On beliefs' structure in language learning:

a case study of beliefs about difficulty in Japanese language learning

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1. Beliefs about difficulty and beliefs research in Japanese language learning

Elaine Horwitz, who originated BALLI[1], a popular instrument for measuring beliefs in language learning, defines the importance of investigating beliefs about difficulty in language learning as follows: "Student judgments about the difficulty of language learning are critical to the development of students' expectations for and commitment to language learning. If they underestimate the difficulty of the task, they are likely to become frustrated when they do not make progress as quickly as they expect. On the other hand, a belief that it will take ten years or more to learn a language could be discouraging and cause them to make only minimal efforts since good results are so far from hand" (1987: 123).

In Japanese language learning (further, JLL) beliefs about difficulty were investigated by BALLI-based research and Mori (1999a)[2]. BALLI-based research is represented by Watanabe (1990), Hashimoto (1993), Hosoda et al., (1994), Mizuta et al., (1995), Okazaki (1996), Itai (1997), (1999), (2000), Kitani (1998), Okazaki et al., (2000), Okazaki (2001), Wakai et al., (2004), Katagiri (2005), Takasaki (2006), and Wata (2007).

The two most popular versions of BALLI, the FL BALLI and ESL BALLI, consist of 33 and 34 items respectively and their items are divided into the following five areas of language learning: "Foreign language aptitude", "The difficulty of language learning" (further, DLL), "The nature of language learning", "Learning and communication

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[1] BALLI is the abbreviation of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory.
[2] Tsygalnitsky (2007) also investigated beliefs about difficulty. However, as she did not focus on the beliefs about difficulty per se, but on the relationship between beliefs and learners' factors and on the relationship between beliefs about difficulty and beliefs of integrative nature, her study is not discussed in detail.

strategies", and "Motivations". DLL consists of similar[3] items in both versions and is represented by six items concerning the difficulty of learning a target language. The items are as follows:

(3)[4] "Some languages are easier to learn than others."

(4) "The language I am trying to learn is: (a) a very difficult language; (b) a difficult language; (c) a language of medium difficulty; (d) an easy language; (e) a very easy language."

(6) "I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well."

(14) "If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: (a) less than a year; (b) 1-2 years; (c) 3-5 years; (d) 5-10 years; (e) you can't learn a language in 1 hour a day."

(24) "It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language."

(28) "It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it."

Items (3), (14), and (24) are beliefs about the difficulty of language learning (further, LL) in general. Items (4) and (6), however, are beliefs about a specific target language in general. Item (28), on the other hand, is more specific than other items in the sense that it deals with specific aspects of the target language. The area DLL, therefore, consists of three different kinds of beliefs, namely, beliefs about LL in general, beliefs about a target language in general and one belief about specific aspects of a target language.

The existence of the three different kinds of beliefs can be explained by the fact that BALLI was not originated statistically from students' responses and no explanation on the structure of the five BALLI areas and on the relationships between these areas was provided by Horwitz (1987, 1988). Kuntz (1996a:4) was the first to point this out: "Although her studies were designed to identify the structure of student beliefs, Horwitz did not generate statistically themes from student responses". It can be concluded, then, that **BALLI-based studies did not examine the structure of beliefs.**

As opposed to BALLI-based studies, Mori (1999a) developed her own language learning questionnaire and employed factor analysis to organize the hypothesized beliefs into homogenous sets and to investigate beliefs structure. 187 college students learning Japanese as a FL in the USA participated in her study.

Mori's instrument contained 92 items of beliefs separated into 17 areas. It is indicated that these beliefs were partly inspired by research on beliefs and pedagogical literature. This might explain why some of her areas bore strong resemblance to BALLI

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[3] In FL BALLI "English" is substituted by "the language I am trying to learn".
[4] The numbers are as of FL BALLI (1988).

items, e.g., "Innate ability" (BALLI's "Foreign language aptitude"), "Language learning is the same" (BALLI's "The nature of language learning"), "Japanese is difficult" (BALLI's "The difficulty of language learning"), etc.

The hypothesized beliefs[5] in Mori's study were: "Innate ability", "Quick learning", "Simple knowledge", "Avoid ambiguity", "Avoid integration", "Certain knowledge", "Dependence on authority", "Language learning is the same", "Japanese is difficult", "Kanji is difficult", "Vocabulary is important", "Effort is a waste", "Focus on the whole", "Memorization is important", "Risk taking", "Cannot learn from mistakes", and "Learn the natural way".

Factor analysis conducted in order to organize the hypothesized beliefs into homogenous sets resulted in six factors of beliefs: "Kanji is difficult", "Analytic approach", "Risk taking", "Avoid ambiguity", "Japanese is easy", and "Reliance on L1".

Analysis of the structure of beliefs showed that the beliefs "Kanji is difficult" and "Japanese is easy" were uncorrelated. Mori (1999a:396) concludes that "**students' beliefs about the difficulty of a certain linguistic system of a target language could exist independently of their perception of difficulty of the language as a whole.** In other words, learners of Japanese recognize the difficulty of kanji learning but do not necessarily find Japanese as a whole difficult. Presumably, this is because they regard other aspects of Japanese as relatively easy (e.g., the sound-symbol regularity in syllabaries, the small number of vowels, or flexible word order)."

The methodological significance of Mori (1999a) is enhancing beliefs research by using factor analysis for identifying beliefs in JLL[6]. The fact that Mori (1999a), as opposed to BALLI-based beliefs research, employed factor analysis for examining beliefs structure, provides validity to her results. The practical significance of Mori (1999a) is that she provides evidence on the complex nature of beliefs, specifically on beliefs about difficulty in JLL.

At the same time, the shortcomings of Mori (1999a) are that she focused on kanji acquisition, which is only one aspect of JLL; it is not clear if her findings are applicable to other aspects of Japanese. Therefore, the findings of Mori (1999a) need to be verified

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[5] Mori (1999a) distinguished between the domain of epistemological beliefs about learning in general and the domain of beliefs, and investigated the relationship between the two domains. Her instrument also included 40 items of epistemological beliefs, but as they are not in the focus of discussion, they are not listed here.

[6] Mori (1999a) was not the first to conduct factor analysis for identifying beliefs. Bacon and Finnemann (1990, cited in Kuntz, 1996a), for example, were among the first researchers to conduct factor analysis of the students' responses to the instrument items. They developed their own questionnaire that consisted of 109 statements assessing students' beliefs.

by analyzing other aspects of Japanese. In addition, she did not point out that the "Japanese is easy" and "Kanji is difficult" were beliefs of different kinds, i.e., she did not conceptualize the structural differences between them.

In order to compensate for the above shortcomings of Mori (1999a) while benefiting from her strong points, this study defines a new research question on the basis of her finding.

2. Research question of this study

The finding that "Japanese is easy", which relates to Japanese language in general, and "Kanji is difficult", which relates to a specific aspect of Japanese, are two unrelated beliefs is considered important. This finding means that beliefs about the difficulty of specific aspects of a target language exist independently from beliefs about difficulty of a target language in general.

The above implication of Mori (1999a) can be summarized in the following research question: "Do beliefs about the difficulty of Japanese language in general exist independently from beliefs about difficulty of specific aspects of Japanese language?"

Examining the research question will improve the methodology of beliefs research as it will make it possible to establish if beliefs about specific aspects of a target language exist independently and differ from beliefs about the target language in general. **If identifying a belief about JL in general (e.g., "Japanese is easy") is insufficient for drawing conclusions about more specific beliefs (e.g., "Kanji is difficult"), it is necessary to analyze beliefs about specific aspects of a target language in order to examine beliefs of language learners in order to find educational implications.**

3. Planning the study

Tsygalnitsky (unpublished manuscript, 2006, 2007) operates with the notions "broad-scope beliefs" and "narrow-scope beliefs" to distinguish between beliefs that relate to a target language in general and beliefs that relate to specific aspects of a target language. Applying the above notions to Mori's findings, "Japanese is easy" can be defined as a "broad-scope belief" and "Kanji is different" can be defined as a "narrow-scope belief".

To check the research question, this study will adopt the notions of "broad-scope beliefs" (further, BS beliefs) and "narrow-scope beliefs" (further, NS beliefs) to refer to beliefs about the difficulty about Japanese language in general and beliefs about the difficulty of specific aspects of Japanese language respectively. This study's research question, then, is paraphrased as follows: "Do BS beliefs about the difficulty of

Japanese language in general exist independently from NS beliefs about the difficulty of specific aspects of Japanese language?"

As opposed to Mori, who used statistical methods of analysis, this study adopts a case study method: each participant's data are analyzed individually. Given that the aim is to verify Mori's findings, providing a more detailed analysis is considered to contribute to the validity of the results.

4. Instrument

A pilot study was conducted with two graduate students of the University of Tsukuba (one Chinese and one Korean) to check the readability of the questionnaire items originated by the investigator. The pilot study was also helpful for originating the list of different aspects of Japanese to be investigated in terms of NS beliefs: grammar, kanji, conversation, listening comprehension, listening comprehension of katakana words, reading of katakana words, reading, writing, onomatopoeia, and pronunciation. This list is not covering every aspect of JLL, so open-ended items which inquire about other difficult aspects of JL were added. To encourage the participants to think about the aspects of Japanese they find difficult, open-ended items were listed before the Likert-scale items. Employing two kinds of questions (Likert-scale and open-ended) is also considered to improve the validity of the results.

The questionnaire consists of a face-sheet, inquiring about participants' data, open-ended questions and Likert-scale questions (6-"strongly agree"-1-"strongly disagree"), which inquire about difficulty of different aspects of Japanese (NS beliefs) and difficulty of Japanese in general (BS beliefs). A copy of the questionnaire is shown in the Appendix.

5. Participants
5.1.   Learners' factors considered in this study

Two learners' factors are taken into consideration in this study: "kanji-using/non-kanji country" and "JL level". Previous research shows that the factor of "kanji-using/non-kanji country" affects learners' beliefs[7] (e.g., Shimizu (1995), Mizuta et al., (1995), Yamamoto (1999), Takasaki (2006), and Tsygalnitsky (2006)). This factor is related to the "cultural factor/ethnicity" factor (i.e., the factor of being Chinese or Russian, for example) in its nature, but is more specific and relevant to the

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[7] Studies which investigated the factor of "kanji-using/non-kanji country" provide evidence that some beliefs differ according to this factor: three out of four beliefs in Shimizu (1995), 12 out of 32 in Mizuta et al., (1995), 28 out of 62 in Yamamoto (1999), 14 out of 51 in Takasaki (2006), and two out of two in Tsygalnitsky (2006).

context of JLL, at least in respect of writing system acquisition, where more similarities can be seen between Japanese and kanji-using languages like Chinese than Indo-European languages. Although South Korea today cannot be characterized as a "kanji-using country", Korean students are still familiar with the kanji culture as they study kanji at school. To consider this factor, then, the beliefs of Chinese and Korean learners need to be investigated separately from other learners.

Toyoda (1995) and Haththotuwa-Gamage (2006) provide some evidence on the importance of the factor of "JL level/kanji level" for affecting learners' beliefs. Verifying the hypothesis of this study presupposes that the participants hold beliefs about different aspects of Japanese language, i.e., they are experienced language learners, which is reflected in their proficiency level. It was therefore decided to recruit advanced learners of Japanese. This was achieved by recruiting learners who have passed the 1st level of the JLPT.[8]

5.2. Participants' data

Eight participants, four Chinese and four Korean, were recruited in the period of August to November, 2007. See Table 1 for the participants' data. C and K are used to signify Chinese and Korean participants respectively.

【Table 1】 Participants' data

Participant	Major	Status	Age	Gender	Length of study in Japan	Length of studying Japanese language
C1	Policy and planning sciences	BA student	19	female	1 year	4 years
C2	Policy and planning sciences	BA student	20	female	2 years	3 years
C3	JL education	Graduate	26	Male	1 year 7	5 years

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[8] This should not be taken as a statement of the equality of participants' JL level. Checking whether learners have passed the 1st level of the JPLT is considered insufficient to establish if they belong to the same JL level. There are likely to be differences between the learners who have passed the same JLPT level both due to the fact that the test does not measure all language skills, for example, speaking, and because its total score is a sum of three parts, which measure different language skills. However, although the condition of recruiting only the learners who have passed the 1st level of the JLPT does not indicate the differences between the learners, it is still likely to guarantee that they are advanced learners. In this respect, this condition of having passed the 1st level of the JLPT is considered satisfactory for dividing advanced learners from intermediate learners etc.

		student			months	
C4	Environmental science	Research student	26	female	2 months	9 years
K1	Biology	BA student	19	female	5 months	3 years
K2	Japanese language and Literature	Exchange student	20	female	1 year	2 years 6 months
K3	JL education	Graduate student	33	female	8 years 7 months	14 years
K4	Applied Linguistics (JL education)	Graduate student	32	female	7 years 4 Months	6 months[9]

6. Procedure

First, the results of the Likert-scale items were analyzed. The questionnaire instructions asked the participants to rank each item from "6" to "1", where "6" is "very difficult" and "1" "not difficult at all", so that the first three values ("6", "5", and "4") indicate agreement. "4", "5", and "6" responses of Likert-scale items therefore indicate that the participants agree that the aspect in question is difficult. For example, if a participant chose "4" to answer the item "Do you find Japanese kanji to be difficult?", the interpretation is that s/he agrees that kanji is difficult and therefore s/he has a NS belief about the difficulty of kanji.

Table 2 shows a summary of the analysis of the Likert-scale items, where each number stands for one aspect of Japanese language in the following order: grammar, kanji, conversation, listening comprehension, listening comprehension of katakana words, reading katakana words, writing, reading, onomatopoeia, and pronunciation. The last number in each list stands for Japanese language in general. In other words, the first ten numbers represent NS beliefs, while the last number refers to the BS belief about the difficulty of Japanese in general.

【Table 2】 Likert-scale items of beliefs about difficulty

Participant	Beliefs about difficulty
C1	2 2 2 3 4 2 3 3 2 1 2
C2	3 1 5 4 4 1 4 3 4 2 3
C3	3 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 3 2 3
C4	4 2 2 2 1 1 5 3 3 1 3

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[9] As K4's JL learning experience is only 6 months in JL schools, she is an independent learner.

K1	2 2 2 1 1 1 4 1 4 3 3
K2	4 3 2 2 2 3 5 2 3 2 3
K3	1 3 1 1 1 2 2 1 1 4 2
K4	2 3 1 1 2 4 3 1 4 4 4

The analysis of the Likert-scale items was followed by an analysis of the open-ended items of the same participant. Finally, the data of all eight participants were summarized.

7. Results and discussion

The summary of the Likert-scale and open-ended questions is shown in Table 3. BS beliefs are shaded.

【Table 3】 Beliefs about difficulty

Partici pants	NS beliefs
C1	listening comprehension, listening comprehension of katakana words, slang
C2	conversation, listening comprehension, listening comprehension of katakana words, writing, onomatopoeia, honorifics, katakana vocabulary, different styles according to contexts
C3	ability to communicate like native speakers, Japanese in general
C4	grammar, writing
K1	writing, onomatopoeia, intonation, Japanese in general
K2	grammar, writing, onomatopoeia, Japanese in general
K3	pronunciation, writing of kanji, "elegant expressions", polite ways of saying things
K4	kanji, reading katakana words, onomatopoeia, pronunciation, writing, Japanese in general

C1 had only one NS belief about listening comprehension of katakana words according to the Likert-scale questionnaire and in the open-ended questionnaire she wrote that she found listening comprehension and slang (*wakamonokotoba* in Japanese) difficult. That is, she found three different aspects of Japanese to be difficult but did not define Japanese in general to be difficult, i.e., she had three NS beliefs but no BS belief. In case of C1, then, NS and BS beliefs exist independently.

C2 had five NS beliefs according to the Likert-scale questionnaire about the following aspects of Japanese: conversation, listening comprehension, listening comprehension of katakana words, writing, and onomatopoeia. No BS belief was identified in the Likert-scale questionnaire. In the open-ended questionnaire she

explained her beliefs as follows: "Since I entered Japanese university, I had to use Japanese both during my classes and in my everyday life. I understood then that Japanese was very difficult when it came to small things: Japanese in casual conversation is different from Japanese you come across in books, and honorifics and katakana vocabulary are very difficult. Another difficult aspect is Japanese conversation as I find it very hard to express my true feelings."[10]

"Small things", according to C2's explanation, are different styles according to contexts, honorifics, katakana vocabulary, and conversation. The listed aspects are different aspects of JL, which means they are NS beliefs. C2, then, had various NS beliefs (five according to the Likert-scale questionnaire and three additional beliefs according to the open-ended questions), but did not have any BS belief.

C3 had neither NS nor BS beliefs according to the Likert-scale questionnaire, but in the open-ended questionnaire he stated that he found Japanese in general to be difficult and that it was hard to communicate (talk) like native speakers. It can be concluded, then, that C3 had both NS and BS beliefs.

Analysis of the Likert-scale items showed that C4 had two NS beliefs about the difficulty of grammar and writing; twice in the open-ended questionnaire she also emphasized the difficulty of writing. No BS belief was identified, however.

K1's data showed two NS beliefs: beliefs about the difficulty of writing and onomatopoeia. She also defined Japanese in general to be difficult, stating that "after having studied it (i.e., Japanese) for many years, I still find it very difficult". In the open-ended questionnaire she also defined the aspects of writing, intonation and onomatopoeia as difficult. K1, then, had both BS and NS beliefs.

K2 had two NS beliefs according to the Likert-scale items: beliefs about the difficulty of grammar and writing. Analysis of the open-ended items showed that she also found onomatopoeia to be difficult and defined Japanese in general to be "not so easy". That is, she also had a BS belief.

One NS belief about the difficulty of pronunciation was identified in the analysis of K3's Likert-scale questionnaire and another three beliefs about the difficulty of writing kanji, "elegant expressions", and polite ways of saying things were identified in the open-ended questionnaire. She emphasized, however, she did not find Japanese in general to be difficult. In case of K3, then, only NS beliefs were identified.

K4, on the other hand, had four NS beliefs about the difficulty of kanji, reading katakana words, onomatopoeia, and pronunciation in her Likert-scale questionnaire; she also emphasized the difficulty of the same aspects in the open-ended questionnaire,

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[10] The translation of the open-ended questions is conducted by the author.

adding the aspect of writing. She also chose "4" to rate the BS belief in the Likert-scale questionnaire, which means she considered Japanese in general to be difficult. In the open-ended questionnaire she stated the following: "It got more difficult as my level got higher. I think I became more aware of the difficulty of Japanese after I passed the 1st level of the JLPT." That is, K4 had both NS and BS beliefs.

To summarize, four participants had only NS beliefs, which means that BS and NS beliefs exist independently in their case. Four participants, however, had both BS and NS beliefs. That is, the answer to the research question "Do BS beliefs about the difficulty of Japanese language in general exist independently from NS beliefs about the difficulty of specific aspects of Japanese language?" is that **in case of some learners NS and BS beliefs coexist while in case of other learners they exist independently.**

This study, then, showed that **some learners have only NS beliefs and not the BS belief. Investigating these learners' BS beliefs is insufficient as analysis on the level of BS beliefs alone cannot identify any NS beliefs or suggest that they exist.**

8. Limitations of this study

The first limitation is the homogeneity of the sample. Two learners' factors were taken into consideration in this study: "kanji-using/non-kanji country" and "JL level". The role of learners' factors on shaping their beliefs, however, has not been investigated extensively in JLL, so even though this study did not employ quantitative methods of analysis, the question of homogeneity of the sample is still valid.

The second problem is the limited sample. Therefore, future research needs to verify the results of this study with larger samples.

9. Implications and questions for future research

The main methodological implication of this study is that there is a need to distinguish between BS (i.e., beliefs about a target language in general) and NS (i.e., beliefs about specific aspects of a target language) beliefs. This study showed that the two kinds of beliefs exist independently in case of some learners. Therefore, in order to understand learners' beliefs and, consequently, to draw educational implications from their beliefs, it is not sufficient to investigate BS beliefs. The findings of this study hence show the limitations of BALLI-based research where mainly beliefs about a target language in general or beliefs about LL in general are analyzed. The practical implication is the importance of exploring NS beliefs.

Another methodological implication derives from employing two kinds of items (i.e., Likert-scale and open-ended items). The two kinds of items were included into the

analysis to check the same issues in order to compensate for the limitations of each method and improve the validity of the results. Combining two methods proved helpful in this study as 1. while according to the Likert-scale items only one participant had BS belief, three other participants stated that they considered Japanese difficult in the open-ended questionnaires; 2. In case of seven participants new NS beliefs were identified via the open-ended questions. Future research could profit from combining Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.

The results that, notwithstanding the fact that the participants come from China, which is a kanji-using country and South Korea, where kanji is taught at schools, and all of them have passed the 1st level of the JLPT, they have different NS beliefs, could indicate that "kanji-using country/non-kanji country" and "JL level" are not the only factors responsible for shaping learners' beliefs. As no generalization can be made on the basis of the limited sample in this study, future research needs to investigate the role of learners' factors for shaping their beliefs.

This study focused on the structure of beliefs about difficulty. To gain better understanding of learners' beliefs, future research needs to analyze the structure of other beliefs as well.

The participants of this study have passed the first level of the JLPT, which means that they are advanced learners. Identification of NS and BS beliefs about difficulty in this sample means that advanced learners also have beliefs about difficulty, which, in turn, means that beliefs about difficulty do not necessarily prevent learners from succeeding in learning Japanese/a foreign language. The same learner could have different beliefs at different stages of her/his learning process. It remains to be investigated how beliefs, namely, beliefs about difficulty, change with time and whether their changes, if any, can be/are changed by language learning facilities. If they are, it will be important to think about ways of changing beliefs to support the LL process, so that beliefs' research could improve methodology and theory in LL.

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【Appendix】

アンケートのお願い

このアンケートは、外国語学習に関する調査のアンケートです。このアンケートからのデータを私の博士論文の作成のために使用する予定です。お忙しいとは思いますが、ご協力下さいますよう、お願いいたします。このアンケートほかの目的での使用はいたしません。この件でご迷惑をおかけすることもありません。安心してお答えください。アンケートは最後までお答え下さるようお願いいたします。また、途中の記入もれなどがないようにご注意ください。

○　　出身地：　　　　　　　　　　　(書いてください)
○　　母語：
○　　性別：男・女　　　　　　　　(○をつけてください)
○　　年齢：(　　歳)
○　　在日期間：(約　　年　カ月)
○　　日本語学習期間：(約　　年　カ月)
○　　日本語を勉強した国（○はいくつでもよいです）：日本・自分の国・その他（　　　）
○　　専門：
○　　日本語を勉強した機関　（○はいくつでもよいです）：
　　　留学生センター・日本語学校・中学校・高校・大学・ボランティア教室
　　　その他（　　　　　　　　）

○　現在の身分：学生・大学院生・研究生・その他（　　　　　　　　　　　）

○　日本語能力試験１級受験日：

以下の質問に対し、できるだけ具体的な答え方を下さるよう、お願いいたします

1．現在、日本語は難しいと思いますか？

2．現在、日本語の非母語話者として、何が難しいと思いますか？

例：漢字、文法、カタカナ語の聞き取り、カタカナ語の読み方、オノマトペ(擬音語、擬態語)、会話、聞き取り、文章を書くこと、文章を読むことなど、発音など

以下の質問は、現時点での日本語の困難さに対する質問です

現在、あなたにとって日本語は、

1．文法が難しいですか？　　　　　　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

2．漢字が難しいですか？　　　　　　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

3．会話が難しいですか？　　　　　　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

4．聞き取りが難しいですか？　　　　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

5．カタカナ語の聞き取りが難しいですか？　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

6．カタカナ語の読み方が難しいですか？　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

7．文章を書くことが難しいですか？　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

8．文章を読むことが難しいですか？　　　　　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

9．オノマトペ（擬音語・擬態語）が難しいですか？　6　5　4　3　2　1

10．発音が難しいですか？　　　　　　　　　　　　 6　5　4　3　2　1

11．現在、日本語全体が難しいと思いますか？　　　　6　5　4　3　2　1

ご協力、ありがとうございます！