

Japanese Learners of English and the Effect of Word Frequency on Loanword Reliance

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1. Introduction

There are *benefits*. There are *merits*. Listen to a Japanese learner of English (hereafter JL) and there is a good chance that you will hear the second sentence. This is because *meritto* (メリット) is a widely known loanword in Japanese that shares some form and meaning with its English counterpart. For the purposes of this paper, *loanword* will refer to English-based words that have a high degree of crosslinguistic similarity between English and Japanese.¹ There are many such words. These words may represent a rich resource for JL, who can transfer lexical knowledge from Japanese to assist their English. However, studies have shown that JL tend to rely heavily on them, often overusing loanwords in comparison to what might be expected of native English speakers. Why is this? The answer is probably dependent on a range of factors, but word frequency has been proposed to be one of them. To help confirm this, an experiment to measure lexical choices by word frequency was conducted. Results suggest that JL increasingly rely on loanword knowledge as word frequency decreases.

2. Background

Several researchers have looked at how knowledge of English-based loanwords in Japanese enhances the English performance of JL. For example, Daulton (1998) claims they are easier to recall. However, rather than measure learner achievement, others decided to study lexical choices, wanting to know whether JL show a preference for loanwords over non-loanwords.

2.1. *The borrowed word recognition phenomenon*

Brown (1995) gave 97 Japanese university students 20 gap-fill problems. For each, they had to choose a word from a list of four to complete the sentence. The word lists were different for each problem, but they all contained one loanword and three options that were non-loanwords. There was no ‘correct’ answer, all options were suitable. Thus, choices should have been random. Results showed, though, that participants were nearly twice as likely to choose a loanword than a word at random. Brown wrote that ‘the students quite clearly felt more comfortable with the use of the words that had been borrowed into Japanese than the words which had not’. He called this the *borrowed word recognition phenomenon*.

¹ Some researchers use the term *cognate* to distinguish words that are crosslinguistically similar.

2.2. The borrowed word effect

After Brown discovered this proclivity towards loanwords, several studies have reported that JL tend to overproduce loanwords in their English writing and speaking compared to what would be expected of native English speakers. In one of these studies, Daulton (2007) gave 33 JL university students 30 minutes to write about their plans for the summer and compiled a corpus from the texts. He then counted and divided the number of loanwords by the number of non-loanwords to find the proportion of each. With up to half of the most common 10,000 words in English having loanword equivalents in Japanese (Allen, 2018), up to a fifty-fifty proportion should be expected in natural English. However, the students produced two to five times as many loanwords. He called this preference for loanwords in written output the *borrowed word effect*, which is expressed in percentages (see Table 2.1). Despite the divergence from natural English, Daulton viewed this effect as a positive for learning because it ‘encourag[es] overall production, and thus facilitat[es] overall acquisition’ (2007: 17).

Table 2.1. *Written corpus data analysis for loanwords (Daulton, 2007)*

Word level	Number of borrowed tokens (types)	Number of non-borrowed tokens (types)	Borrowed word effect
1 to 500	436 (112)	165 (37)	264% (303%)
501 to 1000	202 (73)	37 (16)	546% (456%)
1001 to 2000	60 (30)	27 (13)	222% (231%)

Struc and Wood (2015) conducted a similar, but more extensive, study of JL writing. A hundred and seventy Japanese university students and 29 native English speakers at an American university wrote two essays (narrative and argumentative) within 40 minutes. Upon analysis, the researchers did observe a borrowed word effect, though to a lesser degree than Daulton. One of the reasons they speculated for this reduced effect was that Daulton’s participants studied economics, whereas theirs were majoring in English-related subjects. Greater exposure to English and higher English proficiency are just two variables that might have had an impact on the result. The same JL repeated the writing task a year later. Even after a year had passed, the JL were still using a lot of loanwords, often the same ones repeatedly, and often in different ways to native speakers. Struc and Wood concluded that ‘while loanword cognates arguably contribute to fluency, findings suggest potential for overreliance and negative transfer’ (ibid: 5). This paints a more negative picture of the borrowed word effect as an indicator of a learning stage where the first language (L1) limits English range and accuracy.

Delve (2019) conducted research into spoken, rather than written, production. Speaking prompts around a topic were given to 117 Japanese university students, who were encouraged to speak at length. A corpus was created from recordings, then analyzed for a borrowed word effect. He found one, and so widened the scope of the borrowed word effect from writing to speaking output as well. He concluded that ‘Japanese learners rely heavily on English-based loanwords, although the accuracy and range of use is limited’ (ibid: 73). This again indicated that loanword knowledge supports language production, but not necessarily the quality of it.

As part of his observations, Delve noticed that a reliance on loanwords becomes heavier as word frequency decreases. This is probably because less frequent word levels are more difficult (2019: 77-78). A relationship between a rising borrowed word effect and a rising difficulty level was not clear in Daulton's data (Table 2.1), and it was only hinted at by Struc and Wood speculatively comparing English major students to those studying economics. Table 2.2 shows a clear borrowed word effect upward trend when measured by the number of distinct words (types) occurring in the corpus.

Table 2.2. *Spoken corpus data analysis for loanwords (Delve, 2019)*

Word level	Number of borrowed tokens (types)	Number of non-borrowed tokens (types)	Borrowed word effect
1 to 1000	2184 (246)	8215 (392)	26% (63%)
1001 to 2000	440 (79)	104 (80)	423% (99%)
2001 to 3000	97 (30)	85 (24)	114% (125%)

2.3. Possible reasons for the borrowed word effect

The studies above show that, when given a choice, JL often tend towards loanwords. However, none of them could confidently say why. There are probably multiple factors involved. For example, some studies have shown loanwords are easier to recognize, retain and recall (e.g., Kimura, 1989; Daulton, 1998). Therefore, we might assume they are more cognitively accessible, which is especially important for language production.

Alternatively, Hasselgren suggests that 'learners depend heavily on the familiar, either by choosing words and phrases closely resembling their first language or those learnt early or widely used' (1994: 237). A reliance on language that has been long acquired might account for the persistence of a borrowed word effect for the JL participants in Struc and Wood's study. Why learn and use the word *benefit* when *merit* has been adequate for communication?

Another part of the explanation could be that JL participants overuse loanwords due to insufficiencies in their second language (L2) knowledge. In other words, L1 lexical knowledge is used to fill the gaps in the L2. The economics students in Daulton's research seemed to rely on loanwords more than the English major students in Struc and Wood's. Delve provided some evidence correlating increased loanword reliance with lower word frequency. This reliance may allow JL to maintain a degree of fluency when they are already 'stretched to the limits of their lexical knowledge' (Delve, 2019: 78). A high borrowed word effect may indicate that a learner is uncomfortable at that stage of learning.

Although these possibilities focus on different aspects, they do appear to be linked by a common thread; JL tend to use English words that are familiar to them. There may not be anything particular about loanwords other than that they offer some degree of familiarity, especially when the alternatives are unfamiliar. If JL are somewhat familiar with non-loanword alternatives, the borrowed word effect might become weaker.

2.4. Measuring loanword preference by word frequency

To test this hypothesis, it is necessary to know how familiar JL are with vocabulary items and compare this to how often they choose loanwords. One way to gauge levels of familiarity is to look at word frequency. In general, when learning a language, higher-frequency words will be encountered earlier and used more. The first 2,000 most frequent words account for about 80% of written English, and around 90% of words used in conversation (Nation, 2001:15-17). It is possible to say that, on average, the higher the word frequency, the more familiar the word will be to a JL. Therefore, we can measure how often loanwords are preferred according to word frequency.

Delve all but identified a correlation between lower word frequency and increased reliance on loanwords. However, there are numerous variables that are difficult to control for in free production activities. Aside from usual scientific considerations, like sample size and definitions of loanwords, there are challenges involved in measuring the influences of grammar and context on the data. For example, how are function words to be counted? They are very high frequency but are all non-loanwords. Also, how much does a certain topic affect word choice? Even more complicated would be discerning how previous word choices might set contexts that influence subsequent ones. With such potential variation, it is understandable that Daulton (2007) reported borrowed word effect percentages in word frequency bands that showed an *opposite* trend to Delve (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

The current researcher's solution to the problem of inherent variability in free writing or speaking activities was not to study the borrowed word effect at all, but instead the borrowed word recognition phenomenon (see Section 2.1). Though not directly observing language in use, Brown's data collection instrument isolates and retains the variable in question, lexical choice. By modifying this instrument to include word frequency information, we can examine whether JL choose loanwords more as word frequency decreases. If the answer is yes, it will add to the evidence that suggests a lexical preference for loanwords is an inevitable early stage of learning for JL, but one which weakens as L2 knowledge increases.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

1. Do Japanese learners of English (JL) choose loanwords more frequently than native speakers of English?
2. If so, do JL choose loanwords more as word frequency in English decreases?

3.2. Participants

Two hundred native speakers of Japanese (JL group) participated in the activity with instructions given in Japanese. They were first- and second-year undergraduate students from Shinshu University, and drawn from a variety of faculties (Medicine, Nursing, Law and Economics, Humanities, and Technology). All had received at least 6 years of English education at junior-high and high school, and they were enrolled in twice-weekly mandatory English classes at the university. Additionally, 50 native speakers of English (NS group) participated in an all-English

version of the activity. They were over 18 years old. They were living in, or originally from, the U.K., the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia. Research involving participants was approved by an ethics committee at Shinshu University.

3.3. Test instrument

Participants were presented with gap-fill sentences in English. For each one they selected an English word from a list to complete the sentence. Half of the words on each list were loanwords in Japanese; half were non-loanwords. To complete each sentence, only two words from a list were (lexicographically) suitable. Although equally suitable, one was a loanword in Japanese and the other was not.

7. Could you pass me that _____ , please?

- annoy
- approach
- casual
- comment
- compare
- incredible
- newspaper
- magazine

Figure 3.1 Example gap-fill test item

The test was divided into four sections based on English word frequency levels. Section 1 contained words from the 1st 1000 word-frequency band. Section 2, the 2nd 1000 words, and so on. Each section contained four gap-fill sentences and a list of eight words. In total, there were 16 gap-fill sentences and 32 English vocabulary items. (See Appendix A for the full list of test items).

3.3.1. Vocabulary selection process for the test instrument

The variables of interest were: (1) loanword status in Japanese; and (2) word frequency level in English. Vocabulary was selected based primarily on the basis of these criteria. There were several steps in this selection process.

First, a list of Japanese words which are widely known loanwords was created. Allen (2020) describes a procedure for how to check the status of loanwords in Japanese. Following this procedure, The *Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese* (BCCWJ) (Maekawa et al., 2014) was downloaded to Excel, and the items sorted according to whether they were loanwords or not. The resulting loanword list included many words that are rarely used and probably unknown to most Japanese speakers. According to Allen, words occurring in the corpus at least once every

million words ‘can be used as a general guide to determining loanwords that exist *and* are likely to be known’ (ibid: 2). Thus, words below this threshold were discounted as loanwords.

The next major step was to make lists of English words from which to draw upon for writing test items. The words were drawn from the *BNC/COCA headword lists* (Nation, 2012) because these lists reflect vocabulary that is most likely encountered by learners of English as a foreign language. Four frequency lists were downloaded (1st 1000, 2nd 1000, 3rd 1000, and 4th 1000). Each list was then sorted by whether the words had a Japanese loanword counterpart or not. To do this, they were cross-referenced against the BCCWJ data (as described in Allen’s procedure). English words which have cognates under the one-per-million threshold were discounted.² The result was four lists of English words, each representing a thousand-word frequency band in English, and each further subdivided by loanword status in Japanese: likely-known cognate or non-cognate.

Table 3.1. *Sample list of BNC words cross-referenced against BCCWJ loanword data*

English word	Freq. in English	Japanese cognate	Frequency in corpus	Freq. per million words
PAGE	1k	ページ	24642	235.555198
SERVICE	1k	サービス	16630	158.967736
AUTUMN	1k	オータム	42	0.401482
WAIT	1k	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A

With this information, a pool of potential test vocabulary items had been generated. The final step was to select four loanwords and four non-loanwords for each frequency level (32 in total). This was done using the researcher’s judgement. The Japanese participants needed a fair chance of having had previous exposure to the words. For example, *dad* is one of the most common words in English, but relatively underused by JL, who standardly use the word *father*. Japanese teachers of English were consulted for their intuitions. A small pilot test also revealed the word *drawer* as relatively unfamiliar. In terms of word type, as most loanwords in Japanese relate to English nouns, a spread of word types but with a leaning towards nouns would have been ideal. However, the number of non-loanwords at high-frequency levels is relatively small. Therefore, more verbs had to be selected. A further consideration was how the words fitted into the gap-fill sentences. One loanword and one non-loanword had to be, as much as possible, equally suitable.

3.3.2. *Gap-fill activity design for the test instrument*

The test instrument was a modified version of Brown’s (1995). His instrument (Fig. 3.2) contained 20 gap-fill sentences, each with four possible answers. The basic framework of Brown’s test was used in the instrument design for the current study because it focused on the variable of word choice. However, the design was modified for the current study (Fig. 3.1 and Appendix A) for several reasons.

² The one exception was the word *neighbor*. Although *neighbor* (ネイバール) appears in the BCCWJ corpus, it occurs only six times out of over 100,000,000 words. As a point of comparison, the entry above it was *nucleocapsid*. *Neighbor* was used as a non-loanword.

7. In Hong Kong tourists can buy a lot of _____ name brand goods.
- exceptional
 - cheap
 - foreign
 - imitation*

Figure 3.2 Example gap-fill item (Brown, 1995).

First, because any of the answers are appropriate in Brown's design, there is a possibility that participants might disengage mentally from the activity. To encourage fuller cognitive engagement, the new design asks participants to search for suitable choices amongst unsuitable ones. Ultimately, though, accuracy was not of concern to this study. Any answer was treated simply as a loanword or non-loanword choice. Secondly, at least in the example above, collocation seems to have an influence on word choice, in my opinion. The new design attempted to limit the effect of collocation by employing more neutral language and contexts. It is unlikely the effects of collocation (and lexicogrammar in general) can be completely mitigated. That is why native English speakers also did the activity to provide a benchmark of native speaker norms. Thirdly, the number of sentences was reduced from 20 to 16 for practical reasons. Including ten words in a section of five sentences creates more overlap and a greater number of 'suitable' responses. Moreover, after applying the various criteria for vocabulary item selection, the pool of possible words became small, especially at higher frequencies. Finally, the most important modification was to select and organize vocabulary according to English word frequency levels. This was to observe any effect frequency may have had on participants' choices.

3.4. Procedure

The activity was administered online via a Google Form. Information and instructions were in a participant's first language (Japanese or English). The first page provided some general details about the research. However, the fact that it focused on loanwords was not revealed to participants to avoid a priming effect. The first page also gave brief instructions on how to complete the activity. The second page was labelled as 'Informed Consent' (インフォームド・コンセント). Declining participation ended the activity. Agreeing to participate was considered informed consent and led a participant to the start of the activity. The Google Form Dropdown format was used. Each gap-fill sentence was on its own separate page with an accompanying dropdown of eight words from which to choose. The 'Shuffle' function was enabled, so options would not appear in the same order each time. The 'Required response' function was enabled so that items could not be skipped. No time limit was imposed. Most completed the activity in under five minutes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Do JL choose loanwords more frequently than native speakers of English?

Overall, the Japanese learners of English (JL group) chose loanwords more often than the native speakers of English (NS group). The trend was not as pronounced as in Brown's data, but the results offer support for the borrowed word recognition phenomenon. JL selected non-loanwords (48%) and loanwords (52%) in almost equal proportions. Although this might appear to indicate a

random selection, it is not. The borrowed word effect assumes an approximate 50% use of loanwords. However, the data collection instrument was not designed to produce a completely random result. The JL data must be viewed in relation to the NS group, which is taken here to represent native speaker norms for this instrument. The NS group chose loanwords only 38% of the time, 14% less often than JL.

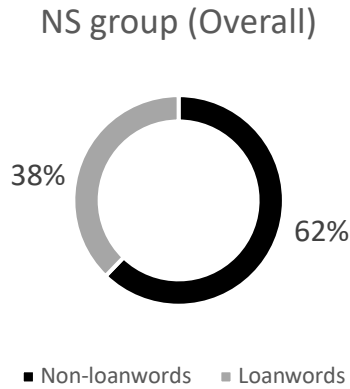


Figure 4.1 Proportion of loanwords chosen overall (NS group)

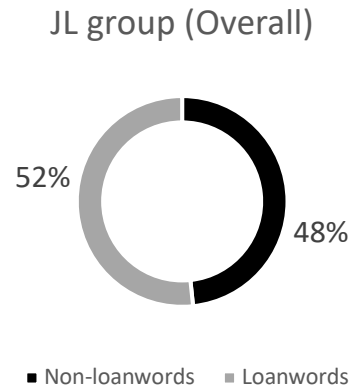


Figure 4.2 Proportion of loanwords chosen overall (JL group)

In stark contrast to the overall proportions, the JL group chose loanwords at almost the same rate as the NS group at the highest frequency word level (1-1000). The groups were compared using a two-sample *t*-test and were determined to be nearly identical ($p=.91$).

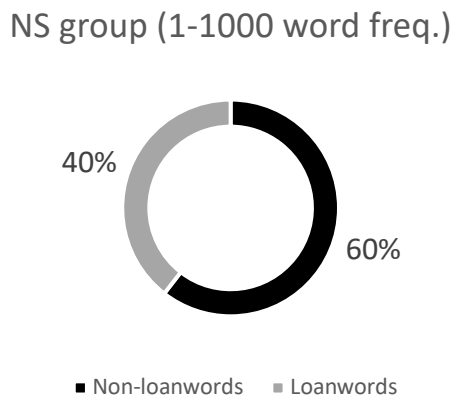


Figure 4.3 Proportion of loanwords chosen at 1-1000-word frequency level (NS group)

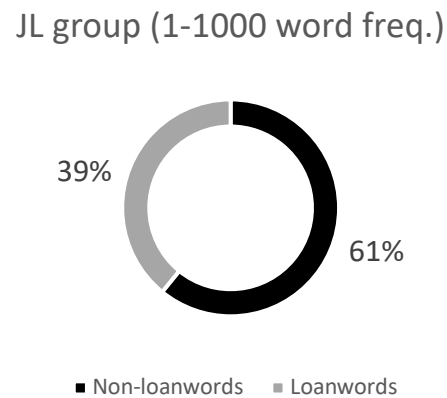


Figure 4.4 Proportion of loanwords chosen at 1-1000-word frequency level (JL group)

The preference for loanwords may not be evident at all if JL are very familiar with the language. This cannot be strongly claimed here as the NS group data cannot be said to represent the English language in general. Nevertheless, this result suggests that a tendency towards loanwords is not constant; it instead diminishes as language becomes easier. It appears to depend on what level of language you are observing. Yes, JL do show an overall tendency towards loanwords, but any

description of the borrowed word recognition phenomenon should take word frequency and language familiarity into consideration. The next section will report and discuss the results for word frequency bands in more detail.

4.2. Do JL choose loanwords more as word frequency in English decreases?

Table 4.1 below shows that the NS group chose loanwords at approximately the same rates for all frequency levels except the lowest (3001-4000), where the proportion of loanword selections fell. On the other hand, the JL group chose loanwords more as word frequency decreased.

Table 4.1. *Proportions of loanwords chosen in word frequency bands*

Word frequency	NS group			JL group			Variance
	Loanwords chosen (%)	Mean	SD	Loanwords chosen (%)	Mean	SD	P value
1 to 1000	40	1.58	0.95	39	1.57	0.8	.91
1001 to 2000	39	1.54	0.93	51	2.03	0.96	.002
2001 to 3000	40	1.58	0.9	54	2.18	0.83	<.001
3001 to 4000	25	1	1.03	62	2.5	0.91	<.001
Overall	38	5.72	1.94	52	8.27	1.82	<.001

Participants chose four words in each word frequency band. This was from a list of eight, half being loanwords. A random sample would have resulted in a mean score of 2 loanwords, or a 50% proportion. With both groups starting at the almost the same proportion of 39-40% for the highest frequency words, the number of loanwords chosen in the JL group steadily rose in an upward trend like the one reported by Delve (2019) for the borrowed word effect. A trendline has been added to the graph below (Fig. 4.6) to show this.

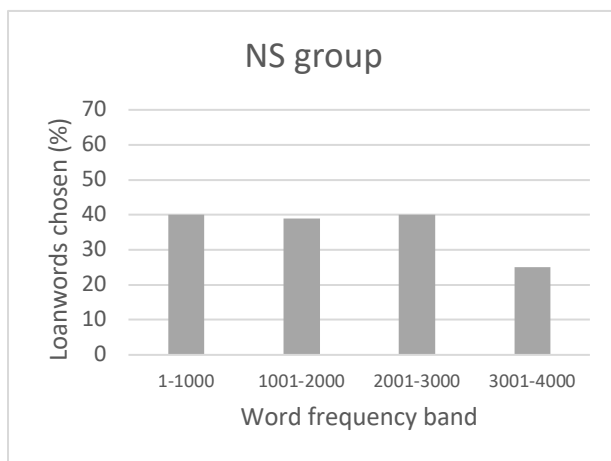


Figure 4.5 *Proportion of loanwords chosen in word frequency bands (NS group)*

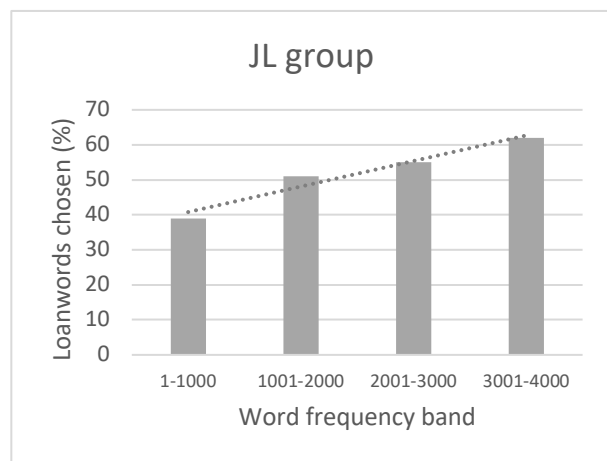


Figure 4.6 *Proportion of loanwords chosen in word frequency bands (JL group)*

Although, this trendline helps us to see the within-group trend, it does not compare across groups. Had the NS group proportions remained constant, it would have offered a convenient point of comparison. As it is, there is a large divergence at the 3001-4000 frequency level across groups. Regardless of degree, the trend is upward. JL do choose loanwords more as word frequency decreases.

5. Implications

Results from this study support the general assertion that when JL make lexical choices in English, they have a greater tendency towards words that are also loanwords in Japanese than do native speakers of English. This concurs with previous studies documenting the borrowed word recognition phenomenon and the borrowed word effect. There is much debate in the literature as to whether knowledge of English-based loanwords in Japanese should be exploited somehow to enhance JL English language acquisition. This pedagogical question remains unanswered. What can be said here is that JL naturally utilise their L1 knowledge. This phenomenon should at least be acknowledged by educators as an inevitable part of English language learning for JL.

Despite being inevitable, a tendency towards loanwords appears not to be constant, but instead changes with word frequency. As language becomes less frequent, the tendency increases. This suggests that JL increasingly rely on L1 knowledge as the L2 difficulty level rises. Conversely, the opposite can be true. As JL become more familiar with language, their reliance on L1 knowledge becomes less dominant, maybe even to the point where a loanword tendency is not evident. We might speculate that a higher disposition towards loanwords indicates an earlier stage of learning, one that is passed through as L2 knowledge builds. This does not mean that it is a single hurdle for low-level learners to jump. The JL in this study simultaneously displayed a preference *and* a non-preference for loanwords depending on the word frequency level. As university students with over six years of English education, they were familiar with high frequency English words, whereas their learning journey with lower frequency words was at an earlier stage. Of course, a learner writing or speaking in English uses a range of language with varying levels of difficulty. The borrowed word effect could change depending on the learner's proficiency, and the language level at which s/he is trying to communicate at that time. If the first step is to acknowledge that JL use L1 knowledge of loanwords, the second is to anticipate when that most often occurs.

It seems that, at least in part, JL naturally tend towards loanwords when they are searching for something familiar. Educators should be sympathetic to learners at these early learning stages whatever their overall proficiency level. Teachers can look for ways to exploit their students' L1 knowledge if they wish, but they should appreciate a progress flow towards less reliance on loanwords and more familiarity with English in general.

6. Limitations of the study

The data produced results that were statistically significant, but the size of the instrument was still relatively small in terms of language range. This was necessary in part because of the survey-style data collection method, and in part due to the small pool of words available at high frequency levels. With only eight words for each word frequency band, substituting any of the words might

have had an impact. This would be especially true if a word was frequent in English but unfamiliar to JL, or vice versa. The researcher proposes that frequency can be used as an indicator of word familiarity, but he acknowledges that the two are not equivalent. Additionally, particular words may resonate with JL more than others. This could be because they are old favourites in a learner's lexicon, or 'lexical teddy bears' as Hasselgren (1994) calls them. Strong conclusions can only be drawn if these results can be replicated using alternative word lists.

Instrument size and word choice also possibly had an effect on the native speaker group data. Ideally, each of the 16 items would have produced an equal proportion of loanword to non-loanword responses to reflect natural proportions in English. Some answers, though, were favoured over others, especially at the lowest frequency level. This may have been due to how the researcher wrote the gap-fill sentences, or some other influence driving collocation. It is unknown why the native speaker loanword proportions were as they were. They provide a useful point of comparison for this instrument, but they are not generalizable to the English language as a whole.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the study observed the borrowed word recognition phenomenon, but it did not measure written or spoken language production. Therefore, strong conclusions cannot be made regarding the borrowed word effect. Instead, this data on lexical choices has been used to draw inferences about it.

7. Conclusion

An experiment about lexical choices was conducted to confirm whether Japanese learners of English tend towards using loanwords, and to investigate the effect word frequency has on any such tendency. Results indicated that Japanese learners tend to choose loanwords more often than native speakers of English. However, this difference becomes less pronounced, even possibly disappears, as word-level becomes more frequent. Correspondingly, Japanese learners increasingly rely on loanword knowledge as word frequency decreases. It appears that to the extent learners are familiar with English, they will use it. Where it is insufficient, they look to their own language for familiarity.

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Appendix A – Test Instrument

1–1000-word level: brother, clear, find, keep, neighbor, wait, work, wrong

1. She is talking to her _____ .
2. The information was _____ .
3. He told us to _____ in the other room.
4. You can _____ it on the shelf.

1001–2000-word level: annoy, approach, casual, comment, compare, incredible, magazine, newspaper

5. Don't _____ him because he might get angry.
6. I've read the book, but I haven't seen the movie, so it's difficult to _____ .
7. Could you pass me that _____ , please?
8. The party tonight is going to be _____ .

2001–3000-word level: cancel, emphasis, phenomenon, sensible, symbol, undertake, unique, volume

9. It is impossible to _____ the project now.
10. It's a common _____ that you often see in this area.
11. That's a _____ point.
12. Did you notice the change in _____ .

3001–4000-word level: classify, consensus, dynamic, identical, integrity, recycle, script, thesis

13. Let's break it into smaller parts and then _____ them.
14. I have nearly finished writing my _____ .
15. How high is the level of _____ at that company?
16. Their designs looked _____ .

(信州大学 総合人間科学系 全学教育機構 外国語講師)
2022年 2月 16日受理 2022年 2月 20日 採録決定