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Ohga, Chiharu
Kyushu University International Student Center : Professor

<https://doi.org/10.15017/6783286>

出版情報：九州大学留学生センター紀要. 31, pp.1-12, 2023-03. International Student Center, Kyushu University
バージョン：
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Acquisition of Polysemous Collocations in Japanese by Chinese Native Speakers

—Comparison of Learners by Level

Chiharu Ohga*

1. Introduction

Collocation becomes one of the important learning items in the course of vocabulary acquisition by Japanese language learners who are in the intermediate or higher levels (Kano 2000). When developing vocabulary learning materials, it is necessary to choose the expressions to introduce upon taking into consideration the sequence for introducing specific types of expressions so that learners can acquire them more easily and systematically. However, most of the conventional vocabulary learning materials select the expressions to introduce based on “the core meaning of a word” or “expressions that are easy or difficult to the learners” from a Japanese native speaker’s point of view.

In order to incorporate the viewpoint of learners into the learning materials, there is a need to shed light on the developmental context with regard to how learners build their knowledge of collocations and the issues they face during the acquisition process. This paper conducts a study and analysis with focus on the developmental aspect for the semantic

acquisition of collocations, an area that has not been addressed in previous studies.

According to Miyoshi (2007: 81), “collocations” can be divided into three different levels: (i) “idiomatic phrases” where the word components are bound together most tightly; (ii) fixed phrases such as “*kasa wo sasu* (open an umbrella)” or “*uso wo tsuku* (tell a lie)” where the meaning of the entire phrase can be interpreted based on the meaning of the individual constituents; and (iii) phrases such as “*ocha wo nomu* (drink tea)” or “*hon wo yomu* (read a book)” where the meaning of the individual word components can be combined freely. As learners may not necessarily perceive collocations in the same way as the systematic classification by native speakers of the target language, all the three levels as proposed by Miyoshi are regarded as “collocations” in this paper.

2. Previous Studies

In the context of Japanese language education, the theory of concept formation is employed in some of the research studies pertaining to the

*Professor, Kyushu University International Student Center

acquisition of lexical semantics (Tanaka et al. 1998). Under the theory of concept formation, the meaning of a word evolves through mutual interaction among the three processes of “typicalization”, “generalization” and “differentiation” (Ibid.). According to Matsuda (2000: 75), “typicalization” is the process of forming a prototype, “generalization” is the process of understanding the multiple meanings of a polysemous word, while “differentiation” is the process of understanding the meaning of similar words. Matsuda (2000) is one of the representative studies on the acquisition of word meanings within the framework of the concept formation theory.

Meanwhile, studies on the semantic acquisition of collocations include Ohga (2017), which also employs the theory of concept formation. Ohga (2017) studies the semantic acquisition of collocations that are formed using the different meanings of a polysemous verb by advanced learners of Japanese who are Chinese and Korean native speakers from the viewpoints of “typicalization” and “generalization”. Findings of the study reveal that the native speakers of both languages form unique prototypes that are different from the Japanese native speakers in the “typicalization” process, while acquisition by advanced level learners is not limited to collocations formed by the core meaning of a word but covers also those formed using the extended meaning in the process of “generalization”.

Although Ohga (2017) has shed light on the actual interlanguage of advanced level learners, it did not analyze the differences in the knowledge of collocations possessed by Japanese learners of different proficiency levels and also the areas in

which acquisition is smooth and areas where the process is slow. In this paper, we focus on how collocations formed using polysemous words are acquired by Japanese language learners who are Chinese native speakers, and make a comparison between the lower and higher level learners from the “typicalization” and “generalization” viewpoints to reveal the developmental aspect.

3. Description, Method of Study and Subjects

3. 1 Description of Study

Based on the previous studies, this paper shall examine the following questions.

Question (1): Typicalization

What is the prototype for the surveyed verbs according to the lower and higher level learners respectively? Is there a difference between their perception?

Question (2): Generalization

What is the degree of understanding by the lower and higher level learners respectively regarding collocations formed using the different meanings of a polysemous word? Is there a difference in the extent of acquisition by learners of the different levels?

Besides the two questions above, we will also examine the factors that affect the acquisition of collocations formed using polysemous words. For Japanese language learning outside Japan, learners have relatively fewer opportunities to come into contact with the language, which means the content that is introduced in the textbooks and classes has a significant bearing

Table 1 Collocations Used in the Study

Meaning	Collocation	Meaning	Collocation	Meaning	Collocation
1	<i>Te wo toru</i> (Take a hand)	4	<i>Sekinin wo toru</i> (Take responsibility for)	7	<i>Baransu wo toru</i> (Balance)
	<i>Juwaki wo toru</i> (Pick up a telephone receiver)		<i>Toshi wo toru</i> (Grow old)		<i>Ankeeto wo toru</i> (Conduct a survey)
	<i>Hon wo toru</i> (Take a book)		<i>Okure wo toru</i> (Fall behind)		<i>Heikin wo toru</i> (Calculate the Average)
2	<i>Sakana wo toru</i> (Catch a fish)	5	<i>Koudou wo toru</i> (Take action)	8	<i>Jikan wo toru</i> (Set aside time to)
	<i>Ii seiseki wo toru</i> (Get a good grade)		<i>Shudan wo toru</i> (Take measures)		<i>Seki wo toru</i> (Secure a seat)
	<i>Seiken wo toru</i> (Come to power)		<i>Yarikata wo toru</i> (Adopt a method)		<i>Supeesu wo toru</i> (Secure a space)
3	<i>Yogore wo toru</i> (Remove dirt)	6	<i>Memo wo toru</i> (Take notes)	9	<i>Sumou wo toru</i> (Play sumo)
	<i>Boushi wo toru</i> (Take off one's hat)		<i>Shashin wo toru</i> (Take a photo)		<i>Rizumu wo toru</i> (Keep a rhythm)
	<i>Tane wo toru</i> (Remove seeds)		<i>Abura wo toru</i> (Press oil)		<i>Chousi wo toru</i> (Beat time)

on the learning process. For this reason, this paper predicts that both lower and higher level learners will have difficulty acquiring word meanings that are not taught in Japanese language textbooks or classes, and there are certain meanings where there is no advancement in the level of comprehension from the lower to the higher level.

3. 2 Nodes and Collocations Used in the Study

This paper focuses on collocations in the form of “*X wo toru*”, where the node *toru* is a Japanese polysemous verb¹. While the verb *toru* can be represented by more than one kanji character, we shall follow the convention of most

Japanese dictionaries and previous studies to treat the variations of *toru* as a single polysemous word.

Kunihiro (1997) classifies the meaning of *toru* into (1) take; (2) get; (3) remove; (4) be resigned to; (5) select; (6) produce; (7) measure; (8) take possession of; (9) take action; and (10) take for example. In this paper, we shall survey collocations formed using the meanings from (1) to (9) under the classification by Kunihiro².

Collocate nouns in the test sentences were chosen from vocabulary that appeared in the old Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and NLB³. The collocations used in the study are shown in Table 1.

After checking through six different types of

1 *Toru* was selected upon considering the fact that it is a verb that every learner will learn at the elementary level and that its meaning has been closely scrutinized in many earlier studies including Kunihiro (1997).

2 The meaning in (10) has been excluded from the scope of this study as it is an archaic use of the verb.

3 NLB (NINJAL-LWP for BCCW) is an online corpus search system developed by National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL).

elementary and intermediate level textbooks used in Japan, it is found that the meanings of *toru* that are introduced in all the textbooks are limited to “(2) get” and “(6) produce”. As for the other meanings, the books vary in terms of the ones that they introduce. “(9) take action” only appeared in one of the intermediate level textbooks surveyed. Next, we checked through elementary and intermediate level textbooks used in China, and only the meanings in (2) and (6) were found to be introduced in the elementary level textbooks, the same results as those used in Japan. Meanwhile, for the intermediate level textbooks, “(1) take”, “(4) be resigned to”, “(7) measure” and “(8) take possession of” were introduced⁴.

3. 3 Method of Survey

To find out the answer for Question (1), a sentence generation task has been employed where the subjects were asked to make short sentences using the meaning of *toru* which they consider to be the most basic meaning (Appendix 1). For Question (2), a phrase acceptability judgment task is introduced and the subjects were asked to determine whether an acceptable collocation sentence can be formed by the respective meanings of *toru* (Appendix 2). For the phrase acceptability judgment task, we created a questionnaire containing 36 sentences, including 27 test sentences with three sentences for each

word meaning and nine dummy sentences.

3. 4 Subjects

The subjects of this study were second- and third-year students studying Japanese language in a university in China. In a survey conducted in Ohga et al. (2011), significant progress in the acquisition of collocations is observed among learners of the advanced and higher levels. Based on this finding, we conducted an analysis that regards learners who have obtained a high score for the phrase acceptability judgment task as those who possess a “high level of Japanese language proficiency”, and the top 40 subjects with the highest scores for the phrase acceptability judgment task were classified as the higher group while the 40 subjects with the lowest scores as the lower group⁵.

4. Survey Findings and Analysis

4. 1 Question 1 (Typicalization)

In the sentence generation task for Question (1), the subjects were asked to make a short sentence using the meaning of *toru* which they consider to be the most basic sense. The top three meanings of *toru* that were most commonly used by the subjects to generate the sentences are summarized in Table 2.

For both the higher and lower groups, the meaning that was most commonly generated by

4 “Zhongri jiaoliu biaoazhun ribenyu” was the only textbook in China that we checked through, but as the content of textbooks in China is required to comply with the “Teaching Guidelines”, it is logical to assume that the word meanings introduced do not vary considerably across the different textbooks.

5 It was deemed inappropriate to classify students of the same university into the higher and lower groups according to their school grade as there were some students who had obtained JLPT Level 1 and others who were at JLPT Level 3 within the same grade.

Table 2 The Most Basic Sense of “*Toru* (lit.take)” As Perceived by the Higher and Lower Groups

Higher group			Lower group		
Meaning	No. of Respondents	%	Meaning	No. of Respondents	%
(6) Produce	13	34.2	(6) Produce	12	35.3
(2) Get	9	23.7	(2) Get	8	23.5
(1) Take	7	18.4	(1) Take	6	17.6

the subjects was “(6) produce”, followed by “(2) get” and “(1) take”. Among the collocates for “(6) produce”, 12 higher group subjects generated “*shashin* (photo)” while one of them generated “*memo* (notes)”. Similarly, 11 lower group subjects generated “*shashin*” and one generated “*memo*”. The most commonly-generated collocation for both groups was “*shashin wo toru* (take a photo)”, an expression that is introduced in the earlier half of elementary level Japanese. From here, we can understand that an expression that was acquired during the initial stage of learning has become a typical example that forms the core concept of *toru* across learners from the lower to the higher levels.

Ohga (2017) conducted the same study as above on Japanese native speakers as well as Chinese students studying in a university in Japan, and found out that meaning (1) was most frequently generated by the Japanese native speaker group, while that by the Chinese student group was (2). From this observation, we can conclude that both Chinese native speakers who are Japanese language learners in universities in China and Japan form their own unique concept based on a core meaning that differs from that of Japanese native speakers. At the same time, the typical meaning as perceived by learners who are Chinese native speakers varies depending on the

location of survey, thus suggesting that prototype formation is significantly affected by the learning and living environments.

Next, collocates that appeared in two or more responses of the learners are summarized in Table 3.

The most commonly-used collocates by the higher group include “*shashin* (photo)”, “*jikan* (time)”, “*shokuji* (meal)”, “*(ii) seiseki* (good result)” and “*pen* (pen)”, while those by the lower group include “*shashin* (photo)”, “*(ii) seiseki* (good result)”, “*jikan* (time)”, “*hon* (book)” and “*nimotsu* (baggage)”. These are all expressions that are learned through textbooks and frequently used in their everyday school life. Meanwhile, a total of 47 different collocates were generated by the higher group and 35 by the lower group, which shows the wider vocabulary knowledge of the higher group compared to the lower group.

4. 2 Question 2 (Generalization)

4.2.1 Level of Comprehension of the Different Uses between the Higher and Lower Groups

So, in what ways is the level of comprehension of collocations between the higher and lower groups affected by their level of Japanese language proficiency? Also, in what ways do subjects

Table 3 Commonly-used Collocates

Higher group				Lower group			
Meaning	Collocate	No. of Respondents	%	Meaning	Collocate	No. of Respondents	%
(6) produce	<i>Shashin</i>	11	12.4	(6) produce	<i>Shashin</i>	20	23.3
(8) take possession of	<i>Jikan</i>	8	9.0	(2) get	<i>(Ii)seiseki</i>	9	10.5
(2) get	<i>Shokuji</i>	5	5.6	(8) take possession of	<i>Jikan</i>	8	9.3
(2) get	<i>Seiseki</i>	5	5.6	(1) take	<i>Hon</i>	5	5.8
(1) take	<i>Pen</i>	4	4.5	(1) take	<i>Nimotsu</i>	5	5.8
(2) get	<i>Yasumi</i>	4	4.5	(1) take	<i>Tegami</i>	3	3.5
(4) be resigned to	<i>Toshi</i>	3	3.4	(4) be resigned to	<i>Toshi</i>	3	3.5
(2) get	<i>Sakana</i>	3	3.4	(1) take	<i>Denwa</i>	2	2.3
(1) take	<i>Hon</i>	2	2.2	(2) get	<i>Kyuuka</i>	2	2.3
(2) get	<i>Eiyuu</i>	2	2.2	(2) get	<i>Sakana</i>	2	2.3
(1) take	<i>Mono</i>	2	2.2	(6) produce	<i>Eiga</i>	2	2.3
(1) take	<i>Prezento</i>	2	2.2	(7) measure	<i>Shusseki</i>	2	2.3
(3) remove	<i>Tsukare</i>	2	2.2	* Type frequency : 35			
(1) take	<i>Mizu</i>	2	2.2				
* Type frequency : 47							

of the two proficiency levels differ with respect to their understanding of the collocations formed using the respective word meanings?

First of all, to analyze how comprehension of the nine different uses varies between the proficiency levels, we made a comparison of the average scores of the higher and lower groups. The scores for the phrase acceptability judgment task were compiled and the average score and standard deviation are summarized in Table 4⁶. In this paper, expressions such as “Usage 1” and “Usage 2” are used to refer to the different uses of a word in a collocation.

For the higher group, Usage 2 has the largest number of correct responses, followed by

Usage 8, Usage 6 and Usage 1. The same can be said of the lower group, with Usage 2 having the greatest number of correct responses, followed by Usages 6, 1 and 8.

Next, a t-test was conducted to compare the average scores for each of the nine uses by the higher and lower groups, and a significant difference was identified in all the nine uses. Prior to the survey, we predicted that there could be some uses where their acquisition do not progress even when learners advance from the lower to the higher level. However, it was found that as learners progress to a higher level, their overall understanding also widens from the prototypical use to uses related to the peripheral meanings.

6 In the phrase acceptability judgment task, three test sentences were created for each word meaning, which means a maximum of three points are allocated to each meaning.

Table 4 Comparison of Higher and Lower Groups by Usage

		Higher group	Lower group	t-test Result
Usage 1	Average Score	2.5	1.9	**
	SD	0.6	0.6	
Usage 2	Average Score	2.8	2.1	**
	SD	0.5	0.8	
Usage 3	Average Score	2.3	1.0	**
	SD	0.7	0.8	
Usage 4	Average Score	2.4	1.7	**
	SD	0.5	0.8	
Usage 5	Average Score	2.4	1.5	**
	SD	0.7	0.9	
Usage 6	Average Score	2.6	1.9	**
	SD	0.5	0.8	
Usage 7	Average Score	2.4	1.5	**
	SD	0.7	0.7	
Usage 8	Average Score	2.6	1.8	**
	SD	0.6	0.8	
Usage 9	Average Score	2.0	1.3	**
	SD	0.7	0.8	

SD; Standard Deviation

*p < 0.05 **p < 0.01

In the textbooks used in the China university which we have examined in this study, the meanings in (3), (5) and (9) have not been introduced. However, as learners progress in their level of proficiency, they are able to obtain more information related to Japanese language from the Internet or books on their own, and this could be the reason that accounts for the progress in learning from the lower to the higher level.

4.2.2 Understanding of Polysemy by Learners of Different Proficiency Levels

Next, let us look at the level of comprehension for the respective uses within the higher and the lower groups. Firstly, repeated measure

variance analysis was conducted on the average score of each usage for each group. Results of the analysis show that the main effect was statistically significant with regard to the level of comprehension between the different uses by the higher group ($F(8,312) = 4.779, p < 0.001$) and lower group ($F(8,312) = 7.235, p < 0.001$). A simple contrast was then made to enable a more detailed study, and the results for the higher group are summarized in Table 5.

Among the responses of the higher group, Usage 9, which has the lowest average score, showed a significant difference with the most uses (Usages 2, 6, 8 and 1). Meanwhile, Usage 3 also showed a significant difference with Usage 2. From this observation, we can divide the

Table 5 Average Score, Rate of Correct Responses, Standard Deviation and Simple Contrast of Higher Group Learners

(N = 40)

Usage	Average Score	Rate of Correct Answers (%)	SD	Simple Contrast								
				2	6	8	1	4	7	5	3	9
Usage 2	2.8	92.5	0.5	–							**	***
Usage 6	2.6	85.8	0.5		–							**
Usage 8	2.6	85.0	0.6			–						**
Usage 1	2.5	84.2	0.6				–					*
Usage 4	2.4	80.8	0.5					–				
Usage 7	2.4	80.0	0.7						–			
Usage 5	2.4	79.2	0.7							–		
Usage 3	2.3	77.5	0.7	**							–	
Usage 9	2.0	66.7	0.7	***	**	**	*					–

SD: Standard Deviation *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

process of the higher group's comprehension of polysemous words into three groups: (i) group including Usages 2, 8, 6, 1, 4, 7 and 5 where acquisition progresses at almost the same pace; (ii) Usage 3 where there is less progress in the acquisition process compared to the other usages in the higher positions; and (iii) Usage 9 where there is least progress in the acquisition process.

Next, the results of the lower group are summarized in Table 6. Among the responses of the

lower group, Usage 3, which has the lowest average score, showed a significant difference with the most uses (Usages 2, 6, 1, 8 and 4). Meanwhile, Usages 7 and 9 also showed a significant difference with Usage 2.

For the lower group learners, acquisition can be divided into the three following groups: (i) group including Usages 2, 6, 1, 8, 4 and 5 where acquisition is progressing; (ii) group including Usages 7⁷ and 9 where a significant difference

Table 6 Average Score, Rate of Correct Answers, Standard Deviation and Simple Contrast of Lower Group Learners

(N = 40)

Usage	Average Score	Rate of Correct Answers (%)	SD	Simple Contrast								
				2	6	1	8	4	5	7	9	3
Usage 2	2.1	70.8	0.8	–						**	**	***
Usage 6	1.9	62.5	0.8		–							**
Usage 1	1.9	61.7	0.6			–						***
Usage 8	1.8	58.3	0.8				–					**
Usage 4	1.7	56.7	0.8					–				*
Usage 5	1.5	49.2	0.9						–			
Usage 7	1.5	49.2	0.7	**						–		
Usage 9	1.3	43.3	0.8	**							–	
Usage 3	1.0	33.3	0.8	***	**	***	**	*				–

SD: Standard Deviation *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

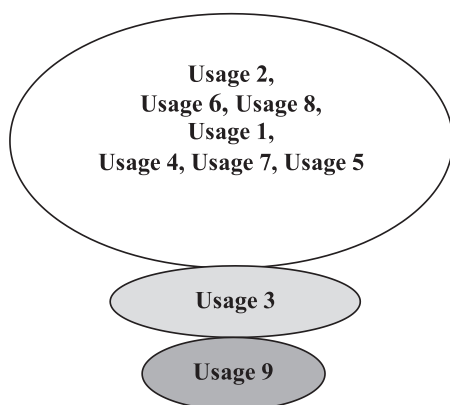


Fig. 1 Word Meaning Groups by Level of Comprehension (Higher Group)

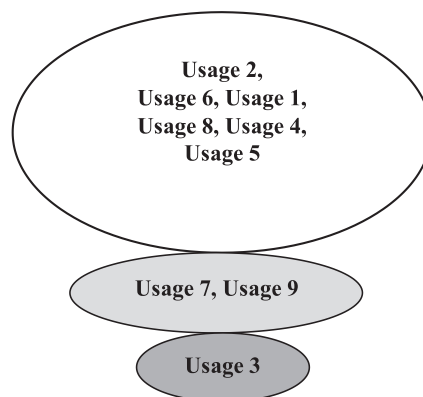


Fig. 2 Word Meaning Groups by Level of Comprehension (Lower Group)

with Usage 2 is observed; and (iii) Usage 3 which showed a significant difference with the most uses. These findings are summarized in Figs. 1 and 2.

With regard to the acquisition trends, both the higher and lower learner groups showed a high level of comprehension for Usage 2 (get) and Usage 6 (produce), and the word meanings can also be divided into three levels for each group according to the degree of understanding, although it goes without saying that there are more word meanings where acquisition by the higher group has progressed much further as compared to the lower group. In contrast, among the nine different usages, the level of comprehension for Usage 3 (remove) and Usage 9 (take action) is found to be low even upon advancing to a higher proficiency level. One of the reasons for the poorer level of understanding is because the

usages have not been introduced in the textbooks, so learners did not have the opportunity to acquire them. Meanwhile, in Usages 1 and 2, which take the form of “*X wo toru*” in sentences such as “*tēburu no ue no pen wo toru* (take the pen on the table)” and “*ii seiseki wo toru* (get good results)”, *X* has reached the area that is subject to influence from the agent. In comparison, in sentences like “*fuku no yogore wo toru* (remove dirt from the clothing)” under Usage 3, *X* does not have a well-defined goal and focus. This difference in the goal of “*X*” as compared to the other word meanings may be the reason that makes it difficult for learners to perceive Usage 3 as a use of *toru*, hence a slower acquisition process compared to other usages where progress is faster. Usage 9 also has the lowest level of comprehension among advanced level Chinese students who are learning Japanese in a

7 Both the average score for Usages 5 and 7 was 1.48, but the standard deviation in the statistical computation result varies with a value of 0.191 between Usages 5 and 2, and a value of 0.154 between Usages 7 and 2. Also, the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval for the difference in average value also differ, with -0.009 (lower) and 1.309 (upper) between Usages 5 and 2, and 0.119 (lower) and 1.181 (upper) between Usages 7 and 2.

university in Japan (Ohga 2017). Usage 9 is an idiomatic expression that is rarely used in everyday life situations, and this is a possible reason why progress in its acquisition is slow.

While the level of comprehension for Usage 3 is the lowest among the lower group learners, Usage 9 is the lowest for the higher group. This may have to do with the degree of ease in associating the verb with the collocate. In terms of the classification of collocations in Miyoshi (2007), Usage 3 is close to the “phrases where the meaning of the components can be combined freely” and “fixed phrases where the meaning of the entire phrase can be interpreted based on the meaning of the individual constituents”. As such, when a learner sees an expression like “*bōshi wo toru* (take off the hat)”, it is possible to deduce other collocates that are words of the same category, such as “*megane* (glasses)” and “*yubiwa* (ring)”. Meanwhile, Usage 9, according to the classification in Miyoshi (2007), is close to the group of “idiomatic phrases”. This means that even by learning an expression such as “*sumō wo toru* (do sumo wrestling)”, it would be difficult for learners to associate it with other collocates as it cannot be correctly applied to produce phrases such as “**karate wo toru* (do karate)” or “**kendō wo toru* (do kendo)”. While both Usages 3 and 9 rarely appear in textbooks, it is believed that the difference in the ease of applying the respective usages to other similar collocates is the factor that affects the progress of the acquisition process.

In 4.2.1, we mentioned that the overall level of comprehension becomes higher in the higher learner group compared to the lower group. Even

so, there still remains a difference in the level of understanding among the different usages of a polysemous word.

5. Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

This paper has provided an analysis on the acquisition of collocations formed using polysemous words from the perspectives of “typicalization” and “generalization”, and shed light on the developmental aspect by making a comparison between learner groups at the higher and lower proficiency levels. In the process of “typicalization”, both the higher and lower groups are capable of grasping the core meaning of Usage 6, but they developed a unique prototype that is different from both Japanese native speakers as well as Chinese students in Japanese universities. We can therefore deduce that the learning and living environments have a significant impact on the formation of prototypes. Meanwhile, in the process of “generalization”, learners tend to gain wider understanding of the polysemous words from the core meaning to the peripheral senses as the level advances from the lower to the higher group. However, we found out that the level of comprehension of the individual word meanings is not consistent within each of the learner groups. The findings of this study suggest that in addition to the learning and living environments, acquisition of collocations through Japanese language learning outside Japan may also be affected by the nature of the collocation, or in other words, how easy it is to associate a polysemous word with the collocate.

Areas that require further research include the following:

- (1) In this paper, we did not study the specific word meanings of *toru* that were introduced in the textbooks used by the learners. Further analysis of the textbooks and scrutiny will therefore be required.
- (2) It is necessary to study the acquisition of collocations formed using verbs other than *toru*.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Mr. Teo Chuu Yong for translating the script into English.

* The results for the 2016-2018 Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Type (C), Grant Number 16K02815) are included as a part of this paper.

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