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Acquisition of relative clauses and *wh*-questions in English by Japanese speakers: The application of the Latent Rank Theory

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### Abstract

This study investigates the acquisition of relative clauses and *wh*-questions in English by Japanese speakers through examining whether L2 learners are sensitive to the constraints in *wh*-movement which are not involved in their native language. To this end, a new test theory, the Latent Rank Theory (Shojima, 2008), was employed. This test theory assumes an ordinal, not continuous, scale in assessing learners' performance, and categorizes learners into a number of "latent ranks." By sorting the test items according to the item reference profiles, which express item facility indices at each of the latent ranks, we can obtain groups of test items that L2 learners at a certain latent rank can answer correctly. Untimed grammaticality judgement tests on relative clause and *wh*-question constructions were given to 784 university-level Japanese learners of English. These tests consisted of 16 grammatical and 18 ungrammatical relative clauses, and 8 grammatical and 18 ungrammatical *wh*-questions. There are five different types of violations on *wh*-movement in ungrammatical sentences. Participants were asked to judge the grammaticality of all the sentences using a 5-point scale. Results showed that the learners were categorised into 10 latent ranks, and a learner in a higher rank judged correctly in more test items. However, there were several items in which, as the learners' ranks went up, parallel increase was observed in the probabilities of both correct and incorrect responses. This implies that even for advanced-level L2 learners, acquisition of some types of relative clause and *wh*-question constructions poses unique difficulty.