Consciousness-raising and written error correction for young learners

A C-R action research project in a private language school

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Most experts in teaching children state that teaching grammar in the traditional way is inappropriate for children under the age of ten. However, very little research has been done on the effectiveness of consciousness-raising (C-R) with young learners. An action research (AR) project was conducted in a private language school for children, to investigate if a consciousness-raising project would be an effective way to help children notice and correct the ten most commonly made errors they made in their writing of weekly book reports. It was concluded that this consciousness-raising project was effective and a positive experience for children over the age of ten, but sometimes frustrating and less effective for younger learners. The conclusions reached through this action research project led to changes in school policy on error correction, as well as greater efforts to educate the parents of the students.

Keywords: consciousness-raising, young learners, action research, developmentally appropriate, grammar teaching, error self-correction

1. Introduction

Weins (2012), in his article for the Harvard Business Review, entitled, *I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why…* says, "I have a "zero tolerance approach" to grammar mistakes that make people look stupid" (para. 2). People are often judged harshly for their written grammar errors, to the point where their future careers depend on it, and L2 learners are not exempt from this criticism. Parents sending their children to private language schools with an eye on their future often focus on their child's errors in writing assignments and complain to

the teacher, rather than appreciate their child's ability to communicate and negotiate meaning in the L2. They usually also have little awareness of what would be expected of a written assignment for a similarly aged child living in an English-speaking country. Often, they compare their child's learning experience with their own experiences of learning English when they were in the first year of junior high school. One parent said in frustration that he could not understand why his eight-year old child, who had been studying English for two years, had not mastered the third person singular form when he had mastered it after studying it for two years in junior high school.

Even teachers who have realistic expectations of what a young learner of English can write may be frustrated when students make the same basic grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors week after week.

2.   Situation

The students are 43 young learners between the ages of six and fourteen at a private language school in Nagoya, Japan owned by the author. All students are non-native speakers of English and receive little English input in their daily lives, although some of the parents are proficient in English. Students take a once a week 90 minute English lesson, which has a communicative curriculum with a CLIL component and a strong focus on reading and extensive reading. The classes are small, with a maximum size of twelve students, and taught by the author and an assistant teacher. Thirty-two of these students have lived in English-speaking countries or have gone to international schools overseas or in Japan and have therefore learned English from living in and/or going to school in an English speaking environment.

Students are required to write a short book report of a few sentences about a graded reader, a leveled reader, or a chapter or two from a novel borrowed from the school library on a weekly basis. All students are able to grasp the main idea of stories and give a brief opinion about them. However, they tend to make the same basic errors week after week when writing reports. The teacher corrects these reports, often in front of the students, in the hope that they will learn from their errors, yet errors still persist. The teacher's corrections are not helping the students "notice the gap" (Thornbury, 1997, p. 326) between correct writing and their own writing, and more needs to be done to help students' explicit knowledge of their errors to become implicit knowledge (Thornbury, 1997).

This Action Research (AR) project was begun by the author to:

1. Investigate the errors the students were making on their book reports.
2. Find effective ways to help these young students notice their errors in their book reports and learn to self-correct them.

3.   Literature review

How should grammar and other rules of writing be taught to children who are learning English as a foreign language in a classroom setting? Krashen (1983) advocated letting them naturally acquire the rules of English through large amounts of input, but Kersten (2015) points out that due to the time constraints of classroom lessons, students are unlikely to receive the language repetition needed to do this.

The traditional ways of teaching grammar that explicitly use meta-language may still occur in adult ELT classrooms, but it seems that most experts on teaching English to children agree that this is very inappropriate for young learners. Cameron (2001) states that children under the age of ten should not be taught pedagogic grammar as if they were adults. Similarly, although Pinter (2006) agrees that mentioning activities that raise awareness of grammatical forms in an explicit way are appropriate for ten-year-old children, she stresses that younger learners are not ready to learn about grammar in that way.

One issue that should be considered when teaching English to younger children is that they are still developing their L1. One has to take a look at what the child can actually do in their L1 before one can expect them to be able to do the same in their L2. Teachers need to fully understand this so they can have realistic expectations of their students and their students' L2 development (Pinter, 2006). Sometimes, teachers of children may think a mistake made in their L2 is due to the student not understanding the lesson when the real reason is due to their stage of development; the mistake is one that a native-speaking English child would naturally make at that age.

According to Cameron (2001), the best way to teach grammar to young learners is in "rote learnt chunks" (p.106). "Rote learnt chunks" are formulaic sequences of prefabricated language, which Wray (2005) defines as, " a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, or words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subjected to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (p.9). Children can learn a language by learning chunks but some artificial methods for bringing attention to the grammar are also necessary since they do not naturally notice the grammar when they communicate. Learners listen for clues that work in their first language and miss cues that do not. Therefore, it is

appropriate to use form-focusing techniques in the language classroom. While it is not appropriate for very young children to be taught grammar rules in an explicit manner, they may still be interested in the way language works and have the ability and the interest to notice patterns. Cameron (2001) compares the growth of internal grammar to a plant. "Explicit teaching of grammar patterns can have a role even in this (plant) metaphor, but it is more like the occasional application of fertilizer at certain key points in the growing season" (p. 106).

Corrective feedback is a very important part of teaching grammar. Without corrective feedback and guidance, second language learners may persist in using certain ungrammatical forms for years (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). However, young learners are sensitive about their writing errors and may find it embarrassing to go back and correct them. Furthermore, teachers have to find a balance between making sure the students learn standard conventions for grammar, punctuation, and spelling without dampening their enthusiasm for writing. Linse and Nunan (2006) suggest making the students play an active role in correcting and noticing their errors; doing a scavenger hunt through their work to find errors or correct usage; or using a checklist to remind them of what rules to look out for when correcting their work. The effectiveness of checklist suggestion is brought into question, as this a consciousness-raising (C-R) exercise, but Ellis (2002), a strong advocate of this method, concedes that, "It may not be appropriate for young learners" (p. 173). Amirian and Sadeghi (2012) also point out that appropriateness of C-R with younger learners needs to be addressed as "it is not known how CR tasks could be applied to younger learners" (p. 719).

4.   First action research Cycle

An AR project was begun to investigate if a C-R campaign, inspired by Linse and Nunan's (2006) checklist idea, would help the students notice and reduce errors in book reports, as students tended to use the same grammar forms when writing these reports. One week's worth of book reports was analyzed for the types of errors made and their frequency. The ten most common errors were:

1. not pluralizing a noun
2. not using the possessive 's
3. neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence
4. neglecting to capitalize a proper noun
5. incorrect use of third person singular verbs
6. not using the past tense form of a verb
7. using "the" before a proper noun

8. using *he's* instead of *his*
9. misspelling the word *interesting*
10. writing, "She is poor," instead of, "I feel sorry for her."

Errors #8–10 were made only once, but were errors that had been made in the past and seemed easy to fix: Error #10 is a translation error, due to the fact that many Japanese-to-English dictionaries incorrectly translate the Japanese word '*kawaisou*' as '*poor*,' rather than '*to feel sorry for someone*.' Although, the most common error was the incorrect use of the articles *a* or *the*, it was decided that asking students to try to notice and correct this error might cause undue frustration, as Lightbown and Spada (2006) found that "even advanced learners have difficulty using these forms correctly in all contexts" (p. 82). Results of this initial assessment of book report errors can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Errors in book reports: Initial assessment ($n = 43$)

	Error type	Frequency
1.	Not pluralizing nouns	8
2.	Not using the possessive *'s*	5
3.	Neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence	5
4.	Neglecting to capitalize a proper noun	2
5.	Incorrect use of third person singular verbs	7
6.	Not using past tense verbs	12
7.	Using *the* in front of a proper noun	2
8.	Using *he's* instead of *his*	1
9.	Misspelling interesting	1
10.	Saying "…is poor", instead of, "I feel sorry for …"	1

After determining the ten most frequently made or easily corrected grammatical and spelling errors, a *Top Ten Mistakes* poster was made, inspired by Linse's (2006) suggestion of using a checklist to remind students of what to look for in their own writing. This poster did not utilize meta-language, as young children may not benefit from metalinguistic explanations (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Instead, it used examples the young learners would easily understand. The poster was titled *Top Ten Mistakes*, as opposed to *Top Ten Errors*, as the students were more familiar with the word *mistake*. A photograph of the poster can be seen in Figure 1.

An efficient method of data collection was modeled after an observation schedule described in another teacher's action research project (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). This observation schedule included each of the top ten errors and left a blank area where the teacher could easily tally up
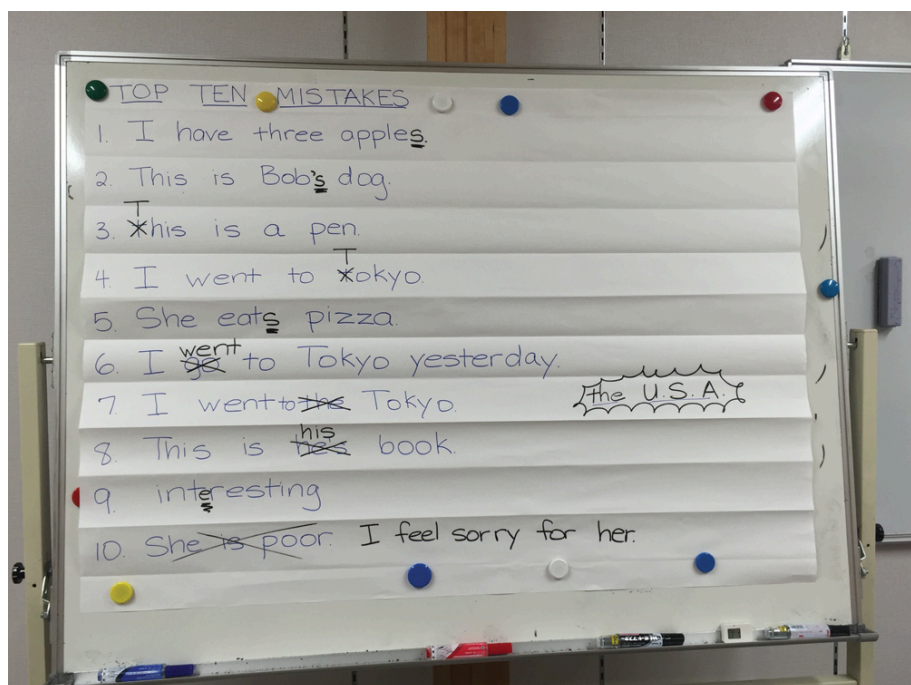
Figure 1. Poster created using frequency of error statistics from Table 1

the errors. In the first week, book reports were checked by the author or assistant teacher who marked grammatical or spelling errors with a red pen and tallied up the number of errors. Then, the teacher put the poster on the white board, and quickly and simply explained the top ten errors made by students participating in the AR project. Finally, the students were asked to look at their own book reports and see if they had made any of the errors on the poster, so that they may refrain from making these errors the following week. Students were told not to share their corrected work with their peers, to avoid potential embarrassment and avoid any hurt feelings over errors made. Students kept their reports, as they were located in their class folders. This sequence of events was repeated in the second, third, and fourth week.

5. Analysis of the first action research cycle

The data of errors made by students gathered from the observation schedule can be seen in Table 2. As can be seen by the data, the amount of errors showed no clear indication of uptake or change; sometimes the amount of errors decreased, only to increase the next week.

Table 2. Errors in book reports (first AR cycle), top ten errors ($n = 43$)

		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
1.	Not pluralizing nouns	1	4	1	1
2.	Not using the possessive *'s*	2	1	0	2
3.	Neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence	6	4	4	5
4.	Neglecting to capitalize a proper noun	6	8	6	1
5.	Incorrect use of third person singular verbs	5	0	0	1
6.	Not using past tense verbs	7	11	11	4
7.	Using *the* in front of a proper noun	1	0	0	0
8.	Using *he's* instead of *his*	1	0	0	0
9.	Misspelling interesting	0	0	0	0
10.	Saying "…is poor", instead of, "I feel sorry for …"	0	0	0	0

It was also observed that just because students did not make any of the top ten errors, this did not necessarily mean that they were using the forms correctly. Instead, the lack of errors tended to be because they did not use the forms at all.

From the data, it was difficult to see if the campaign was helping the students notice and self-correct their errors. The author also felt that the data available was insufficient in order a complete picture of what was happening. There was also suspicion that a few students were receiving help from their parents to produce error-free book reports. As the results of the first AR cycle were inconclusive, a second AR cycle was undertaken to investigate if the C-R project was being effective or not, this time with book reports done in class and a system to identify which student did what report.

6.   The second action research cycle

For the second AR cycle, the focus was on student work done during the lesson, instead of analyzing work done at home. Furthermore, each student was assigned a number, so the author could identify which student had written the book report. The same story or chapter of a novel was read to the students from one of the following books, depending on the level of the particular class:

Frog and Toad are Friends	(Lobel, 1992)
Chocolate Touch	(Catling, 1952)
Charlie Bumpers vs Teacher of the Year	(Harley, 2014)
Botchan	(Soseki, 2013)

Then, the poster was put up and the errors were quickly reviewed on the poster by the teacher. The students were given their usual book report form and asked to write a report within a five-minute period. This was repeated for two classes, stated as *Week 5* and *Week 6* in Table 3. A dossier was compiled of the students' reports that could be looked over carefully after class.

Table 3. Errors in book reports (second AR cycle), top ten errors (*n* = 43)

		Week 5	Week 6
1.	Not pluralizing nouns	0	0
2.	Not using the possessive *'s*	5	0
3.	Neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence	7	2
4.	Neglecting to capitalize a proper noun	8	6
5.	Incorrect use of third person singular verbs	3	4
6.	Not using past tense verbs	9	5
7.	Using *the* in front of a proper noun	4	2
8.	Using *he's* instead of *his*	2	0
9.	Misspelling interesting	0	0
10.	Saying "…is poor", instead of, "I feel sorry for …"	0	0

The data in Table 3 show there was a slight reduction in errors from Week 5 to Week 6, except for error #1, which showed no change, and error #5, which showed a slight increase. No errors were made for errors #9–10.

At first glance, the data shows a slight reduction in errors. However, as the students could be identified in the second AR cycle, the data could be grouped by age. When grouped by age, it became apparent that more errors were made by students younger than ten and fewer errors were made by students ten or older, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Errors in book reports (second AR cycle), top ten errors divided by older (*n* = 24) and younger students (*n* = 19)

		Week 5 – Students ten or older	Week 5 – Students younger than ten	Week 6 – Students ten or older	Week 6 – Students younger than ten
1.	Not pluralizing nouns	0	0	0	0
2.	Not using the possessive *'s*	0	5	0	0
3.	Neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence	4	3	1	1

Table 4. *(continued)*

	Week 5 – Students ten or older	Week 5 – Students younger than ten	Week 6 – Students ten or older	Week 6 – Students younger than ten
4. Neglecting to capitalize a proper noun	0	8	0	6
5. Incorrect use of third person singular verbs	1	2	2	2
6. Not using past tense verbs	3	6	2	3
7. Using *the* in front of a proper noun	0	4	0	2
8. Using *he's* instead of *his*	2	0	0	0
9. Misspelling interesting	0	0	0	0
10. Saying "…is poor", instead of, "I feel sorry for …"	0	0	0	0

The results suggested that the Top Ten Errors poster campaign had been more effective with older children since they made fewer errors.

7.   Post-action research questionnaire and student feedback

In order to receive student feedback about the top ten errors campaign for the purposes of teacher reflection, students were administered a bilingual questionnaire, which can be found in Appendix 1. Forty-one students completed the questionnaire (two students were absent). The questionnaire was numbered to protect the identity of the students and created using the Smiley questionnaire, in line with the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) guidelines (2010). The results of the questionnaires for students ten and older can be seen in Table 5 and the results for students younger than ten can be seen in Table 6.

As evidenced by the results of the questionnaire, almost all students ten or older had a positive or neutral feeling about the Top Ten Errors campaign. Students were also invited to share their comments at the end of the questionnaire. The nine comments were all positive, with students reporting that they found the campaign helpful, became more mindful of their errors, and believed they now

Table 5. Top ten errors campaign questionnaire results for students ten and older ($n=22$)

	☺	😐	☹
1. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me make fewer errors in writing book reports.	10	12	0
2. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me notice my errors when I write.	13	8	1
3. I think I will make fewer errors in the future when I write.	10	12	0

Read the sentences. How do you feel? Circle.
☺=YES 😐=SO-SO ☹=NO

Table 6. Top ten errors campaign questionnaire results for students younger than ten ($n=19$)

	☺	😐	☹
1. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me make fewer errors in writing book reports.	8	8	3
2. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me notice my errors when I write.	5	10	4
3. I think I will make fewer errors in the future when I write.	7	10	2

Read the sentences. How do you feel? Circle.
☺=YES 😐=SO-SO ☹=NO

made few mistakes. One student remarked that they thought it was important they were learning to correct errors students actually made.

Table 3 shows the students younger than ten had fewer positive responses and more negative responses than the older students. Only three comments were received at the end of the questionnaire. Two of the comments were positive, stating that they found the campaign helpful and one comment was a neutral comment that the campaign was only a little helpful. From their responses, a tentative conclusion can be reached that most of the younger students did not feel the Top Ten Errors campaign was beneficial in helping them with their writing.

8.   Conclusion

The AR project showed that a C-R campaign, using a poster with their Top Ten Errors worked best with learners older than the age of ten. Students older than ten also had the greatest reduction of errors, noticed their errors more, and generally had more positive feelings about the campaign. This is probably due to them

having reached the stage of cognitive development where they are able to analyze grammar forms and are beginning to show interest in them, as well as understand metalanguage when grammar forms are explicitly taught (Pinter, 2006). However, this action research study could have been improved if more than one week had been devoted to analyzing errors made by students, if the students had been observed for a longer period of time, and if the author had been able to identify which students were making what errors from the beginning.

This AR project led to revamping our school policy on teaching grammar and error correction. Red pen corrections are no longer given in book reports for students under the age of ten. While correct grammar is expected when completing focus on form exercises, children under the age of ten are no longer expected to produce error free writing and the emphasis has shifted to clearly communicating meaning. Finally, efforts to educate students' parents about the results of the AR project were begun in conjunction with the usual parent/teacher conferences, to help them understand what can really be expected from their children at this age in their development.

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Appendix

I'm giving you this paper because I want to hear your opinions on the Top Ten Grammar Errors campaign we had in the fall. You don't have to answer the questions if you don't want to.
この秋にトップ１０文法ミスのキャンペーンを行いました。それぞれに思うことを聞かせてください。もし、答えたくなければ答えなくても構いません。

Read the sentences. How do you feel? Circle.
下の文章を読み、あなたの感じることを〇で囲んでください。
😊=YES 😕=SO-SO 😣=NO

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1. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me make fewer errors in writing book reports.
    トップ１０文法ミスがブックリポートを書くときに自分の文法ミスを少なくしてくれるようになった。   😊   😕   😣

2. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me notice my errors when I write.
    トップ１０文法ミスキャンペーンが文章を書くときに自分の文法ミスを気付かせてくれるようになった。   😊   😕   😣

3. I think I will make fewer errors in the future when I write.
    おそらく将来的に文法ミスが少なくなると思う。   😊   😕   😣

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4.   Any other comments?　他にコメントがあれば記入してください。

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Biographical note

Lesley Ito is the teaching director at BIG BOW English Lab in Nagoya, Japan. While she has been teaching young learners in Japan for over 25 years, she only recently graduated with an MSc in TEYL from Aston University and became interested in doing action research on young learners at her school. In addition to teaching, she has also made many teaching presentations in Japan, Korea, and the UAE and is an award winning author of a wide variety of EFL materials.