

Reading Strategies to Overcome Difficulties in Understanding Japanese Sentences

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Abstract—The increase of difficult new words, complex sentences, various context and new information from reading materials make learning and teaching at the intermediate level difficult. The objective of this study is to identify student's difficulties in comprehending complex sentences and how teachers overcome these problems. The study was conducted at a university level language course outside Japan, majoring in Japanese, with 34 respondents. Respondents have been learning Japanese for 2 years of the elementary level equal to JLPT N4. They were asked to pick two most difficult sentences from a passage of 4 paragraphs and tell what they understand from the sentence. They work individually and may not search words on the dictionary. New words and expression were introduced in grammar class previously. As a result, it is discovered that grammatical morpheme and clause order was discovered as obstacles to students. This made difficult for them to apply a guessing strategy towards unfamiliar words. Through this study, teachers are recommended to again review teaching sentence comprehension, point out hints as a reading strategy to overcome difficulties in understanding Japanese sentences.

Keywords—difficulties; sentence; strategy; syntax

I. INTRODUCTION

Many students find reading comprehension in intermediate L2 Japanese is difficult. Factors that make reading difficult, are kanji (more than 50%), linguistic (more than 24%), and the remaining 26% consists of other factors, e.g. inherent difficulties in reading, typographical problem, unavailability of materials and others [1]. This shows that besides Kanji, students still encounter linguistic difficulties when reading.

New vocabulary is among other linguistic difficulties, nevertheless, Japanese sentences are also not easy to understand. Mainly because of the structure (S-O-V) and the fact that Japanese subject may be omitted (O-V). In intermediate reading activities, Vietnamese students are shown to be able to understand the main idea of a passage, nevertheless, they find difficult to understand detailed information. Vy identified 3 linguistic difficulties faced by intermediate reader, which are: 1) difficulties in identifying transitive to intransitive verb; 2) difficulties in understanding pronoun and sentence logic; 3) difficulties in structure and comprehension, when they find difficult sentences, students

tend to put together words they know, and end up creating their own understanding [2].

Similar mistakes as mentioned in no.3) were also discovered in Indonesian students work in reading classes. After understanding parts of the sentence, students then put together word meaning they know and create their own understanding. The origin sentence in Japanese is as follows.

過疎化の流れを止めることはできないとしても、

Kasoka no nagare wo tomeru koto wa dekinai to shite mo,

何らかの手を打たないことにはということで、

nanraka note wo utanai koto ni wa toiu koto de,

地方自治体と地域の人たちが一つになって、

chihou jichitai to chiiki no hito tachi ga hitotsu ni natte,

新しいふるさと作りの運動を続けている村がある。

atarashii furusatodzukuri no undou wo tsudzuketeiru mura ga aru. [3].

Correct meaning:

'Even if (omitted subject) can't stop depopulation, some action must be taken, therefore, there is this village, where district government, together with a local citizen, collaborate and continue rebuild (the village) into a new hometown.'

The student (KN) understanding:

'Even if depopulation can't be terminated, to solve the problem, the government creates a new village to take in people who are living alone'.

The first clause was correctly understood, but KN was not able to understand the other clauses. Difficulties may be caused by the sentence length, the subject omission, the words and clause relation, or vocabulary. It is expected to discover reading strategies that may be proposed to poor reader to overcome these linguistics difficulties.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To be able to overcome learner's difficulties in reading Japanese, learners, as well as teachers, should be aware on learner's background knowledge on reading, the knowledge of sentence structure, and reading difficulties. Language learners

at the university level are used to read textbooks in English. Therefore, they are considered to have the knowledge of English (L2) sentence structure as well as their L1 sentence structure. Following are both English and Indonesian sentence structure, continued by an explanation of Japanese sentence structure. This comparison intends to see, how to utilize linguistics background knowledge as reading strategies.

A. Indonesian and English Sentence Structure

Indonesian students understand L1 sentence structure by nature and by learning in school. They learn and understand Indonesian sentence structure as the following types: a.) Simple sentence (S+V) and b.) (S+V+C); c.) modified simple sentence (S+V+C); d.) Sentence with more than one independent clause; e.) Sentence with independent and dependent clause [4]. As a comparison to Bahasa Indonesia, English sentence structure which is simply divided into 3 types [5]. It is mentioned that there are 3 types of sentence structure, which are: a.) Sentence with one independent clause; b.) Compound sentence joined by a comma and coordinating conjunction; c.) Complex sentence with independent and dependent clauses. To identify conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions commonly used in a compound sentence are identified as: ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘but’, ‘so’. Addition to these conjunctions is ‘for’, ‘nor’, ‘yet’. Others are considered as conjunctions used in a complex sentence.

In complex sentences, these other conjunctions are used to connect subordinate clauses. Each subordinator clause may express or function as: a.) Reason (e.g. because, since); b.) condition (e.g. if); c.) Time (e.g. after, as soon as, before, since, until, when, whenever, while); d.) Adjective clauses (e.g. who, that, which); e.) Order (e.g. Time order: first, first of all; listing order: in addition, first, second, finally; space order: on the right, in the center); f.) Give example (e.g. for example, for instance, ...such as...); g.) Give opinion (e.g. In my opinion, according to); h.) Add a conclusion (e.g. In brief, in conclusion, in short).

B. Japanese Sentence Structure

Japanese grammar, focus on the relation between grammatical units. Grammatical unit in Japanese mainly consists of *bun* (sentence or clause); *bunsetsu* (word or word + particle); and *tango* (word). *Bunsetsu* may function as subject, predicate, modifier, conjunction or word [6]. The relation between each *bunsetsu* or word composes meaning. Particle may look the same, but may bear different function depends on the word it pairs.

e.g.1. target marker [ni]	e.g.2.source marker [ni]
ははにあげる	ははにもらう
<i>haha ni ageru</i>	<i>haha ni morau</i>
mother to give	mother from receive
Give to mother	Receive from mother.

In e.g. 1 and 2, [ni] may act as target or source marker, or a resource marker depends on the verb ‘*ageru*’ (to give) or ‘*morau*’ (to receive). Therefore, the relation between a

bunsetsu with the pair word is important to understand the Japanese sentence.

Japanese traditional grammar does not discuss sentence structure, by identifying Subject-Verb-Object. Therefore, this is adapted from English sentence structure [7]. Teramura explains that by adopting from English sentence structure, Japanese sentence structure is as follows, a.) *Tanbun*: simple sentence; b.) *Juubun*: compound sentence; c.) *Fukubun*: complex sentence. Example of Japanese simple sentence *tanbun*:

太郎が おいしい 野菜を 食べた。

Taro-P delicious vegetable-Obj.P eat-Past

Bunsetsu: 「*tarou ga*」 「*oishii*」 「*yasai wo*」 「*tabeta*」

Meaning: Tarou ate a delicious vegetable.

In spite of this adoption, still the relation of grammatical unit is mostly important. This is caused by the fact that a related pair, words or *bunsetsu* may be in a distance, separated by modifiers or compliment. Students should be able to identify the relation between each word and clause to overcome complex sentence difficulties.

In Japanese language teaching, a sentence with two or more subject and predicates is a complex sentence (*fukubun*). *Fukubun* covers compound (*juubun*) and complex sentence (*fukubun*) itself. *Fukubun* is explained to have 5 types of clauses: 1) Relative clause, ‘*rentaishuushoku*’ which modifies a noun; 2) Nominal clause. Identified by the particle ‘*no*’ or ‘*koto*’; 3) Quotation clause, which is identified by the word ‘*to itta*’; 4) Adverbial clause which modifies main clause predicate and expresses cause, reason, aim, condition and others; 5) parallel clause [8].

Japanese Complex sentence is difficult for L2 learner. Among other findings, Teruya proposed the following strategies. a.) Seek for "subjects" in the sentence; b.) Identify sentence type "static or dynamic" according to the verb or predicate types; c.) Cut sentence in parts on "time", "condition", "progress" modifier [9]. What Teruya propose is useful, nevertheless, as mentioned previously subject may be omitted. Therefore, students still need more hints to overcome the obstacle of understanding Japanese complex sentences.

III. METHOD

This research was initiated from problems occur in reading classes. 34 university students majoring Japanese, were asked to identify difficult sentences from two different passages. Each passage consists of 4 short paragraphs where each student chooses one or two difficult sentences. There were 13 sentences chosen by students from the first text, and 4 sentences from the second text. Students were then given exercises and instructions in order to overcome their reading obstacle. Finally, students were asked to take another test to check their understanding of the complex sentence. This shows kinds of strategies can be proposed to teachers.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

From the student’s assignment, it is discovered that not all student applies accurate strategy to overcome syntax difficulties. They fail to make use of syntactic knowledge of English or Bahasa Indonesia to understand Japanese sentences. In English and Bahasa Indonesia, identifying subject and predicate or verb will lead students to understand the main idea of a sentence. The subject is usually found at the beginning of each sentence. This strategy failed in reading Japanese sentences and was discovered by the following assignment.

First attempt was asking students to propose 2 sentences they consider difficult from a passage. There were 13 sentences out of 28 sentences that were claimed difficult. The other task was to identify the subject and predicate from the sentences, where several mistakes were identified, which are:

Syntax mistakes

- Try to comprehend from the first word of a sentence.
- Incorrectly identify clause order.

Lexical mistakes:

- Incorrectly identify the function of the particle, conjunction.
- Lack of understanding of word meaning e.g. transitive and intransitive verb, idiom, homonym.

These findings have proven that especially slow learner needs to achieve reading strategy and practice reading more frequent to overcome syntactic difficulties in understanding Japanese complex sentences.

Students need to be trained, first to identify the main clause as the main idea and identify the subordinate clause and modifier as an information source for further details. The following discussion will show how students can identify the main clauses and how it can give a wide image of what the sentence is about.

B. Discussion

Bao Vy and Teruya discussed how students fail to understand Japanese complex sentences [2,9]. Similarity among the two studies was that students try to grasp meaning from the beginning of a Japanese sentence, and by seeking for the subject. This strategy to start from the beginning of a sentence may apply on languages with S-V-O structure, and when the subject may not be omitted. In Japanese sentences, the subject may be omitted and the predicate or verb comes at the end of the sentences. Therefore, in this study, students are not advised to search for the subject, on the other contrary search for the verb or predicate. Secondly, students are also advised to avoid starting to understand from the first word, on the other hand, students are advised to identify predicate, main clause and other subordinate clauses function according to conjunction as markers.

The understanding of a complex sentence in an instance is the main goal in teaching intermediate reading comprehension.

Translating the whole sentence, seeking for word by word meanings will be time-consuming. From identifying students mistake, there are three strategies proposed.

- Locating predicate and identify the main clause.
- Ask 5 W 1H towards the predicate.
- Adding number according to word order in L1.

A learner must first locate verb or predicate and then the subject, to grasp the main clause and construct them into a simple sentence from the whole complex sentence. The second step is to ask a related question which information is in the text, and finally construct a sentence according to L1 sentence order.

1) *Identify the main clause by the predicate:* It is important for students to be able to see words in a sentence, not as an individual word, but as chunks in a pattern of {Subject + complement + Verb}. The pattern {S + Comp.+ V} compliment part may also resemble as a dependent clause. {S+ dependent clause +V}. Formation of {S + V} will build the main clause which should be first identified as the main idea of the sentence. In English or Bahasa Indonesia, the sentence structure will form {S+V + Comp.}, which result that the main clause is immediately identified.

- (1) タテの関係は、身分制度が廃止されてからも長く家族や学校、会社内の人間関係に残り、日本は「タテ社会」などと言われてきた。[3].

This sentence is a compound sentence with two independent clauses, therefore should have been an easy attempt. Nevertheless, 4 out of 7 students who consider this sentence difficult, failed to understand.

Tateno kankeiwa mibunseidoga haishisare te karamo nagaku
Vertical relation-P socialclass-P abolished -P since even for long
S1 Comp.1b.
 kazoku ya gakkou, kaisha nai no ninngen kankei ni **nokori**,
 family and school office in -P human relation -P remain,
 Comp.1a **V1**
Nihonwa ‘ tateshakai’ nado to **iware te kita**.
Japan-P vertical-society others-P said -P up to now Past
S2 Comp.2 **V2**

The first step is to identify predicate then subject, which is V1 ‘*nokori*’ and S ‘*tateno kankei*’. Another independent clause is located as pairs in V2 ‘*iwarete kita*’ and S2 ‘*Nihon*’, which brings to a compound sentence pattern ‘S1-V1-Comp.1a-1b.+S2-V2-Comp.2.’, with a general understanding of:

- ‘*Vertical relation remain*’ + *Comp.1a-1b*
- ‘*Japan is said up to present*’ + *Comp.2*

Therefore, to understand the whole meaning, learner may just fill in remaining words left according to the pattern, which construct meanings as follows, ‘Vertical relation remain in human relationships in the family, school, and office for a long time, even since class society has been abolished, (therefore), Japan has been said to be a “hierarchy society”’.

2) Ask 5W 1H towards the predicate:

- (2) タテの関係が すっかり見られなくなったと言わないが、ヨコのつながりが大切にされるようになった今、その影響で失われつつあるものが何か、真剣に考えてみる必要がある。 [3]

This sentence is quite long and complex, though not using much kanji characters, nevertheless, this sentence is considered difficult by 8 students, and 5 fail to understand the meaning. Following is a reading strategy proposed to students.

Tateno shakaiga, sukkari mirarenaku nattatowa iwanaiga,
Vertical-P society-P, all see-Pass-neg.be-P say neg but,
----- Chunk 1 -----
yokono tsunagariga taisetsuni sareru youni natta
horizontal-P relation-P important-P do pass.conj.turn-past
----- Chunk 2 -----

ima, sono eikyou de ushinawaretsutsuaru monoga nanika,
now, that influence-P disappearing modf.thing-SP what QP
□ ----- Chunk 3 -----
shinkenni kangaetemiru hitsuyouga aru.
serious-P think-CP try need P exists.□
----- Chunk 4 = Verb Phrase -----

The first step is to realize there are 4 clauses which divide the whole sentence into 4 chunks. Then students are asked to identify the main clause by locating main predicate which is in 'Chunk 4' namely 'kangaetemiru hitsuyouga aru' with a modifier 'seriously' ('shinkenni'), which compose the meaning of 'It is needed to think-seriously'. This is the sentence's main idea, with 'the need' ('hitsuyou') as subject and 'there is' ('aru') as a verb. The student must realize that there is no need to seek for a subject elsewhere in the sentence. Shift to the following step, which is searching for what, when or why it 'is needed to think seriously'.

The second step is to identify what the main clause is talking about, which is obviously in the chunk before it, which is coded 'chunk 3' 'sono eikyouda ushinawaretsutsuaru monoga nanika' ('what is missing caused by that'). Therefore, students may achieve half the understanding of the whole sentence, which is 'It is needed (for us) to think about what is missing', by that influence'. Furthermore, the learner may ask what does the demonstrative pronoun 'that' ('sono') refers to?

Third step is to identify subordinate clause Chunk 1. 'Tateno shakaiga, sukkari mirarenaku nattatowa iwanaiga' ('nevertheless it may not be said, that vertical society is totally not seen, but') and Chunk 2 'yoko no tsunagariga taisetsuni sareru youni natta' ('horizontal connection is considered to become important'). Finally, the learner can identify the whole meaning, or pick up the most important message which is 'Now (when) horizontal relation is being important, it is needed to be thought, what is missing (as a result)', which is in Chunk 2, 3, and 4.

From the student's mistakes, it is shown that most of them try to understand the main idea, starting from the first word encountered at the beginning of the sentence. Three students who succeeded to understand the meaning as, 'It is needed to

think about what is missing, by that influence, which horizontal connection is considered to become important, nevertheless, it may not be said, that vertical society has totally disappeared'. These students who considered this sentence difficult, but succeeded to understand the main idea, did not start to understand the meaning from the first word or phrase ('tate no shakai ga'). These students identified the independent clause at the end of the sentence, then composed comprehension by seeking more detail on the independent clause 'It is needed to think'.

3) Adding number as on word order in L1 structure: Compared to the previous sentence in (2), this sentence is less short. Nevertheless, this sentence in data (3) was declared difficult by 3 students, and neither of them succeeded to understand the meaning.

- (3) 厳しい上下関係の社会では、その関係を守って生活せざるおえず、身分が違えば気安く口を利くことさえできなかった。 [3].

Besides identifying verb or predicate, main clause and ask questions towards the main verb, adding number according to L1 sentence structure and identify conjunction is recommended when reading a difficult sentence. Adding omitted subject is recommended as well.

Kibishii jouge kankeino shakaidewa, sonokankei wo mamotte
Strict vertical relation society-P, that relation OP keep-P
----- Place modifier ----- Chunk no 3 -----
seikatsusezaruoezu, mibunga chigaeba kiyasuku kuchiwo kikukotosae
live must status different if easily ask even
-- Chunk no.2: if clause -- -----Chunk no.1 ----
dekinakatta,
can not past

Students are advised to add omitted subject to the sentence, which makes it easier to understand as follows. 'In a strict hierarchy society, (you) can't even ask a question easily, if (your) social status is different, then (you) must live to maintain that relationship.' This sentence, contains a place modifier clause ('kibishii jouge kankeino shakaidewa'), an if clause ('mibunga chigaeba'), and a predicate clause ('kiyasuku kuchiwo kikukotosae dekinakatta'). The first step to overcome difficulties is identifying Chunk no.1 (predicate), which is a clause: 'kiyasuku kuchiwo kikukotosae dekinakatta' ('can't even ask a question easily'). This happens under the condition of the 'if clause' which is 'mibunga chigaeba' ('if social status is different') and the rest of the sentence is all a modifier, which can be just lined up using word order numbering and suitable subject.

- Place modifier = 'in a strict hierarchy of society',
- Chunk No.3 = 'must live to maintain that relation',
- Chunk No.2 = 'whenever the social status is different'
- Chunk No.1 = 'can't even ask a question easily'

It was mentioned previously, as a reading strategy, students do not start comprehending from the beginning of the sentence.

This may be an exception if the sentence starts with a place modifier or time modifier at the first clause. In this case, it was identified by the particle *-de wa* (in). The sentence meaning becomes ‘in a strict hierarchy society’, (one) ‘must live maintaining that relation’, (and) ‘whenever the social status is different’, (one) cannot even ask a question easily’.

4) *Verb-actor pair*: As an additional strategy, it is proposed here to identify the relation between the verb and the actor (verb-actor pair), to recheck comprehension. Learner often got trapped in confusion, and not being able to identify the actor of the verb or the subject. This is usually caused by the omission of the subject is possible in Japanese sentences. 12 out of 31 students find it difficult to understand this following sentence.

(4) 私はわけがわからなくて、機嫌が悪いのだろうか、それとも、私のプレゼントがうれしくて、泣きそうになった顔を見られたくなかったのだろうか、いろいろ考えつつ、何とか納得できないまま、自分の部屋に入った。[10].

Watashiwa wakega wakaranakute, kigenga waruinodarouka,
 I-P reason-P know neg-P mood-P bad maybe QP,
 soretomo, watashino purezentoga ureshikunakute, naki souni
 or my-P gift-P happy neg-P, cry seems
 natta kao wo mi rare taku nakatta no darouka to, iroiro
 turn face-P see passive wan tneg Past-P maybe P, vary
 kangaetsutsu, nantonaku nattoku dekinai mama,
 think keep no reason satisfy can neg condition
 jibun no heya ni haitta.
 own-P room-P enter-Past

This is a part of a paragraph about a mother and her grown-up child (*watashi*). This sentence has 7 commas and is very long. Besides executing strategies mentioned previously, it is proposed here to identify the person in action (actor) for each verb. This will verify the correct relation between the S-V of each clause. First is to identify how many persons are involved in the sentence (2 people), then identify each verb according to its sequence (as seen in Table.1).

TABLE I. ACTOR-ACTION IDENTIFICATION

Watashi (I)	Haha (omitted)(Mother)
Wakaranai don't know	kigen ga warui in bad mood
kangaetsutsu keep thinking	Ureshikunai not happy
nattoku dekinai can't understand	nakisouni naru nearly cry
heyani haitta entered own room	miraretakunai don't want to be seen

Sentence meaning: ‘I do not know the reason, so I went to my room, remained not understanding (whether the mother is in a bad mood, or is it that she was so happy for my present, she did not want me to see her happy tears?)’

Students which have the ability to see chunks in this sentence was able to identify compound sentence conjunction

‘*soretomo*’ meaning ‘or’ and the word ‘*darouka*’ meaning ‘maybe’ which was used twice, and may realize the quotation particle ‘to’. Therefore, they may not need this actor-action strategy to understand difficult sentences.

(5) 母が結婚してすぐ、安心したように亡くなった父親の部屋から、小学校のときに、父にプレゼントをした赤い花の絵が出てきた。[10]

Hahaga kekkon shite sugu, anshinshita youni
 Mother-P married immediately relieved looks
 nakunatta chichioyano heyakara, shougakkouno tokini
 passed away father-P room from, elementary-P time-P
 chichini purezento shita akai hanano e ga detekita.
 father-P gift gave redflower-P drawing-P appeared

Students who failed to understand correctly, identified ‘*detekita*’ (appeared) as mother’s action (56%). Therefore, it is important to use action-actor strategy to check details.

Several learners were not able to identify ‘*detekita*’ (‘appeared’) as an intransitive word, therefore they understood the clause as ‘mother put out / took out the drawing from father’s room’. Several other learners understood that the actor of the verb ‘*purezentshita*’ ‘give a gift’ was ‘*chichi*’ ‘father’, which the actor should be ‘mother’. The correct meaning is ‘mother gave a present to (her) father’.

Finally, students are advised to write notes when reading. Moreover, a simple worksheet maybe provided as well. This will be useful to collect various reading strategy. The student may ask questions towards predicate such as “what appeared?” → drawing appeared, “what about the present?” → gave a present to father, “whose father passed away?” → mother’s father, “who got married?” mother.

To wrap up the whole meaning, it is important to identify conjunction to be able to identify clause type, dependent or independent. This helps to construct meaning according to L1 sentence structure. This sentence has 4 clauses, and the clause marker ‘*kara*’ (from) which shows the meaning of origin, and construct the following meaning, “From (her) father’s room who passed away in peace, right after mother got married, mother’s drawing of a red flower which was a present to (her) father, appeared.”

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Besides competence in understanding kanji and vocabulary, learner needs to have knowledge of Japanese sentence structure, and how it is different from an L1 structure. Even though learner had learned sentence structure in L1 and other L2, the structure in Japanese is different in many aspects. Among others are: word order, sentence structure, numerous homonyms, and a lot of grammatical words. Students need to exercise on identifying main information in main clauses and add up an understanding with subordinate information from other parts of the sentence.

Students also need to discover their own reading difficulties and find various reading strategies to apply to different kinds of

sentence. As for teachers, there are several recommendations to propose. First, teachers and students must not only focus on contents or grammar but also on reading strategy achievement. Teachers are expected to modify reading instruction according to the reading strategy aim. Useful reading strategies are: shift from word reading to chunk or clause reading; Identify verb or predicate (action) before subject (actor); Identify conjunction as markers; Identify clause types; ask questions (who, what, where); construct meaning in L1 sentence structure by numbering.

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