

# **First Language Interference in Writing of Japanese as a Foreign Language**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing and reading are two areas of difficulty identified in learning Japanese as a Foreign Language by Sinhala native speakers. The main reason is that the students are expected to be competent in using around 2000 kanji characters to utilize in standardize written document which is unfamiliar for students learning Japanese as a Foreign Language. Thus, there are many errors occurring in the use of Kanji characters in written work of students. Furthermore, there are considerable amounts of grammatical errors and errors in the usage of correct vocabulary.

## **PURPOSE**

The aim of this study is to distinguish common errors made by students in Japanese essay writings due to first language interference.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For this study 30 students from the Honors Degree programme in Japanese Studies were selected. The students have also passed the level 2 (N2) in Japanese Proficiency Test. All were given a task of essay writing; to write 500 letters essay in 30 minutes, and the errors found in the essays were analyzed.

## **RESULTS**

The findings show that more than mistakes in Kanji characters, the first language interference (L1) is clearly highlighted in students' essay writings. The interference indicates that the students have not grasped the structures of the target language in the expected manner and are thus unable to break away from switching back to the known language for support. As we

specifically analyze the errors made by students, they can be classified as follows:

a) Grammatical errors; grammatical errors include, incorrect usage of adverbs, particles and fundamental grammatical structures. Since there are many adverbs in same meaning in Japanese, students learning Japanese as a Foreign Language find it difficult and confusing to choose between them and decide on the appropriate adverb to be used in a sentence. For Instance, in sentences like 大変違います“taihen chigaimasu” (very different) and とても反対しました“totemo hantaishimashita” (very opposing), the usage of the adverb “taihen” and “totemo” is incorrect. The cause for this is overgeneralization of the adverb “harima” in Sinhala with the Japanese adverbs “taihen” and “totemo”. In the sentence 私は母に手伝いました。“watashi wa haha ni tetsudaimashita”(I helped my mother), usage of particle “ni” is incorrect. Instead of “ni” particle “wo” should be used. The cause for this is, Overgeneralization of particle “ta” in Sinhala with particle “ni” in Japanese. In the sentence 隣の人が私の足を踏みました。“Tonari no hito ga watashi no ashi wo fumimashita” (The person next to me stepped on my foot”, the grammatical structure used to is not accurate. It should be written in passive form as; 私は隣の人に足を踏まれました。“watashi wa tonari no hito ni ashi wo fumare mashita”. Thus it is evident that the students have not grasped the structures of the target language in the expected manner and unable to break away from switching back to the known language for support. Furthermore, in expressions like 使い言語“tsukai gengo” (Language which is used) and 思う方“omou kata” (The way of thinking), the combination of verb with noun is incorrect. These types of errors show that the students have not grasped the fundamental grammatical structures of the target language and directly translated the words in Sinhala to Japanese.

b) Kanji errors: The usage of kanji characters in majority of the writings were not sufficient. Words that can be replaced with Kanji characters were written in Haragana. Kanji character errors mainly include omission of strokes, incorrect Okurigana and incorrect usage of the character. Errors like 表わしている “arawashiteiru” shows the incorrect Okurigana and it occurs due to less Kanji practice and less frequency in usage. Moreover, sentences like 魚を取る “sakana wo toru” and 写真を取る “shashin wo toru” show student’s less awareness of different meanings and accurate usages of the character.

c) Incorrect usage of vocabulary: Incorrect usage of the Japanese word 活動する “katsudo suru” which means “active in” were prominent in majority of the writings. The cause behind this is overgeneralization of the word “katsudo suru” with Sinhala word “kriya karanawa”

According to the analyzed data it shows that 44% of the errors made by the students were grammatical while 29% of the errors were due to incorrect use of vocabulary. Only 27% of errors were Kanji errors. Thus this study shows that errors committed in Japanese writing are mainly grammatical and the cause for this is the L1 interference while learning L2. Therefore, they are unable to attain full fluency in L2.

## **DISCUSSION**

It was evident that the majority of students initially think in L1 and transfer this knowledge to Japanese language. Furthermore, there is a tendency to overgeneralise grammatical structures and some particles in Japanese language with Sinhala. Errors are inevitable in the process of foreign language acquisition. A foreign language learner’s errors are not negative or interfering in any way with learning the target language but are a positive factor, evidence of strategies and procedures the learner is employing in his or her discovery of the language. A systematic analysis of errors will tell the teacher how much of the target language the learner knows and

consequently, what remains to be learned. The teacher should know what kinds of errors need to be handled, otherwise, they can become fossilized. Error analysis is also helpful to the learner to help test his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.

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## **KEYWORDS**

Japanese language writings, grammatical errors, first language interference, overgeneralisation

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