

Wh-questions in Japanese: Challenges for Vietnamese L2 learners

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Abstract

The study explored how Vietnamese learners of Japanese handle structural differences in *wh*-questions. Despite both being *wh-in-situ* languages, the divergent word order poses challenges for Vietnamese learners. The research involved 65 high school students with 2.5 to 13 years of Japanese learning. Survey results showed a positive correlation between Japanese proficiency and performance. Students were more accurate when Japanese *wh*-questions mirrored Vietnamese word order, especially in 'why' and 'when' questions. Difficulties arose when structures differed. Advanced learners could acquire L2 *wh*-questions with parametric values distinct from L1, but native-like interpretations in Japanese remained challenging. The study advocates for explicit classroom instruction on Japanese *wh*-question word order, particularly with scrambled sentences, to enhance accuracy and improve overall teaching effectiveness.

Keywords: *wh*-movement, *wh-in-situ*, scrambling, Vietnamese, Japanese

Povzetek

Raziskava obravnava razumevanje in uporabo *wh*-vprašanj med vietnamskimi učenci japonščine. Kljub temu, da sta oba jezika jezika *wh-in situ*, se različen besedni red izkaže kot izziv za vietnamske učence. Raziskava vključuje 65 učencev, ki so se japonščino učili v razponu med dvema letoma in pol ter trinajstimi leti. Rezultati ankete kažejo pozitivno povezavo med znanjem japonščine in uspešnostjo. Učenci so bolj natančni, ko so japonska *wh*-vprašanja podobna vietnamskemu vrstnemu redu, še posebej pri vprašanjih 'zakaj' in 'kdaj'. Težave nastanejo pri različnih strukturah med jezikoma. Nekateri napredni učenci lahko obvladajo japonska *wh*-vprašanja, vendar doseči naravno tolmačenje ostaja izziv. Študija zagovarja učenje vrstnega reda japonskih *wh*-vprašanj, še posebej pri premešanih stavkih, za povečanje natančnosti in učinkovitosti poučevanja japonskega jezika.

Ključne besede: premik *wh*-vprašalnice, *wh*-vprašalnice *in situ*, preurejanje, vietnamščina, japonščina



1 Objectives

In Vietnam, the burgeoning diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with Japan have sparked a growing interest in Japanese language acquisition. Nevertheless, language acquisition remains a challenging task. In light of this, the present study seeks to investigate the extent to which the syntactic typological differences between Vietnamese and Japanese impact Vietnamese students' acquisition of Japanese *wh*-question word order. Ultimately, the findings of this study may inform pedagogical strategies to improve the efficacy of teaching and learning Japanese for Vietnamese language learners.

2 Why Vietnamese learners of Japanese?

The Japanese and Vietnamese languages were chosen for this study due to their interesting typological similarities and differences concerning question formation and word order.

The first typological distinction which highlights the similarities between Japanese and Vietnamese is the one between *wh*-movement and *wh-in-situ*, which refers to whether a language employs the movement of interrogative words (such as 'who', 'what', 'where', 'how', 'why', 'when', etc.) to form a question. In *wh*-movement languages, they utilize a syntactic operation where the interrogative word moves to the beginning of the sentence, leaving behind a trace in its original position. In contrast, *wh-in-situ* languages keep the interrogative word in its original position and form the question without movement.

In many languages such as English and German, *wh*-movement is employed to transform declarative sentences into *wh*-questions. Consider the example in English:

- (1) a. He went to the store.
b. Where did he go?

In English, crafting a *wh*-interrogative sentence requires both *wh*-movement and *do*-insertion. The *wh*-word, such as 'where' in (1b), is shifted to the beginning of the sentence, and a tense auxiliary verb is inserted before the subject, leading to a change in word order between the *wh*-interrogative and its declarative counterpart.

In contrast, *wh-in-situ* languages include Chinese and Korean (Huang, 1982; Cheng & Rooryck, 2000; Beck & Kim, 1997). Let's take a look at an example in Mandarin Chinese:

(2) a. 他 去 了 商店。 Mandarin Chinese

tā qù le shāngdiàn

he go PERF store

'He went to the store.'

b. 他 去 了 哪里? Mandarin Chinese

tā qù le nǎlǐ?

he go PERF where

'Where did he go to?'

In Mandarin Chinese, as demonstrated in example (2b), a notable distinction from English interrogative sentences emerges. Unlike English, where the interrogative word is relocated to the beginning of a sentence, the Mandarin Chinese interrogative word, *nǎlǐ* 'where' remains fixed within the sentence's original position. Remarkably, this characteristic feature is accompanied by the absence of verb movement or inversion in Mandarin Chinese questions. The sentence's word order and structure remain unchanged when compared to the corresponding declarative sentence (2a).

Mandarin Chinese exemplifies a *wh-in-situ* language by retaining the *wh*-word in its original position, showcasing its distinct approach to forming interrogative sentences compared to those languages that employ *wh*-movement and other syntactic transformations (Pesetsky, 1987).

The distinction between *wh*-movement and *wh-in-situ* has been a topic of interest in typological and generative grammar studies. According to Dryer (1991), *wh-in-situ* is more common among the world's languages. The reasons for this typological variation are still a subject of debate among linguists on whether these parameters are innately determined by the human mind or whether they are the result of functional pressures on the language system (Hawkins, 2004).

As it will become clear in the following sections, both Japanese and Vietnamese are languages that have *wh-in-situ* (Saito, 1992; Tomioka, 2007; Tran, 2009; Tsai, 2009), meaning question words can appear in their base positions in a sentence. Studies in foreign language acquisition have consistently shown that learning is more accessible when the target language and the native language share typological similarities (Krashen, 1982; Ringbom, 2006). This is because the use of cross-linguistic similarities, known as transfer,

plays a crucial role in language learning. Therefore, it is expected that the shared typological features between Vietnamese and Japanese could greatly improve Vietnamese learners' understanding of Japanese.

However, despite this apparent similarity, a pivotal typological contrast between Japanese and Vietnamese complicates the language learning process. This distinction lies in the contrast between head-final and head-initial languages. Japanese adopts a head-final structure (Subject-Object-Verb), where the usual sentence order places the subject, followed by the object, and concludes with the verb. Conversely, Vietnamese follows a head-initial pattern (Subject-Verb-Object), positioning the verb before the object. This fundamental disparity in word order poses a challenge for Vietnamese speakers attempting to construct *wh*-questions in Japanese accurately.

To sum up, while both languages employ *wh-in-situ* structures, the difference in word order between Japanese and Vietnamese presents a significant obstacle for Vietnamese learners. This contrast is expected to create difficulties in mastering the formation of *wh*-questions in Japanese. Therefore, our study specifically focuses on the challenges of Vietnamese learners acquiring Japanese *wh*-interrogatives.

While the past decade has seen a surge in research on Japanese as a Second/Foreign Language acquisition, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Vietnamese learners specifically grapple with the complexities of Japanese. Existing studies predominantly feature English and Chinese L1 learners of Japanese, leaving the experiences of Vietnamese learners in Japanese language acquisition largely unexplored, especially concerning word order acquisition (Lieberman et al., 2006; Umeda, 2008). In this context, the term 'transfer' (Ringbom, 2006) is particularly relevant, encompassing the impact of the learners' L1 (Vietnamese) on their Japanese learning process. Positive transfer occurs when the influence of Vietnamese leads to accurate acquisition, whereas negative transfer results in errors or difficulties.

To comprehensively understand these transfer patterns and their implications, our study emphasizes a thorough contrastive analysis, focusing specifically on the distinctions between Vietnamese (learners' L1) and Japanese (the target language). By unraveling the complexities of linguistic transfer within this specific learner group, we aim to provide valuable insights into the challenges Vietnamese learners had to face when mastering Japanese *wh*-interrogatives, offering nuanced pedagogical suggestions for more effective language teaching strategies.

3 Wh-questions in Japanese and Vietnamese

3.1 The list and positions of *wh*-words

This research primarily focuses on the position of question words in *wh*-questions and compares the two languages, Japanese and Vietnamese. In particular, the basic *wh*-words examined in the two languages are listed below.

Table 1: List of *wh*-words investigated in Japanese and Vietnamese

Language	wh-words					
Japanese	だれ	なに/何	どこ	どのように	なぜ	いつ
	dare	nani/nan	doko	donoyouni	naze	itsu
Vietnamese	ai	cái gì	ở đâu	như thế nào	vì sao	khi nào
English	who	what	where	how	why	when

Noam Chomsky emphasized the creative nature of language, stating that language is a process of free creation where the principles of generation are fixed, yet the way they are employed is diverse and unrestricted (Chomsky, 1970). This insight underscores the significance of comprehending the distinct principles and parameters inherent in various languages, including the formation of *wh*-questions in Japanese and Vietnamese. Understanding these linguistic nuances is essential for effective language learning and usage. Our study is based on the assumption that all languages in the world follow certain rules when constructing sentences. Although languages around the world may have diverse external manifestations, all sentences can be divided into three different domains when it comes to structure: CP (complementizer phrase), the domain of the pragmatics (usually located before the subject); IP (inflection phrase), the domain of functional elements (that are normally located between the subject and the predicate); and VP (verb phrase), the domain of lexical elements (located inside the predicate).

Applying this assumption to our discussion, we take into consideration three positions of *wh*-words in a sentence: a) before the subject, b) between the subject and the verb, and c) after the verb, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

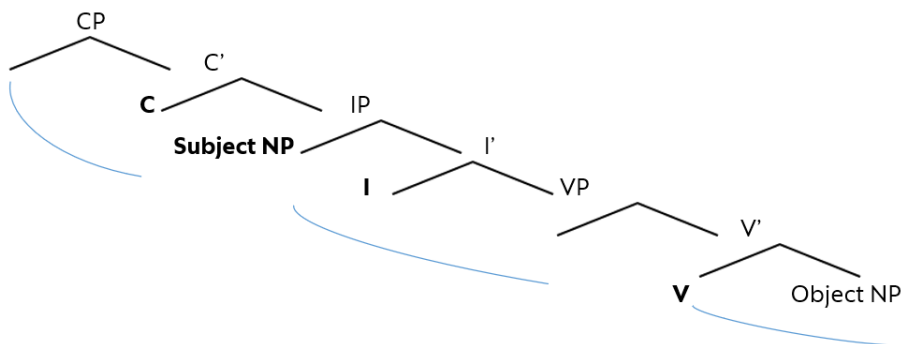


Figure 1: Three positions of *wh*-words in a sentence

We will examine each of the *wh*-words from Table 1 in all three positions. In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the different positions of *wh*-words in Japanese and Vietnamese, which sets out the theoretical foundation for our survey.

3.2 The position of *wh*-words in Japanese

The principal reservoir of Japanese language data utilized in this study comprises the works of Zhang and Hayashi (2000), Gunji (2011), and Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu 1 Honsatsu [Everyone's Japanese Elementary 1 Textbook] (1998).

Let's first have a look at the different positions of *dare* だれ ('who') in a sentence.

(3) *dare* だれ ('who')

- a. だれ に あなた は 会う の ですか。 Japanese
dare ni anata wa au no desu ka
who DAT you TOP meet ACC POL Q
 'Who are you meeting with?'
- b. あなた は だれ に 会う の ですか。 Japanese
 anata wa **dare** ni au no desu ka
 you TOP **who** DAT meet ACC POL Q
 'Who are you meeting with?'

- c. あなたが 会う の は だれ ですか。 Japanese
 anata ga au no wa **dare** desu ka
 you NOM meet ACC TOP **who** POL Q
 ‘Who are you meeting with?’

In example (3a), *dare* appears at the beginning of the sentence, preceding the subject *anata*. In example (3b), it appears in the middle of the sentence after the subject *anata* and before the verb *au*. In example (3c), *dare* appears at the end of the sentence, after the object *kare* and the verb *au*. The examples emphasize that the use of *dare* (‘who’) as a question word can be used in all three different positions of a *wh*-word in a sentence.¹ A similar pattern is observed for other *wh*-words in Japanese.

(4) *nani/nan* なに (‘what’)

- a. 何 を あなた は 食べたい ですか。 Japanese
 nani wo anata wa tabetai desu ka
what DAT you TOP want to eat POL Q
 ‘What do you want to eat?’
- b. あなたは 何 を 食べたい ですか。 Japanese
 anata wa **nani** wo tabetai desu ka
 you TOP **what** DAT want to eat POL Q
 ‘What do you want to eat?’
- c. あなたが 食べたい の は 何 ですか。 Japanese
 anata ga tabetai no wa **nani** desu ka
 you NOM want to eat ACC TOP **what** POL Q
 ‘What do you want to eat?’

¹ Several factors, including word order syntax, pragmatics, and prosody influence the formation of *wh*-questions (Kitagawa, 2005; Tomioka, 2007). However, this study focuses solely on word order syntax and prosody, excluding discourse level and pragmatics. The exploration of discourse-level aspects, particularly topicalization, is deferred to future research endeavors.

(5) *doko* どこ ('where')

- a. どこ で 私 は 両替する の ですか。 Japanese
doko de watashi wa ryougae suru no desu ka
where DAT I TOP money exchange ACC POL Q
'Where do I exchange money?'
- b. 私 は どこ で 両替する の ですか。 Japanese
watashi wa **doko** de ryougae suru no desu ka
I TOP **where** DAT money exchange ACC POL Q
'Where do I exchange money?'
- c. 私 が 両替する の は どこ ですか。 Japanese
watashi ga ryougae suru no wa **doko** desu ka
I NOM money exchange ACC TOP **where** POL Q
'Where do I exchange money?'

(6) *donoyouni* どのように ('how')

- a. どのように あなた は 休み を 過ごします か。 Japanese
donoyouni anata wa yasumi wo sugoshimasu ka
how you TOP holiday DAT spend Q
'How do you spend your holiday?'
- b. あなた は どのように 休み を 過ごします か。 Japanese
anata wa **donoyouni** yasumi wo sugoshimasu ka
you TOP **how** holiday DAT spend Q
'How do you spend your holiday?'
- c. あなた は 休み を どのように 過ごします か。 Japanese
anata wa yasumi wo **donoyouni** sugoshimasu ka
you TOP holiday DAT **how** spend Q
'How do you spend your holiday?'

(7) *naze* なぜ ('why')

- a. なぜ あなた は 彼 に 会う の ですか。 Japanese
naze anata wa kare ni au no desu ka
why you TOP him DAT meet ACC POL Q
'Why are you meeting him?'

b. あなたは なぜ 彼 に 会う の ですか。 Japanese
 anata wa **naze** kare ni au no desu ka
 you TOP **why** him DAT meet ACC POL Q
 'Why are you meeting him?'

c. あなたが 彼 に 会う の は なぜ ですか。 Japanese
 anata ga kare ni au no wa **naze** desu ka
 you NOM him DAT meet ACC TOP **why** POL Q
 'Why are you meeting him?'

(8) *itsu* いつ ('when')

a. いつ あなたは 北京 に 着く の ですか。 Japanese
itsu anata wa Pekin ni tsuku no desu ka
when you TOP Beijing DAT arrive ACC POL Q
 'When will you arrive in Beijing?'

b. あなたは いつ 北京 に 着く の ですか。 Japanese
 anata wa **itsu** Pekin ni tsuku no desu ka
 you TOP **when** Beijing DAT arrive ACC POL Q
 'When will you arrive in Beijing?'

c. あなたが 北京 に 着く の は いつ ですか。 Japanese
 anata ga Pekin ni tsuku no wa **itsu** desu ka
 you NOM Beijing DAT arrive ACC TOP **when** POL Q
 'When will you arrive in Beijing?'

To summarize, there are two types of *wh*-words in a sentence, the former includes *nani/nan* なに ('what') or *dare* だれ ('who'), which function as arguments, whereas the latter type includes *doko* どこ ('where'), *donoyouni* どのように ('how'), *naze* なぜ ('why'), or *itsu* いつ ('when'), which function as sentence adjuncts. It can be observed that in the above examples, regardless of their function within the sentence, all of these *wh*-words can appear in all three positions: before the subject, between the subject and the predicate, and after the verb. These examples illustrate that, unlike English where the word order of questions is typically fixed, Japanese allows for greater flexibility in the placement of *wh*-words, which in turn enables greater expressivity in sentence formation and helps convey nuances in meaning. As such, understanding the various positions in which *wh*-words can appear is an important aspect of learning and using the Japanese language effectively.

3.3 The position of *wh*-words in Vietnamese

Initially, we shall examine the various syntactical positions of *ai* ('who') and *cái gì* ('what') in the Vietnamese language within a sentence.

(9) *ai* ('who')

- a. ? **Ai** bạn sẽ gặp? Vietnamese
what you will meet
Intended: 'Who will you meet with?'
- b. *Bạn **ai** sẽ gặp? Vietnamese
you who will meet
Intended: 'Who will you meet with?'
- c. Bạn sẽ gặp **ai**? Vietnamese
you will meet who
'Who will you meet with?'

In *wh*-questions that function as objects, *ai* ('who') can naturally appear in the base position, following the verb. Placing it before the verb results in an ungrammatical sentence, and positioning it at the beginning of the sentence diminishes the sentence's grammaticality. In the latter context, 'who' can only be interpreted contrastively, such as in the sentence, 'Who is it that you will meet with?' Consequently, we labeled the sentence with a question mark.

(10) *cái gì* ('what')

- a. ? **Cái gì** bạn muốn ăn? Vietnamese
what you want eat
Intended: 'What do you want to eat?'
- b. *Bạn **cái gì** muốn ăn? Vietnamese
you what want eat
Intended: 'What do you want to eat?'
- c. Bạn muốn ăn **cái gì**? Vietnamese
you want eat what
'What do you want to eat?'

Similar to *ai* ('who'), *cái gì* ('what') can be used in two positions of the sentence; and when it is fronted to the beginning of the sentence, it is interpreted contrastively, cf. 'What is this that you want to eat?'

Hereinbelow is presented a comprehensive listing of the feasible placements of other *wh*-words in Vietnamese.

(11) *ở đâu* ('where')

a. ? **Ở đâu** tôi sẽ đổi tiền? Vietnamese

where I will exchange money

Intended: 'Where will I exchange money?'

b. *Tôi sẽ **ở đâu** đổi tiền? Vietnamese

I will **where** exchange money

Intended: 'Where will I exchange money?'

c. Tôi sẽ đổi tiền **ở đâu**? Vietnamese

I will arrive Beijing **where**

'Where will I exchange money?'

In the examples given, the interrogative word *ở đâu* ('where') appears most naturally in the sentence-final position only. Placing it in the sentence-initial position results in a decrease in grammaticality, and the mid-sentence position results in ungrammaticality.

(12) *như thế nào* ('how')

a. ***Như thế nào** bạn sẽ trải qua kì nghỉ? Vietnamese

how you will experience through CLF vacation

Intended: 'How will you spend your vacation?'

b. *Bạn sẽ **như thế nào** trải qua kì nghỉ? Vietnamese

you will **how** experience through CLF vacation

Intended: 'How will you spend your vacation?'

c. Bạn sẽ trải qua kì nghỉ **như thế nào**? Vietnamese

you will experience through CLF vacation **how**

Intended: 'How will you spend your vacation?'

The *wh*-word *như thế nào* ('how') in the above examples only appears in one position, after the verb.

(13) *vì sao* ('why')

- a. **Vì sao** bạn gặp anh ta? Vietnamese
why you meet him
'Why are you meeting with him?'
- b. Bạn **vì sao** gặp anh ta? Vietnamese
you why meet him
'Why are you meeting with him?'
- c. Bạn gặp anh ta **vì sao**? Vietnamese
you meet him why
'Why are you meeting with him?'

In the given examples, *vì sao* ('why') in principle can appear in all the three positions.

(14) *khi nào* ('when')

- a. **Khi nào** bạn đến Bắc Kinh? Vietnamese
when you arrive Beijing
'When will you arrive in Beijing?'
- b. Bạn **khi nào** đến Bắc Kinh? Vietnamese
you when arrive Beijing
'When will you arrive in Beijing?'
- c. Bạn đến Bắc Kinh **khi nào**? Vietnamese
you arrive Beijing when
'When did you arrive in Beijing?'

In these examples, the question word *khi nào* ('when') appears in all three positions. However, there is a difference in terms of the tense used in the sentences. Specifically, *khi nào* ('when') is interpreted in the future tense when it precedes the subject and the verb whereas it is interpreted in the past tense when it follows the verb. This has been noted by researchers as a feature of the Vietnamese language (Cao, 2004; Duffield, 2007; Tsai, 2009; Tran, 2009; Tran, 2021). That is, the placement of *khi nào* ('when') in Vietnamese appears to be exceptionally versatile; nevertheless, its positioning is, in fact, contingent upon the tense utilized within the given sentence.

That is, the inflexibility of the position of *wh*-words in Vietnamese is due to at least two factors, namely, the tense of the verb and the contrastiveness of information.

Based on the data presented above, we can summarize the positions of question words in Japanese and Vietnamese in Table 2.

Table 2: Position of *wh*-words in Japanese and Vietnamese²

		why	when	where	how	what	who
Japanese	before the subject	v	v	v	v	v	v
	between the subject and the verb	v	v	v	v	v	v
	after the verb	v	v	v	v	v	v
Vietnamese	before the subject	v	v	?	*	?	?
	between the subject and the verb	v	v	*	*	*	*
	after the verb	v	v	v	v	v	v

The empirical findings discussed in Section 3 imply that despite both Japanese and Vietnamese being characterized by a *wh-in-situ* structure, whereby question words are positioned in their base positions within a sentence, Japanese exhibits greater flexibility in the placement of *wh*-words than Vietnamese. Among the six investigated *wh*-words, ‘why’ and ‘when’ demonstrate the highest degree of commonality between Vietnamese and Japanese, while ‘where’, ‘how’, ‘what’, and ‘who’ display the most notable differences. The present study, therefore, aims to examine the level of proficiency among Vietnamese students in comprehending and utilizing the word order about Japanese interrogative sentences containing *wh*-words.

4 The survey

4.1 Participants

The target population for the survey comprises 65 individuals learning Japanese at the Foreign Language Specialized School, an affiliate of the VNU University of Languages & International Studies, Vietnam National University

² This study presents an initial exploration of *wh*-words in relation to the fundamental sentence components in Vietnamese and Japanese, focusing on subject arguments and verbs. Moving forward, it is essential to expand our analysis to include topics as well. We express gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for this valuable suggestion, which will be a significant aspect of our future investigations.

Hanoi. The participants are distributed across different grades, with 19 students from grade 10, 11 students from grade 11, and 35 students from grade 12. The duration of Japanese language instruction for the surveyed students ranges from 2.5 to 13 years, with 11 individuals among the cohort having lived in Japan. The Japanese language curriculum employed in the school features the following textbooks: Japanese for grade 10, Japanese for grade 11, and Japanese for grade 12, all of which are published by the Vietnam National Education Publishing House.

Regarding Japanese language competence, the students have been categorized according to their proficiency level as per the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), with three students classified as N5, twenty-five as N4, twenty-two as N3, thirteen as N2, and two as N1, as illustrated in Figure 2.

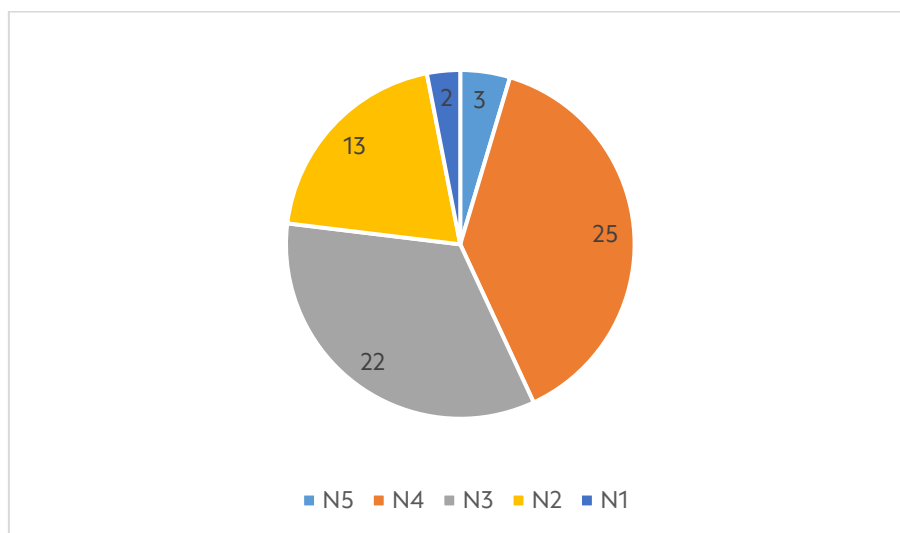


Figure 2: Participants by Japanese language proficiency

In our study, N4 and N5 represent advanced proficiency levels, N3 indicates intermediate proficiency, and N2 and N1 are considered beginner levels.

4.2 The stimuli

The survey methodology entails an online test with a duration of 20-30 minutes comprising 18 stimuli questions (6 *wh*-words, each in 3 positions) in the multiple-choice format, requiring responses indicating correctness or incorrectness by selecting either the affirmative or negative symbol (i.e., ○ or ×). It should be emphasized that communication or collaboration with other participants during the test is strictly prohibited.

4.3 Predictions

The primary objective is to investigate potential correlations between differences in the student's native language (L1) and the target language (L2), their proficiency levels, and the percentage of the related word order errors in L2 comprehension attributed to L1 transfer.

The analysis of the collected data is expected to reveal the following outcomes:

(i) Word Order Similarity: Students are likely to provide accurate responses when the word order of Japanese *wh*-questions aligns with that of Vietnamese. In other words, when the word order structures in both languages are similar, students are anticipated to demonstrate higher accuracy in their responses.

(ii) Proficiency Levels: We anticipate that students with higher levels of proficiency in Japanese, especially those classified as intermediate or advanced, will exhibit greater accuracy when answering survey questions compared to their counterparts with lower proficiency levels. This expectation aligns with the notion that proficiency levels often impact the ability to grasp complex grammatical structures.

By investigating these aspects, this research aims to provide insights into the relationship between L1-L2 differences, proficiency levels, and the acquisition of specific grammatical structures, particularly in the context of Japanese *wh*-questions.

4.4 Results

The findings of the survey on Japanese *wh*-words proficiency among Vietnamese students are as follows. The column chart in Figure 3 below provides a visual representation of the accuracy rate of Vietnamese students' responses with respect to their Japanese language proficiency.

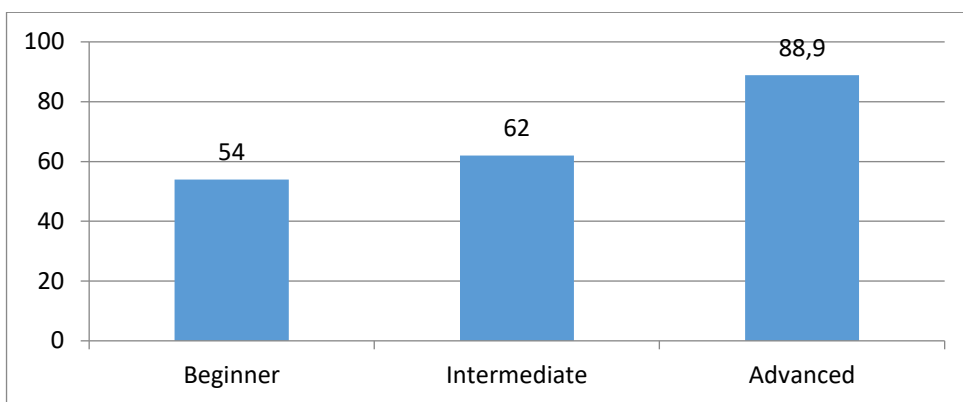


Figure 3: Accuracy rate of students by their Japanese language proficiency

As depicted in Figure 3, students exhibiting advanced Japanese language proficiency demonstrate the highest level of accuracy, followed by individuals at intermediate proficiency levels and, lastly, those at lower levels of proficiency. Students who display better command of the Japanese language are more likely to provide correct responses, thereby aligning with the earlier predictions formulated based on the survey outcomes.

The evident pattern displayed in Figure 3 implies a direct correlation between proficiency and accuracy. These results corroborate our initial hypotheses, highlighting that students possessing a higher level of Japanese language proficiency tend to offer more precise responses. While these conclusions offer a fundamental understanding of proficiency and accuracy, further research is essential to unveil the intricate nuances and potential non-linear patterns in language acquisition processes.

Furthermore, the study showed that certain advanced learners could grasp L2 *wh*-constructions with different parametric values from their native language. Nevertheless, attaining native-like interpretations of *wh*-phrases in Japanese posed ongoing challenges, underscoring the complexity of language acquisition in this context.

Now let's see how Vietnamese students respond to different types of *wh*-words. To this end, the subsequent chart provides a detailed account of the accuracy rate of their responses about different categories of *wh*-words in Japanese.

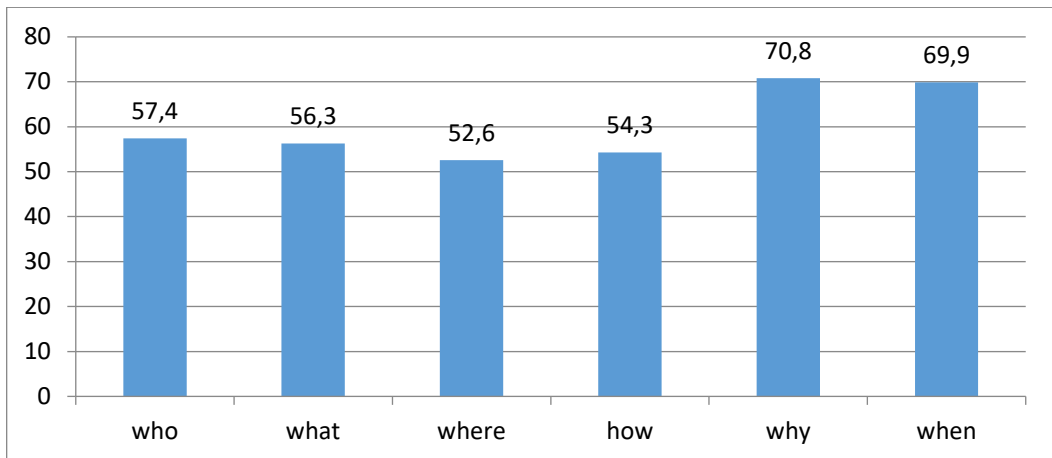


Figure 4: Accuracy rate of students with respect to different *wh*-words in Japanese

Figure 4 presents a compelling demonstration that the accuracy of responses to the Japanese *wh*-words ‘why’ and ‘when’ is notably high, amounting to approximately 70% of the surveyed population. This high accuracy can be attributed to the substantial shared characteristics between Vietnamese and Japanese in the context of these specific *wh*-words. Among the six *wh*-words investigated, ‘why’ and ‘when’ exhibit the most pronounced similarities between the two languages, as shown in the previous section.

Notably, this observation raises intriguing questions for future research. It prompts an exploration into whether there exists a deeper theoretical basis explaining the exceptional accuracy of *why*-questions. Previous literature highlights ‘why’ as a distinctive element (Lin, 1992; Tsai, 1999; Ko, 2005), underscoring the need for further investigation into the theoretical underpinnings contributing to the heightened accuracy in this particular category.

In the next step, we consider how Vietnamese students respond to different positions of *wh*-words.

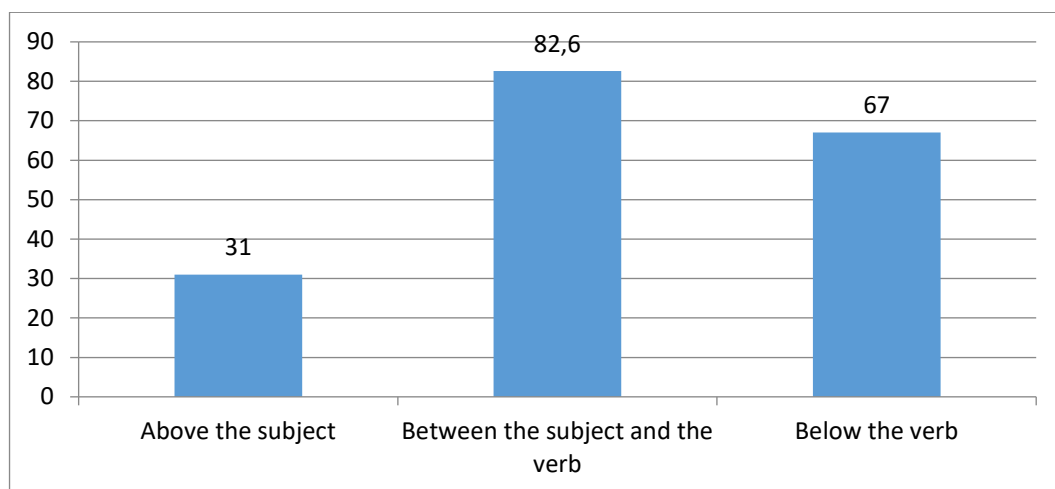


Figure 5: Accuracy rates of students according to different positions of Japanese *wh*-words

Based on the data presented in Figure 5, it is evident that the most accurate responses to questions containing *wh*-words are found when these words are positioned between the subject and the verb (or mid-sentence position) with an accuracy rate of 82.6%. The accuracy rate drops to 31% when the *wh*-word is placed before the subject. Conversely, the accuracy rate increases when the *wh*-word is positioned after the verb. The rationale behind the superior accuracy rate of *wh*-words in the mid-sentence position can be attributed to the subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, which is typical in the Japanese language. Hence, the question word is most likely to appear in the middle of the sentence. This knowledge is commonly documented in Japanese language textbooks that Vietnamese students currently use in the curriculum. For instance, the beginner's level textbook *Mina no Nihongo 1* includes questions that feature question words in the mid-sentence position.

(15) a. **それは 何 ですか。** (Unit 2) Japanese

Sore wa nan desu ka

DEM TOP what POL Q

'What is that?'

…… **名刺 ですよ。** (Unit 2) Japanese

Meishi desu

business card POL

'It's a business card.'

b. トイレはどこですか。(Unit 3) Japanese

Toire wa **doko** desu ka

Toilet TOP **where** POL Q

'Where is the toilet?'

…… あそこです。(Unit 2) Japanese

asoko desu

there POL

'It's over there.'

The accuracy rate of questions placed at the beginning of a sentence is notably lower, primarily due to the subject-object-verb (SOV) basic sentence order that is prevalent in the Japanese language. The structure with questions at the beginning (also known as 'scrambling') using the OSV formula is not extensively addressed in Japanese language textbooks for foreign learners, making it challenging for students to comprehend the intricacies of scrambled sentences and their function within the language. Jordan (1962) emphasizes the importance of studying and understanding scrambled sentences in her book *Japanese: The Spoken Language*, highlighting that it is a crucial aspect of the contemporary Japanese language, particularly in spoken language where it is commonly used for emphasis. See also Saito (1985, 1992), Miyagawa (2003). However, this crucial aspect of the language is often overlooked in language instruction, leading to difficulties for learners. Research conducted by scholars such as Mazuka et al. (2002) and Tamaoka et al. (2005, 2014) has revealed that even native Japanese children encounter challenges in understanding this type of sentence. Therefore, it is understandable why foreign learners of Japanese tend to make mistakes regarding this type of sentence. Therefore, both teachers and students need to acknowledge the significance of scrambled sentences in Japanese and allocate sufficient time and effort to studying and mastering their use. By doing so, learners can develop a comprehensive understanding of the language and achieve a higher level of proficiency in communicating in Japanese.

5 Conclusion

The proficient utilization of interrogative words constitutes a vital aspect of the Japanese grammatical system. The current research endeavor scrutinizes the proficiency of Vietnamese students in employing Japanese *wh*-words within question sentences. Although both Japanese and Vietnamese are considered

wh-in-situ languages, the syntactical differences between these languages create a significant hurdle for Vietnamese students when attempting to grasp the proper order of *wh*-words in Japanese questions.

The study recruited 65 high school students who have studied Japanese for varying durations (ranging from 2.5 years to 13 years) at the Foreign Language Specialized School, which is affiliated with the VNU University of Languages & International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

The findings of this study corroborate the underlying hypotheses. Firstly, students with higher levels of Japanese proficiency (i.e., intermediate or advanced levels) demonstrated a better ability to answer survey questions in comparison to those at lower proficiency levels. Secondly, students displayed a greater aptitude for accurately responding to Japanese *wh*-questions that share a similar word order with Vietnamese, especially 'why' and 'when' questions.

The research showed that learners could acquire L2 *wh*-constructions with different parametric values from their L1, as demonstrated by some advanced learners. However, achieving target-like interpretations of *wh*-phrases in Japanese proved challenging.

Effective instruction on the specific word order of Japanese *wh*-questions plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' accuracy rates. However, the existing introductory Japanese language curriculum primarily focuses on providing basic information about the meaning and usage of interrogative words, neglecting to take into account their syntactic role within a sentence or the specific sentence structures in which they are utilized. Therefore, teachers must convey this information clearly and comprehensively. Even for novice learners of Japanese, introducing fundamental concepts related to question words would be beneficial. Moving beyond the basics, intermediate or advanced-level students stand to benefit significantly from learning scrambled sentences. This approach facilitates a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the usage of Japanese *wh*-words and their appropriate placement within sentences.

It is essential to create opportunities for the development of both explicit and implicit knowledge. However, it is crucial not to assume that explicit knowledge will automatically translate into implicit knowledge. Learning a language is a gradual process that requires time. While instruction is valuable for drawing learners' attention to grammatical forms, the key to developing implicit knowledge lies in consistent exposure to meaningful input and regular practice. Therefore, it is vital to provide opportunities for learners to

repeatedly use target grammatical forms in meaningful communicative contexts, fostering a gradual and comprehensive language acquisition process.

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative
CLF	classifier
DAT	dative
DEM	demonstrative
NOM	nominative
PERF	perfect
POL	politeness
Q	question
TOP	topic

Contributions

Authorship credit for this paper is as follows: Trang Phan authored Chapters 1 and 2, Sections 3.1 and 3.3, as well as Chapter 5. Giang Vu authored Section 3.2 and Chapter 4.

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