

College Students' Opinions of Proofreading Marks in English Composition Classes

Peter GRAY

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[Abstract]

A survey given to 205 university students majoring in English and enrolled in required English composition classes shows four main results. (a) Students find the proofreading marks used at the university easy to understand. (b) Students' opinions of the proofreading marks change very little throughout their two years of study. (c) For a variety of reasons, most students desire comprehensive teacher corrective feedback. (d) Students are aware of many resources that they can use to learn on their own, but it is unclear how often or how well students actually use those resources. Being aware of student opinions about corrective feedback can help composition teachers use it more effectively.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the results of a survey about students' opinions of the specific proofreading marks used for corrective feedback in English composition classes in the English Department of Hokusei Gakuen University, Sapporo. At this university, students are required to take two years of English composition classes. Each class meets once a week for 90 minutes, with a total of 30 classes in the academic year (two 15-week semesters). In both years, the students are divided randomly into five classes with approximately 25 students in each class. The classes are taught in computer labs, and students write all assignments on a computer. All students use the same textbook, one textbook in the first year and a different textbook in the second year. All classes are taught by native speakers of English and conducted in English. Students have one teacher during their first year and a different teacher in their second year.

In first-year classes, students spend most of the year writing paragraphs. Near the end

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of the second semester, they write one short essay. In second-year classes, students write academic essays, usually four to five paragraphs in length, and learn basic research and documentation practices. Both first and second-year classes focus on academic writing, and the students learn various rhetorical modes such as definition, narrative, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and opinion.

The composition teachers are given a general set of guidelines concerning class goals, homework assignments, and classroom procedures; however, each teacher decides the order and pace at which his class will use the textbook and also decides the specific topics of homework assignments. Two procedures that all the composition teachers follow are (1) to have students submit writing assignments twice, first as a rough draft, on which the teacher provides corrective feedback, and then as a final copy, and (2) to use a set of standardized proofreading marks when giving corrective feedback. The same standardized proofreading marks are used in all first and second-year classes.

The 15 simple proofreading marks (Appendix 1) were devised by the composition staff specifically for the students at this university. Five of the marks allow the teachers to directly correct a mistake, and these are used when the teachers feel that a mistake is too difficult for students to correct on their own. The other ten marks point out a mistake and give a hint about how the mistake should be corrected. Students must then think of the correct answer on their own. In addition to using these standardized proofreading marks, teachers also write general comments about content and organization on students' rough drafts.

A survey (Appendix 2) was given to all first and second-year composition students in order to investigate three things. (a) How easy do the students find the proofreading marks to understand? (b) Do students' opinions of the proofreading marks change from their first to second year? (c) What are the students' opinions of teacher corrective feedback in general?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The survey was answered by first and second-year English Department students who were enrolled in required composition classes. All of the students were Japanese nationals who attended local Japanese schools from elementary through high school before entering university, although a small percentage of them had lived abroad in an English speaking country from six months to one year before entering university. Approximately 84% of the students were female and 16% were male.

2.2 Procedure

The survey was given to the students in January 2013, near the end of the 2012 academic year. Students were given 15 minutes in class to complete the survey. A total of 205 students (109 first-year; 96 second-year) did the survey, although a few of them did not answer all the questions. The number of students who did the survey was less than the total enrollment because some students were absent on the day that the survey was given.

3. Results and Discussion of Part A

In Part A of the survey, students were asked to rate nine proofreading marks using a five-point Likert Scale from “Easy to Understand” (1) to “Hard to Understand” (5). Table 1 shows the proofreading marks in the order that students rated them from easiest to hardest to understand, describes the type of mistake that each mark is used for, gives the number on which it appeared on the survey, and shows the average score given to that mark by all students.

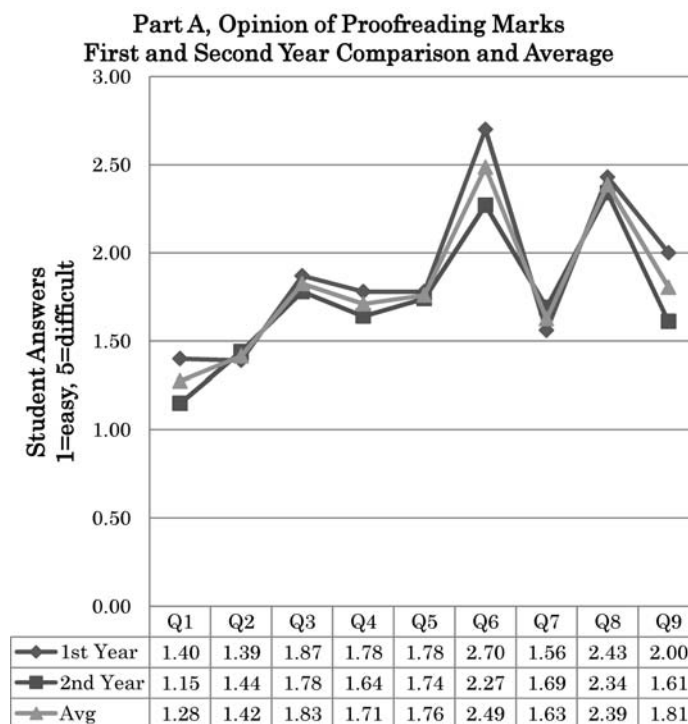
Table 1 Rating of Proofreading Marks from Easiest to Hardest

<u>Order</u>	<u>Type of Mistake (No. on Survey)</u>	<u>Average Score</u>
1	Capitalization (1)	1.28
2	Spacing (2)	1.42
3	Missing Word (7)	1.63
4	Spelling (4)	1.71
5	Grammar (5)	1.76
6	Word Order (9)	1.81
7	Punctuation (3)	1.83
8	Garbled Sentence (8)	2.39
9	Word Choice (6)	2.49

Generally, the students rated the proofreading marks as easy to understand. Seven of the marks were given a score between 1 and 2, and the most difficult one received the score of 2.49. There was only a .55 point spread in the difficulty of the seven marks which students rated as the easiest to understand, but a .56 point jump between those marks and the last two marks. One possible reason for this difference is that both No. 8 (garbled sentence) and No. 6 (word choice) mark mistakes in which students have written something that they think is correct but which they must completely rewrite, requiring students to think again from scratch rather than simply changing a word or phrase that is partially correct.

Figure 1 compares how first and second-year students rated these nine proofreading marks and also shows the average score of all students. Students in both years rated the marks similarly with only small differences between the two years. Second-year students rated all the marks as somewhat easier to understand than the first-year students with the exceptions of No. 2 (spacing) and No. 7 (missing word), which first-year students rated as slightly easier.

Figure 1



These results suggest three things. (a) The students quickly learn the proofreading marks in their first year, and they find these marks generally easy to understand. (b) The students' opinion of the proofreading marks changes very little during their two years of taking composition classes. These two results confirm the general experience of the composition teachers, who find that the proofreading marks are easy to teach to first-year students, and that using standardized marks for both years eliminates confusion when students have a different teacher in their second year. (c) Students find some of the proofreading marks more difficult to understand than others. Being aware of which proofreading marks the students find more difficult to understand should help the teachers use these marks more effectively.

4. Results and Discussion of Part C

Part C of the survey was designed to see if there was a correlation between how easy to understand the students rated the marks and how well students could actually make corrections using the marks, so this part will be discussed before Part B. The students were asked to correct a paragraph in which mistakes were marked with eight of the nine proofreading marks in Part A. Proofreading mark No. 8 (garbled sentence) was not included because it was thought to be too unnatural for students to correct. Generally, students write a

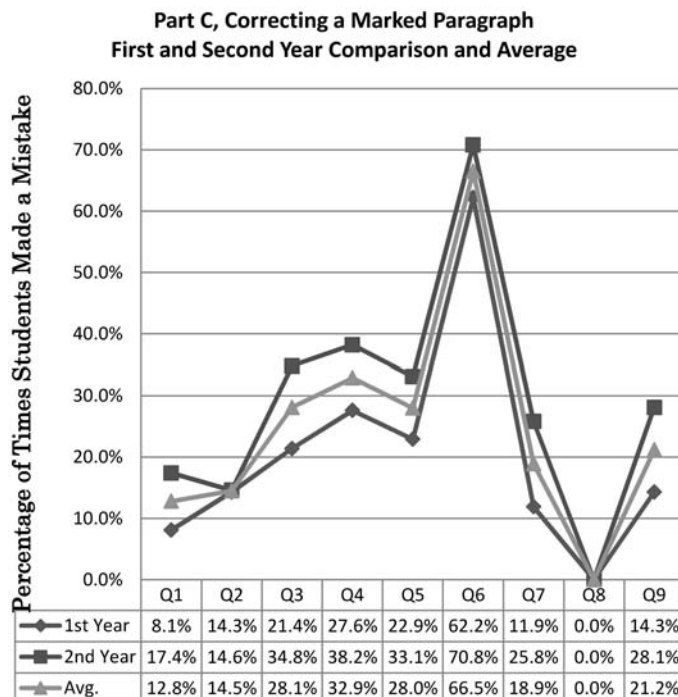
garbled sentence when they know what they want to say in Japanese but can't express their idea in English due to lack of vocabulary or weak syntactical knowledge. Asking students to guess the meaning of a garbled sentence written by someone else seemed too difficult a task to be a useful question. There were 15 mistakes in the paragraph in Part C, and the mistakes corresponded to the proofreading marks in Part A as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Correspondence between Part A Marks and Part C Mistakes

Part A Marks	Part C Mistakes
1. Capitalization	1, 8
2. Spacing	4
3. Punctuation	9, 15
4. Spelling	2, 6
5. Grammar	3, 11
6. Word Choice	7, 12, 14
7. Missing Word	5, 13
8. Garbled Sentence	Not used
9. Word Order	10

Part C was graded and then the percentage of times students could not correct the indicated mistakes was calculated. Figure 2 shows the results of first and second-year students and the average of all students.

Figure 2



Somewhat surprisingly, the first-year students corrected the mistakes better than the second-year students for all eight marks that were tested. It had been expected that just as the second-year students had rated the proofreading marks as slightly easier to understand in Part A, they would be able to make more corrections in Part C. Why did this happen? Perhaps the first-year students were just better. Perhaps the second-year students didn't take the survey as seriously as the first-year students and made more careless mistakes. Perhaps some other dynamics were at play. To know if these results were an anomaly or a consistent pattern, this questionnaire would have to be given over the course of several years.

Table 3 compares student opinions of the proofreading marks in Part A, from easiest to understand (1) to most difficult (9), and their ability to correct mistakes that were indicated with the same marks in Part C, from most correct (1) to least correct (8). There was a high degree of correspondence between the students' opinion of a mark and their ability to use the mark to make corrections. The two largest differences were with No. 4 (spelling), which the students rated as easier to understand but had trouble correcting, and No. 9 (word order), which the students rated as more difficult to understand but corrected fairly well.

Table 3 Comparison of Part A Rating and Part C Corrections

<u>Proofreading Mark</u>	<u>Part A Rating</u>	<u>Part C Corrections</u>
1. Capitalization	1	1
2. Spacing	2	2
3. Punctuation	7	6
4. Spelling	4	7
5. Grammar	5	5
6. Word Choice	9	8
7. Missing Word	3	3
8. Garbled Sentence	Not used	
9. Word Order	6	4

The students found question 7 in Part C the most difficult. It was a wrong word question in which they had to correct the clause "but many people also see a special church service." Most students wrote a variant of "see" such as "watch" or "look" rather than a correct verb such as "go to" or "attend." This question may have been particularly difficult because "go to church" is not a culture specific idea for Japanese students, even though it is a common phrase in most English speaking countries. Although this one question may have skewed the results a bit, according to this survey, and according to the teachers' general experience in grading papers, wrong word is consistently one of the hardest types of mistakes for students to correct. This would suggest that lack of vocabulary is one of the biggest weaknesses that Japanese students have as writers.

Part C of the questionnaire was too limited a sample to determine with full accuracy which types of mistakes students find the most difficult to correct, though the results mirrored the general experience of the teachers. A more accurate method would be to compare the

rough drafts and final copies that students submit throughout a given period of time and tabulate the mistakes students are able to correct.

5. Results and Discussion of Part B

Part B of the survey had three questions that were intended to ask students to look beyond the proofreading marks and think about teacher correction and learning to write in general. Because Question 3 does not apply directly to teacher correction, those results are not discussed in this paper.

5.1 Question 1

In Question 1, the students circled a percentage to indicate how much teacher correction they wanted, and then they wrote free answers to explain their choice. The average amount of correction desired by all students in each year differed by only one point: 83% for first-year students and 84% for second-year students; however, there was great variety between individual students.

The results indicate that these students want and expect teachers to correct most of the mistakes in their writing. It is difficult to know how much of this attitude is formed before students enter university and how much of it is formed due to the way university composition classes are taught. However, for teachers, several issues seem relevant. If students want a lot of correction, what is the best way to give them corrective feedback that actually helps them improve their writing? And closely related to this, how quickly can students be expected to internalize and correctly use the knowledge gained from corrective feedback? How much do teachers want students to rely on teacher correction? If teachers want students to rely less on teacher correction, how can that attitude be fostered, and how can students learn to use the necessary tools to become more autonomous learners?

Table 4 shows the results of the students' free answers to Question 1. The answers have been paraphrased and grouped together in similar ideas, and the number of first and second-year students that wrote each idea is indicated. Some students wrote more than one idea, and some students didn't write a reason for their choice. This rather long list shows the variety of opinions that students have about the process of learning to write in English.

Table 4 Students' Answers to Part B, Question 1

Students who want 100% correction (52% of all students)		
<u>Answers</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
I want to write correctly/perfectly.	18	15
I can't find all mistakes by myself.	15	12
It helps me. I learn from my mistakes.	4	9
I want to study hard/improve.	4	8
I don't want to remember mistakes.	3	2
Correction by native speaker is best.	2	1
Teachers correct mistakes clearly.	1	1
Teachers should correct mistakes.	1	1
Students who want 80% correction (27% of all students)		
<u>Answers</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
I should learn to correct (some) by myself.	8	12
I can't find all mistakes by myself.	4	7
I want to write correctly/perfectly.	5	2
I want to improve my writing.	3	2
Too much correction hurts my confidence.	2	1
Think by myself. Teacher isn't always correct.	0	3
I don't want to remember mistakes.	2	1
It helps me. I learn from my mistakes.	0	2
Correcting everything is hard for teachers.	1	0
Students who want 60% correction (11% of all students)		
<u>Answers</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
I should learn to correct (some) by myself.	3	7
I can't find all mistakes by myself.	3	3
I want to learn from my mistakes.	1	1
Teacher corrections don't help students.	1	1
Too much correction hurts my confidence.	1	1
Students who want 40% correction (7% of all students)		
<u>Answers</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
I should learn to correct by myself.	5	5
I can't find all mistakes by myself.	1	1
I want to learn from my mistakes.	1	0
I'm not good at grammar.	1	0
Students who want 20% or 0% correction (3% of all students)		
<u>Answers</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
I should learn to correct by myself.	3	2

Just over half (52%) of the students said they want their teacher to correct 100% of their mistakes. The reasons students listed for this opinion fall into three basic categories. First, students have a desire to improve their writing ability, with many of them describing their ultimate goal as becoming "correct" or "perfect." This opinion presents a delicate problem for teachers. How can teachers harness students' enthusiasm for learning while at the same time helping them set realistic goals for their two years of university composition classes?

Perfection is impossible; noticeable improvement is the goal.

The second most mentioned reason for desiring 100% correction was the feeling that without a teacher's help students cannot find or correct many of their writing errors. This reason seems to be a realistic assessment of their own ability, and it points out the responsibility that teachers have to intelligently use corrective feedback in such a way as to help students improve their writing skills.

The final main reason students listed for wanting 100% correction was the belief that making mistakes is like coming to a fork in the road of learning. Going down one path, students can learn from their mistakes and improve. Going down the other path, students will memorize mistakes and eventually fossilize them. Although this belief does not take into consideration the amount of time and repetition often necessary for ESL learners to internalize new language, it is how many Japanese ESL students seem to approach learning English.

The next group of students (27%) said that they wanted the teacher to correct about 80% of their mistakes. Interestingly, the most common reason listed for this was that they wanted to learn to correct some mistakes on their own. This reason was not written by any of the students who wanted 100% correction, but it was the most common reason listed by the students who desired from 80% to 0% correction. This seems to indicate that many students are open to the idea of learner autonomy and see it as an educational goal.

The other reasons listed by students who desired 80% correction mirrored the reasons listed by the students who wanted 100% correction: the desire to write correctly, the realization that the teacher can help them, and the opinion that mistakes can lead to either improvement or fossilization of problems. One new idea in this group was that students said they might be discouraged by seeing too many corrections.

A total of 20% of the students said that they wanted from 60% to 0% correction. Their answers were similar to those of the students who choose 80%. Perhaps they wanted less correction because they had a stronger desire to be able to learn on their own.

5.2 Question 2

Table 5 shows the students' free answers to the question, "If you are not sure how to write something correctly, how do you try to find the correct way to write it?" Students could write more than one answer, and a total of 200 students wrote 357 ideas. The variety of answers on this list shows that students are aware of many methods for learning on their own. After the answers were tallied, they were divided into three groups: (a) written resources, (b) human resources, and (c) various other methods; and the number of students who wrote each answer is indicated.

Table 5 Answers to Part B, Question 2

<u>Written Sources</u>	<u>Year 1</u>	<u>Year 2</u>
(Electronic) dictionary	59	53
Internet dictionary	27	23
Textbook	10	6
MS Word correction function	2	6
Grammar book	3	3
Class handouts	3	1
Reference book	2	3
Other paragraphs/essays	1	2
<u>Human Resources</u>		
Teacher	41	29
Friends/classmates	29	26
English speaking friend	5	1
<u>Various Other Methods</u>		
Translate from Japanese	6	3
Just writing something	1	4
Use easy words/grammar	2	0
Reread what I wrote	2	2
Wait a day and try writing again	0	1
Try to remember grammar	1	0

In the first group of answers, most students wrote “dictionary,” but it can be assumed they meant electronic dictionary because nearly all of the students at this university have an electronic dictionary. Students are also aware of and have access to many Internet dictionaries and translation sites (specific ones mentioned include Aruku, Lang-8, Eijiro, and ALC), but they may not be utilizing them effectively. A fair number of students also listed textbooks as a resource, but although the two composition textbooks used at this university are good sources of information about paragraph/essay structure and the writing process, they offer only limited help for grammar and vocabulary problems.

In the second group of answers, the teacher was the person most students said they turned to for help. Friends and classmates were a close second to teachers, and this seems to indicate that students are willing to ask each other for help. This suggests that well designed small group activities and peer feedback sessions could be an integral part of composition classes.

The opinions expressed by the students in their answers to Part B, Questions 1 and 2, suggest several general types of educational activities concerning corrective feedback that might be useful in composition classes. (a) Doing some type of survey or brainstorming activity which asks students how much correction they want, and then discussing this issue in class, might heighten students’ awareness of the possibilities and the limitations of teacher corrective feedback. (b) Using class time to introduce, explain, and let students practice using various on-line resources could be effective in fostering learner independence. Just telling students that certain resources are available is not effective; students can benefit most from

guided practice in using each resource. (c) Actively incorporating peer feedback activities into classes could also help develop student autonomy.

6. Conclusion

A survey such as this serves two purposes. (a) The teachers at the university where the survey was given receive valuable, detailed information about the methods they are using from the students they are teaching. (b) Other teachers can compare the educational system and the student opinions described in this paper with their own classroom situations and students, perhaps finding useful ideas that either confirm their educational methods or help them to devise alternative methods.

For the composition teachers at this university, the results of Part A of the survey confirm their general impression that the standardized proofreading marks, which they devised specifically for these students, are an easy-to-understand and appropriate tool for the students. Part C of the survey illustrates the well-known fact that students are not able to correct all mistakes even if the mistakes are clearly pointed out. Also, the surprising result that first-year students corrected mistakes better than second-year students makes the teachers wonder which factors besides the use of these proofreading marks may have contributed to these results. The students' answers to Part C give the teachers a clear idea of why these students generally want extensive corrective feedback, and they provide detailed information that might help the teachers devise other educational activities that will foster student autonomy. For teachers of different students in other educational situations, it is hoped that certain details in the results of this survey will provide them with ideas that help them remain innovative in their teaching and open to the opinions of their students.

Appendix 1

Proofreading Marks Handout for Students

Proofreading

Type of Correction	Example Sentence with Mistakes and Proofreading Marks <i>Corrected Sentence</i>
Delete this Word	I have ever been to Hawaii. <i>I have been to Hawaii.</i>
Use this Word	Next summer I want to take a travel ^{trip} to Canada. <i>Next summer I want to take a trip to Canada.</i>
Punctuation Mistake (delete, add, or change)	Were your mother and father born on May 21, 1955? <i>Were your mother and father born on May 21, 1955?</i>
Spelling Mistake	My high school <u>freinds</u> and I went to <u>Disney land</u> . <i>My high school friends and I went to Disneyland.</i>
Capitalization Mistake	My favorite <u>japanese</u> food is <u>SUSHI</u> . <i>My favorite Japanese food is sushi.</i>
Insert a Space	My livingroom is quite large (about 20 square meters). <i>My living room is quite large (about 20 square meters).</i>
Insert a Word	I'd like to see a soccer at the Sapporo Dome in future. <i>I'd like to see a soccer game at the Sapporo Dome in the future</i>
Grammar Mistake (Use the same word but change the grammar)	Many <u>freshman</u> <u>join</u> the Yosakoi Club last week, and now it <u>have</u> become the <u>big</u> club at Hokusei University. <i>Many freshmen joined the Yosakoi Club last week, and now it has become the biggest club at Hokusei University.</i>
Wrong Word (Use a different word)	My favorite ski <u>park</u> is near Aspen, Colorado. <i>My favorite ski slope is near Aspen, Colorado.</i>

Marks

Type of Correction	Example Sentence with Mistakes and Proofreading Marks <i>Corrected Sentence</i>
Word Order Mistake	<p>I always keep ^{WO} in my wallet a picture of my ^{WO} best very friend. (or)</p> <p>I always keep <u>in my wallet</u> a picture of my <u>best very</u> friend. ↘</p> <p><i>I always keep a picture of my very best friend in my wallet.</i></p>
Fragment	<p>I'm not going out tonight. ^{frag} Because I'm too tired.</p> <p><i>I'm not going out tonight because I'm too tired.</i></p>
Combine these Sentences	<p>I went to a concert last night. It was a classical concert. It was at Kitara Concert Hall.</p> <p><i>I went to a classical concert last night at Kitara Concert Hall.</i></p>
Not Understandable (Completely rewrite the sentence)	<p>Yesterday because she separated me for her broken heart.</p> <p><i>Yesterday my girlfriend broke up with me because she said I broke her heart.</i></p>
Indent	<p>→ Beginning is often the hardest part of a job.</p> <p><i>Beginning is often the hardest part of a job.</i></p>
Teacher's Mistake (Your original word was correct)	<p>Please call me on my cell phone sometime ^{by} after 10:00 PM.</p> <p><i>Please call me on my cell phone sometime ^{ok} after 10:00 PM.</i></p>

Appendix 2

Survey Given to Students

Hokusei Gakuen University
January 2013

Proofreading Marks Survey

Part A) Circle one number to show your opinion of the following proofreading marks.

	<i>Easy to Understand</i>	←—————→			<i>Difficult to Understand</i>
1. ^{cap} <u>this</u> sentence has a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
2. This sentence has ^Y <u>a</u> mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
3. This sentence has a mistake [△] <u>△</u> .	1	2	3	4	5
4. This sentence has a ^{sp} <u>mis</u> stake.	1	2	3	4	5
5. This sentence ^g <u>have</u> a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
6. This ^{ww} <u>par</u> agraph has a mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
7. This sentence [△] <u>a</u> mistake.	1	2	3	4	5
8. <u>This words wrong is way.</u>	1	2	3	4	5
9. This <u>has</u> <u>sentence</u> a mistake	1	2	3	4	5

Part B) Answer these questions in your own words. If you cannot express your ideas clearly in English, Japanese is OK.

1. How many of your writing mistakes do you want the teacher to correct? Circle one number and then explain why you say that.

a) 100% b) 80% c) 60% d) 40% e) 20% f) 0%

Why?

2. If you are not sure how to write something correctly, how do you try to find the correct way to write it? (More than one answer is OK.)

3. What helps you most to improve your writing? (More than one answer is OK.)

Hokusei Gakuen University
January 2013

Part C) Correct each mistake that is marked in this paragraph. Write your answers above each mistake.

^{cap}
Two favorite Holidays

Although American Christmas and Japanese New Year are celebrated for ^{sp}quiet different reasons, the way they are celebrated has several interesting similarities. Both holidays have special ^gdecoration that people put in homes and in public^Y places. People give presents on both holidays. In America, family and friends exchange Christmas presents, and ^{sp}recieve New Year's money, called *otoshidama*, from parents and relatives. American Christmas activities center on the family, but many people also ^{ww}see a special ^{cap}Church service. Similarly ^{cap}Japanese New Year is very much a family event, but many people also visit a Shinto shrine to pray for happiness for the New Year. Just as Americans celebrate traditionally Christmas with lots of special foods, Japanese also enjoy ^geat many traditional New Year's foods. Finally, if you ask Americans what ^{ww}our favorite holiday is, most of them will answer, "Christmas." If ^{cap}ask Japanese the same question, most of them will say, "New Year." You will never mistake American Christmas ^{ww}to Japanese New Year ^{cap}but underneath the outer differences there are many underlying similarities to these two favorite holidays.

Thank you for your help.