. (2)
```

The verb 'make' is missing in this example. The three interpretations following the sample sentence are all correct paraphrases of the original sentence. The last paraphrase, "I want greater things for me." has the connotation that "I wish my surroundings would become better;" thus this is considered a misunderstanding.

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27. I want to engage — Japan's trade with Asia. →
I want to engage in Japan's trade with Asia. (45.0%)
?..... to engage Japan's trade with Asia. (9)
?..... to encourage ......(5)
?..... to help ......(2)
*..... Japan to trade with Asia. (1)
```

The preposition "in" is missing in the above example.

Least Intelligible:

```
42. So I am — trouble sometimes. →
Sometimes I am in trouble. (42.5%)
*I am troubled. (11)
*I am worried sometimes. (1)
*Do I inconvenience you? (1)
```

Here also the preposition 'in' is omitted. As you can see eleven native speakers of English mistook the original sentence as "I am troubled." We note that omission of 'in' from the idiom 'in trouble' triggered a decline of intelligibility. This shows an interesting contrast with example No. 3 which is also an instance of omission of 'in' but with 100% intelligibility.

The missing verb 'speak' caused a low rate of intelligibility (42.5%) in this example. Ten cases of no answer also tell us that it was difficult for the informants to understand this sentence. On the other hand, it is amazing that 42.5% could guess the verb 'speak' correctly in spite of the important missing lexical item.

Though 'English' is missing here, 27.5% of the native speakers

correctly guessed it from the context.

B. Addition

Most Intelligible:

Above is a case of incorrect addition of the copula-verb 'is' and 'as' used correlatively — syntactic errors which little influence to the interpretation of the sentence since it reached a 95% level of intelligibility.

Intelligible:

This is also an instance of addition of the copula-verb 'was.' Based on the student's translation in Japanese, we know that he intended to say "I moved to Takamatsu." The fact that 67.5% of the natives could understand it correctly is probably because the verb "move" is generally used intransitively.

36. I want to do what as concerns movies. →
I want to do what concerns movies.
@I want to be involved in making movies. (2) (50.0%)
?I would like to produce movies. (1)
*..... be in the movies. (4)

```
*I want to be an actor/actress. (1)

*....... like the people in movies. (1)

*...... do what I see in the movies. (1)

*I would like to do some of the things I learned from movies. (1)
```

Fifty percent of the incorrect response is ascribed to the addition of an unnecessary word, 'as.' An interesting result, demonstrated above, was that the extraneous 'as' influenced the informants to give the sentence various meanings. The lack of context seems to have led to misunderstanding in this case and indicates one of the limitations of this study.

Least Intelligible:

```
40. .... but I can't work study very hard. →
.... but I can't study very hard. (35.0%)
*I can't work because I must study very hard. (3)
*I can't work and study at the same time. (15)
```

Addition of the verb 'work' made the understanding very hard and 15 informants misinterpreted the sentence, although their interpretations are plausible. The student meant to say "study" but he used two verbs "work" and "study." Clearly, two verbs in a simple sentence hindered intelligibility to a large extent, as is demonstrated in the above example.

C. Tense

Most Intelligible:

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4. I get nice job as possible. →
I will get as nice a job as possible.
②I will try to get as good a job as possible. (1) (97.5%)
?I would like to find a nice job. (1)
```

'As possible' worked as a good hint in altering the original present tense sentence into a future tense. Thus 97.5% of the informants corrected the tense in this example.

18. I have been swum since I am in junior high school. →
I have been swimming since I was in junior high school. (80%)
?..... since I was a junior in high school. (4)
*I have not been swimming since I was in junior high (3)

Though the present perfect progressive form was not employed correctly in the original sentence, nearly all the American informants corrected it into the proper form, an indication that grammatical errors do not cause serious problems in comprehension.

Intelligible:

72.5% of the informants corrected the present tense into the past tense. This can be explained by the fact that all the informants were told in advance that the sample sentences were produced by Japanese university students.

The example above is ranked 29 even though its percentage of intelligibility is low. This is because there were 33 informants who paraphrased the student's sentence using the past form of the verb 'take'; this is regarded as demonstrating partial understanding. As the students now go to a university, only paraphrases with the present tense were counted as correct. Our explanation for the three incorrect paraphrases with asterisks is that those native speakers misunderstood the meaning of 'take' as 'choose.'

Least Intelligible:

35. I master English until I graduate from this college. →
I will master English before I graduate from this college.
@I hope to master English before (2) (40%)
?When I graduate, I will have mastered English. (2)
?I will study English until I graduate from (6)
*I'm majoring in English at this college. (5)

Forty percent of the natives guessed the student's intention correctly.

D. Word Order

Most Intelligible:

2. So I want to have free time more. \rightarrow So I want to have more free time. (100.0%)

Clearly, mislocation of the adverb "more" did not hinder intelligibility at all.

6. My family is four. →
There are four people in my family.
There is four in my family. (1) (97.5%)
?My family has four members, father, mother, son, and daughter. (1)

Though the sample sentence manifests a typical Japanese-like word order, it was understood by nearly all the informants. This kind of error may be categorized as a lexical type, namely incorrect change of the verb 'has' into the copula-verb.

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10. My part-time job is rental record shop. →
I have a part-time job in a rental record shop. (92.5%)
?.....rental shop. (2)
```

This is also English reflecting Japanese word order — a typical English sentence produced by Japanese students — still with a high level of intelligibility. From the semantic contents of the two NPs in the sentence, it is apparent that they cannot be construed as identical, leading us to speculate that the latter NP functions as locative.

17. In the future , working is bank, I want, I hope. \rightarrow In the future, I hope to work in a bank. (80%)

The sample sentence above reflects the word order of Japanese: "shigoto (work) -wa ginko (bank) -de," nevertheless, it had a high percentage of understanding.

19. Nipponese is only one. → I was the only Japanese (Nipponese) student. (72.5%)

These samples, numbers 6, 10, 17 and 19 above, all manifest a typical error in word order made by Japanese, reflecting mother tongue interference. Yet it is interesting to find that all of samples listed above showed a relatively high percentage of understanding.

Intelligible:

31. Now I want to more speak more English. →
I would like to be able to speak English better. (20.0%)
?I want to speak more English. (31)

The reason the student duplicated "more" is that he wanted to say, "I want to be able to speak English." Twenty percent of the judges guessed the student's intention correctly.

Least Intelligible:

46. Hearing don't like very much. →

I don't like to listen to English.

- @I prefer to speak English rather than listen. (1) (7.5%)
 - ?I don't like hearing (listening) very much. (13)

*I don't like what I'm hearing. (2)

*I like English and can speak English but don't understand it very well. (1)

Number 46 is also an error reflecting the word order of the Japanese language. The low percentage of understanding in this example can be explained from the fact that the first person subject is frequently deleted in spoken Japanese. In this case 'hearing' as an object was topicalized since in Japanese subject would ordinarily be followed by the Japanese topic particle 'wa,' making understanding difficult. Thus such misinterpretation as "I don't like what I'm hearing" resulted.

```
48. ... but dangerous are we. →
.... but we are in danger.

@ We are in a dangerous position. (1) (32.5%)
?Are we in danger? (1)
*We are brave. (1)
*... but we are dangerous. (23)
```

Three students riding on one bicycle, while going down a hill in the city of Kobe, wanted to say "Watch out!" to those people ahead of them. Errors in both word order and vocabulary selection in this example hindered intelligibility.

As we have seen so far, there were many word order errors, most of which stem from interference with the word order of Japanese. This is a characteristic of English spoken by the Japanese students. Some word order errors, as in numbers 46 and 48, had a low intelligibility. To summarize our findings regarding word order, it can be noted that word order errors do not necessarily cause misunderstanding, nor is the opposite true. What interested us was that English

with Japanese-like word order can be understood by native speakers of English.

Lastly let us cite the words of an American who helped us with our study: "Japanese-like expressions in English are rather easy to understand, but wrong words or idioms which were coined through the speaker's effort to make them English-like usually make no sense."

E. Vocabulary

Most Intelligible:

The error in verb selection here did not hinder intelligibility very much.

```
I decided stop to go to this college. →
I decided to stop going to this college. (21)
...... to quit going to this college. (5)
..... not to go to this college. (6) (92.5%)
*I have decided to drop out of this college. (3)
*I gave up the sports to be able to go to this college. (1)
*I decided to go to this college. (1)
```

Number 13 evidently demonstrates a grammatical error which Japanese students are nevertheless always taught to avoid. 92.5% of the informants could understand this sentence, as the context might have helped them to grasp the meaning.

20. In my future I want to be a pretty wife. \rightarrow

We were very much interested to know to what extent the expression "a pretty wife," meaning "a wife to be cherished," is understood by the American informants. The Japanese female student did not mean to say that she wanted to "develop the character of a good wife," as one of the paraphrases by the one informant suggests. She meant to say that she wished to be the kind of wife who would be cherished by the husband and her new family (including her inlaws). Here we sense the existence of a cultural difference.

Intelligible:

We wanted to examine the intelligibility of the ambiguous expression "good or bad", meaning "ma: ma:" or "yokare-ashikare" in Japanese.

```
24. ... actual life is not meet my ideal figure. →
Real life does not meet my expectations. (80%)
?There is a great deal of differences between the ideal life and real living. (1)
*I've not met my ideal mate yet. (1)
*I have not met my real life idol (or model). (1)
*I would like to have a better figure. (1)
```

```
28. I had a sick with my legs. →
I had a problem with my legs. (57.5%)
?... sickness (illness, disease) with my legs. (13)
*I injured (hurt) my legs. (10)
```

Though the student's expression was not in proper usage, 57.5% of the informants guessed his intention correctly.

```
30. I was very happy surrounding good senior or good junior. →
I was very happy being surrounded by good seniors and juniors. (52.5%)
?I am happy with old friends and young friends. (1)
?I was very happy to be around junior or senior student who studies hard. (1)
*I enjoyed my junior and senior years in school very much. (1)
*I was very happy during my junior and senior years. (3)
*I was very happy to spend time with my family. (1)
Ø (5)
```

This example, with both a vocabulary selection error and also a grammatical error, was understood by 52.5% of the informants. Expressions like "senior" meaning older student and "junior" (younger student) are not common in English. This might be one of the causes of relatively low intelligibility in this example.

```
32. (I am going to study English and)

I want to speak frequently. →
I want to speak it fluently.

@I am going to study English hard so that I can speak it fluently. (1)
@I want to be fluent in English, so I will need to study hard. (1) (20.5%)
?I want to speak frequently. (24)
*I'm going to study English hard and more frequently. (1)
*In order to learn English, I try to speak it often. (1)
```

The student meant to say "fluently" but he said "frequently" by mistake. We did not expect that as much as 20% of the informants

would change "frequently" to "fluently."

Least Intelligible:

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38. My high school club is soft tennis club. →
In high school, I belonged to a soft-ball tennis club. (15%)
?...... the tennis club. (11)
?..... the soft tennis club. (21)
*..... my tennis club was easy. (1)
*The high school club I belonged to is non-competitive club. (1)
```

The low percentage of understanding in 38 can be attributed to the fact that "soft tennis" is a unique type of tennis played and developed in Japan, so the American informants appear to be unfamiliar with the expression.

The student wanted to convey the meaning "jimina-shigoto" (or, ordinary work) in the words "plain work." From the variety of adjectives above you can see that informants tried to guess the student's intention from an imperfect sentence.

```
49. .... was very hard about study about clean. →
.... was very strict about studying and keeping the campus clean.

My high school emphasized hard studying and cleanliness.
(17.5%)
*My health class was very hard. (1)
*... studied very hard about hygiene. (3)
*At my high school you had to study hard, and to dress nice. (1)
Ø (3)
```

We hear that American high school students do not have to clean their own classroom. Thus the difference in customs between Japanese and American school system explains the low level of understanding in this example. Most of the informants took "clean" as their own cleanliness and hygiene.

V. Summary

The sentences produced by the Japanese students contained many grammatical and vocabulary errors, which might be taken as fatal ones in the Japanese English teaching scene. We found out that the native speaker of English understood these imperfect sentences quite well with their reasoning powers and tolerance for impression and ambiguity. Note that these sentences would have been strictly prohibited in use by non-native teachers such as Japanese and would be evaluated as having almost zero communicative value. People from different countries usually have different languages, but it seems that they share the same desire to understand each other even under difficult circumstances. In this sense we believe that perfectionism is not helpful in language teaching.

Some of the sentences which we thought would be easily understood by the native speakers ranked very low in the rate of intelligibility. We must try to find the causes of this low intelligibility and cope with them.

Each native speaker showed different levels of understanding the sentences. From this can we surmise that factors like age, sex, and vocation are possible influences on the levels of intelligibility, and that we would have to examine them in future studies.

As mentioned earlier, a 79.2% intelligibility rate does not necessarily show the students' real speech ability in English. However, if they realize that their English can be understood by native speakers to such a great extent, they may well be motivated to try to use more

complex expressions. Non-native speakers, especially non-native teachers of foreign languages, will have to consider this fact and should thus not discourage their students in the process of language teaching by hypercorrection. What they should do now is to try to be as tolerant of the students' errors as natives are. It is not always good for them to be strict and careful with the student's errors as "professional language teachers." Many teachers might be surprised to learn the scope of grammatical deviance allowed to non-natives or ignored by natives in the communication process in English. We hope this research will have some effect on re-directing the existing grammar oriented objectives to realistic communicative ones for foreign language teaching.

This paper has dealt with the degree of the intelligibility between non-natives and natives, but we think it also suggests more realistic expectations for communication between non-native speakers of English, such as Japanese and Chinese.

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Material 1.

correct
partial
misunderstanding
no understanding

Sample phrases spoken by Japanese university students:

Our	ipto pinades spoken by supamose aniversity statemes.
1.	I born in Kobe and grew in Kobe.
2.	So I want to have free time more.
3.	I'm now mandolin club.
	The state of the s
4.	I get nice job as possible.
	8.5. September 1981 and 1981 a
5.	And I moved from Ehime to Kobe, because I come to Kobe University of Commerce.
	2.50
6.	My family is four.
7.	I am not much money, so I can't go.
	ntianazzo norma inntiaria antiana indiantaria naracio di esta a monumenta en esta de la composita de la compos
8.	But I wonder I can go to China.
	TOTAL TO THE PROPERTY OF THE P
9.	I could not high school life, so I want to enjoy college life.
10.	My part-time job is rental record shop.
	in the property of the propert
11.	So there is few summer holiday in this summer.
12.	I think Kobe is resemble as Hiroshima.
	95°
13.	I decided stop to go to this college
	92.50
14.	I want to back to my high school days. 9h school days.
	57.50 <u>₩</u> 5₩
1 5.	And I can go to this college for eight minutes. Perhaps I am nearest.
	and a second and the

62.50

