

# LEARNER-INITIATED ATTENTION TO FORM IN BLOG-BASED NOVICE-TO-NOVICE L2 ONLINE INTERACTION

ブログプロジェクトとゼロ初級日本語学習者間での  
「自発的フォーカス・オン・フォーム」の考察

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the area of foreign language education, both accuracy and fluency play pivotal roles in developing second/foreign language (L2) proficiency (Campbell & Duncan, 2010; Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Ortega, 2007; Richards, 2005). According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, accuracy is defined as “the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently” (p. 141) and fluency as “the ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar” (p. 141). Although the degree to which accuracy and fluency are emphasized in L2 classrooms tend to vary from instructor to instructor, those L2 learners who are at the earliest stages of their L2 learning are usually required to focus on the development of accuracy first because they do not yet have sufficient L2 linguistic knowledge to produce the language fluently (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). For that reason, accuracy-oriented activities such as grammar presentations and pattern drills aim to enhance the L2 learners’ accurate production of a specific L2 form are often introduced in the beginning level L2 classrooms.

However, one of the issues associated with such accuracy-oriented activities in the beginning level L2 classrooms is that there is general tendency for L2 learners to rely extensively on their L2 instructors for getting feedback on the correct grammar usage (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a; 2001b; VanPatten, 1990; 1996; Williams, 1999). For instance, when the learners made linguistic errors on a given form, the instructor might be the first one to identify and point out the errors to the learners by using various corrective feedback. While it seems somewhat natural to see the instructor playing an active role in drawing the learners’ attention to the given form, a potential drawback of such teacher-initiated attention to form is that L2 learners might not have the opportunity to develop a sense of autonomy that allows them to feel that they are in control of their own learning process (Cotterall, 2000; Leow, 1998; Loewen, 2004). The term “learner autonomy” is defined as “the same condition of being self-ruled or capable of regulating one’s own thoughts, learning, and actions” (Oxford, 2003, p. 80).

As there has been a growing consensus among foreign language educators and researchers in recent years that some degree of learner autonomy is essential in order for L2 learners to engage in successful language learning (Benson, 2001; Dam, 2001; Scharle & Szabó, 2000), the present study attempts to explore the occurrence of learner-initiated attention to form in blog-based L2 online interaction through a small-scale descriptive study of novice Japanese language students ( $n = 73$ ). The objective of the present study is

to offer the possibility that novice L2 learners may be able to exhibit their attention to form even within the context of teacherless online environment.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Meaning-Focused Versus Form-Focused**

Over the past two decades, foreign language education has gone through numerous changes. One of the most notable changes is the pedagogical shift from an explicit focus on formal and grammatical aspects of the target language to a greater emphasis on the meaning and functional aspects of the target language (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Renou, 2000; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). This pedagogical shift has caused many foreign language instructors to prioritize meaning-focused instruction in which learners are encouraged to use the target language in a contextualized and authentic manner.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) and content-based instruction (CBI) are the two major examples that illustrate such meaning-focused instruction. CLT is a type of instruction that requires learners to attend solely to language meaning and the content of what they would like to communicate (Howatt, 1984; Savignon, 2002; Spada, 2006a). CLT recognizes the primary function of language as communication, and its main purpose is to enhance L2 learners' "communicative competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980a; Canale, 1983a). During the 1970s, there was some disagreement among linguists and researchers about whether communicative competence should be extended to incorporate the notion of grammatical competence (Campbell & Wales, 1970; Hymes, 1972; Munby, 1978; Savignon, 1972). Munby (1978) claimed that the failure to include grammatical competence in the theoretical framework of communicative competence would mislead many researchers and language teachers to conclude that grammatical competence should be developed separately from the communicative competence and that one should be able to carry out effective communication without possessing the knowledge of grammatical rules. In order to settle the disagreement over the distinction between grammatical competence and communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980a) revisited the concept of communicative competence in reference to the earlier works of other researchers and finally reached to the conclusion that grammatical competence should indeed be included as part of the important elements in communicative competence. In Canale and Swain's view, grammatical competence is recognized as an essential for carrying out effective communication and that accuracy of language expression and understanding is attainable only if the speakers possess the proper knowledge of grammatical rules.

Despite the fact that the grammatical competence has been included as part of the four major components in the latest theoretical framework of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980a; Canale, 1983a), the prior literature reveals that the notion of grammatical competence or grammatical accuracy has long been neglected in numerous CLT contexts (Alderson and Steel, 1994; Harley and Swain, 1984; Lightbown and Halter, 1993; Lyster, 1987; Swain, 1985, 1988). Furthermore, there has also been a major concern that error in L2 learners' linguistic performance has been indulged in CLT (Harley and Swain, 1984; Lightbown, Halter, White and Horst, 2002; Lyster, 1987; Renous, 2000).

## **2.2 Various Types of Form-Focused Instruction**

In contrast to CLT or meaning-focused instruction (MFI), the term “form-focused instruction (FFI)” is defined as “any pedagogical effort to draw learners’ attention to language either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada, 1997, p. 73). What differentiates FFI from MFI is that FFI does not recognize language as a mechanism for communication. Rather, it is aimed at teaching specific L2 grammatical forms such as morphology, syntax, pronunciation, pragmatics, etc (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Generally, the purpose of FFI is to enhance L2 learners’ accuracy rather than fluency (Ellis, 2001). In the last twenty years, there have been a number of attempts by SLA researchers and foreign language educators to categorize various types of FFI (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991, 1996; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). According to Long (1991, 1996), FFI is divided into “a focus on forms” and “a focus on form”. The former type of FFI is viewed as a more traditional approach in which language elements are systematically taught and practiced according to a structural syllabus that specifies which grammatical topics are to be taught and in what order. On the contrary, the latter type refers to grammatical instruction in which the primary focus is on meaning-oriented activities and an emphasis on form occurs in an unplanned manner as the communicative need arises from learners themselves. In attempt to elaborate on Long’s earlier definition of “focus on form”, Ellis (2001) has further made a distinction between “planned” and “incidental (or unplanned)” focus on form. In “planned focus on form,” learners attend to formal aspect of the target linguistic items while primarily engaged in meaning-focused activities. Their attention to form does not come naturally because all the target linguistic items have intentionally been chosen by the instructor prior to the activities. In contrast, “incidental focus on form” draws learners’ attention to the non-specified linguistic items while primarily engaged in meaning-focused activities. L2 learners attend to form spontaneously without the instructor’s prior planning.

Results from the past studies indicate that among the various types of FFI described above, “incidental focus on form” might be considered effective for solving the potential drawback of CLT in developing L2 learners’ grammatical accuracy (Loewen, 2005; Nabei and Swain, 2001; Williams, 2001). Although these studies have been successful in gathering some empirical evidence to support the potential benefit of incident focus on form in L2 learning, their studies have not been able to address the question of whether L2 learners are capable of noticing the linguistic form of the L2 without getting assistance from their own instructors. All the different types of FFI that the present study had discussed thus far included the presence of both instructors and learners. Since one of the goals outlined in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning emphasizes the importance of guiding L2 learners to be “life-long learners” who can develop a continuous habit of self-studying the target language and culture beyond the classroom setting (National Standards, 1999), further investigation on FFI is certainly required to find out whether L2 learners possess the abilities to enhance their grammatical accuracy or metalinguistic knowledge without receiving help from their instructors.

## **2.3 Incidental Focus on Form in a Student-Only Online Environment**

In light of evidence that past studies on incidental focus on form paid scant attention to situations in which learners spontaneously attend to form without being provided further assistance by the instructor, Kessler (2009) investigated the occurrence of

incidental focus on form within the context of a student-only online environment and its potential for developing L2 learner autonomy. The study examined the occurrence of incidental focus on form among Spanish-speaking learners (ESL teacher candidates in Mexico) who were participating in a long-term wiki-based collaborative task. The study defined the concept of learner autonomy in reference to Littlewood's (1996) framework of autonomy. The results from the study yielded three major findings. First, it seemed that learners regarded their web-based collaborative activity as "less form demanding" (Kessler, 2009, p. 84) and ended up not paying much attention to the formal aspects of what they were writing on wiki. Secondly, there was a tendency for learners to be more form-focused when editing their peers' postings rather than when editing their own postings. Lastly, when students autonomously took the initiative to concentrate on form either for peer-focused or self-focused postings, word choice and spelling errors were the two types of grammatical errors that were most frequently addressed among the students.

### **III. Research Question**

As the review of Kessler's study (2009) has shown, L2 learners do demonstrate their autonomous abilities in initiating focus on form without the presence of the instructor. However, the study has been limited in scope because it fails to address the specific proficiency level of each study participant. This raises the question of whether students who are at the earliest stage of L2 learning are capable of drawing their attention to form in a "student-only" online environment. To further address this issue, the present study examines the occurrence of learner-initiated attention to form in beginning Japanese language classrooms. This study is intended to contribute to the pre-existing literature on the role of incidental focus on form, particularly focusing on novice L2 learners' autonomous abilities in drawing their attention to form while actively engaged in their blog-based L2 online interaction. What differentiates the present study from Kessler's study is that it defines the concept of "autonomous abilities" based on Oxford's theoretical model of learner autonomy (2003). Oxford (2003) claims that the concept of L2 learner autonomy should be viewed from four perspectives, technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical. In addition to these perspectives, four important elements, agency, motivation, and learning strategies are associated with each perspective. In particular, the present study uses the first two perspectives, technical and psychological as theoretical frameworks to identify L2 learners' autonomous abilities in attending to form.

From a technical perspective, autonomy is viewed as "skills for independent learning situations such as in a self-access center" (Oxford, 2003, p. 77). For the present study, such an independent learning situation refers to their "student-only" blog-based online interactions. From a psychological perspective, autonomy is viewed as "a combination of characteristics of the individual including attitudes, ability, learning strategies, and styles" (Oxford, 2003, p. 77).

Based on this psychological perspective, the present study defines "autonomous abilities" as the abilities to take the initiative to notice language-oriented issues observed in their or peers' blog posts. Overall, the present study seeks to understand how both the student-only online environment and the individual characteristics of each student will be integrated to assist novice Japanese language students in demonstrating their autonomous

abilities to initiate focus on form. The specific research questions that guide the present study are as follows:

1. Do novice Japanese language learners autonomously attend to formal aspects of the language within the context of their blog-based L2 online interaction?
2. During what types of activities do they take the initiative to draw their attention to form?
3. What kinds of forms do they attend to?

## **IV. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Participants**

The participants in the present study comprised 73 English-speaking college students enrolled in the beginning Japanese language courses at a large private university in the northeastern United States. The course had a total of five different class sections that met four times a week for 65 minutes per session. There were five Japanese language instructors assigned to teach each class section. The participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1<sup>1</sup>. The majority of these students had received no experience learning Japanese as a foreign language prior to the study. All students agreed to participate and all signed a consent form stating that they understood their rights and permitted the researcher and instructors to analyze and discuss the results of the study.

### **4.2 Blog Project**

The blog project was implemented during the third week of the course in Fall 2010. The project constituted 6 % of the overall course grade. The instructors incorporated a blog into their beginning Japanese language classes in order to fulfill the following three objectives: to provide students with a platform 1) to express themselves in the target language, 2) to interact with their classmates as well as others outside the class, and 3) to reflect on their learning process over the semester. Prior to the project, the instructors developed a main class blog that served as a platform for posting all class instructions and assignments. In addition to the main class blog, each student was required to set up a personal blog.

As noted above, this project was conducted purely out of meaning-focused purposes and the study participants were never informed that they were required to focus on the formal aspect of their L2 writing. It should also be noted that there was no intervention of the instructors in editing any language errors observed in the study participants' blog posts. Furthermore, the project was carried out rather as an "in-class project" since it did not require students to update their blog on a regular basis except the time they were in a computer lab for their bi-weekly computer lab sessions. Students were also given great flexibility in choosing the contents of their blog posts. Their topics were generally related to their personal stories and feelings, reports about their daily lives, current events, and popular culture. They were also allowed to use a variety of visual aids for their blogs.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Appendix A on page 20.

### 4.3 Instruments

The present study used three data collection procedures: (a) the LRE analysis of blog posts, (b) a survey of student attitudes towards blog project, and (c) retrospective interviews with students.

#### *The LRE Analysis of Blog Posts*

The present study used Language Related Episodes (LREs; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) to answer the first research question pertaining to identify “learner-initiated attention to form” throughout the writing of the blog posts. LREs are generally defined as any language-oriented speech in which the learners “talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998. p. 326). The present study coded all the LREs based on the following 5 factors. These factors are modeled on the LRE analysis investigated by Williams (1999).

1. Learner-initiated requests to a teaching assistant about language
2. Learner-initiated requests to another learner about language
3. Learner-learner negotiation over a language item
4. Learner-learner metatalk
5. Other-correction

The first two categories refer to the instances in which learners took the initiative to attend to form in hopes of getting assistance about language-oriented issues from a teaching assistant and other learner. The examples of such requests are “how do you say X in Japanese?” or “what does X mean in English?” Even though the LRE analysis of the present study was initially restricted to those novice-to-novice interactions, the researcher decided to extend the data to include those episodes in which learners were requesting assistance from the teaching assistant. The third category, negotiation, refers to the instances in which learners took the initiative to attend to form in attempt to repair their “communicative breakdown” (Williams, 1999, p. 319) in the target language. The fourth category, “metatalk” (Swain, 1998), refers to those instances in which learners took the initiative to discuss form-oriented topics with other learners. Finally, the fifth category, other-correction, refers to any other LREs that did not fit into the first four LRE categories. The examples of such other-correction include those instances in which learners took the initiative to self-assess grammatical accuracy in their blog posts or to give form-oriented feedback to other students. For the purpose of the present study, it excluded all the blog posts that were directly relevant to their homework assignments and coded only those LREs from their regular non-assignment related blog posts. Those blog posts with very few (less than 1 sentence) or no L2 writings at all were excluded from the analysis.

In order to answer the second research question pertaining to “when” learner-initiated attention to form is likely to occur, the present study subcategorized each LRE based on the following 3 activity types.

1. Writing
2. Feedback I
3. Feedback II

The first type, “writing”, refers to the activities in which learners were writing their own blog posts. The second type, “feedback I”, refers to the activities in which learners were commenting on other learners’ blog posts. The third type, “feedback II”, refers to the activities in which learners were responding to the comments left by other learners. Because the study participants had very limited Japanese writing proficiency, they used either English or a mixture of English and Japanese to leave their comments.

### *Survey Instrument*

A blog project survey was developed by the instructors in order to elicit more detailed information about students’ perceptions on the blog project. The overall scheme of the blog project questionnaire is shown in Appendix B<sup>2</sup>. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) students’ personal attitudes towards different types of blog-based activities (nine items) and (2) students’ perceived learning with blog project (four items). In the first part of questionnaire, the participants rated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a six-point scale (1= strongly disagree, 6= strongly agree). In the second part of questionnaire, the participants were given specific statements and were asked to check all the statements that applied to them. In addition to that, the participants were asked to provide answers to three open-ended questions indicating their overall learning experiences with blog project. In particular, the present study focused on the answers to the first open-ended question, which was to give specific examples of what the students have learned through blogging. The data collected from this particular question was later used as additional evidence to support the overall LRE analysis of the present study.

### *Retrospective Interviews*

In addition to the LRE analysis and survey questionnaires, the researcher interviewed various participants. An initial pool of 20 students was chosen. The selection of interview participants was made based on gender, school year, major and an average number of blog posts per month. In order for the present study to appear as representative as possible, such specific characteristics were taken into consideration for the selection of interview participants. The rationale for the interview questions was to collect data pertaining to the degree of students’ attention given to formal aspects of what they or others were writing. A few days prior to the last week of the course, an invitation email for the follow-up interview was sent to those 20 particular students who were initially selected. Of the 20 participants invited for the follow-up interviews, 8 agreed to do so. Of the 8 interview participants, 5 were female students and the other 3 were male students; 4 were undergraduate students and the other 4 were graduate students. The interview participants came from a different field of study ranging from East Asian history, Chinese literature to engineering.

## **4.4 Procedures and Data Analysis**

On the last day of class, students were instructed to complete the blog project questionnaire at a computer lab. The survey was administered online through the open-

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<sup>2</sup> Please refer to Appendix B on page 21.

source application called Google Docs<sup>3</sup> and the survey yielded a total response rate of 73%. Right after the completion of survey, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews with a total of eight students. The interviews were conducted in English either individually or in pairs. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes in length. The researcher recorded all of the interviews on a portable audio recorder and later transcribed them in English.

After the semester ended, the researcher visited each student's personal blog and carefully coded all the blog posts based on the five LRE types described earlier. Each LRE was later subcategorized into three activity types. The grammatical categories that emerged during the LRE analysis are as follows:

- |                |                   |           |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1. Definition  | 6. Verb choice    | 11. Other |
| 2. Spelling    | 7. Omit verb      |           |
| 3. Particle    | 8. Omit subject   |           |
| 4. Word choice | 9. Sentence order |           |
| 5. Verb form   | 10. Tense form    |           |

## V. FINDINGS

**5.1 RQ1<sup>4</sup>.** Do novice Japanese language learners autonomously attend to formal aspect of the language within the context of their blog-based L2 online interaction?

The finding showed that novice Japanese language learners do autonomously attend to form while engaged in their blog-based interactions, albeit infrequently. Over the semester, a total of 308 regular blog entries were posted by the students. Among these blog entries, 21 (6.8%) involved LREs while 287 (93.2%) involved no LREs as presented in Table 2<sup>5</sup>. Of the 21 blog entries related to LREs, 3 blog entries (14.3 %) were learner-initiated requests to a teaching assistant about language. 2 blog entries (9.5%) were learner-initiated requests to an other learner about language. 11 blog entries (52.4%) were learner-learner metatalk. 5 blog entries (23.8%) were other-correction. Finally, none of the blog entries involved learner-learner negotiation over a language item. An overview of this finding is summarized in Table 3 and Figure 1<sup>6</sup>.

**5.2 RQ2.** During what types of activities do they take the initiative to draw their attention to form?

Among all the 21 LREs, 12 (57.1%) took place during the time in which students were posting their blog entries (writing). 6 (28.6%) took place during the time in which they were commenting on other students' blog entries (feedback I). Finally, 3 (14.3%) took place during the time in which they were responding to the comments left by other students (feedback II). The breakdown of LREs by each activity type is presented in

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<sup>3</sup> Please visit <http://www.docs.google.com> for more detailed information.

<sup>4</sup> RQ = Research Question

<sup>5</sup> Please refer to Appendix C on page 24.

<sup>6</sup> Please refer to Appendix D. on page 25.

Table 4 and Figure 2<sup>7</sup>. Of the 3 LREs related to *learner-initiated requests to teaching assistant about language*, 2 LREs occurred during the first type of activity, writing and the other 1 occurred during the third type of activity, feedback II. For the 2 LREs related to *learner-initiated requests to other learner about language*, both LREs occurred during the second type of activity, feedback I. Among the 11 LREs related to *learner-learner metatalk*, 9 LREs occurred during the writing activity, 1 LRE occurred during the feedback I activity, and the other 1 occurred during the feedback II activity. Finally, of the 5 LREs related to *other-correction*, 1 LRE occurred during the writing activity, 3 LREs occurred during the feedback I activity, and the other 1 occurred during the feedback II activity.

### 5.3 RQ3. What kinds of forms do they attend to?

Throughout the LRE analysis, a total of eleven grammatical categories were found. As noted earlier, they were definition, spelling, particle, word choice, verb form, verb choice, omit verb, omit subject, sentence order, tense form and other (e.g. ending phrase, puns). It should be noted that the total number of LREs are extended from 21 to 26 in this particular categorization due to the fact that some blog entries and comments had more than just one type of grammatical focus and the present study decided to count each type of grammatical focus as one LRE. As presented in Table 5<sup>8</sup>, definition accounted for 4 (15.4%) of the 26 LREs, spelling accounted for 6 (23.1%) of the 26 LREs, particle, word choice, and other accounted for 3 (11.5%) of the 26 LREs, verb form accounted for 2 (7.7%) of the 26 LREs and finally, verb choice, omit verb/subject, sentence order and tense form accounted for 1 (3.8%) of the 26 LREs.

### 5.4 The Contents of LREs

Example 1. *Learner-initiated requests to other learner about language:*

<p><b>Blog Title:</b> こんにちは</p>	<p><b>Thursday, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010</b></p>
<p>はじめまして。わたしはどなるとです。まーしゃるのだいがくせいです。これはひとつのぶろぐです。おもしろいです。わたしはにじゅはっさいです。をすこんしんからきました。あれはにほんじゃありません。にほんごはおもしろいです。じゃまた。</p>	

<sup>7</sup> Please refer to Appendix E. on page 26.

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to Appendix F. on page 27.

(English Translation<sup>9</sup>)

**Blog Title: Hello**

Nice to meet you. I am Donald<sup>10</sup>. I am a Marshall college student<sup>11</sup>.  
This is one blog. It's fun. I am 28 years old. I came from Wosukonshin.  
That is not Japan. Japanese is fun. See you.

**OTHER STUDENT commented:**

こんにちは、どなるどさん！どうぞよろしく。“をすこんしんからきました”は  
えいご で なんですか？<sup>12</sup> わたしの にほんご いい じゃ ありません。  
ありがとう！

(English Translation)

Hello, Donald-san! Nice to meet you. What does “*Wosukonshin kara kimashita*” mean in English? My Japanese is not good. Thank you!

**STUDENT responded:**

I tried to spell “Wisconsin” hahaha.

The example above illustrates the LRE during the feedback I activity. The student self-introduced himself on his first blog entry with few typing errors in Japanese. The student was not sure about the correct spelling of “Wisconsin” in Japanese and ended up typing it incorrectly. Later, one of his classmates read this blog post and left her comment. Apparently, she was able to understand the content of his blog post except for the word “*wosukonshin*”, so she questioned him about what “*wosukonshin*” meant in English. In response to her comment, the blog author (Donald) confessed that his original intention was to spell “Wisconsin”. He responded to her comment in English perhaps due to his limited Japanese writing proficiency.

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<sup>9</sup> All the English translations presented in this section were added by the researcher and did not originally appear in the students' blog posts.

<sup>10</sup> To protect the privacy of each study participant, pseudonyms were used in this section.

<sup>11</sup> To protect the privacy of each study participant, a fictitious college name was used in this section.

<sup>12</sup> All the underlines presented in this section were added by the researcher and did not originally appear in the students' blog posts.

Example 2. Learner-learner metatalk

**Blog Title: Week 4: Lessons1-4**<sup>13</sup>

**Thursday, September 28<sup>h</sup>, 2010**

I am pretty confident with a lot of basic grammar such as:

わたしは MELINDA です。わたしはアメリカ人です。わたしはだいがくいんのいちねんせいです。あのかばんはわたしかばんです。etc...I feel like I'm pretty good with knowing when to use “の” vs “は” vs “も”。。。。

Other topics that are giving me trouble:

-Numbers! Please comment if you are having a dickens of a time remembering how to say, write, or structure Japanese numerals! I need to create a support group or something...-Telling time. Again...those pesky numbers.

(English Translation)

I am pretty confident with a lot of basic grammar such as:

I am MELINDA. I am American. I am a first year graduate student. The bag over there is my bag. etc...I feel like I'm pretty good with knowing when to use “no” vs “ha” vs “mo”...

**OTHER STUDENT commented:**

I completely agree about the numbers. It seems easy for me to understand how those sounds would come out of the 3 + 1000 or 2 + 10 verbal equations (e.g. sound shifts due to the preceding sounds). This is a natural kinda thing to happen or so my study of linguistics would indicate, but that doesn't make it super easy to remember all of them--orally it's fine but the hiragana still take some thought and practice (which I could stand to do more of). And it doesn't mean that the truly irregular number forms for counting fit that at all! I am especially thinking about the days of the month!

The example above illustrates the instance in which the student discussed about several form-oriented topics such as the use of particles and counting numbers on her blog entry. While the instructors were usually encouraging their students to write about more meaning-oriented topics such as personal stories or reports about weekend if the students did not know what to write for their blog posts, this particular student took the initiative to post a number of blog entries consisted of form-oriented topics rather than meaning-oriented topics. Upon reading this blog post, one of her classmates left a comment and said that she was in the same position as the blog author (Melinda) about having difficulty in memorizing all those numbers and counters. Furthermore, she

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<sup>13</sup> Some sentences from this blog entry were excluded due to space limitations.

discussed the phonetic aspects of Japanese numerals by referring to what she had studied from her past linguistic course.

Example 3. Other-correction

**Monday, October 4th, 2010**

**Blog Title: わたしのうちへLIRRのでんわでいきました。**

せんしゅうのどようびわたしはかえりました。ごごはちじかえります。  
ちかてつでえきへいきました。でんしゃのなまえはLIRRです。どようび  
にひやくきゅうじゅうにえんです(I converted USD -> Yen)。  
まいしゅうでんしゃでいけます。これわでんしゃです：



(English Translation)

**Blog Title: I went to my house by LIRR telephone**

Last Saturday, I went home. I go home at 8pm. I went to the station by subway.  
The name of the train is LIRR. On Saturday, it's 292 yen. (I converted USD -> Yen).  
I go by train every week. This is the train:

**OTHER STUDENT commented:**

こんばんは、ホップキンスさん！わたしたちはともだちです so I will be taking this opportunity to ask you questions about your grammar (as well as suggest corrections!) =)

いち：In your title, you put "でんわ" instead of "でんしゃ" for electric train =>

に：in "せんしゅうのどようびわたしはかえりました。", would it be the other order? as in: どようびのせんし for the saturday of last week? not really sure about the format for this one...

さん：you forgot to stick a "かえりました" with a past tense ending! (2nd sentence)

よん：in the second-to-last sentence with the price, I don't think "どよおび" needs that

"に" after it because the sentence is a "です" sentence and there is no action taking place? At least, that's how I understood that rule...Let me know if I'm wrong!

ご: in your last sentence, you accidentally kept the "わ" instead of the "は" particle =>

きょう was not a good day for you, huh? Especially with that コンピュータアの accident!

おやすみ、ホップキンスさん!

- テイラー

The example above illustrates the instance in which the student initiated an attempt to correct the errors on her classmate's blog entry by addressing a variety of grammatical concerns. This should be regarded as a striking example because none of the study participants had been instructed to peer-edit their blog entries except for the first blog entry: self-introduction. This learner-initiated focus on form episode must have emerged purely out of the student's own willingness (Littlewood, 1996) to help her classmate strive for higher grammatical accuracy. In the first LRE, the student identified the word choice error and suggested that the blog author (Mr. Hopkins) revise the word from “でんわ” (telephone) to “でんしゃ” (electric train). In the second LRE, the student questioned the sentence order of the first sentence and wondered if the correct sentence order would be “どようびのせんしゅう” (the Saturday of last week) as opposed to “せんしゅうのどようび”. In the third LRE, the student noticed the error in tense form and suggested Mr. Hopkins to stick to the same tense form throughout the writing. In the fourth LRE, the student questioned whether particle “に” (*ni*) is required after the noun “どようび” (Saturday) if the sentence is ended with a non-action verb “です” (*desu*). Finally, in the fifth LRE, the student suggested that Mr. Hopkins fix the typing error for the particle “は” (*ha*).

## VI. DISCUSSIONS

The first research question addressed the possibility of novice Japanese language students demonstrating their autonomous abilities in initiating focus on form within the context of a teacherless online environment. The finding indicated that while the present study had been successful in finding some form-oriented speeches initiated by the students themselves, novice students rarely attended to formal aspect of the language. This finding is consistent with the previous studies (Kessler, 2009; Williams, 1999). Perhaps there are two logical reasons behind this finding. One reason is that given the fact that they had just began to learn the language, they had not yet developed sufficient linguistic knowledge for noticing and correcting error. This is considered one of the general characteristics about novice L2 learners; their insufficient L2 linguistic knowledge may sometimes discourage them from placing a priority upon the role of form. Perhaps the students were more concerned with grasping the meaning of blog posts

in order to sustain the communication with other students (VanPatten, 1990; 1996; Williams, 1999).

Another reason is that as the main objective of this project suggests, the students probably perceived their blog-based interactions as meaning-oriented rather than form-oriented. In follow-up interviews, the researcher asked the interview participants to see if they had observed any grammatical errors in other students' blog posts. The students confessed that they had actually seen some errors but they did not think that it was their obligations to point out the errors to other students. Furthermore, it seemed that the students did not bother giving such explicit form-oriented feedback to other students because they did not want other students to think that they were being mean and unfriendly.

However, this finding should not automatically lead to the conclusion that a majority of novice L2 students in the present study did not possess the abilities to initiate focus on form. As was demonstrated in the example earlier in which one female student (Ms. Taylor) took the initiative to address issues of form observed in her classmate's (Mr. Hopkins) blog entry, the students would be capable of initiating focus on form had they been given the right opportunities. It seems that the female student, Ms. Taylor was not worried about appearing as a bad person in giving explicit form-focused feedback to her classmate because she knew that there was a stable friendship between them and that their friendship would not be affected negatively just by pointing out a few errors. This example indicates that the two perspectives of autonomy, technical perspective and psychological perspective are interwoven with each other (Oxford, 2003) because even if the external condition for facilitating the development of learner autonomy is met, L2 learners are unlikely to act autonomously towards their own learning process unless they had some convincing internal motives. Although their blog-based online environment had a potential to serve as a platform to foster learner autonomy, the students' lack of obligations and motivations towards the correction of other students' blog posts actually hindered them from demonstrating their autonomous abilities in initiating focus on form.

The second research question sought to find out the specific situations in which the students autonomously devoted their attention to form. As the finding revealed, the students were likely to attend to form especially when they were writing their own blog entries. Perhaps this finding should come as no surprise given that during the computer lab sessions, students were given more time for posting their blog entries rather than leaving comments or responding to the comments left by others. During the first few computer lab sessions, students were instructed to leave comments on other students' blogs but as the semester progressed, the likelihood of the students leaving comments or responding to the comments got gradually lower because they started to work on a different in-class project called *katakana* project during the last half of their computer lab sessions. This project was considered more form-oriented since it required the students to focus on the uses of *katakana* observed in various resources. Based on the data collected from survey questionnaires, it seems that the students indeed perceived this *katakana* project as more form-oriented and felt that they were able to address issues of form more from posting their *katakana* project-related blog entries than from posting their regular blog entries. This finding is consistent with the previous study (Williams, 1999) that learner-initiated focus on form is often related to learners' perception of the goals of the activity. In other words, learners are more likely to take the initiative to attend to form

when they are engaged in the type of activities that are perceived as more form-oriented. The fact that there was not even a single LRE that dealt with “learner-learner negotiation over a language item” is also not surprising since students were allowed to communicate both in English and the target language on their blogs. Thus, the communicative breakdown between the students was unlikely to occur unless they had been instructed to communicate exclusively in the target language. Nevertheless, information gathered in both survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews reveals that some students actually had a trouble understanding the contents of other students’ blog entries especially when the blog entries included some unlearned grammar, vocabularies, and/or *kanji*. They commented on the survey questionnaires that they would have appreciated it more if the instructors had been able to encourage everyone to use only those previously learned grammar, vocabulary, and/or *kanji* on their blogs. Furthermore, some Chinese-speaking students confessed during the follow-up interviews that they intentionally avoided using a lot of *kanji* in their blog posts because they assumed that other students would not be able to understand the contents of their blog entries if they used too many unlearned *kanji*. This information indicates that although the LRE analysis of the present study detected very few incidents of learner-initiated focus on form from students’ blog posts, some students have actually showed their attentive attitudes towards the formal aspect of what they were writing in such non-verbalized manner.

The third research question dealt with the types of grammatical focus initiated by students. The finding showed that students focused on “spelling” and “definition” above all things. Again, this finding is consistent with the previous study that novice L2 learners tend to focus on “lexical meaning rather than morphosyntactic features” (William, 1999, p. 338) during their meaning-oriented activities. A plausible explanation for this finding is that students perceived morphosyntactic errors (e.g., errors in particle, verb form, tense form) as less prominent since morphosyntactic errors did not hinder them from comprehending what other students were trying to express in their blog posts (Harley, 1994; Kessler, 2009). By contrast, students paid more attention to lexical errors (e.g., errors in spelling, definition) because such errors could lead them to misinterpret the contents of other students’ blog posts. For example, the present study mentioned earlier about an instance in which a student, Donald, incorrectly spelled the word “Wisconsin” and received form-oriented feedback from one of his female classmates. Perhaps the fact that she was not able to tell where Donald originally came from urged her to question him about what the word “*Wosukonshi*” meant in English. According to the data collected from survey questionnaires, many students felt that their L2 vocabulary knowledge increased as a result of reading other students’ blog entries. The data reconfirms the finding noted above that lexical items rather than morphosyntactic items were the ones that appeared more prominent to novice L2 learners during their blog-based online interactions.

## **VII. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

In addition to the findings discussed above, the present study provides several important pedagogical implications for “learner-initiated attention to form” within meaning-oriented activities. First, L2 instructors teaching at the beginning level will need to have highly structured classroom activities if they wish their L2 students to maintain “an ideal equilibrium of attention to form and meaning” (Williams, 1999, p. 336). As the

findings in the present study suggested, novice L2 learners are less likely to take the initiative to address issues of form if they perceive the activities to be more meaning-oriented. This implies that a minimal level of facilitation from the instructors is needed to elicit L2 learners' autonomous attention to formal aspect of the language during their meaning-oriented activities. As for the specific minimal level of facilitation, the present study would like to recommend the instructors to provide it at least three times throughout the entire meaning-based activities. Ideally speaking, once prior to the activities, another one during the activities and another one again after the activities. Second, L2 instructors at all levels should not be romanced into thinking that a "student-only" online environment alone would spontaneously lead to foster learner autonomy because the students' lack of psychological motives in being responsible for their own learning process may sometimes affect their learner autonomy to be further developed. In order to facilitate the development of learner autonomy in any L2 classrooms, both classroom environment and the individual characteristics of each student must be taken into account in the first place (Oxford, 2003). Finally, given that novice L2 learners are likely to focus on lexical items rather than morphosyntactic items during their meaning-oriented activities, L2 instructors should design the type of classroom activity that initially encourages L2 learners to notice lexical errors in the target linguistic items. As their L2 proficiency level increases, the instructors should gradually increase the complexity of the activity by encouraging their students to devote attention to both lexical meaning and morphosyntactic aspects of the target linguistic items.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of the present study was to explore the possibility of novice L2 learners exhibiting their autonomous abilities in devoting attention to formal aspect of the language in a student-only online environment. The findings of the present study have been consistent with previous studies by Kessler (2009) and Williams (1999). First, novice L2 learners are capable of autonomously attending to form even when they are engaged in meaning-oriented activities although the chances might be very low. This indicates that the facilitation of the instructor is needed at some point in order to encourage their students to initiate form-oriented interaction. Another finding was that the possibility of novice L2 learners showing their obligations and willingness towards the corrections of other students' language production might depend on their internal motives. Their lack of interest in checking other students' grammatical accuracy may be attributable to the fact that they have not yet gained enough L2 knowledge for noticing errors. Thus, the goals of the class activities should always be clearly presented to L2 learners if the instructors are interested in training their students to be attentive to both form and meaning. Lastly, the errors in lexical meaning rather than grammatical form appear more prominent to novice L2 learners because those are the ones that have a potential to affect their communication. This implies that the instructors at beginning levels should not immediately expect their students to attend to every formal aspect of the target language. Needless to say, more future research on learner-initiated attention to form in teacherless L2 online environment is needed in order to enhance the conclusions of the present study.

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## Appendix A.

**Table 1.** *Demographic Information about Participants*

Category	Level	Number	Percentage*
Gender	Male	34	47%
	Female	39	53%
Age	18-19	32	44%
	20-21	15	21%
	22-23	11	15%
	Over 24	15	21%
Native Language	English	53	73%
	Chinese	8	11%
	Korean	8	11%
	French	2	3%
	Spanish	1	1%
	Unanswered	1	1%
School Year	Freshman	22	30%
	Sophomore	14	19%
	Junior	10	14%
	Senior	8	11%
	Graduate	17	23%
	Others	2	3%
Major	East Asian Studies	18	25%
	Engineering	7	10%
	Natural Science	4	6%
	Economics	3	4%
	Math	3	4%
	Computer Science	2	3%
	Business	2	3%
	Others (Liberal Arts)	12	16%
	Undecided	22	30%

Note.  $N = 73$ .

\*Percentages are rounded to the second decimal point. Percentages may not equal 100 % due to rounding.

**Appendix B.**  
*A Blog Project Questionnaire*

**SECTION I. Types of Blog Activities**

Please read each sentence carefully and choose the degree to which you agree or disagree.

Choose only one answer for each sentence.  
Do not leave out any of the sentences.

**1. I liked expressing myself on blog by writing about various topics. \***

(e.g. my life, interests, thoughts, experiences, future plans, etc.)

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

**2. I liked using audio and/or visual aid(s) to express myself on blog. \***

(e.g. pictures, photos, videos, etc.)

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

**3. I liked reading others' blog entries. \***

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

**4. I liked reading the comments left on my blog entries and/or others' blog entries. \***

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

**5. I liked interacting with my teacher and/or my classmates through blog use. \***

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

**6. I liked interacting with people outside the class through blog use. \***

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

7. I liked working with my classmates during the lab activities, to see if my understandings of the lab activity instructions written in Japanese were correct or not. \*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

8. I liked sharing thoughts, ideas, and/or opinions with my classmates for posting group responses to the class blog entries titled under "today's lab activities". \*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

9. I liked conversing with my teacher and/or my classmates about blog entries or any other topics related to blog use during the lab activities. \*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree       Strongly Agree

## SECTION II. Perceived Learning Outcomes Through Blog Use

1. Which of the following statements describe your perceived learning outcomes through blog use? Check all that apply to you. \*

If you select "other", please write your specific answer on the little box.

- Through blog use, I learned new Japanese vocabularies that were relevant to my interests.
- Through blog use, I learned new Kanji characters that were relevant to my interests.
- Through blog use, I learned new Japanese grammar that were relevant to my interests.
- Through blog use, I learned Japanese culture.
- Through blog use, I learned typing skills in Japanese.
- Through blog use, I learned how to use online Japanese tools.
- Through blog use, I learned how to communicate in Japanese.
- Other:

**2. Give some examples of Question 1. \***

**3. Did you like blogging? Why (not)? \***

**4. How can this project be improved in future? Any suggestions? Any Comments? \***

### Section III. Student Information

**Please select your Japanese section from the list below. \***

Section 1 (10:35-)

**Please write your name or initials \***

**Appendix C.**

**Table 2.** *Number of Blog Posts with LREs and Number of Blog Posts with Non-LREs*

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<b>Category</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
LREs	21	6.8%
Non-LREs	287	93.2%

---

Note.  $N = 308$ . LREs = Language Related Episodes; Non-LREs = Non-Language Related Episodes.

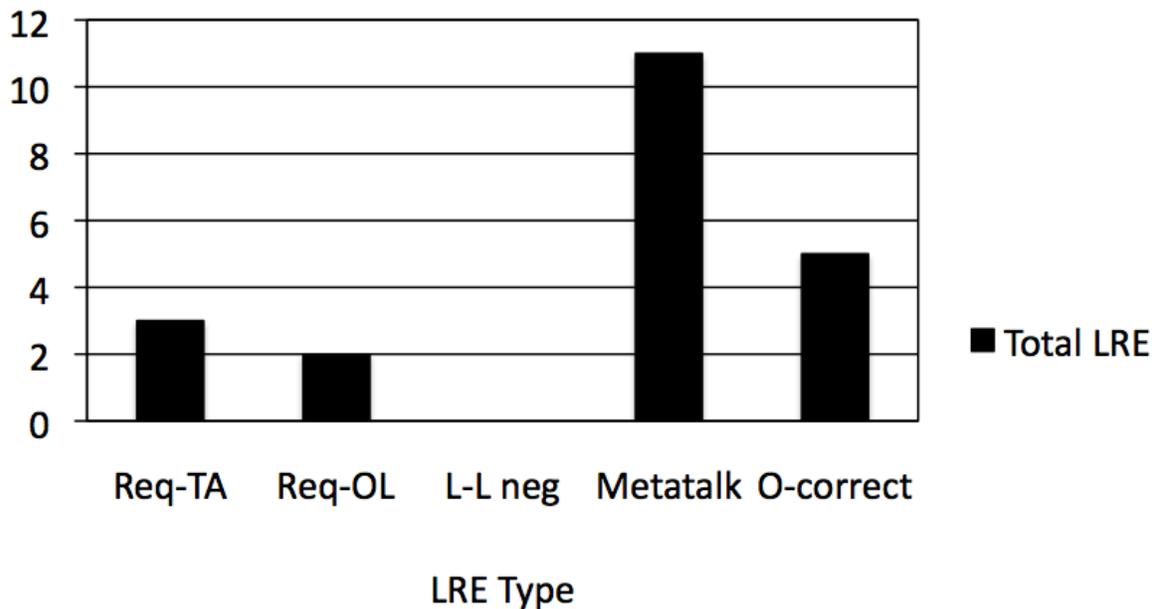
**Appendix D.**

**Table 3.** *Number of LREs by LRE Type*

LRE Type	Number of LREs	Percentage
Req-TA	3	14.3%
Req-OL	2	9.5%
L-L neg	0	0%
Metatalk	11	52.4%
O-correct	5	23.8%

Note.  $N = 21$ . Req-TA = request to teaching assistant; Req-OL = request to other learner; L-L neg = learner-learner negotiation; O-correct = other correction.

**Figure 1.** *Number of LREs by LRE Type*



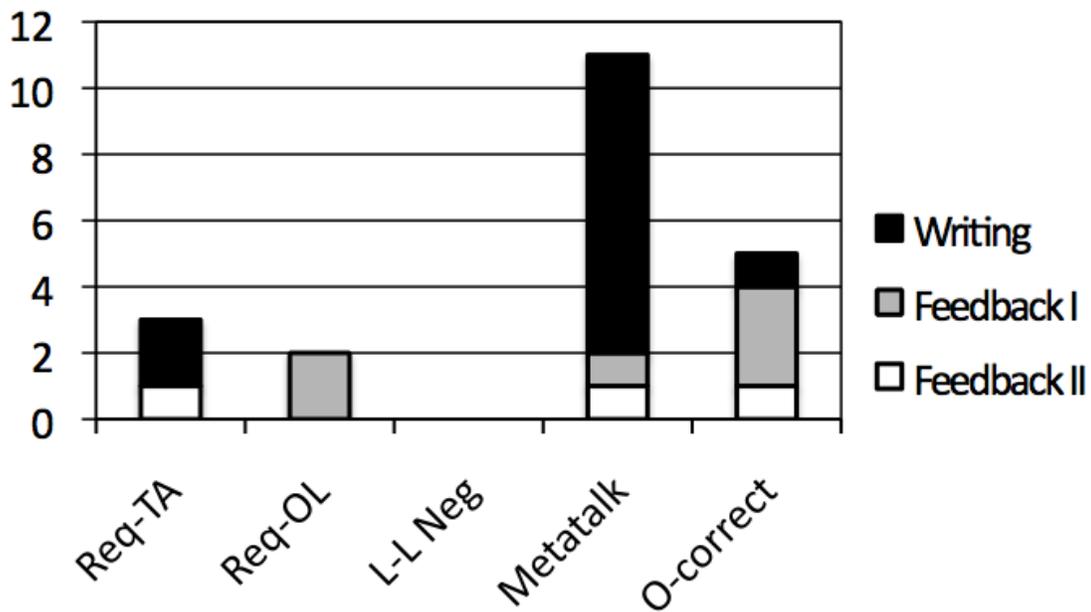
**Appendix E.**

**Table 4.** Number of LREs by Activity Type

<u>LRE type</u>	<u>Activity type</u>		
	Writing	Feedback I	Feedback II
Req-TA	2	0	1
Req-OL	0	2	0
L-L neg	0	0	0
Metatalk	9	1	1
O-Correct	1	3	1
Totals	12	6	3
Percentages	57.1 %	28.6 %	14.3%

Note.  $N = 21$ . Req-TA = request to teaching assistant; Req-OL = request to other learner; L-L neg = learner-learner negotiation; O-correct = other correction; Writing = writing one's own blog entry; Feedback I = commenting on other's blog entry; Feedback II = responding to the comments left by others.

**Figure 2.** Number of LREs by Activity Type



**Appendix F.****Table 5.** *Number of LREs With Grammatical Categories*

---

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of LREs</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Definition	4	15.4%
Spelling	6	23.1%
Particle	3	11.5%
Word Choice	3	11.5%
Verb Form	2	7.7%
Verb Choice	1	3.8%
Omit Verb	1	3.8%
Omit Subject	1	3.8%
Sentence Order	1	3.8%
Tense Form	1	3.8%
Other	3	11.5%

---

Note.  $N = 26$

\*Percentages are rounded to the third decimal point. Percentages may not equal 100 % due to rounding.