

## *Learners' Perceptions of Difficulties in Orally Producing English Sentences*

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### **Abstract**

Japanese English learners struggle to speak English as they have few opportunities to use it in a truly immersive setting. We attempted to develop a new system for English-speaking practice to address this challenge. Our research suggests that Japanese students feel challenged when using English words and phrases orally, even if they know them. This study examines their perceived difficulties in the oral production of English sentences to identify the specific language items posing challenges. To ascertain the subjective difficulty levels of 60 English sentences, we administer pre- and post-practice questionnaires to 71 Japanese university students. The study's results indicate that after practice, the average difficulty scores of 43 sentences are significantly lower, 14 sentences show no significant differences, and the average scores of the remaining three sentences slightly increase. These results suggest that short sentences, familiar content, and expressing sentences in chronological order are recommended strategies when learning unknown or unfamiliar words and phrases. The results also indicate that students need oral practice to fluently use inanimate subject sentences, causative verbs, phrasal verbs, relative pronouns, and sentences leaving out object pronouns. Additionally, using adverbs, such as “completely” is difficult for Japanese learners. Although further investigations are required, learners' subjective perceptions of difficulty in the pre- and post-practice questionnaires clarify which language items are easier to handle. Furthermore, we aim to clarify the role of subjective evaluation of learner difficulties in spoken English by focusing on specific grammar and constructions, as well as controlling the length of target sentences.

Keywords: Difficulty Perception of Japanese Learners of English, Foreign Language Use, Foreign Language Learning System, English-Speaking Practice

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## Introduction

As part of the country's significant efforts toward globalization, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2015) has developed an English proficiency promotion plan to develop English communication skills among Japanese students. With the introduction of a new course of study, English education has become compulsory in elementary schools since 2020 (MEXT, 2019). Between the third and fourth grades, English becomes a "foreign language activity." In the fifth and sixth grades, English is adopted as a subject called "foreign language." Such reforms are expected to produce significant changes in English education.

Given that Japanese students have limited opportunities to practice English in their everyday life outside language classes, they lack confidence when speaking English (Kashiwagi, Kang, & Ohtsuki, 2018). Specifically, Japanese students experience difficulties speaking English even while knowing the correct words and phrases.

Therefore, a suitable English-speaking environment is necessary for Japanese learners to develop oral proficiency. We have been developing a prototype system for practicing English-speaking (Kashiwagi, Kang, & Ohtsuki, 2020). To promote English-speaking practices in our system, we believe that learners' self-reflective evaluations of learning items may play a crucial role.

Reflection is an essential skill that learners are expected to acquire (OECD, 2005) and a key to learning (Waguri, 2010). Therefore, considerable research has been conducted on successfully promoting reflection (Mori, Amioka, Egi, & Ozawa, 2018; Onoda & Shinogaya, 2014). For example, Chang (2019) promoted reflective learning by identifying foundational features of reflection in learning. While self-reflection may sometimes be unreliable, failing to reflect the learner's actual performance (Todd, 2002), it can raise learners' awareness of language use and develop learner responsibility and autonomy (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskienė, 2007). Thus, this study attempted to incorporate subjective difficulty ratings to improve English-speaking practice.

To this end, we administered pre- and post-practice questionnaires to ascertain the subjective difficulty levels of various English sentences among Japanese university students. While acknowledging that some sentences may never be produced smoothly, we conducted pre- and post-practice assessments to observe detailed changes in the perceived difficulty of the sentences after practice. This would allow for identifying specific items students find particularly challenging during language use. We investigated the following research questions:

- RQ1. Are there any English sentences in which students' perception of difficulty decreases after practice? What characteristics can be observed in these sentences?
- RQ2. Are there any English sentences in which students' perception of difficulty does not change after practice? What characteristics can be observed in these sentences?
- RQ3. Could incorporating subjective difficulty ratings in the language learning system help further develop English-speaking practice?

RQ1 and RQ2 aim to identify which language items provide more difficulties for learners in spoken English. RQ3 investigates whether learners' subjective difficulty ratings in pre- and post-practice questionnaires can help improve English-speaking practices.

## Methods

### *Participants*

This study recruited 71 first-year students in three classes at a university in Japan (29 in the Engineering class, 20 in the Global Human Sciences class, and 22 in the Letters class). Table 1 reports the number of students and their majors. Students were informed of the study's purpose, and their informed consent to participate was obtained. They were further informed that their data would remain confidential.

<b>Class</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Major Field</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
<b>A</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Engineering	29
<b>B</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Global Human Sciences	20
<b>C</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Letters	22

Table 1: Number of participants and their major.

### *Data collection and analysis*

We administered two self-reflective questionnaires to gather responses from the students regarding their difficulty ratings for the 60 sentences listed in Table 2. These sentences are expressions related to daily life, including "School Life," "At the Office," and "Illness and Injury." We administered 60 sentences in three blocks of 20 sentences each.

<b>Review quiz</b>	<b>Sentence No.</b>	<b>Sentences</b>	<b>Number of words</b>
	1	You always wait until the last minute before you leave.	10
	2	(Responding to "Did you do your math homework?") I've got it all done today.	6
	3	What material will the test cover?	6
	4	The mock exam uses a computer-scored answer sheet.	8
	5	(Responding to "Did you study for your exams?") I only studied for one night.	6
	6	(Responding to "How did you do on the exam?") I guessed right about what would be on the exam.	10
	7	(Responding to "How did you do on the exam?") I had no idea there would be questions like that on the exam.	13
	8	If I flunk/fail this class, I'll have to repeat a year.	11
	9	(Responding to "Have you seen the department bulletin board?") It listed canceled and extra classes.	6

1	10	(Responding to “Is your job search coming along well?”) Things are pretty tough, you know.	6
	11	(Responding to “I’m going to the library to check out some books.”) You can check out up to five books at any one time.	12
	12	The lending period is two weeks, but this book is currently checked out.	13
	13	This book is not available to be checked out, so you’re welcome to use it in the library.	18
	14	(Responding to “Did you find the book you were looking for last week?”) I had them retrieve the book from the stacks.	9
	15	I used a fire extinguisher during a fire drill last year.	11
	16	I completely forgot that today was the due date for these library books.	13
	17	(Responding to “Did you find your library card?”) No, I had them reissue my library card.	8
	18	To run for the Vice President position in the student council, she will give a campaign speech at a school assembly.	21
	19	(Responding to “We wanted to win, but we weren’t ready for the game.”) The opposing team had a substantial physical advantage, so we should have come up with (devised) a game plan to make up for it.	23
	20	When I was a university student, I was a member of a student circle. We set up a yakisoba booth at the school/annual festival.	24
<hr/>			
	21	In the end, I went back to sleep.	8
	22	I take a shower.	4
	23	The mirror is fogged up.	5
	24	My hair is sticking out.	5
	25	My face is slightly swollen.	5
	26	My face looks awful.	4
	27	My skin feels nice and smooth.	6
	28	My mouth feels refreshed.	4
	29	I clear the breakfast dishes.	5
2	30	I put the garbage into the plastic trash bag.	9
	31	I take the garbage bags to the drop-off site.	9
	32	There was a flame war on his blog.	8
	33	If you receive junk/spam emails, you can block the email addresses you don’t want to receive messages from.	18
	34	My computer is broken. I’ll get it fixed. (I’ll have it repaired.)	8

	35	I got 10 likes.	4
	36	The battery runs out.	4
	37	I charge/recharge my smartphone.	4
	38	I make three copies of contracts on A4 paper.	9
	39	Could you enlarge this document from A4 to A3?	9
	40	This copier often gets jammed.	5
	41	It's not your fault.	4
	42	Don't push yourself too hard.	5
	43	Your snoring disturbed my sleep.	5
	44	You grind your teeth so loudly.	6
	45	I toss and turn a lot in my sleep.	9
	46	Zoning out is the best way to get rid of stress.	11
	47	I want to fix my stooped shoulders.	7
	48	He has bad breath.	5
	49	He is nerdy.	3
3	50	She dresses neatly.	3
	51	My eyes are itchy.	4
	52	I'd like to get a vaccination for the flu.	9
	53	It's a throbbing pain.	4
	54	I strained my back. It hurts so much.	8
	55	He might be depressed.	4
	56	Can you prescribe a Chinese herbal medicine?	7
	57	Do you have medicine for hay fever?	7
	58	Please give me a compress for my sprain.	8
	59	I have terribly stiff shoulders.	5
	60	My eyes are a bit irritated.	6

Table 2: 60 English sentences provided in the self-reflective questionnaires.

First, participants orally translated 20 sentences from Japanese to English during their English language class. We then asked them to rate the difficulty level of the sentences on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., “1” for *Easy*, “2” for *Relatively Easy*, “3” for *Neutral*, “4” for *Relatively Difficult*, and “5” for *Difficult*).

Next, we gave students the same Japanese sentences and their English translations for a review quiz. Students were given two weeks to practice speaking in English without looking at the text, after which they took the quiz. A doctoral student verified students' answers using our proposed system (Kashiwagi et al., 2020). After the quiz, students were again asked to rate the difficulty of the sentences. The above practice cycle was conducted three times for the 60 sentences.

Then, using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, we investigated whether any statistical differences existed among the difficulty ratings of the pre- and post-practice questionnaires.

## Results and Discussion

Figures 1–6 illustrate the average difficulty ratings of the 60 sentences in the pre- and post-practice questionnaires across the three classes. The dotted red line indicates neutral difficulty values. The results show that the average values of the difficulty ratings across the three classes were similar in the pre- and post-practice questionnaires. As expected, the average scores of 57 of the 60 sentences (95%) decreased from the pre-practice to the post-practice questionnaire, although the average scores of the remaining three sentences increased. We examine the detailed results of the respective sentences in the following subsections.

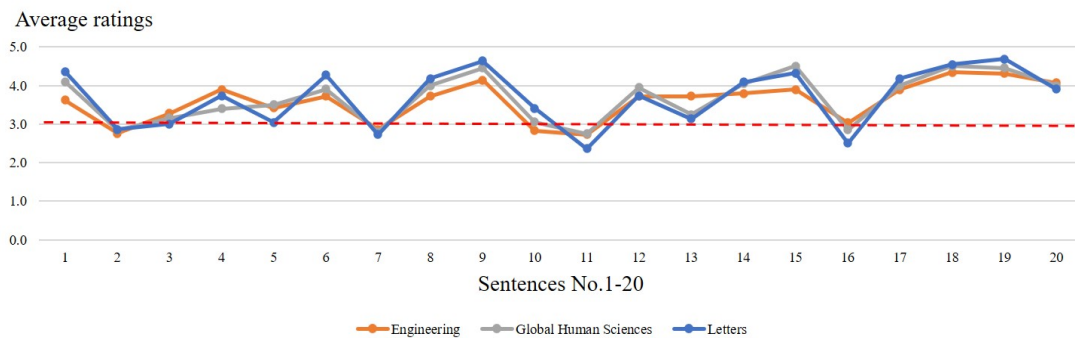


Figure 1: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 1–20 in the pre-practice questionnaire.

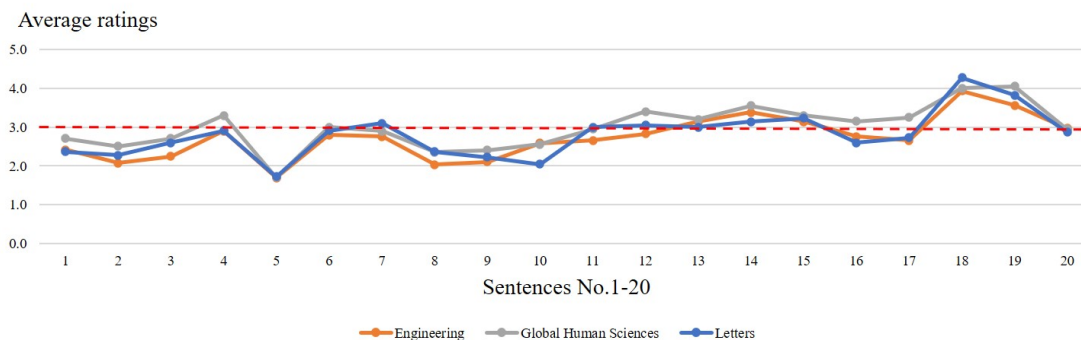


Figure 2: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 1–20 in the post-practice questionnaire.

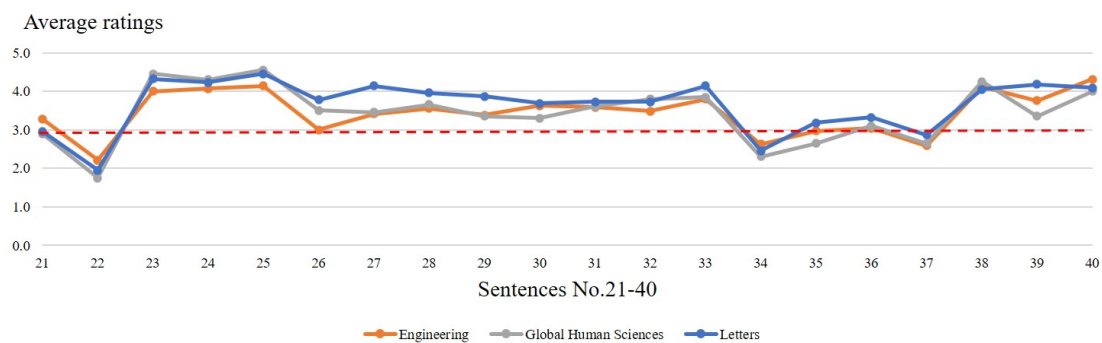


Figure 3: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 21–40 in the pre-practice questionnaire.

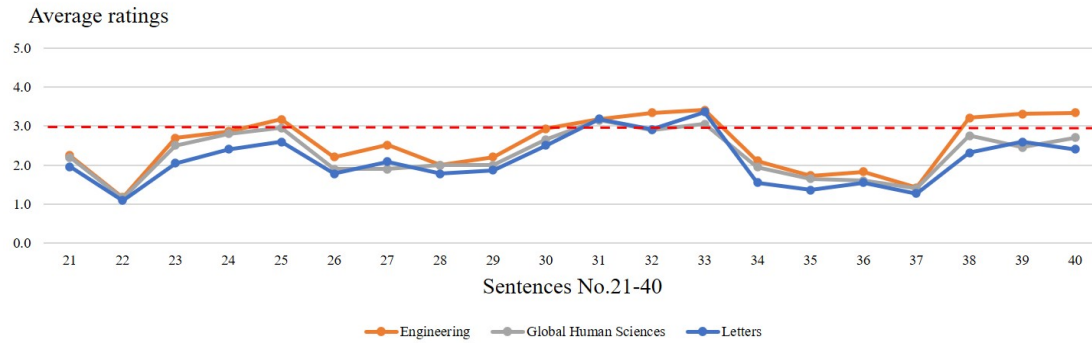


Figure 4: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 21–40 in the post-practice questionnaire.

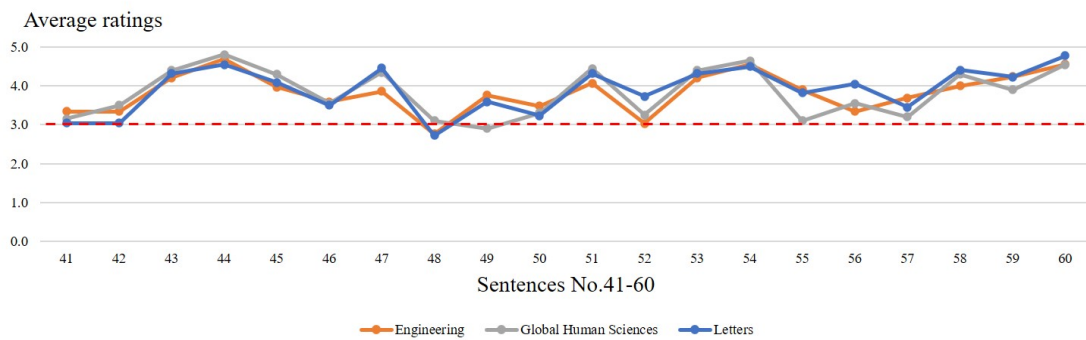


Figure 5: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 41–60 in the pre-practice questionnaire.

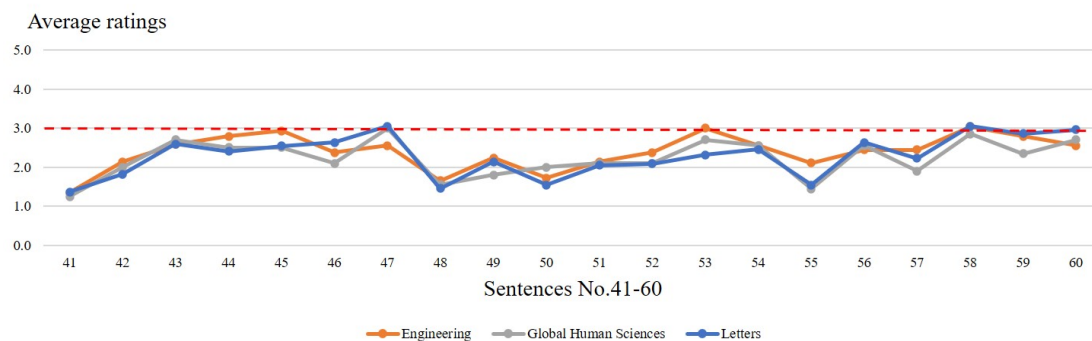


Figure 6: Average difficulty ratings of sentences no. 41–60 in the post-practice questionnaire.

**Research Question 1: Are there any English sentences in which students' perception of difficulty decreases after practice? What characteristics can be observed in these sentences?**

We used the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to analyze whether any statistically significant differences existed among the difficulty ratings of the pre- and post-practice questionnaires at a 5% significance level. Furthermore, we examined the characteristics of the proposed English sentences.

**Sentences with Significantly Lower Average Difficulty Scores.** Table 3 indicates that of the 57 sentences with lower scores after practice, the average scores of 43 sentences were significantly different between the pre- and post-practice questionnaires. We observe that the average difficulty scores of all short sentences consisting of three to five words (highlighted in yellow in Table 3) were significantly lower than those of the pre-practice questionnaire.

Although these sentences contained words unknown or unfamiliar to the students, such as “nerdy,” “itchy,” “throbbing,” and “fogged up,” they are very short. As students can easily focus on unknown or unfamiliar words, concise sentences are easy for them to learn. These results suggest that short sentences are recommended when using unknown words.

Average difficulty ratings on a five-point Likert scale										
Sentence No.	Number of words	Engineering			Global Human Sciences			Letters		
		pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences
49	3	3.8	2.2	*	2.9	1.8	*	3.6	2.1	*
50	3	3.5	1.7	*	3.3	2.0	*	3.2	1.5	*
22	4	2.2	1.2	*	1.8	1.2	*	2.0	1.1	*
26	4	3.0	2.2	*	3.5	1.9	*	3.8	1.8	*
28	4	3.6	2.0	*	3.7	2.0	*	4.0	1.8	*
35	4	3.0	1.7	*	2.7	1.7	*	3.2	1.4	*
36	4	3.0	1.8	*	3.1	1.6	*	3.3	1.5	*
37	4	2.6	1.4	*	2.7	1.4	*	2.9	1.3	*
41	4	3.3	1.3	*	3.2	1.3	*	3.0	1.4	*
51	4	4.1	2.1	*	4.5	2.1	*	4.3	2.0	*
53	4	4.2	3.0	*	4.4	2.7	*	4.3	2.3	*
55	4	3.9	2.1	*	3.1	1.5	*	3.8	1.5	*
23	5	4.0	2.7	*	4.5	2.5	*	4.3	2.0	*
24	5	4.1	2.9	*	4.3	2.8	*	4.2	2.4	*
25	5	4.1	3.2	*	4.6	3.0	*	4.5	2.6	*
29	5	3.4	2.2	*	3.4	2.0	*	3.9	1.9	*
40	5	4.3	3.3	*	4.0	2.7	*	4.1	2.4	*
42	5	3.3	2.1	*	3.5	2.0	*	3.0	1.8	*
43	5	4.2	2.6	*	4.4	2.7	*	4.3	2.6	*
48	5	2.8	1.7	*	3.1	1.6	*	2.7	1.5	*
59	5	4.2	2.8	*	3.9	2.4	*	4.2	2.9	*
5	6	3.4	1.7	*	3.5	1.7	*	3.0	1.7	*
9	6	4.1	2.1	*	4.5	2.4	*	4.6	2.2	*
27	6	3.4	2.5	*	3.5	1.9	*	4.1	2.1	*
44	6	4.7	2.8	*	4.8	2.5	*	4.5	2.4	*
60	6	4.6	2.6	*	4.6	2.7	*	4.8	3.0	*
47	7	3.9	2.6	*	4.4	3.0	*	4.5	3.0	*
56	7	3.3	2.4	*	3.6	2.6	*	4.0	2.6	*
57	7	3.7	2.4	*	3.2	1.9	*	3.5	2.2	*
17	8	3.9	2.7	*	4	3.3	*	4.2	2.7	*
21	8	3.3	2.2	*	2.9	2.2	*	3.0	2.0	*
54	8	4.6	2.6	*	4.7	2.6	*	4.5	2.5	*
58	8	4.0	3.0	*	4.3	2.9	*	4.4	3.0	*
30	9	3.6	2.9	*	3.3	2.7	*	3.7	2.5	*
38	9	4.1	3.2	*	4.3	2.8	*	4.0	2.3	*
45	9	4.0	2.9	*	4.3	2.5	*	4.1	2.5	*
52	9	3.0	2.4	*	3.3	2.1	*	3.7	2.1	*
1	10	3.6	2.4	*	4.1	2.7	*	4.4	2.4	*
6	10	3.7	2.8	*	3.9	3	*	4.3	2.9	*
8	11	3.7	2.0	*	4	2.4	*	4.2	2.4	*
15	11	3.9	3.1	*	4.5	3.3	*	4.3	3.2	*
46	11	3.6	2.4	*	3.6	2.1	*	3.5	2.6	*
20	24	4.1	3.0	*	4	3.0	*	3.9	2.9	*

Table 3: Sentences with significantly reduced average difficulty scores.

Second, the longest sentence consisted of 24 words (Sentence no. 20: “When I was a university student, I was a member of a student circle. We set up a yakisoba booth at the school/annual festival.”). Its score significantly decreased from the pre-to-post-practice



questionnaire, suggesting that students did not find it difficult after self-study despite its length. In Japanese, there is a tendency to describe situations chronologically. As Sentence no. 20 is written in chronological order, using this sentence orally was not challenging.

Third, the difficulty scores of sentences in the form “get” + the past participle form of the verb (Sentence no. 40: “This copier often gets jammed.”) and “have” as a causative verb (Sentence no. 17: “No, I had them reissue my library card.”) significantly decreased after practice. While such sentences are not easy for Japanese students, since the target sentences were short with familiar content, they had no difficulty using them orally after self-study.

These results suggest that short sentences, sentences in chronological order, and familiar content even in the form of “get” + the past participle form of the verb and of “have” as a causative verb are recommended strategies for Japanese students learning unknown or unfamiliar words and phrases.

**Sentences with Lower but not Significant Average Difficulty Scores.** Table 4 reports the average difficulty scores of the remaining 14 of the 57 sentences with reduced average scores. These sentences do not show significant differences between the pre- and post-practice questionnaires. The sentences highlighted in green in Table 4 have reduced but not significantly different difficulty scores.

Sentence No.	Number of words	Average difficulty ratings on a five-point Likert scale								
		Engineering			Global Human Sciences			Letters		
		pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences
2	6	2.8	2.1	*	2.9	2.5		2.9	2.3	
3	6	3.3	2.2	*	3.2	2.7		3.0	2.6	
4	8	3.9	2.9	*	3.4	3.3		3.7	2.9	
10	6	2.8	2.6		3.1	2.6		3.4	2.0	*
12	13	3.7	2.8	*	4.0	3.4		3.7	3.0	
13	18	3.7	3.1	*	3.3	3.2		3.1	3.0	
14	9	3.8	3.4		4.1	3.6		4.1	3.1	*
18	21	4.3	3.9		4.5	4		4.5	4.3	
19	23	4.3	3.6	*	4.5	4.1		4.7	3.8	*
31	9	3.6	3.2		3.6	3.2		3.7	3.2	
32	8	3.5	3.3		3.8	2.9	*	3.7	2.9	*
33	18	3.8	3.4		3.9	3.1	*	4.1	3.4	*
34	8	2.6	2.1		2.3	2.0		2.5	1.5	*
39	9	3.8	3.3		3.4	2.5	*	4.2	2.6	*

Table 4: Sentences with lower but not significantly different average difficulty scores.

When we analyzed the characteristics of these 14 sentences, the following observations were noted. First, the average difficulty scores of the inanimate subject sentences, such as “What material will the test cover?” (Sentence no. 3), “The mock exam uses a computer-scored answer sheet” (Sentence no. 4), and “Things are pretty tough” (Sentence no. 10) decrease, but without significant differences in two classes. The inanimate subject sentence is a unique linguistic phenomenon in English and may be challenging for Japanese learners. Hence, students did not find it easy to translate these sentences orally, even after self-study.

Second, the difficulty scores of sentences using the structure “get” or “have” + object + past participle form of the verb (Sentence no. 2: “I’ve got it all done today” and Sentence no. 34: “My computer is broken. I’ll get it fixed. (I’ll have it repaired)”), and the structure of “have” + object + infinitive of the verb (Sentence no. 14: “I had them retrieve the book from the

stacks.”) are not significantly lower in two classes. We assume that Japanese students know how to use the verbs “have” and “get” as basic verbs. However, in the case of the structure “get” or “have” + object + past participle form of the verb and of the structure “have” + object + infinitive of the verb, they may struggle to use them orally in English, even after self-study.

Third, we observe that students do not use phrasal verbs. For example, the difficulty score of Sentence no. 18, which includes “run for” (“To run for the Vice President position in the student council, she will give a campaign speech at a school assembly.”) is not significantly lower in all three classes. The difficulty score of Sentence no. 12, which includes “check out” (“The lending period is two weeks, but this book is currently checked out.”), is not significantly lower in two classes. Additionally, the difficulty score of Sentence no. 19, which includes “come up with” and “make up for” (“The opposing team had a substantial physical advantage, so we should have come up with a game plan to make up for it.”), is not significantly lower only in one class. These sentences are rather long, and the length of the sentence may determine students’ difficulties. In addition, using these phrasal verbs may be hard for them, whereas native English speakers often use them. Previous research (Ishii, 2018) has found that the phrasal verbs used by EFL (English as a foreign language) learners differ from those used by native English speakers. These results suggest that further consideration must be given to teaching phrasal verbs.

Finally, the difficulty score of sentences with relative pronouns or the omission of relative pronouns, such as “You can block the email addresses you don’t want to receive messages from” (Sentence no. 33), is not significantly lower only in one class. Object relative pronouns are often left out in relative clauses. Japanese students have lesser proficiency in using relative clauses, even as teaching methods for addressing this issue have been explored (Nakamori, 2002). As such, they do not find it easy to use them orally in English, even after self-study.

These results suggest that students must learn to use inanimate subject sentences, the structure of “get” or “have” + object + past participle form of the verb, and that of “have” + object + infinitive of the verb, phrasal verbs, relative pronouns, and sentences that leave out object pronouns.

***Research Question 2: Are there any English sentences in which students’ perception of difficulty does not change after practice? What characteristics can be observed in these sentences?***

The results in Table 5 indicate that the average difficulty scores of three sentences slightly increase after practice in both Class B (Faculty of Global Human Sciences) and Class C (Faculty of Letters). The sentences highlighted in orange in Table 5 are those with higher but not significantly different after-practice average scores in the two classes. We analyzed the characteristics of these three sentences.

		Average difficulty ratings on a five-point Likert scale								
Sentence No.	Number of words	Engineering			Global Human Sciences			Letters		
		pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences	pre-practice	post-practice	statistical differences
7	13	2.9	2.8		2.8	2.9		2.7	3.1	
11	12	2.7	2.7		2.8	3.0		2.4	3.0	
16	13	3.0	2.8		2.9	3.2		2.5	2.6	

Table 5: Sentences with slightly higher average difficulty scores after practice.

First, the lengths of the three sentences are 12 or 13 words (moderately long), which may generate difficulties in producing sentences.

Regarding Sentence no. 7 (“I had no idea there would be questions like that on the exam.”), the phrases “I have no idea” and “like that” appear to be perceived as challenging. In Sentence no. 11 (“You can check out up to five books at any one time.”), the expressions “check out,” “up to,” and “at any one time” are included in one sentence, and students do not seem to be accustomed to these idiom expressions. Sentence no. 16 (“I completely forgot that today was the due date for these library books.”) contains the adverb “completely.” For Japanese learners, using adverbs is challenging, and an efficient way to teach adverbs has been proposed (Kumagai & Kumagai, 2016). Additionally, the sentence includes the expression “the due date,” which may be unfamiliar to most students.

In the pre-practice questionnaire, students do not find it challenging to produce these sentences in English orally; however, they seem to find it challenging after self-study. We assume that these sentences are unexpectedly tricky for them to produce.

***Research Question 3: Could incorporating subjective difficulty ratings in the language learning system help further develop English-speaking practice?***

In investigating whether learners’ subjective difficulty ratings could help develop the proposed system of English-speaking practice, it was found that students perceived most proposed sentences as easier after practice. However, their difficulty ratings of some sentences did not reduce, as expected, or slightly increased after practice. These sentences were not produced smoothly, although the students knew the words and phrases.

Subjective difficulty ratings may help identify specific language items that students have problems with. In addition, learners’ self-reflective evaluations of detailed learning items play a meaningful role in observing real perceptions of language use. While self-reflective evaluation is not an objective test, it allows us to observe how students perceive the difficulty of producing certain words and phrases.

By incorporating subjective difficulty ratings in the proposed system, we may gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of which language items are unfamiliar on an individual basis. In turn, our system of English-speaking practice can be improved by incorporating these items to improve individual learning.

***Findings***

Although the study of the role of learners’ perceived difficulty is still in progress, this preliminary study provides some meaningful implications.

For example, students may more easily focus on unknown or unfamiliar words in short sentences with familiar content, which is recommended when learning new words. Another recommended strategy for learning unknown or unfamiliar words and phrases is expressing sentences chronologically.

Japanese students find it challenging to produce sentences using inanimate subjects. The questionnaire results suggest that students find it hard to use the structure “get” or “have” + past participle form of the verb and “have” as a causative verb. However, if these expressions are introduced in short target sentences, they may be easier to learn. Furthermore, it was found that Japanese students do not use phrasal verbs such as “make up for” but instead tend to use one longer word, such as “compensate.” Therefore, Japanese learners need to become familiar with using phrasal verbs. Similarly, they need to be accustomed to using adverbs, which are also difficult for Japanese learners. Finally, the results indicate the importance of practicing producing sentences with relative clauses, especially wherein the objective relative pronoun is omitted.

In all these cases, learners’ subjective perceptions of difficulty may help determine which language items are particularly challenging for them.

## **Conclusions**

To improve the proposed English-speaking practice system, we examined learners’ perceived difficulty in producing English sentences. We administered pre- and post-practice questionnaires among 71 Japanese university students to ascertain the subjective difficulty levels of 60 English sentences. The results suggest that short sentences, familiar content, and expressing sentences in chronological order are useful strategies when learning unknown or unfamiliar words and phrases. Moreover, students should practice using inanimate subject sentences, causative verbs, phrasal verbs, relative pronouns, and sentences leaving out object pronouns.

It was also observed that Japanese learners had trouble with expressions such as “I have no idea,” idiom expressions such as “check out,” “up to,” and “at any one time,” and with adverbs. These should hence be made more familiar to them.

Finally, assessing the learner’s subjective perception of difficulty may help identify particularly problematic language items.

Despite its contributions, the current study has some limitations. For instance, it does not control the target sentences’ grammar, syntax, or length, all of which are important and should be examined in future research. Moreover, objective evaluations, such as review quizzes, are needed to measure learners’ ability to use English orally. In addition, as this study only addresses three classes, the results may not be easy to generalize. Further studies targeting larger numbers of students should thus be conducted.

As a continuation of this study, we hope to investigate the role of learners’ perceptions of difficulty in oral English production by focusing on specific target grammar and syntax, as well as controlling the length of the target sentences.

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