



## LEARNING JAPANESE AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE: THE HOME SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Mizue Aiko<sup>i</sup>

School of Education RMIT University,  
Melbourne Australia

### Abstract:

The number of heritage language speakers in the world has increased in recent years and the diversity and importance of heritage language education has become significant. The focus of this paper is Japanese heritage language learners in an Australian context. The project was conducted at a hoshuu-koo, a Japanese supplementary school and explored the experiences of a group of year seven students over a period of one year, in an alternative language class especially designed for heritage language learners. Emphasis for this study was on exploring the language learning experiences of a group of students and considering these against the experiences they brought with them to assist in their learning. The theoretical approach underlying the design of language instruction for the research was based on theories of language acquisition for heritage language learners and emphasised integrated, meaningful content with a focus on the academic register. Data were based on student performance in writing tasks. This research has implications for the design and pedagogical approaches adopted for Japanese heritage language education programs.

**Keywords:** Japanese heritage language (JHL) learners, hoshuu-koo, writing tasks, home environment

### 1. Introduction

This paper explores issues related to learning Japanese as a heritage language and challenges that arise for children learning the language of their families while living in another language environment. The context for the study was a hoshuu-koo, a Japanese

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [mizue.aiko@rmit.edu.au](mailto:mizue.aiko@rmit.edu.au)

Saturday school, in Australia. The participants were students in year seven at the hoshuu-koo. The significance of maintaining heritage language has become increasingly important socially, culturally and economically as global population movement increases. Year seven was selected as the focus for this research as this is a time when the demands of learning the heritage language become more demanding and complex (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Willoughby, 2006). It is also a time when peer socialisation can seem more important than formal learning (Schneider, 2016). Patrick (2004) also mentioned adolescent years are the periods which identity should be respected to consider learning methods. Therefore, this is a year when proficiency and social development can become a challenge and influence motivation for participation in certain types of extra-curricular activities. Against this background is the growing understanding that heritage language learners have different needs and abilities to those acquiring the language as a first language and also for second language learners.

The research project discussed here consisted of studying a group of students at a hoshuu-koo who had been enrolled into a newly developed heritage language course, the Nihongo class. The Nihongo class was run concurrently with an existing course, the Kokuga class, designed by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The Kokuga class was designed by the MEXT for the purpose of teaching formal Japanese language and literacy to children of Japanese families who intended to return to Japan. There is a growing body of evidence that many children in the Japanese diaspora in Australia do not have the Japanese language skills to successfully study at this level and the expectation that they can participate in formal classes based on the Japanese curriculum is setting them up to fail, or withdraw (Oguro & Moloney, 2012). The newly designed heritage language course, based on guidelines developed by Douglas (2006), for this research was to address the issues faced by many heritage language learners and explore strategies to encourage these learners to continue studying Japanese.

The results revealed certain characteristics of students' writing. Overall, they were competent with the structure of written passages. There were some common mistakes made by all students, such as use of wrong particles and inappropriate vocabulary, while verb conjugation and incorrect vocabulary was more individual. It was predicted that the learning environment would influence the type and amount of errors learners would make in the use of grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, in order to investigate the differences amongst students three students were selected for further examination. These three students had markedly different heritage language experiences in the home environment and differing proficiencies as evidenced through their test results.

This article presents a description of the relevant literature, identifies the theoretical frame of the research, and describes the approach taken to Japanese heritage language learning for students in an alternative class in a hoshuu-koo. The data collection and analysis were based on writing tasks the students completed. Three students with diverse language backgrounds were studied in depth. Findings agree with research that suggests that significant differences in the home language environment may be associated with learning Japanese as a heritage language (Douglas, Kataoka, & Chinen, 2013). The conclusion emphasises the importance of teaching and learning experiences for individual students and includes implications for the further study.

## 2. Literature Review

As achievable proficiency is an important motivating factor in any learning situation (e.g., Ersanli, 2015; Schibli, 2010 ), this project was initiated by identifying areas where heritage language learners might encounter most difficulties. By studying the literature on JHL students and current and previous student work the researcher determined that kanji, grammar and vocabulary were aspects of Japanese language learning that were most likely to present difficulties. By exploring levels of proficiency amongst the students there could be a possibility that a more differentiated curriculum could be developed in the future. As globalization progresses, the number of heritage language speakers in the world is increasing and the diversity and importance of heritage language education (HLE) has become a focus within the language and linguistic research (e.g., Oguro & Moloney, 2012). This literature review presents the definition of heritage language adopted for this paper and identifies the importance of Japanese heritage language education, issues in hoshuu-koo and methods of teaching. Prior research on heritage Japanese language learners is described and specific to this research the role of the hoshuu-koo is contextualised and questions of learner proficiency highlighted to justify the focus of the research.

Hoshuu-koo, the supplementary Japanese schools outside Japan, are organised by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and provide Japanese education for first grade to ninth grade students who go to a local school during the week. The schools were originally designed for children who would eventually return to Japan and were expected to provide children with access to part of the Japanese compulsory education curriculum (Doerra & Leeb, 2010). As well as teaching Japanese to the designated original cohort of students many supplementary schools also teach Japanese as a heritage language (JHL) (Yamaguchi, 2008).

The term “heritage language” has been defined by many researchers. Compton (2001) referred to “*a heritage language as a language which indigenous and immigrant groups speak that is other than the dominant national language*” (p157). Globalization has created greater numbers of new-arrivals, migrants, and foreign-born students and the term “heritage language learner” has acquired many variations. According to Nakajima (1998) heritage language is the first language that children learn to speak fluently. For example, in Australia, as children grow they will come to use the local language (e.g., English) more frequently and skilfully and thus their first language (e.g., Japanese) becomes their “heritage language”. Compton’s definition is adopted for this paper as most of the students at the hoshuu-koo in this research were born outside Japan and will grow up outside Japan although at least of one of their parents are Japanese and use Japanese within the home to varying degrees.

Wang and Green (2001) stated that languages other than the national language are “*valuable resources both for individuals and for the society as a whole*” (p167). Heritage speakers gain a sense of belonging through learning the language and culture, and it provides a positive sense of identity (Park & Sarkar, 2007), supports social belonging and develops self-confidence (Kakui, 2001). Heritage languages are an important conduit between home and society. Communication within a family and their own ethnic community greatly influences children’s values, personality, and language acquisition (Fukazawa, 2010), and it encourages learners to transmit their own culture from one generation to the next (Wang & Green, 2001). It is often hard, however, to maintain a language if appropriate education is not provided. Nakajima (2003) has reported that 30% of second generation children do not understand their parents’ language and 70% of third generation children lose their heritage language. Thus, organising formal learning environments to encourage the maintenance of the heritage language is essential.

JHL are unique amongst multilingual students as they have a partial knowledge of the language that varies for each individual depending on early childhood experience and subsequent exposure. For heritage language teachers student proficiency is a major measure to define challenges these students might face. The MEXT curriculum is one of the difficulties identified as a concern. The curriculum designed by MEXT is based on the proficiency and knowledge expected of Japanese native speakers. The difference between the levels of knowledge and proficiency of JHL learners and native Japanese speakers becomes wider as they grow. A mismatch of proficiency levels between curriculum and HL students makes learning difficult and may discourage students from continuing (Douglas, 2010). Moreover, learners of the first language and heritage language have been expected to study together in the same

class at hoshuu-koo. The gap in language proficiency, established at a younger age, will continue to become greater as the child gets older in this situation (Nishimura, 2012).

Although the single phrase 'heritage language learner' is used the learners' background, environment, proficiency, interest and dialect they speak have infinite variety (Doerra & Leeb, 2009; Oguro & Moloney, 2012). The reasons for living away from Japan are also different and include Japanese students who arrived in the new country at a young age and attend a local school, overseas-born students who are children of immigrants or intercultural marriage parents, or Japanese students who are living overseas as temporary residents (Doerra & Leeb, 2009; Wang & Green, 2001). At the school where this research was conducted, more than 80% of the students were born outside of Japan and the MEXT curriculum was used for all of the students up to year six. Diversity in student' proficiency and purposes for learning the language make it hard for students to be motivated if they have difficulty achieving expected levels of performance required by the MEXT curriculum. Reasons for learning Japanese and the use of Japanese in the home differ for each student. (Oguro & Moloney, 2012) found that linguistic development affects the learner's study outcomes. Research findings regarding the proficiency of heritage language learners have found Japanese language acquisition in English speaking countries presents particular difficulties because of its unique linguistic characteristics (Nakajima, 1998). Different word order from English, verb conjugation system, various registers depending on situation and users are examples of these complexities; In Japanese, verbs usually come last; for example, "Watashi wa kinoo banana o 3 bon tabemashita (I yesterday banana 3 ate)." means "I ate 3 bananas yesterday." Although Japanese has a basic word order, the order is very flexible as long as verbs come last and omission of words often happen. Therefore, "Banana o 3bon kinoo tabemashita (banana 3 yesterday ate)" can be the same meaning as the sentence above. Moreover, Japanese verbs conjugate to indicate such as tense, negation, aspect and mood; for example, "taberu (dictionary form of "to eat") change into "tabeta (past tense)", "tabenai (present negative)", "tabeteiru (progressive)" and "tabeyoo (intension)". Examples of various registers are casual forms, polite forms and honorific forms (Miyagawa, 1999). Moreover, the number of particles and their function make it difficult for learners of Japanese to form correct sentences. Besides these characteristics, a script system is another complex characteristic which is easy to discourage learners from learning Japanese. Ootsuki (2010) commented that Japanese is not very different from other languages in terms of the difficulty of acquiring the system although Japanese grammar is unique; however, the most difficult part of Japanese learning is the script system. It is thought that learners who lack self-assurance in Japanese often do not have confidence in kanji.

Improving their kanji skill may be one of most important design developments for teachers to address when making curriculum decisions.

An imbalance is reported amongst specific language skills. Many researchers have found that oral and aural skills are stronger than literacy skills (Douglas, 2010; Nishimura, 2012). Interference from the dominant language is often found in heritage language learners' speech. According to Vleet (2010), learners often cannot control code-switching between Japanese and the dominant language. Generally, heritage learners have better competence in the local language and therefore prefer to use the local language. Gestures are more important for JHL learners compared to native speakers of Japanese (Montrul, 2010; Nakajima, 2001; Nishimura, 2012). Heritage language users often use the registers and vocabulary which they acquired at a younger age and can find their language proficiency does not meet age-appropriate academic levels (Wang & Green, 2001). HL students often use informal speech and writing, acquired in their early years, where formal language is required in school (Krashen, 2000; Wiley, 2001a). Japanese, especially, has several types of honorific language; respectful language, humble language, simple polite language, and misuse of these different types of language are common for JHL learners (Calder, 2008).

Heritage learners' grammar and script often has errors not commonly observed among first language users. Montrul (2010) pointed out heritage language learners are weak at morphology and have difficulty making complex sentences. Correct word order and use of conjunction words can also be challenging. Nakajima (2001) found that written tasks tended to be lists of short sentences with a mix of different forms such as polite and plain forms and a lack of appropriate choice of scripts that would be age-appropriate for native students. Age-appropriate proficiency is regarded as knowledge of vocabulary, script, grammar and skills to use them which students learn at school in each grade based on the curriculum designed by MEXT. For example, in Year 1, students are expected to know 80 kanji and 380 compound words, and they are expected to be able to express their own ideas and feelings in sentences (Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology (MEXT), 2017). Other problems that JHL learners includes: use of grammar patterns representing direct translations from English, dropped particles, general structure of passages (Douglas, 2006) and written work sometimes lacks logic and social conceptualisation (Calder, 2008). Common tendencies in literacy skills for JHL learners can be that although users usually understand lengthy texts they may not know the meaning of each word (Gambhir, 2001). Nishimura (2012) suggests that reading comprehension skills are proportional to the fluency of Japanese pronunciation (Douglas, 2010). Douglas' research indicated that

reading proficiency of year nine Japanese heritage learners was similar to primary school student levels in Japan.

Douglas (2010) and Oguro and Moloney (2012) reported the JHL learners' vocabulary is often restricted making it difficult to express their opinions and present a sophisticated argument. Douglas and Chinen (2014) made a distinction between the knowledge of vocabulary and ability to understand the meaning of vocabulary spoken aloud and in a written text. Such performance will vary depending on proficiency levels at individual tasks. According to research conducted by (Kataoka, Koshiyama, & Shibata, 2008), Japanese heritage language learners in early primary school have age-appropriate level of vocabulary, but after year five, their vocabulary does not increase at the same rate as that of native Japanese speakers, and only 37.5% of year nine students have age-appropriate vocabulary skills. The types and age-appropriate levels of vocabulary JHL learners possess are different from first language speakers. Heritage learners usually start using the language with their parents when they are babies. When they grow, they tend to use "children's words" due to a lack of formal language use (Nishimura, 2012, p.131). Even if they know broader terms, they tend to have less knowledge of narrower terms. For example, "tree" is a broader term, and "trunk" is the narrower term (Yoneda, 2003, p.162). Heritage learners sometimes use incorrect registers; are not proficient at the use of formal registers and cannot update their vocabulary to a suitable academic level (Wiley, 2001b); are usually better at the use of nouns than verbs and adjectives (Montrul, 2010); and the language of childhood, represented by onomatopoeic and mimetic words, is observed in heritage language learners' speech (Nishimura, 2012).

Another challenge in heritage Japanese learning relevant to this research is script. There are three types of Japanese script: hiragana, katakana and kanji. Hiragana and katakana are phonetic scripts; each character represents one sound and does not represent any meaning. As each of hiragana and katakana was originally made by single kanji, reading of each letter and its original kanji are often similar. For example, hiragana "あ" is pronounced "a" and it comes from kanji "安" (on-yomi of this kanji is "an"). Similarly, hiragana "い" (pronunciation "I") and "う" (pronunciation "u") are made from kanji "以" (on-yomi "I"). Katakana "ア" (reading "a") and "イ" (reading "I") come from kanji "阿" (on-yomi "a") and "伊" (on-yomi "I") respectively. Thus, hiragana and katakana which indicate the same sounds come from either the same or different kanji, and reading of hiragana and katakana are the same or similar of the origin kanji (Matsumura, 2006). As each hiragana and katakana represents one syllable, words can be expressed by the combination of each script; for example, the word "tokorode (mean "by the way")" is represented by the combination of "to", "ko", "ro"

and “ga” (ところが). Katakana words, such as “koin (means “coin”) is written by the combination of “ko”, “I” and “n” (コイン).

Kanji is used to write most content words of the native Japanese language and any words that come from China, including most nouns, the stem of most verbs and adjectives. Kanji has multiple readings and meanings; when two or more kanji characters are used in one word, different readings and meanings are applied than when a single kanji is used. For example, kanji “行” can be read as either “i” as in “iku (行く)” (means “to go”), “okona” as in “okonau (行こう)” (means “to conduct”), “koo” as in “koodoo (行動)” (means “behaviour”), “gyoo” as in “gyooretsu (行列)” (means “queue”) or “an” as in “andon (行燈)” (means “lantern”). The meaning of kanji “行” in the examples above is “to go”, “to conduct”, “act” “line” and “journey” respectively. Even if the same reading is applied the meaning of each kanji can be different, such as “通行 (tsuukoo)” and “ginkoo (銀行)” (the meaning of kanji “行” indicates “traffic” and “bank”). Thus, the same kanji can be read differently depending on words, either in single kanji or combinations, and the same or different meaning of each kanji are applied for words which includes kanji, depending on the kanji.

The use of hiragana, katakana and kanji also has rules. Hiragana is used for the conjugative parts of verbs, adjectives (“う” in “思う” and “い” in “古い” as described in examples above), particles and small words that indicate relations of words within a sentence following nouns, such as “は(topic particle)” and “まで (means until)”. They are also used for conjunctions, words that do not have kanji (or only obscure or unusual kanji), okurigana, inflectional ending for verbs and adjectives and furigana, for example, “そして (means “and”) and “いじめ (means bullying)”. Furigana are phonetic readings of kanji placed above or beside the kanji. Hiragana is also used when the writer, or reader, lacks kanji knowledge. Katakana is used for proper nouns that are not in kanji, for example words borrowed from foreign languages and names of persons, places and onomatopoeia. Example of borrowed words or proper nouns are “カメラ (reading is “kamera” and meaning is “camera”) and “オーストラリア (reading is “oosutoraria” and meaning is “Australia”)” (Banno, Ikeda, Ohno, Sinagawa, & Tokashiki, 2011; Japanese Language Resource, 2011).

Due to its complexity, a lack of proficiency in kanji skills for JHL learners is often found. According to a large-scale international investigation of the experience of hoshuu-koo teachers findings indicated that many JHL learners do not reach age-appropriate levels of kanji proficiency (Kataoka & Shibata, 2011). Nakajima (2002) also found that JHL learners’ kanji proficiency does not necessarily progress as they get older, regardless of the period of time they study Japanese.



This research focuses on the areas of language learning which Japanese heritage language learners may find challenging. The context is an alternative class developed especially for heritage language learners in a hoshuu-koo. The area in which significant differences have been found between heritage language speakers and native speakers are written tasks so selected written tasks were developed for the alternative class and it is these written tasks are the focus of the data collection for this project.

### **3. The research**

JHL learners' proficiency has been investigated by many researchers (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Kataoka & Shibata, 2011). Each heritage language learner has a different level of skills; some have proficiency with Japanese script and are not proficient with grammar. Although most of the heritage language classes are conducted on a group basis, not for individuals, it is important to recognise that each learner has a different experience and presents with different abilities. Writing requires many types of skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, organisation and script. It is important for the teacher to try to understand common characteristics and differences in writing skills amongst learners. Linguistic and cognitive theories of language acquisition have explained differences in heritage language proficiency against other second language learners (Montrul, 2010). Linguistic areas where HL learners may experience gaps in their knowledge have been discussed in the literature review. This paper extends this discussion to examine the input of the home environment in specific circumstances. It is assumed that the home environment is an extra-linguistic factor that will have an influence of the HL learners' proficiency (Douglas et al., 2013). Psycholinguistic theories and research have identified abilities and deficits of HL students and this paper builds on this research by examining the work of a class of year 7 students. Children with different abilities were identified and features of their home language environment presented and their proficiencies are discussed in relation to specific writing tasks.

#### **A. The context**

At the hoshuu-koo, the site for this research, most of the students had no plan to return to the Japanese education system. In order to meet the needs of these students, this school opened a new heritage language course for learners beyond year six. This course was delivered concurrently alongside the original class which follows the curriculum designed by MEXT. Students can choose which course they take when they finish year six. In the heritage course, a variety of activities, including reading, writing, speaking, listening and kanji, are incorporated using only a part of the MEXT textbook. Writing

practice is conducted consistently throughout the year. The contents and the schedule of writing practice are based on the curriculum as well as introducing a variety of types of writing that included, creative writing, letter writing, informative essays and interpreting textbooks. The students are strongly encouraged to use dictionaries to assist in the use of kanji when they write. It is in the context of this newly introduced Japanese heritage course that this research project took place.

### **B. The research questions**

The questions asked were:

1. What can the similarities and differences in student proficiency in writing skills in heritage language tell us about the home language learning environment?

To address this question, the following sub-questions were explored.

- a. In which of the writing tasks set in the Nihongo class was student's performance least differentiated?
- b. In which of the writing tasks set in the Nihongo class, were the student's performance most differentiated?

### **C. The participants**

Year seven students studying Japanese in the heritage course in an Australian hoshuukoo in 2015 were approached to participate in this research. Seven boys and six girls agreed to join this research and consent forms were obtained from the participants, their parents and the school. Ethics approval was gained from the RMIT University ethics committee. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

### **D. Method**

Quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis were used in this research. Data were collected and analysed to find what actual problems the students faced and to identify common characteristics displayed by these HL students in relation to overall proficiency and differentiated performance across the focus tasks. The writing tasks designed for the alternate class throughout the year were assessed. These writing tasks consisted of different genres; informative, creative, narrative writing and interpreting textbooks. Nine writing tasks were marked based on the five criteria; structure, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, complexity and script. These criteria were adopted based on findings in prior research (e.g., Montrul, 2010; Nakajima, 2001). Assessment of results were used to see emerging patterns in student' writing skills and to compare these across the student cohort. Three students with differing skills in the areas assessed

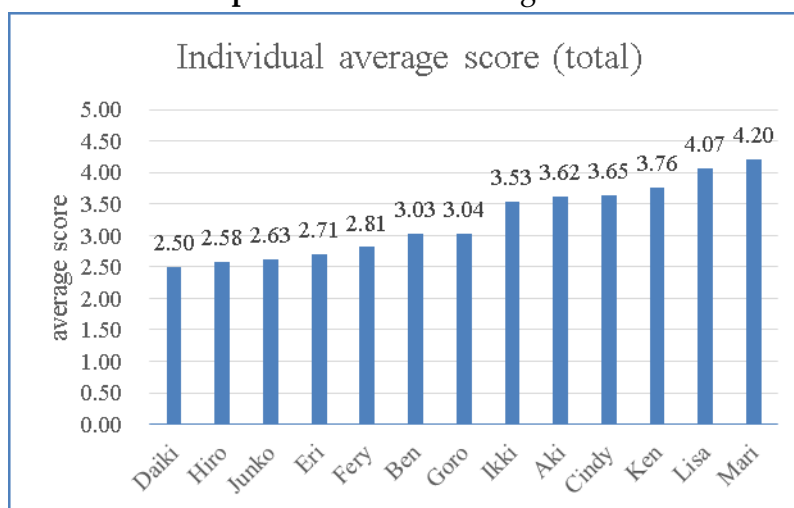
and diverse home language background experience were chosen for detailed analysis of their writing.

#### 4. Data collection and analysis

Writing tasks based on the curriculum were conducted throughout the year, and written tests were marked based on pre-determined criteria: structure, grammar, coherence and cohesion, complexity, and script. The maximum score for each criterion was 1.0. “Structure” included introduction, body, and conclusion. Most students organised the passages competently, although some omitted the conclusion, or their conclusion was not relevant to the text. “Grammar” was scored based on the range of grammatical forms used. Some students had problems with particles, word order, and conjugations. “Vocabulary” was scored based on choice and variety of words used. “Coherence and cohesion” were scored based on whether sentences were linked fluently and information was presented in a logical manner. “Complexity” focused on students’ ability to form complex sentences rather than a list of short sentences. With “Script”, students were expected to use kanji up to a year six level. Common mistakes were the use of hiragana instead of kanji, choice of kanji, or the writing of kanji.

The statistical results are presented in the graphs below. Graph 1 presents the individual average score of nine tasks. The results were sorted by scores.

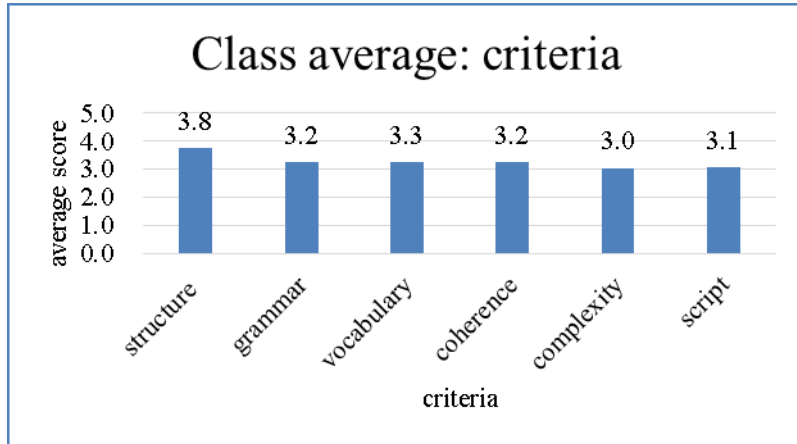
**Graph 1:** Individual average scores



The average score was 3.24. When the data was sorted by score, differences between students were not large, although there are 1.7 points difference between the highest and lowest score.

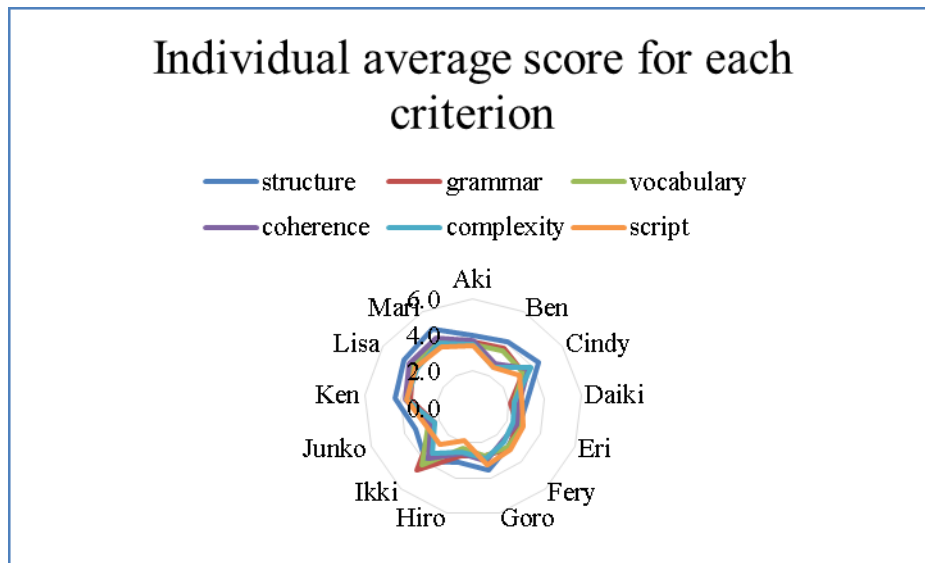
The average score of the class for each criterion was graphed.

**Graph 2:** Class average for each criterion

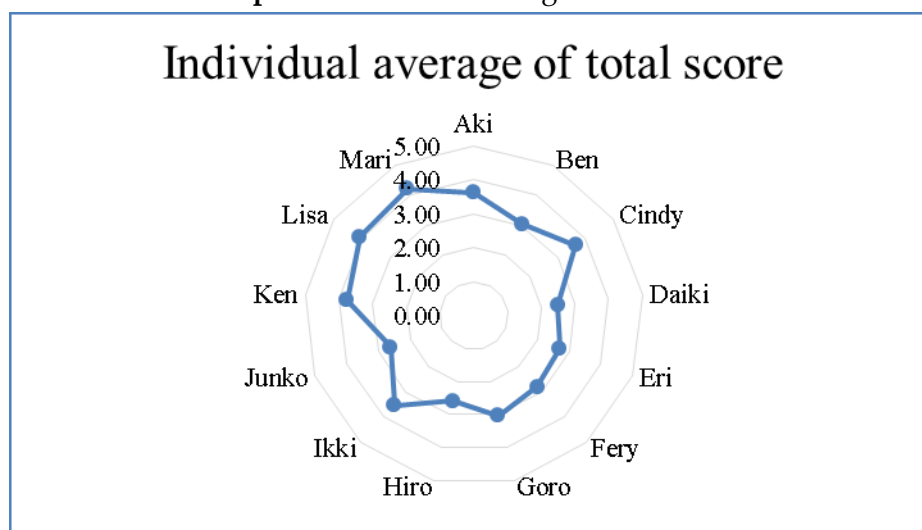


The score of the class average in “structure” was the highest and other scores were around 3.0 out of 5.0. The individual average score of each criterion was compared (Graph 3) in order to see individual performance. Graph 4 indicates the individual average of total scores.

**Graph 3:** Individual average score for each criterion



**Graph 4:** Individual average of total score



It was found that most of the students obtained the highest scores in structure. Other than “structure”, the average score of all the students were close with the greatest difference occurring in script and complexity. This indicates that levels of proficiency of most of the students were similar except “structure” where the score was high, but there was still variation. Overall script was the lowest score for the students who obtained relatively high scores for all categories. Grammar and vocabulary had more variations. Overall, the students who gained higher scores in total obtained similar scores for each category and the students whose total scores were not high had greater differences between items.

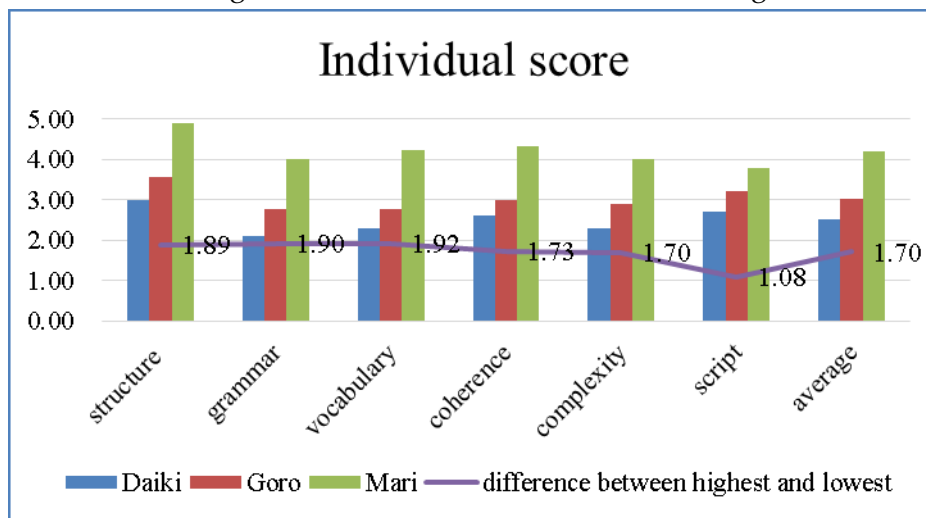
In order to investigate the kind of challenges each student faced in the writing tasks three students were chosen for extra analysis. The selected students were Daiki, Goro and Mari respectively, chosen because each presented with a different overall pattern and each had different exposure to Japanese in the home environment.

Descriptions of the selected students’ backgrounds are included here and this information will be revisited in the discussion section of this paper. Daiki is a boy who has an Australian father and Japanese mother. He was born in Australia and started to study at the hoshuu-koo when he was four years old. He has an older brother and his brother also studies at the hoshuu-koo. Daiki uses Japanese only at the hoshuu-koo and when he talks with his mother at home.

Goro is a boy who has Japanese parents. He was born in Australia. He has a brother who also attends the hoshuu-koo. He usually uses Japanese at home and English with his friends at his local school. According to his parents, his performance in Japanese is better than English. He has studied at the hoshuu-koo since he was four years old.

Mari is a girl who has Japanese parents. She was born in Australia and like Goro, she uses Japanese at home. She goes to Japan once a year and spends time with her grandparents. She has studied at the hoshuu-koo for eight years. She likes reading books. She reads mostly English books, but sometimes reads Japanese books. The following graph (5) indicates Daiki, Goro and Mari's individual scores by item. The line indicates the difference between the highest student score and the lowest one.

**Graph 5:** Individual average scores and differences between the highest and lowest scores

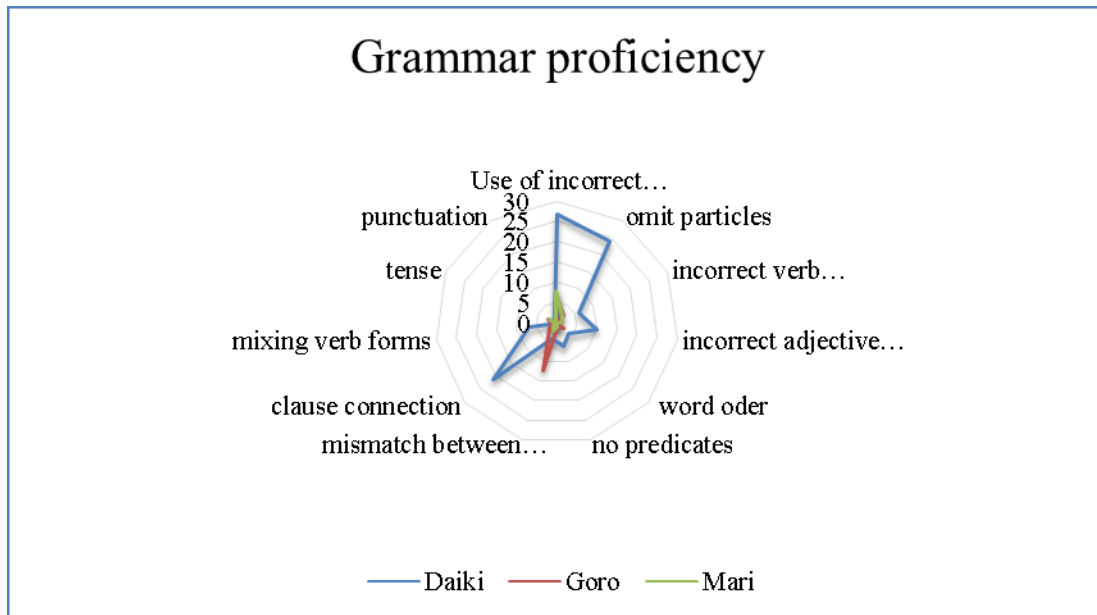


The greatest differences can be seen in grammar and vocabulary. The smallest differences can be seen in “script”, and even the student who obtained a higher score in total, Mari, did not perform very well. Then grammar and vocabulary in the writing tasks of these three selected students were examined to see how each performed against the criteria.

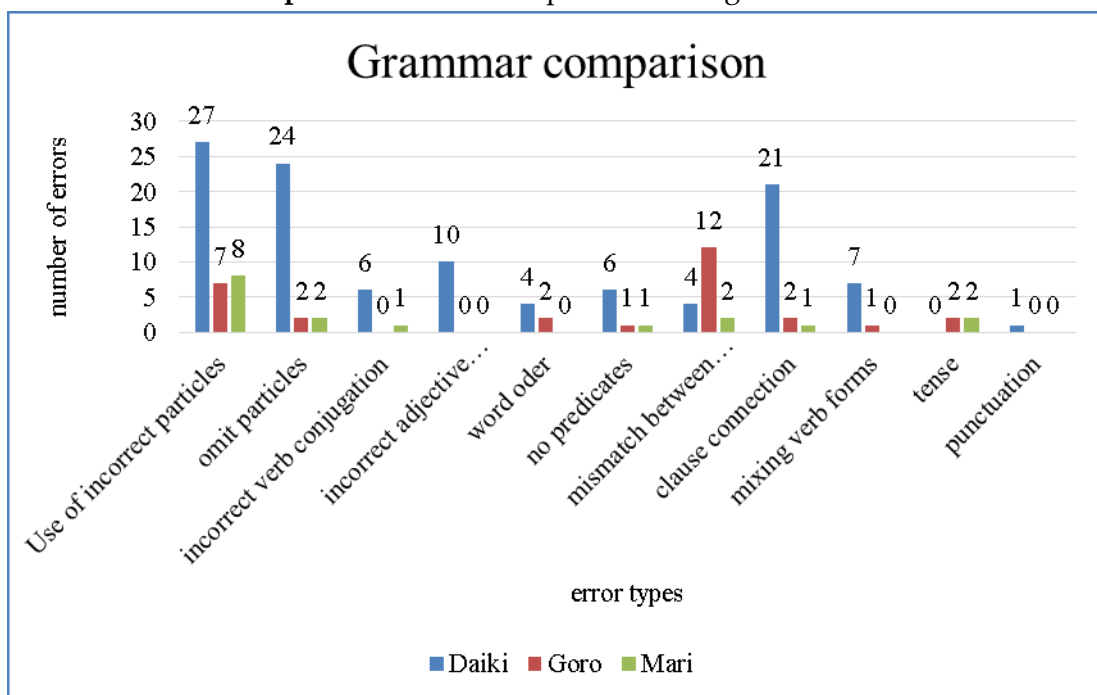
### A. Grammar

Each of the three students' performance were compared in Graph 6 and summarised in Graph 7.

**Graph 6:** Grammar proficiency of the three participants



**Graph 7:** Grammar comparison amongst students



Particles are defined as “*postposition words attached mainly to noun phrases*” and “*they supply various kinds of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information*” (Iwasaki, 2002, p40) . Nakajima (1998) points out that it is difficult for JHL learners to develop the use of particles because of fewer opportunities to use them. In Japanese, these are used to join nouns, not to join verbs, adjectives and clauses. Daiki’s work indicated he had problems with the use of particles, omitting particles and also clause connections in verb and adjective conjugation. Results varied for all three students with Goro and Mari mainly

producing mismatches between subjects and predicates. This was a mistake Goro repeated more than the other two and Daiki was more confident in the use of tense.

Incorrect use of particles, particle omission and clause connection were common in Daiki's work. These errors accounted for one-fourth of the total. A number of types of errors occurred more frequently than others. The most frequent was the use of the particle "to" to join verbs or adjectives. In English, clauses can be joined using "and" (for example, I was a student and I study Japanese.), however, in Japanese, the particle "to" is used to join only nouns, and is never used to join clauses. Use of conjunction words, such as "soshite" is required. Use of the particle "to" was also observed in verb conjugation and adjective conjugation. Japanese verbs conjugate in many ways; for example, to make past tenses, to make negative forms, and to connect two or more verbs. When two verbs are joined, for example "I go to the park and eat lunch", "te" form is used. Here are some examples of making "te" form; dictionary form "taberu", "iku" and "suru" change into "tabete", "itte" and "shite" respectively. Most of Daiki's mistakes in verb conjugation were in the use of "to" to connect two verbs or in the wrong conjugation form of the "te" form. Adjectives also conjugate to make past tense and to join more than two adjectives and so on. There are two types of adjectives in Japanese and each type of adjective conjugates differently. Daiki used the particle "to" to join two adjectives and conjugates adjectives incorrectly. Another mistake observed in Daiki's writing was a mixture of sentence forms. In Japanese passages are written in either plain forms or polite forms. Writers choose the form depending on the type and the purpose of the writing task. The form should be used consistently in each passage. However, Daiki mixed sentence forms within the same written task.

The majority of Goro's errors were a mismatch between subjects and predicates, followed by the use of incorrect particles. Examples of errors were a mismatch between subjects and predicates, such as, "Sukina koto wa sakkaa o shimasu (My favourite thing is (I) play soccer)". "Doushitekatoyuuto ...sukidesu (The reason for that is (I) like...)". In most of these cases, he finished the sentence using verbs without changing the form, regardless of subject patterns.

Choosing correct particles presented a problem for both Daiki and Goro. The types and the numbers of particles in Japanese are complicated. For example, particles which indicate subject, object, places, and time are all different. Daiki and Goro both mixed up the particles. For example, they use subject particles where object particle must be used.

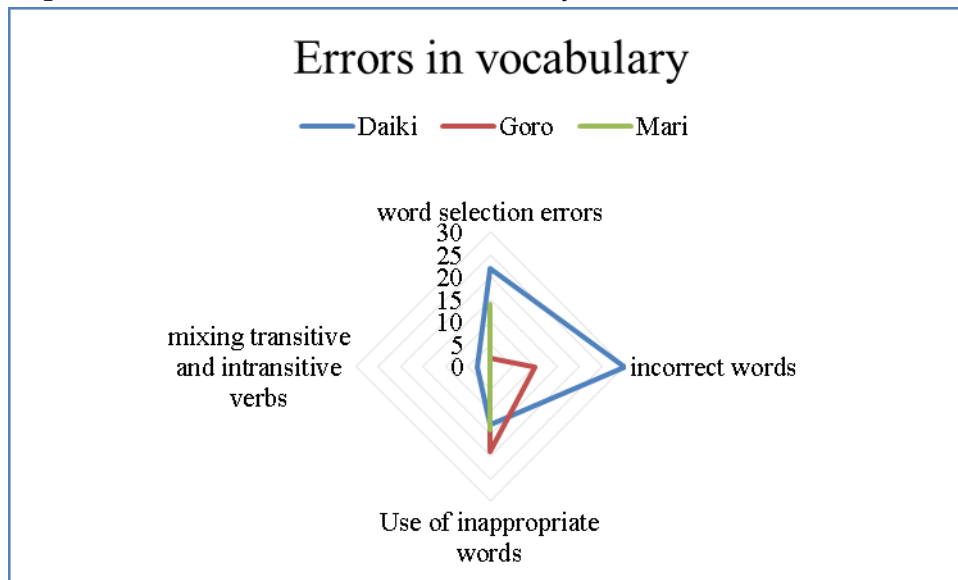
Mari made relatively less errors. More than half the mistakes in her writing were the use of wrong particles, especially particles indicating places are main errors. No mixture of subject and object particles was found.



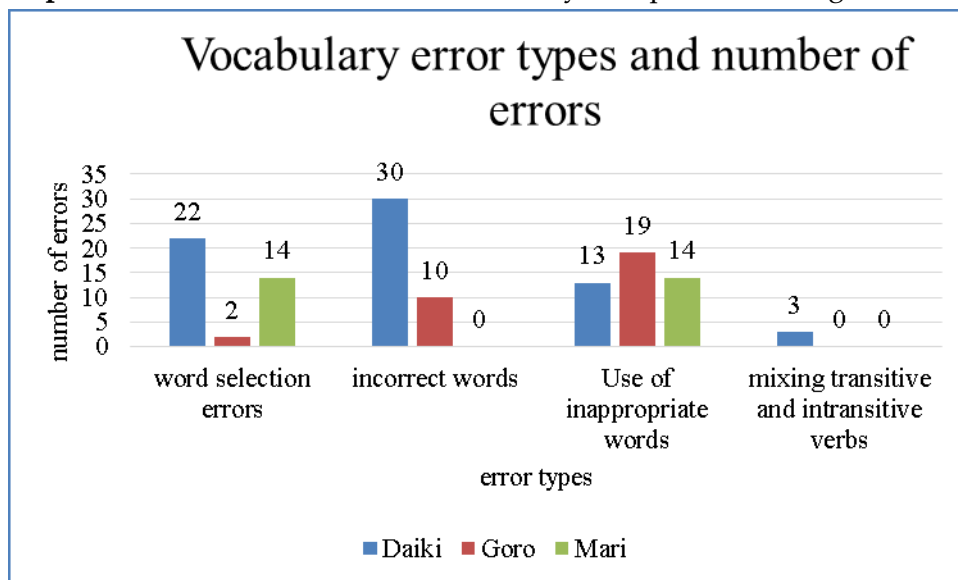
## B. Vocabulary

Individual student' errors in vocabulary were graphed by type in Graph 8 and 9. A comparison of the number of errors made by the students in each category is presented in Graph 8. The number of errors displayed in Graph 9.

**Graph 8:** The number of errors in vocabulary: the balance within individuals



**Graph 9:** The number of errors in vocabulary: comparison amongst students



Types of errors in vocabulary can be categorised into four; word selection errors, incorrect use of words, use of inappropriate words and mixing transitive and intransitive verbs. Amongst errors in vocabulary made by Daiki, word selection errors and use of incorrect words were higher than other errors while use of inappropriate

words were the highest portion of Goro's errors. As can be seen from the results each student displayed different tendencies in relation to vocabulary errors.

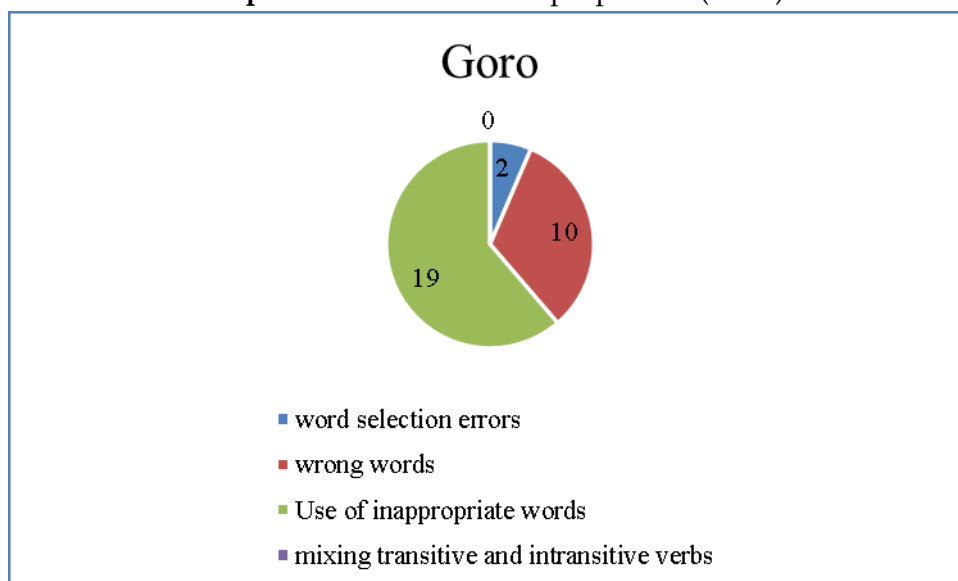
Errors often made by both Daiki and Goro were the use of incorrect words. Errors observed in all writing tasks were word selection errors and use of inappropriate words. Use of inappropriate words was more evident in Goro's writing but Daiki made more errors in the use of incorrect words and word selection errors.

The proportion of each error type was calculated individually. Graphs 10, 11 and 12 show results for Daiki, Goro and Mari respectively.

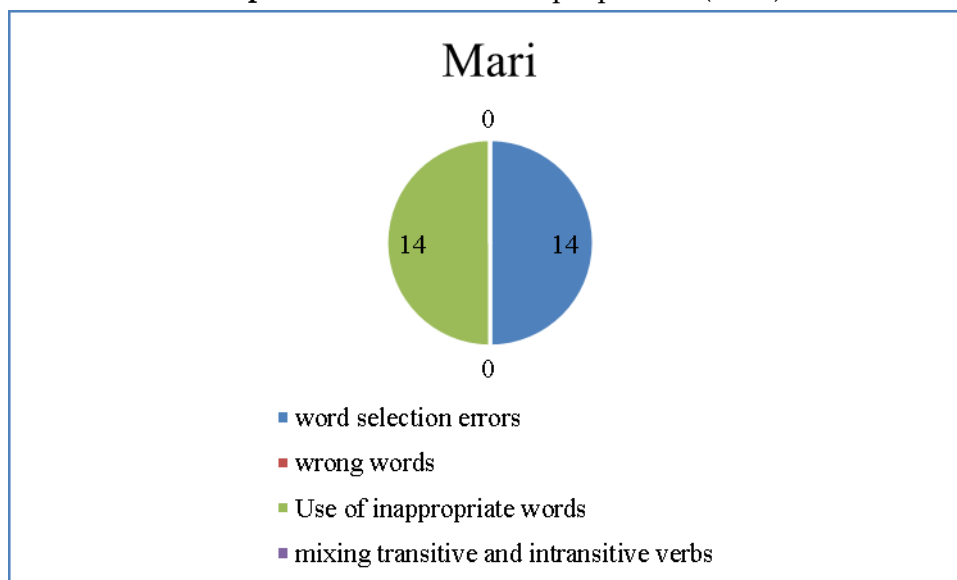
**Graph 10:** Individual error proportion (Daiki)



**Graph 11:** Individual error proportion (Goro)



**Graph 12:** Individual error proportion (Mari)



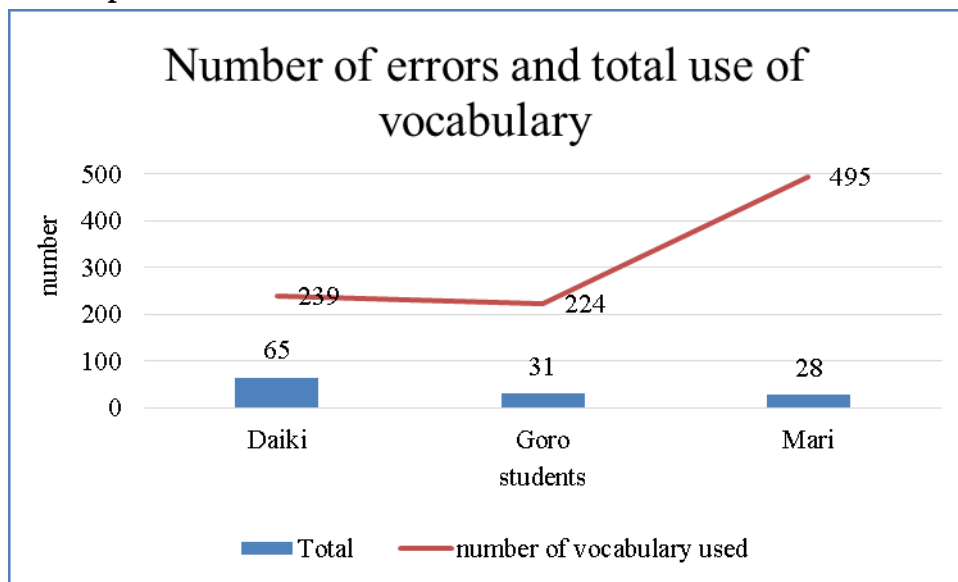
In Daiki's writing, the majority of errors were the use of incorrect words. Nearly half of the errors made in vocabulary involved spelling words incorrectly, for example, he spelt "isa" and "shizashi" instead of "isha" and "hizashi". Long vowels and double consonants were especially challenging; for example, "kyukyusha" instead of "kyuukyusha" and "shiteiru" instead of "shitteiru". Word selection errors were the second most frequent error. "Word selection error" is the use of a substitute word other than the one expected; for example, "toutou" instead of "yatto", "shiru" instead of "wakaru" "imasu" instead of "arimasu" and "kiku" instead of "tanomu". In English the same words are used for each pair, they signify "finally" "know", "exist" and "ask" respectively, but different words are used in Japanese. Daiki's was the only one of the three to mix transitive and intransitive verbs. In Japanese transitive and intransitive verbs have different words, for example, "hajimaru (intransitive)" and "hajimeru (transitive)" (means "to start"). Daiki only made a few of these mistakes.

Errors most frequently made by Goro were the use of inappropriate words. Most of these were the use of informal speech. The meanings of the sentences were understandable and the vocabulary was correct as vocabulary, but the vocabulary Goro employed is usually not used in formal writing. For example, "sugoku" instead of "taihen" (means very), "shinakya" instead of "shinakerebaikenai" (means I must do), "toka" instead of "nado" (means etc.). These words are usually used as colloquial expressions.

Mari also used informal forms in her writing. Word selection errors were similar to Daiki as she also used substitute words. It might be that she could not recognise the differences between two words in Japanese when there is only one word in English.

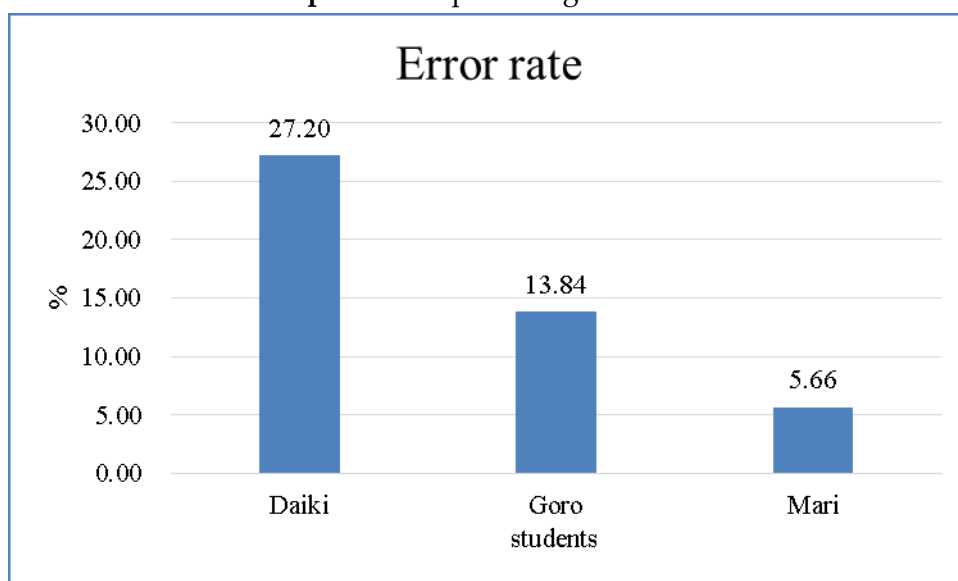
When the number of errors were compared between the three students Mari appears to have made a lot of errors; however, the total number of words presented in the writing tasks were different. Then word count of all nine tasks was checked. Graph 13 shows the number of the total words and the number of the errors.

**Graph 13:** The number of total words and the number of the errors



The number of the words used in the writing tasks of Daiki and Goro are almost the same, although the number of the errors differed. The total number of words used by Mari was greater than the others and the number of errors Mari made less. In Graph 14 the percentage of the errors out of the total number of words used in all writing tasks are represented.

**Graph 14:** The percentages of errors



## 5. The findings and discussion

Various skills are required in writing passages; such as knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and script. Research has found that script is the most difficult task for most of the heritage students. This may be because heritage learners usually have less chance to practice writing and reading compared to speaking. Most of the students in this study performed well in the organisational structure of their work. It would appear differences amongst heritage students relate to knowledge of grammar which includes sentence complexity, and vocabulary. Difficulties in grammar and vocabulary for heritage language students have been reported in prior research but errors in this research reveal a difference in type when individual student errors were considered.

For the three students, Daiki, Goro and Mari, the patterns of their errors can be related to their opportunities to use Japanese in their daily lives. Goro and Mari used Japanese as a main communication tool at home. They can communicate in Japanese although the opportunity to read may be limited. Mari was the only one who reported reading books in Japanese at home. Daiki had the least exposure to Japanese outside the hoshuu-koo. This lack of exposure would be expected to influence his acquisition of vocabulary and grammar.

An analysis of grammar indicated that errors in use of particles were the most prevalent errors regardless of the performance in writing. However, most of the particle errors for Goro and Mari were the use of incorrect particles while particle omission was more common in Daiki's writing. These results suggest that the students who used Japanese more frequently had a better understanding of the position of the particles and Daiki, who had less opportunity to practice outside the class had difficulty understanding the function of particles or how particles should be used. A mismatch between subjects and predicates were observed in many of the students' writing. The reason this error was not found Daiki's work could be explained by the lack of variation in his sentence patterns and that the sentences he wrote were simple in structure. Grammar errors in Daiki's writing could also be due to language interference as his family tended to use English in the home. The same errors were not observed in Goro's writing tasks and this could be related to his proficiency in Japanese as his parents reported that his performance in Japanese was better than his English.

Vocabulary analysis indicates that students who use Japanese at home often use inappropriate words in writing. In Japan, people often use informal speech at home; but heritage students have less chance to be exposed to formal Japanese and it would be difficult for these children to distinguish between formal and informal speech. Students

who read books in Japanese, like Mari, have a better chance of understanding different genres.

In contrast, use of incorrect words which were often found in Daiki and Goro's writings may have come from the methods they used to remember words. When each error was examined, it seemed they may be remembering each word through listening, or they kept using words without confirming the accuracy of the use. These words were written in hiragana. The two students did not use kanji as presumably they could not find these words in the dictionary. Mari's writing reflected an ability to use more words and more correct words, in her writing which could be associated with the reading of more Japanese books.

## **6. Conclusion and implications**

This research has examined the characteristics of writing tasks of adolescent heritage Japanese language learners. Year nine students who study Japanese at a hoshuu-koo in Australia were chosen for this research. Based on prior research, five criteria, structure, grammar, vocabulary, complexity and script, were used to analyse the students' writings tasks conducted throughout the year. Many characteristics were reported as typical, or common, errors for each criterion. Most of the students had problems in script and were relatively good at organising structure. Moreover, appropriateness and accuracy of grammar, vocabulary and complexity varied depending on the students. It was predicted that there would be differences depending on the students' background and proficiency. Three students who presented with different levels of proficiency in class were selected to explore the relationship of skill level and use of Japanese in the home.

When considering the research questions: "What can the similarities and differences in student proficiency in writing skills in heritage language tell us about the learning environment?" it would appear there were common patterns of proficiency across the criteria used to mark the class writing tasks. These patterns, levels of difference, discrepancies in the pattern of performance should be a focus of future curriculum design for the heritage class.

The three students selected for more in-depth attention had very different language backgrounds and the differences in levels of Japanese language proficiency have been detailed. The supplementary questions were designed to address what aspects of home experience might assist in the learning of the heritage language. The first supplementary question was directed at the area where the student's performance was least differentiated and this was in script. The greatest differences in the writing

skills were found in grammar and vocabulary, especially, incorrect use and omission of particles, clause connections, and use of incorrect words. It would appear that two factors influenced these students' proficiency levels. One was the increasing use of English as the dominant language; therefore, some errors could be the result of the influence of English grammar and expression. The amount of exposure to Japanese also needs to be nuanced. Even students who predominantly used Japanese at home had problems with grammar and vocabulary possibly related to lack of opportunities to hear or use formal language registers.

These findings suggest that it is important for hoshuu-koo teachers to have a knowledge of the types of exposure to Japanese language students receive outside the school. Book reading and storytelling could be encouraged in class to provide a more intuitive knowledge of different types of language use. Literature, film, television and many digital resources are now available to provide broader exposure to language and literature in forms that may be attractive to year seven students. As well as exploring the use of a greater range of materials for JHL teachers can also provide opportunities for more applied writing exploration and practice through identifying individual differences in performance.

The context for the research was an alternative class designed to meet the needs of heritage language learners who already have a dominant second language and will not return to the Japanese education system. Potentially this alternative class has greater flexibility than the content and teaching methods available in the MEXT curriculum. The implications are that individual needs can be addressed through developing pedagogical methods and learning resources that are reflective of the results of regular assessment, knowledge of home exposure and individual ability.

### **About the Author**

I have taught Japanese and English for 23 years in Australia and Japan. I am familiar with working with diverse classrooms and interested in designing pedagogical methods for addressing students' needs when studying a second language. This paper is taken from my doctoral research which is a report on an intervention program designed for Japanese heritage language learners. Qualifications include a Masters in Applied Linguistics, secondary teaching qualifications and a Diploma for Teaching English as a Second Language. I am a lecturer in Japanese language studies at RMIT University.

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Mizue Aiko  
LEARNING JAPANESE AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE:  
THE HOME SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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