Japanese EFL Learners' Knowledge of and Encounters with English Profanity

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Little research has been done on knowledge of English profanity in EFL populations. Moreover, no research has been done in Japanese EFL learners, whose language background creates unique challenges to understanding and learning this language. Therefore, a questionnaire was developed to study three aspects of profanity knowledge, background factors related to this knowledge, and frequency of encounters with profanity in various daily life activities. Results indicate participants had varying knowledge of English profanity, with particular difficulties related to differences between English and the participants' L1. The factors of English proficiency and time spent living in English-speaking countries were found to be significantly related to overall English profanity knowledge. Participants reported the situations where they most frequently encountered profanity to be from media and from the internet. Results are followed by implications for materials design and possible directions for future research.

Note. Please be advised that this study contains frequent usage of strong language both in English and in Japanese.

英語の禁句表現（English　profanity）に関する知識について、英語を外国語としての学習者を対象とした研究はほとんど行われていない。さらに、日本語を母国語とする言語背景がこの言語の学習に困難をもたらす日本人の英語学習者についての研究はほとんど行われていない。本研究は、日本人英語学習者を対象に、禁句表現の知識に関する3つの側面、この知識に関連する背景要因、および日常生活のさまざまな活動中での禁句表現との遭遇頻度を明らかにすることを目的とし、アンケート調査をおこなった。その結果、参加者は英語の禁句表現に関する知識にばらつきがあり、特に困難さは英語と学習者の母国語の違いに関係することが分かった。また、英語力や英語圏での生活期間が、英語の禁句表現に関する知識と有意に関連していることが示された。さらに、参加者は、禁句表現に最も頻繁に遭遇する場面として、メディアとインターネットを挙げた。終わりに、本研究結果に基づき、教材設計への示唆および今後の研究の方向性について議論した。

注記:本研究には英語および日本語の強い言葉が頻出することにご留意ください。

Despite what parents and teachers often espouse, swearing is both useful and prevalent in the English language. Native English speakers learn swearing at school, at home, in public, online, and in the media during adolescence, when risks are low and rebellious behavior is expected. But how do non-native speakers learn these words? Moreover, what about those living outside of English-speaking countries and whose native language contains taboo words that function quite differently from English (Stoffman, 1998; Dewaele, 2010)? In particular, taboo language in Japanese functions quite differently than in English, being more restricted in use both in what social situations are deemed acceptable for use and who is deemed socially acceptable to use such language. For English learners in Japan, these differences may inhibit the learning of English taboo language. No research has been done to study the specific difficulties that this group of learners faces in this common aspect of English. Therefore, the present study aims to expose how well Japanese EFL learners know English taboo language on three aspects of knowledge (productive knowledge, recognition, and knowledge of semantic function) and to discern what background factors relate to knowledge of English profanity.

One of the difficulties in determining how much profanity learners know is the definition of what constitutes profanity. Combining the ideas from the work of Jay (2009) and the work of Allan and Burridge (2006), this study defines profanity as certain words and phrases that have unique ability to convey and provoke strong emotional force, often deemed too powerful to be uttered freely due to their evocative nature which fall into one of several categories of taboo topics specific to each language. For English, these categories of language are as follows: sexual references, scatological, animal, ethnic, deviations, offensive slang, and blasphemous words (Jay, 2009).

Even with this definition, there are several cases where the same word may be viewed as either mundane or profane depending on the person's variety of English, religious background, age, and other various personal background factors. However, some words appear to be accepted as profanity for most English speakers, such as the words *shit* and *fuck* (Dewaele, 2015; Andang & Bram, 2018), and generally people are aware of differing perceptions of profanity

and act accordingly. For example, most Americans would be conscious of the word *bloody* during travels to England, and those who do not think of the interjection *God!* as profanity may be conscious of its use when speaking to a devout Christian. Therefore, when designing a study on profanity, it is best to either specify a regional variety of English whose profanity one chooses to study, or to focus on those words that are commonly viewed as profanity throughout most varieties of English.

One thing that can be said regardless of the variety of English is that profanity is has both *utility* and *ubiquity* in English, as described by Jay (2009). Jay describes the utility as the ability to perform various linguistic functions fulfilling different social goals. Other scholars have attempted to define this utility more narrowly (Pinker, 2008; Kapoor, 2016; Finn, 2017). The present study uses Kapoor's (2016) categories for profanity use for their focus on pragmatic usage. Kapoor defined five categories of profanity usage:

> (a) casual, directed to a nonliving object, situation or experience; (b) conversational, directed to an individual with no intention to cause harm; (c) cathartic, to express physical or emotional pain ... (d) abusive, directed to an individual to cause harm; and (e) hostile, to indicate antagonism. (pp. 259–260)

These categories specify who and what the profanity is aimed at and the tone of use. The category of conversational profanity is especially of interest because Japanese does not have this usage of profanity outside of some subcultures. Therefore, this usage of profanity may be especially difficult for Japanese learners to acquire as it places a higher burden on the learner due to the differences between the L1 and the L2 (Nation, 2013).

The ubiquity described by Jay (2009) can be readily observed by any native English speaker, though he and one other scholar (Beers Fägersten, 2012) both note that attempts to discern what percentage of the English language consists of profanity are inconsistent and flawed. Regardless, it is reasonable to assume that most, if not all, native English speakers have used profanity in at least one part of their life or throughout their whole life. However, for the majority of EFL learners who have limited access to authentic language exchange opportunities,

the chance to learn this language is far more limited as well. Language learned in an educational setting tends to have taboo subjects and language omitted (Gray, 2002). This presumably leaves most EFL learners with the option of learning taboo language only via unintentional exposure to or deliberate searches for the language via media and the internet. However, this is not ideal for several reasons. First, profanity is often used in different ways online than how it is used during in-person interactions (Wang et al., 2014; Gauthier & Guille, 2017). Second, online articles addressing profanity inaccurately reflect how profanity is used pragmatically (Green, 2021). Lastly, media viewed with L1 subtitles do not accurately relay the meaning and taboo nature of profanity due to difficulty of translation (Cintas & Rameal, 2014). Taken together, this means limited opportunity to notice and learn productive usage (utility) of English profanity.

Despite these challenges to learning English profanity, some Japanese EFL learners are bound to gain understanding of such words. However, it is unknown as to just how much Japanese EFL learners already know English profanity. This knowledge may provide insight into whether or not the resources and opportunities available to them without formal instruction on the language is adequate to learn English profanity. Further, finding what background factors relate to higher profanity knowledge may reveal what is needed for learners to gain knowledge of profanity. Therefore, the present study will ask the following research questions:

1. How well do adult Japanese EFL learners know English profanity?
2. What background factors relate to knowledge of English profanity?
3. Which daily life scenarios where taboo language is present do adult EFL Japanese learners engage with most?

Methods

To answer the research questions, an online questionnaire written in Japanese was developed using the software Qualtrics (qualtrics.com/au/core-xm/survey-software/) and distributed to learners at several universities, one vocational school, three conversation schools, and ten online English study groups. Participation was incentivized with a 2000-yen Amazon gift card drawing.

Responses ($N = 512$) were collected over 55 days from December 2020 to February 2021. The target population was adult Japanese learners of English who identified themselves in the questionnaire as actively taking steps to improve their English either formally via an educational institution or informally via self-study at the time of participation. Responses collected from participants that did not match the target population were removed, as were mostly incomplete responses, leaving 257 complete responses and 43 partial responses with enough data for use in analysis. Including partial respondents ($n = 300$), the majority were between 19-29 years old ($n = 205$) and were majority female ($n = 197$). Most had intermediate English proficiency (CEFR B1–B2 $n = 177$) and did not speak a third language past beginner proficiency ($n = 248$). The majority had less than 3 months of overseas experience in English-speaking countries ($n = 248$), had completed high school as their highest level of education ($n = 179$), and had started learning English at junior high school age (12–14 years old; $n = 137$). Some respondents ($n = 56$) appeared to have misunderstood the question on highest level of completed education, so the researcher manually adjusted answers based on participant age. Some participants ($n = 142$) were currently or had previously majored in English. Finally, most participants reported having learned English mostly through instruction-based learning ($n = 175$).

Background factors collected were chosen based on the works of Dewaele (2004, 2017): gender, personality, education, age of onset of learning English, type of English learning (naturalistic or instruction-based), self-rated spoken English proficiency, and experience living abroad in an English-speaking country. Factors not included from Dewaele's studies were personality and frequency of English usage. Assessing personality would require a much lengthier questionnaire to accurately measure, and information on frequency of English usage was not collected due to difficulty in accurately measuring it. The education section was expanded to ask if participants had studied or were studying English as their major in at least one of the schools they attended. Participants self-assessed their English proficiency based on the official Japanese translation (British Council of Japan, n.d.) of the CEFR Global Scale descriptions (Council of Europe, n.d.). An additional category of "native speaker" accompanied by

a description adapted from Davies (2004) was included to remove non-target participants. Participants were also asked if they had at least lower intermediate proficiency in any language other than Japanese or English. Finally, questions were included to confirm that all participants were native Japanese speakers and were actively engaging in activities to increase their English proficiency, either formally or informally.

The test sections measured three types of English profanity knowledge: productive knowledge, recognition, and semantic knowledge. Productive knowledge was tested with 10 gap-fill items based in part on the instrument developed for the work of Kapoor (2016). Each item contained brief relational and situational context written in Japanese accompanying a spoken or written English sentence with a missing word. In line with Kapoor's work, situations were categorized as casual, conversational, cathartic, abusive, or hostile. Participants could state that they did not know what to write rather than completing the gap-fill. Most of Kapoor's items were altered or rewritten to be more intelligible for participants with lower English proficiency and to include situations that may not involve face-to-face interactions (text messaging, internet reviews, etc.). Each situational category had two items: one open item which could be answered with a variety of correct answers, and one closed item that allowed for only one or two correct answers. The exception to this was for the conversational items, where finding a sentence limited to only one answer meant leading to a specific slur on a group of people which was deemed unethical to include. Therefore, both conversational items were closed.

Productive Test Example Items

5.1 V messaging friend A about a concert V attended: "That concert was so _____ good!" (Casual – Open; Acceptable answers: fucking, damn, bloody)

5.4 Y says to Z during a heated argument: "You're a piece of _____. I'll get revenge for this." (Abusive – Closed; Acceptable answer: shit)

For profanity recognition, participants selected the taboo word from a presented sentence. Participants could also select that they did not know the answer or that no taboo words were in the sentence. Seven sentences contained

taboo words, and three did not. Distractors were included in two of the sentences with profanity and in all sentences without profanity. Distractors were short, low-frequency words, unlikely to be known by participants while still feasible as profanity due to appearance (Bergen, 2016). All words besides profanity and distractors were of common frequency.

Profanity Recognition Test Example Items

6.5 I just know I'm gonna make an ass of myself.

6.9 Egad! I think I know the answer!

Semantic knowledge of profanity was tested with a single item consisting of 10 social situations written in Japanese accompanied with a verbal or written statement in English containing profanity. Participants selected items where the social situation and verbal statement matched. Each social situation had the potential for profanity usage, and each of the statements was a valid use of profanity grammatically. A longer format of multiple questions with each statement being given several potential social situations to choose from, or vice versa, may have yielded more accurate results. However, the shorter format was chosen to reduce questionnaire length and risk of participant withdrawal.

Semantic Knowledge of Profanity Test Example Items

7.5 Q, after being sent a message from P complaining about something, replies: "Quit bitching!" (correct usage)

7.10 B, upon reluctantly agreeing to participate, says: "Fuck yeah!" (incorrect usage)

In the section on encounters with English profanity, participants rated how often they encounter English profanity in daily life situations and activities (such as listening to music or talking with one's teacher outside of class) on a 7-point Likert scale from 1= "[I] never encounter English taboo language" to 7="[I] always encounter English taboo language" regarding each activity. Alternatively, participants could instead select that they do not do the activity. Language encounter scenarios were adapted from Briggs (2015) with additional categories added based on feedback from pilot participants and reduced to small phrases for brevity. Additionally, purely productive items (e.g., writing) were removed since receptive encounters were the focus of this study. Other items from Briggs's

study were cut or altered due to irrelevance to this study. Because the focus of the study is Japanese EFL rather than ESL contexts, participants were asked to report only on experiences within Japan.

Several measures were taken to ensure that the questionnaire was understood by participants and tested the intended topic. Pilot testing was performed with seven pilot participants of varying genders, ages, and English proficiency levels to confirm items were unlikely to be misinterpreted. An explanation of the term "taboo language" described the meaning of the term so that learners would not mistake it to mean insults or negative language, which the direct translation to Japanese insinuates. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese by the author in consultation with several Japanese colleagues with all items and explanations being written in Japanese except for quoted speech found in test items. A back-translation confirmed accuracy of the translation. Items in each test section were presented in a randomized order.

Results

Knowledge of English Profanity

Each item on the profanity knowledge test was given a score of 1 for a correct answer, and 0 for an incorrect answer. Points for the productivity test were determined by the researcher and two other native English judges, each coming from a different English-speaking country. Two judges were male, and one was female. All judges were each at least 10 years apart in age from each other. The judges scored the tests individually, and scores were compared. When scores differed, the judges consulted until they agreed on a final score. Half-points were issued for uses of minced oaths (a non-offensive word standardly used in place of a more taboo word, e.g. *frick* instead of *fuck* or *darn* instead of *damn*) when used correctly. Half points were also given for word/spelling choices that would give the listener pause but would not disrupt communication (i.e., receptive interlocutor does not feel need to request clarification). Selection of "I do not know what to write" was scored as 0. Scores for each overall section were calculated only for participants that had completed all items of the section. Likewise, combined scores were calculated only if all sections were completed.

Table 1

English Profanity Productive Knowledge Mean Scores by Item

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
5.1 Casual-Open	291	.418	.4861	.0285
5.2 Casual-Closed	287	.247	.4282	.0253
5.3 Abusive-Open	292	.295	.4528	.0265
5.4 Abusive-Closed	293	.244	.4272	.0250
5.5 Cathartic-Open	292	.342	.4717	.0276
5.6 Cathartic-Closed	290	.605	.4762	.0280
5.7 Conversational-Open	289	.114	.3047	.0179
5.7 Conversational-Open	287	.134	.3323	.0196
5.9 Hostile-Open	290	.202	.4009	.0235
5.10 Hostile-Closed	279	.545	.4916	.0294

Participants scored highest in semantic knowledge (mean = 6.280, stdv = 1.6810) receptive knowledge was moderate (mean = 5.550, stdv = 1.4820), and productive knowledge was lowest (mean = 3.208, stdv = 2.9085). For productive knowledge, the lowest productive scores were from conversational uses. Abusive profanity also received low scores along with casual-closed, and hostile-open. Besides use of English profanity, attempts to directly translate Japanese insulting language and words from Japanese taboo topics were found in several items (e.g., "die," "idiot," and "fool"). The highest scores were received for cathartic-closed, hostile-closed, and casual-open. See Table 1 for results of each productive item.

For receptive knowledge, the lowest average score was for the item containing the word "Jesus" as the taboo word, followed by the three distractor items. Highest scores were received for the items containing "fuck" and "shitty." Table 2 shows results for each receptive item.

For semantic function knowledge, the item containing the phrase "fucked

Table 2

English Profanity Receptive Knowledge Mean Scores by Item

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
6.1 "fuck"	271	.95	.214	.013
6.2 "shitty"	271	.91	.290	.018
6.3 "hell"	270	.75	.433	.026
6.4 "piss"	271	.80	.400	.024
6.5 "ass"	268	.85	.353	.022
6.6 "Jesus"	270	.06	.229	.014
6.7 "bastard"	272	.61	.489	.030
6.8 distractor "boon"	273	.12	.331	.020
6.9 distractor "egad"	268	.17	.374	.023
6.10 distractor "oft"	271	.32	.468	.028

up" received a low average score relative to the other items in this section. On the high end, the item containing the word "shitting me" received relative high average score. Table 3 shows results for each semantic function item.

Background Factors Affecting English Taboo Language Knowledge

A histogram of combined scores from participants that completed all sections was used to determine normal distribution, indicating a slightly uneven distribution, but within reasonable boundaries for conducting further parametric tests. Therefore, a univariate analysis of variance was performed with the dependent factor of combined profanity knowledge to the fixed factors of participant backgrounds. The factors of English proficiency and abroad experience in an English-speaking country were the only two factors that significantly affected combined profanity knowledge ($p=.004$ and $p=.001$ respectively). The factors of gender, style of acquisition, L3-proficiency, age, English major, education, and

Table 3

English Profanity Semantic Knowledge Mean Scores by Item

|	*N*	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
7.1 correct "bullshit"	266	.58	.494	.030
7.2 correct "fucked up"	266	.39	.489	.030
7.3 correct "Jesus Christ"	265	.62	.487	.030
7.4 correct "fucking"	266	.58	.495	.030
7.5 correct "bitching"	265	.52	.500	.031
7.6 incorrect "cock"	265	.79	.409	.025
7.7 incorrect "shitting me"	265	.89	.313	.019
7.8 incorrect "pissed off"	265	.60	.492	.030
7.9 incorrect "damn"	266	.55	.499	.031
7.10 incorrect "fuck yeah"	266	.76	.426	.026
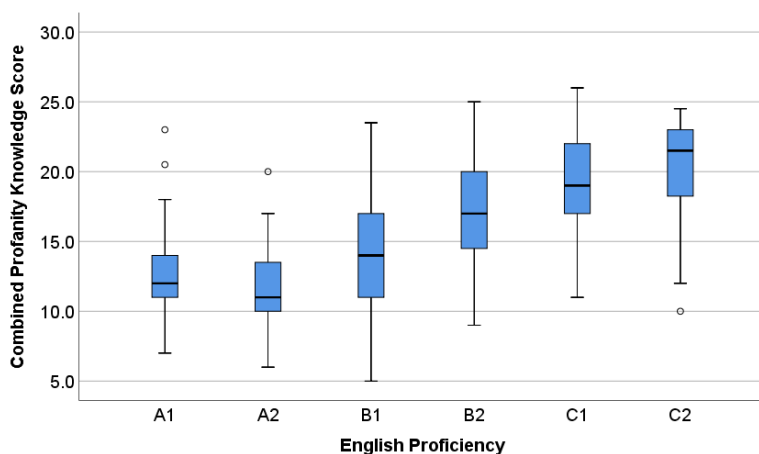
Figure 1. Combined Profanity Knowledge Scores Grouped by English Proficiencies

age of onset were all found to be insignificant.

A post-hoc Bonferroni multiple comparisons test was performed comparing combined profanity knowledge scores to levels of English proficiency. Comparing each proceeding level of proficiency showed significant, medium gains between levels A2*B1 (2.395 mean score difference, d=.65) and significant, large gains between levels B1*B2 (3.122 mean score difference, d=.86). Figure 1 provides visualization of the total profanity test mean scores by proficiency level.

An Independent Samples t-Test found significantly higher profanity knowledge in participants with experience living abroad in an English-speaking country for 3+ months. However, there were few advanced participants with no abroad experience and very few beginner participants with abroad experience. This means the significant gain may be attributed to proficiency, so further analysis was performed. Numbers of beginner and advanced participants with varying abroad experience were not viable for analysis due to small sample size. Therefore, a Univariate Analysis of Covalence was performed with the fixed factor of intermediate proficiencies combined with abroad experience. Post-hoc
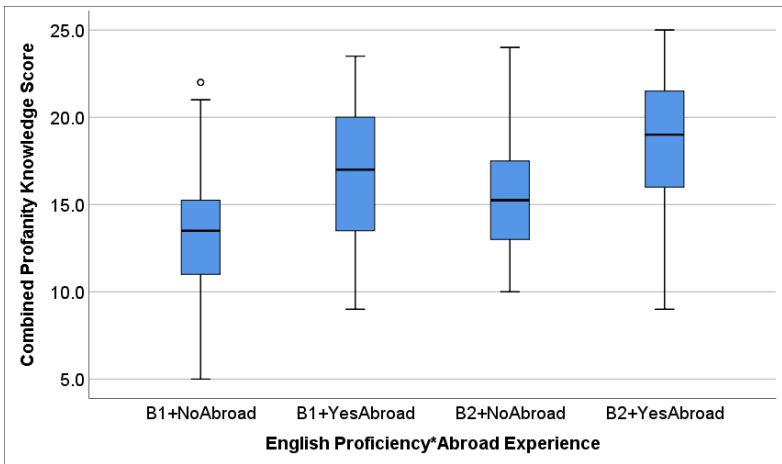

Figure 2. Mean Combined Profanity Knowledge Scores Across Combined Factors of Intermediate English Proficiencies and Abroad Experience

Bonferroni showed significant, large gains of those with the same proficiency but differing abroad experience (see Figure 2 for visualization). Average scores between participants with B1-proficiency were significantly higher in those who had abroad experience with a medium effect size (3.114 mean score difference, *d*=.77). Similarly, average scores between B2 participants were significantly higher in those who had abroad experience with a large effect size (3.187 mean score difference, *d*=.87).

Engagement with Taboo Language in Daily Activities

Table 4 shows engagement in each activity by participants and reported frequency of profanity encounters by situation type. Participants that selected not doing the activity were removed from mean analysis for that activity. Most activities were rated as low-frequency for profanity encounters (Likert-scale points <3). Only three scenarios scored above 4 points (movies/DVDs, comments on the internet, and social media). The three scenarios that scored the lowest all involved interactions with teachers.

After visual inspection, a pattern of correlation between higher average frequency of encounter and higher participant disagreement (i.e. standard deviation) emerged. The relationship was confirmed via regression analysis ($r=0.866, p=.000$). This could denote some learners filtering media that contains profanity due to personal preference on profanity itself or on the types of media that contain frequent profanity usage. This may also be due to proficiency divides, with lower-proficiency learners more frequently interacting with L1 media thus decreasing encounters with profanity. All learners reported far fewer encounters from in-person and interpersonal interactions, with lesser disagreement between participants. This may relate to preserving face during such interactions or may denote that these interactions are more commonly performed in Japanese by all participants.

Table 4

Reported Frequency of Encounters With English Profanity

Activity	Does not engage in activity (*n*)	Engages in activity (*n*)	Mean Likert Score	Std. Deviation
Movies, DVDs	6	262	4.56	2.04
Comments on the internet	10	256	4.2	1.955
Social media	12	256	4.04	1.946
Music or songs	5	262	3.84	1.963
Reviews on the internet	16	252	3.67	1.982
Internet webpages	11	256	3.17	1.898
Video games	80	187	2.98	2.045
TV programs	20	248	2.93	1.922
Comics	78	188	2.77	1.832
Listening to other people's conversations	9	256	2.72	1.788
Signs, posters, T-shirts, menus, etc.	23	243	2.41	1.677
When talking with friends	10	256	2.4	1.721
Talking to those who cannot speak Japanese	23	245	2.32	1.783
Novels	46	222	2.3	1.607
Radio programs or podcasts	48	219	2.29	1.693
When messaging friends	13	253	2.29	1.614
Magazines	50	218	2.03	1.612
Getting information from other people	15	250	2	1.407
Talking to those who can speak Japanese	7	261	1.93	1.379
Talking to someone you live with	43	224	1.75	1.48
Email	23	245	1.58	1.183
Talking with your teacher outside of class	34	233	1.5	1.103
Talking with your teacher inside class	29	237	1.38	1.004
Listening to your teacher talk	20	248	1.38	0.945

Note. Table sorted by average mean Likert score.

Discussion

Knowledge of English Profanity

Scores in each of the aspects of profanity knowledge may have been influenced in part by item design. The design of the productive knowledge test was gap-fill, which is generally more difficult than multiple-choice item design which was used for the receptive knowledge test. Upon reflection, the design of the semantic knowledge test was overly insensitive, with a 50/50 chance of being correct. There was no option for participants to select that they do not know the answer, forcing the participant to guess. Therefore, the scores for each section cannot be directly compared with each other.

Low scores for conversational profanity were expected considering the lack of this type of profanity in Japanese. Unexpectedly, abusive profanity was also difficult for participants despite abusive profanity being found in Japanese. This result may have arisen instead from the different categorizations of taboo topics that direct insults come from in the two languages. It was also expected that closed options would be more difficult for participants, but the two highest scores were from closed items. Both items were correctly scored with the use of the word "fuck," but it is unlikely that the high scores are results of guessing alone considering comparatively low uses of "fuck" to answer other items. Knowledge of the phrase "what the fuck" may be explained by its high frequency (13,991 occurrences in COCA; Davies, 2008), but the same cannot be said for the phrase "fuck off." Perhaps the latter phrase elicits more usage of vocabulary learning strategies or elicits more effective vocabulary learning strategies used when encountered, leading to quicker acquisition of the phrase. This higher or more effective use of learning strategies may be due to the highly antagonistic nature of the phrase making it more memorable. Use of Japanese taboo language translated into the L2 was expected, showing participants' reliance on the L1. Finally, as mentioned previously, overall low scores in this section relative to the other sections may be attributed to the item design. However, they may also be related to limited opportunities for productive profanity use compared to receptive exposure.

Low scores on receptive distractor items were in part due to the selection of distractors, indicating that some participants were guessing unknown words to be profanity. This may mean that results from items containing profanity with no distractor (6.1—6.5) may have been guessed rather than known. The one score that greatly deviates from the others is item 6.6 with the interjective use of "Jesus," with only 15 participants selecting correctly. This may be due to the use of the distractor "hock" in the sentence, which was selected by participants more often over the target taboo word. This may also be related to the lack of religious taboo words in Japanese and the use of Jesus as a non-taboo word when not used as an interjection, making this word harder to recognize as taboo. Logically, the word "hell" would also follow this pattern, but the recognition of "hell" to be a swearword may be attributed to similarities with the Japanese taboo topic of death and the highly offensive Japanese phrase "jigoku ike" (meaning "go to hell"). However, with no distractor in the sentence containing "hell," reasons for this discrepancy are unclear.

For semantic function, insensitive item design may have resulted in middling scores. However, that learners were correct more than incorrect on all but one item indicates the participants have some knowledge in this area. The one item with a low score was 7.2 (Person F, when relaying to friend Person G that Person F did something bad, says: "I really fucked up."). It is unclear why this usage was difficult for learners. One possibility is the multiple meanings of the phrase "fucked up," being used to indicate an intoxicated state, the ruination of something, something disturbing, or a mistake made. Perhaps some learners know one of the alternate meanings of the phrase and falsely assumed it to be the only meaning. With enough participants making this error, it may have led to these results. This assumption relates to the fact that most Japanese profanity has far fewer meanings for any one word or phrase compared to that of English profanity.

The item with both the highest score and lowest standard deviation was 7.7 (Person D, concerned about friend Person E's health, messages: "You're shitting me."). One possible explanation for this high score is the connections between the word "shit" and Japanese "kuso." The topic of health indicates a literal usage

of the word, but the Japanese version of the word cannot be used to literal mean "feces." Participants may have assumed this restriction for the use of the word "shit" as well and guessed correctly without knowing the meaning of the phrase. One other possibility is the serious tone of topic, where usage of profanity may be viewed as inappropriate and therefore incorrect from a Japanese viewpoint. Therefore, it may be that participants did not know the phrase and its usages but instead guessed correctly based on L1 knowledge rather than L2 knowledge.

Background Factors Affecting English Taboo Language Knowledge

Many factors that were expected to affect English profanity knowledge failed to show significance. Gendered use of profanity in the L1 would presumably result in differing scores between male and female participants, but it may be that this gendered aspect does not extend to the L2, or that overall knowledge remains the same between men and women, while other aspects such as frequency of usage in the L2 may be significantly different. Similarly, a relationship with style of acquisition was expected, but perhaps being surrounded by Japanese culture and continuous use of the L1 reduced opportunity to encounter profanity, even in natural daily life language learning situations. As for having an L3, perhaps it is insignificant unless at a higher proficiency or only has an effect if it shares similarities in taboo language use to English. The factors of age, English major, education, and age of onset were all insignificant. Insignificance from other examined factors may all relate to the Japanese education system shared by most participants that generally excludes discussion of profanity.

Results indicate that the highest gain happens between high-beginner and high-intermediate levels. No significant gains were found between low-beginner and high-beginner levels, with the average score for low-beginners surpassing high-beginners. This may be explained by a higher proportion of atypical participants at the low-beginner level, with several typical participants not completing the survey. A1 participants had the highest dropout rate among participants that had competed at least one item (completion rates: A1 75%, A2 84%, B1 85%, B2 88%, C1 86%, C2 95%). Responses from a subsequent

study related to the present study indicate deviant cases in lower and higher levels to likely be genuine answers rather than chance guessing, hence why they were included in the chart results. Lack of significancy in other progressive levels may be explained by more gradual learning, which may not be evident when comparing gains between each level of proficiency.

Results showing increased scores in those who had abroad experience were expected. This is because time abroad for 3+ months allows for higher exposure to profanity in daily life, which increases the chance of acquisition. These results may hold true for the beginner and advanced levels, but without adequate number of participants to compare, it remains unknown.

Engagement with Taboo Language in Daily Activities

Music and songs were expected to score highly, but did not receive a score higher than four. Movies/DVDs elicited an average score higher than 4 points, but other forms of media did not. For many of these forms of media, this can be explained by the amount of English that is encountered in general. Foreign movies make up a large proportion of the movies that are shown in movie theaters, making up more than 50% of movies shown in theaters for seven years between 2000-2023, and almost half of movies for the majority of other years (Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, n.d.). Of these movies, it can be assumed that the majority come from Hollywood. In comparison, other forms of English media are not nearly as prevalent as their Japanese counterparts. This could explain why other forms of media did not score as highly for profanity encounters because encountering English during these activities was less common overall. Besides movies, comments on the internet and social media were also places where higher frequency of English taboo word encounters were expected. This is likely due to both the higher encounters with English overall while online along with the anonymous nature of the internet increasing the amount of taboo language used. While social media is not always anonymous, it often lends itself as a place where people feel more comfortable using casual language that they may not use in daily life due to lack of immediate consequence and ability to control one's audience.

Activities involving teachers all received very low scores for encounters with

profanity, each with ≤1.5 points. This can be understood by the fact that the Japanese student-teacher relationship is usually formal where taboo language in general, let alone English taboo language, is unlikely to be used. Formality may also explain other activities such as with email or getting information from other people, where politeness is expected. However, this does not explain lower scores in interpersonal activities where politeness is not expected such as when communicating with people you live with or messaging friends. In these cases, again the majority of these situations would be in Japanese and therefore unlikely to contain any English except that which has been appropriated into the Japanese language.

Conclusion

These results show that Japanese EFL learners are encountering and acquiring knowledge of English profanity despite not learning about such language in formal education settings. However, the results also indicate that learners have greater difficulty in those areas where English and Japanese differ, such as with conversational profanity, limitations in word meaning, and with profane words that belong to a taboo categorization in English but not a taboo category found in Japanese. Such differences are harder for learners to overcome and could possible be an area where explicit instruction helps aid learners in acquiring this language and therefore avoiding potential future difficulties where such language may be either misinterpreted or misused due to lack of adequate understanding.

The results showing that English proficiency and time spent abroad in English-speaking countries are related to higher profanity knowledge both reflect that higher exposure may be an important factor to acquiring English profanity knowledge. Higher proficiency comes with more time exposed to the language in general but may also come with more exposure to English outside of the classroom, where chances to encounter profanity are higher than the sanitized version of the language found in most educational institutions. Likewise, living abroad exposes learners daily to slang in person, including profanity, which appears to be more effective for learning such language considering the higher scores found in those who had abroad experience. As postulated in the literature

review, it may be that the change in culture also contributes to this higher understanding of profanity, where profanity in English-speaking countries is more likely to be used in friendly, daily life situations than in Japan, where profanity is more restricted in usage.

Japanese EFL learners have knowledge of English profanity, but the finding that these learners most commonly report encountering profanity through media and the internet may indicate an incomplete knowledge of profanity. As discussed by scholars (Wang et al., 2014; Gauthier & Guille, 2017), the ways that profanity is used differ in person versus online both in frequency and in how such language is used by different groups of people. It is possible that learners have a false idea of when, where, and to whom with profanity may be used based on their encounters with the language via media and the internet. However, without further study, this is purely speculation.

Those designing materials addressing the topic of English profanity would be advised to take the results from this study into consideration. It could be beneficial for learners to read about areas where profanity differ in English and Japanese to aid in their acquisition of the language. Care should be taken when discussing conversational and abusive profanity and the differences between the two due to the potential for particularly negative social outcomes from use of such language. Learners should be made aware of types of profanity that are not present in the Japanese language, such as with profane words related to religion. It may also benefit learners to know how a single profane word or phrase in English can have several more meanings than they expect. Learning about cultural differences related to profanity and its pragmatic functions may aid learners in understanding the language. Finally, considering that many learners are exposed to profanity online and in the media, it might be beneficial to learners to give learners information on or examples of how profanity is sometimes used differently in these contexts as opposed to in-person situations.

Several limitations were found for this study. At least two background factor items were misinterpreted by some participants. Answers about educational background were able to be adjusted to a more probable answer based on participant age. Answers about experience living in an English-speaking country

showed misunderstanding about which countries are included as English-speaking countries. This means that differences between those with abroad experience in English-speaking countries may be different than what was found presently. Insensitive and poor item design could have affected results of semantic knowledge and receptive knowledge. Item design also meant that scores between different aspects of profanity knowledge were unable to be directly compared. Additionally, profanity knowledge scores may not accurately represent all Japanese learners, considering the higher incompletion rates for participants with lower English proficiency. Learners not interested in profanity or with negative attitudes on profanity might have chosen not to participate in the study at all.

There are many areas regarding this topic of research that have yet to be explored. Research on English profanity knowledge, attitudes, and usage are generally limited to ESL populations. More studies with varying EFL populations might offer differing perspectives. Likewise, the questionnaire developed for this study could be used with participants of different language backgrounds, though modifications to add distractors to all items in the receptive test and more sensitivity to the semantic test would be recommended.

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