

The Acquisition of Pragmatically Constrained Japanese Pronouns by L1 English Learners: Results from a Context Translation Task

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Abstract

The allocation of explicit and implicit pronouns and the literature extensively discusses the syntactic and pragmatic conditions that permit and necessitate the use of overt and null pronouns in Romance languages, such as Spanish and Italian. This topic has been explored by various researchers, including Alonso-Ovalle and D'Introno (2000), Fernández-Soriano (1989), Luján (1987, 1999), Montalbetti (1984), Rigau (1986, 1988), and Rizzi (1997). Rothman (2009) argues that the employment of overt subject pronouns in Spanish is pragmatically unusual, except in select discursive situations when their existence contributes more to semantic interpretation than just agreement features. In Japanese, null forms of pronouns are more common than overt pronouns, as observed by Martin (1976). However, like Spanish, the distribution of pronouns in Japanese is influenced by both syntax and pragmatics. In pro-drop languages, overt pronouns, as well as lexical subjects, have the role of resolving any potential uncertainties that may occur when new referents are introduced in a conversation.

Keywords: *Japanese; pronouns; pragmatic; context translation*

INTRODUCTION

The distribution of overt and null pronouns Romance languages such as Spanish and Italian, specifically the syntactic and pragmatic conditions that allow and require the use of overt and null pronouns has been extensively discussed in

the literature (e.g. Alonso-Ovalle and D’Introno, 2000; Fernández-Soriano, 1989; Luján, 1987, 1999; Montalbetti, 1984; Rigau, 1986, 1988; Rizzi, 1997). With respect to Spanish in particular, Rothman (2009) states, “the use of overt subject pronouns is pragmatically odd in all but very specific discursive environments where their presence offers more than agreement features to the semantic interpretation.” In Japanese there is a tendency for null forms over overt pronouns (Martin, 1976), however like Spanish, the distribution is syntactically and pragmatically driven. Overt pronouns—as well as lexical subjects—in pro-drop languages serve the function of clearing up ambiguities that might arise due to the introduction of new referents into a discourse. This can be seen when comparing (1) and (2) in Spanish, and (3) and (4) in Japanese. Additionally, we see that once a referent has been introduced in the discourse, the use of an overt pronoun becomes pragmatically odd.

(1) Luna y Nilda no durmieron anoche. */?ellas/∅ tendrán mucho sueño.

Luna and Nilda not sleep-3ppl.-pret. /? They/pro have-3ppl.-fut. much sleepy

‘Luna and Nilda did not sleep last night. They must be sleepy.’

(2) No dormí anoche. Ellas/* ∅ piensan que tengo sueño ahora.

pro not sleep-1psg.-pret. last night. They/*pro think-3ppl.-pres. that pro have-1psg.-pres.

sleepy now

‘I did not sleep last night. Luna and Nilda/they must think I am sleepy.’

(3) Kyoo, Luka-to Taira-ga hirugohan-o tabete-i-nai. */?Luka-to Taira-

ga/?Karera-ga/∅ onaka-ga suiteiru deshoo.

today Luka-and Taira-nom. lunch-acc. eaten-not *Luka-and Taira-nom./?They-nom./pro stomach-nom.

empty probably

‘Luka and Taira haven’t eaten lunch today. Luka and Taira/They are probably hungry.’

(4) Kyoo, hirugohan o tabetei-nai. Karera-ga/Luka-to Taira-ga onaka-ga suitei-ru to omotte-iru deshoo.

today lunch-acc. have eaten-not They-nom./Luka and Taira-nom. stomach-nom. empty thinking probably

‘I haven’t eating lunch today. They/Luka and Taira probably think I am hungry.’

Furthermore, the comparisons between (5) and (6), and (7) and (8) show that in answers to topic questions, an overt subject pronoun proves to be pragmatically odd.

(5) ¿Quiénes tomaron el foto? ... Nosotros/*∅ lo tomamos.

Who take-3ppl-pret. a photo?... We/*pro it-clitic take-1ppl-pret.

‘Who took the photo? We took it.’

(6) ¿Tomaron Uds. el foto? ... Sí, ?nosotros/ ∅ lo tomamos.

Take-3ppl.-pret. you-plural the photo?... Yes, we/pro it-clitic take-1ppl.pret

‘Did you guys take the photo? ... Yes, we/* \emptyset took it.’

(7) Dare-ga shashin-o totta? ... Watashitachi-ga /* \emptyset totta.

Who-NOM photo-ACC took? ... We-NOM/*pro took (it)

‘Who took the photo? ... We took it.’

(8) Anata-tachi, shashin-o totta ? ... Un, watashi-tachi-ga*/ \emptyset totta yo.

You-plural photo-acc. took ? ... Yes, we-nom.*/pro took (it) emph.

‘Did you guys take the photo? ... Yes, we*/ \emptyset took it.’

Sentence (9) and (10) show that when a context calls for a contrast in focus, null subjects are pragmatically odd.

(9) O te lo digo yo o te lo dice ella. Quiero que me lo digas tú [y no ella].

Or you-clitic-dat. it-clitic-acc. I or you-clitic-dat. it-clitic.acc. tell-3psg.-pres.
she pro want-1psg-pres.

that me-clitic-dat. It-clitic-acc. tell-2psg.-pres.-subj. You [and not she]

‘Either I will tell you or she will tell you.’ ‘I want you to tell it to me [and not her].’

(10) Watashi-ga kimi-ni oshieru ka. Kanojo-ga kimi-ni oshieru ka. [Kanojo ja nakute] anata-ni/ \emptyset *oshiete

moraitai.

I-nom. you-dat. tell Q. You-nom. you-dat. tell Q. [her not]
you-from/pro* tell-

want to receive

‘Either I will tell you or she will.’ ‘I want you to tell it to me [and not her].’

However, as shown in (11) and (12), overt subjects are odd when there is no contrast in the focus.

(11) María tiene buenas noticias y acaba de llegar. Quiero que */?ella me las diga ahora.

Mary have-3psg.-pres. good news and she finish-3psg.-pres. of arrive-inf.
pro want-1psg.-pres that she

me-clitic-dat. It-clitic-acc. tell-3psg.-pres.-subj. now.

‘Mary has good news. I want her to tell it to me now.’

(12) Mearii-ga ima kaette-kita. Soshite ii nyuusu-ga aru. Ima \emptyset /kanojo-ga? oshiete hoshii.

Mary-nom. now return-came. And good news-nom. exists. Now Mary-nom*/pro tell want

‘Mary has good news. I want her to tell it to me now.’

Given these constraints and the fact that the pronominal distribution is not a fact that is explicitly taught in language classrooms (i.e. poverty of the stimulus), Rothman (2009) tested if L1 adult English learners of Spanish have the same knowledge of these constraints as native speakers.

This paper is organized as follows: section 2 presents the results of Rothman's context translation task, section 3 poses the research questions, section 4 discusses the present study, section 5 discusses the results, section 6 presents the discussion, and section 7 gives concluding remarks.

A portion of Rothman's (2009) study utilized a context dependent translation task to investigate whether adult English L2 learners of Spanish have acquired the correct knowledge of the distribution of overt and null subject pronouns. He compared three experimental groups: (i) a native control group, (ii) an intermediate group, and (iii) a high advanced group. Rothman's test instrument consisted of five contextualized stories. Within each story, there were four context dependent sentences that the participants were asked to translate into Spanish based on the previous short context, totaling 20 sentences. The first type, as in (13a), was a sentence without contrastive focus from the context. The second type, as in (13b), was an answer to a topic question. The third type, as in (13c) was an answer to a topic question. The fourth type, as in (13d), is the answer to a yes/no question.

TYPE 1 - NO CONTRASTIVE FOCUS (Null pronoun required)

(13) (a) My friend Juan is a scientist who is currently in the Antarctica. He's very isolated and doesn't have a television, radio, or the Internet. I recently

received a letter from him suggesting that I come stay with home during the warm season.

Translate: “I hate the cold, but I want to visit him because we are best friends.”

TYPE 2- ANSWER TO TOPIC QUESTION (Overt pronoun required)

(b) I tell my mom that I’m going to Antarctica for a while. She tells me to make a list of everything I need and to not forget to pack a little sunscreen since there is a hole in the ozone layer in Antarctica. Just then, my dad, who caught the very end of the conversation, walks into the room. He asks, “Who did you say is going to Antarctica?” I respond:

Translate: “I’m going to Antarctica to visit Juan.”

TYPE 3 – CONTRASTIVE FOCUS (Overt pronoun/Referring expression required)

(c) My dad starts asking me a million questions about the trip. He wants to know how I’m getting there, how long I’ll be gone, if I have the proper equipment, etc. He asks me when the last time was that I went to Antarctica and if Juan has any experience living in the outback.

Translate: “I’ve never visited there, but he has lived there for two years.”

TYPE 4 – ANSWER TO YES-NO QUESTION (Null pronoun required)

(d) My visit to Antarctica was fantastic and I was sad when I left. It’s been two years since I made the trip. But, finally, Juan has finished his research and is

able to come home. Since I haven't seen him for a long time, I am very excited. My stepfather can see this and says, "I see you're pretty excited. Juan gets home today, doesn't he?" I tell him:

Translate: "Yes. He arrives at the airport at two."

Figure 1 shows the means of the various contexts for each group. The inclusion of the four context types was meant to counterbalance each other (i.e. No Contrastive Focus vs. Contrastive Focus/Answer to Topic Question vs. Answer to Yes/No Question). The results are reported in terms of the total number of times an overt subject was used in each context. Therefore, a result of 5 would be 100%. The advanced learners showed similarities across all four contexts with their means being the most similar in the No CF and Yes/No contexts. Both groups showed consistent use of overt pronouns in the CF and Topic WH contexts, and a consistently low number of them in the No CF and Yes/No contexts. On the contrary, the intermediate learners used many of them across all four contexts. Statistical analysis showed that the intermediate group differed from the advanced group and native group. The advanced group showed no significant difference from the native group in all categories except for the Topic WH contexts. Despite this however, the advanced group still showed a high mean score of overt subject pronouns with 87%. Rothman (2009) also observed that the intermediate learners overuse overt subject pronouns in contexts where they

are pragmatically odd, while also showing an “over-production of null subjects in environments where overt subjects are discursively expected.”

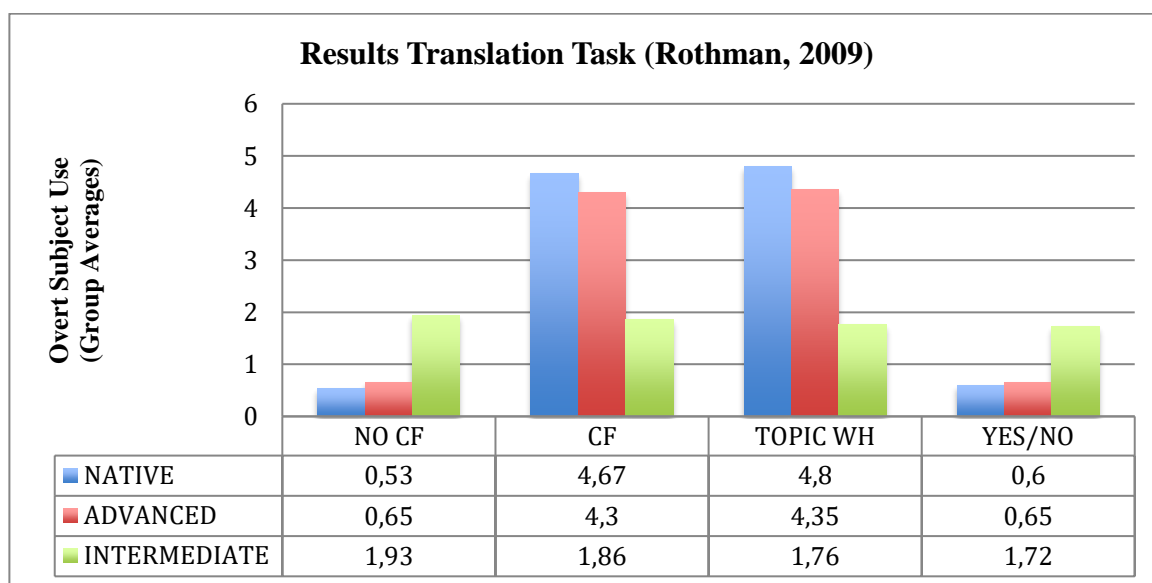


Figure 1. Results of Rothman’s (2009) translation task

NO CF = contexts without contrastive focus, null subjects expected; CF = contexts with contrastive focus, overt subjects expected; TOPIC WH = answers to topic-WH questions, overt pronouns expected; YES/NO = answers to yes/no questions, null subjects expected.

Research questions

- (a) Question 1: Given that Japanese—like Spanish—is a pro drop language, do L1 English learners of Japanese acquire knowledge of the pragmatically/discourse constrained distribution of overt and null subject pronouns?
- (b) Question 2: If they do acquire this knowledge, at what level (intermediate or advanced) is it acquired?

(c) Question 3: If there are problems in acquisition at any stage, in which contexts do they appear?

The present study

The study used a context translation task modeled after Rothman (2009).

Participants

The participants were 43 adults studying at a midwestern university in the United States. They were divided into three different groups: an intermediate group (n=13) with up to 200 hours of language instruction, an advanced group of more than 200 hours of instruction (n=19), and a native speaker control group (n=11).

RESEARCH METHOD

The test instrument consisted of five contextualized stories. Within each story, there were four context dependent sentences that the participants were asked to be translate into Japanese based on the previous short context. The participants were asked to read the following four short English contexts. Following each context there was a sentence to be translated. The participants were asked to translate the sentence into Japanese based on the previous short context.

TYPE 1 - NO CONTRASTIVE FOCUS (Null pronoun required)

My friend Akira is a scientist who is currently in Australia. He is very isolated and doesn't have a television, radio, or the Internet. I recently received a letter from him suggesting that I come stay with him during the warm season.

Translate: I hate cold places, but I want to visit him because we are best friends.

寒い所が嫌いだけど、友人だから、Ø 会いたい。

Samui tokoro-ga kirai da kedo, yuujin da kara, Ø aitai.

cold-place-nom.1 hate cop. but friend cop. since want to meet

TYPE 2- ANSWER TO TOPIC QUESTION (Overt pronoun required)

I tell my mom that I am going to Australia for a while. She tells me to make a list of everything I need and to not forget to pack a little sunscreen since there is a hole in the ozone layer in Australia. Just then, my dad, who caught the very end of the conversation, walks into the room. He asks, "Who did you say is going to Australia?" I respond:

Translate: "I'm going to Australia."

私が、オーストラリアに明に会いに行くよ。

Watashi-ga Oosutoraria-ni Akira-ni ai-ni iku yo.

I-nom. Australia-loc. Akira-to meet-go emph.

TYPE 3 – CONTRASTIVE FOCUS (Overt pronoun/Referring expression required)

My dad starts asking me a lot of questions about the trip. He wants to know how I'm getting there, how long I'll be gone, if I have the proper equipment, etc. He asks me when the last time was that I went to Antarctica and if Akira has any experience in the cold. Translate: "I've never visited there, but he has lived there for two years."

私は行ったことないけど、彼/明は二年間あそこに住んでいるよ。

Watashi-wa itta koto nai kedo, kare/Akira-wa ninenkan asoko ni sundeiru yo.

I-top. went thing not but, he/Akira-top. 2 years there-loc. living
emph.

TYPE 4 – ANSWER TO YES-NO QUESTION (Null pronoun required)

My visit to Antarctica was fantastic and I was sad when I left. It's been two years since I made the trip. But, finally, Akira has finished his research and is able to come home. Since I haven't seen him for a long time, I am very excited. My dad can see this and says, "I see you're pretty excited. Akira gets home today, doesn't he?" I respond:

Translate: "Yes, he arrives at the airport at two.

うん、∅ 二時に 空港に 着く。

Un, ∅ niiji-ni kuukoo-ni tsuku

yes 2 o'clock-at airport-loc. arrive

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis

The purpose of this task was the same as in Rothman's study. We can see that the native speakers chose an overt pronoun 100% of the time in the CF and Topic WH contexts and had very low means in the No CF and Yes/No contexts. The native speaker and the advanced group also performed similarly. The intermediate learners, however, performed more similarly to the native speakers than Rothman's intermediate learner group.

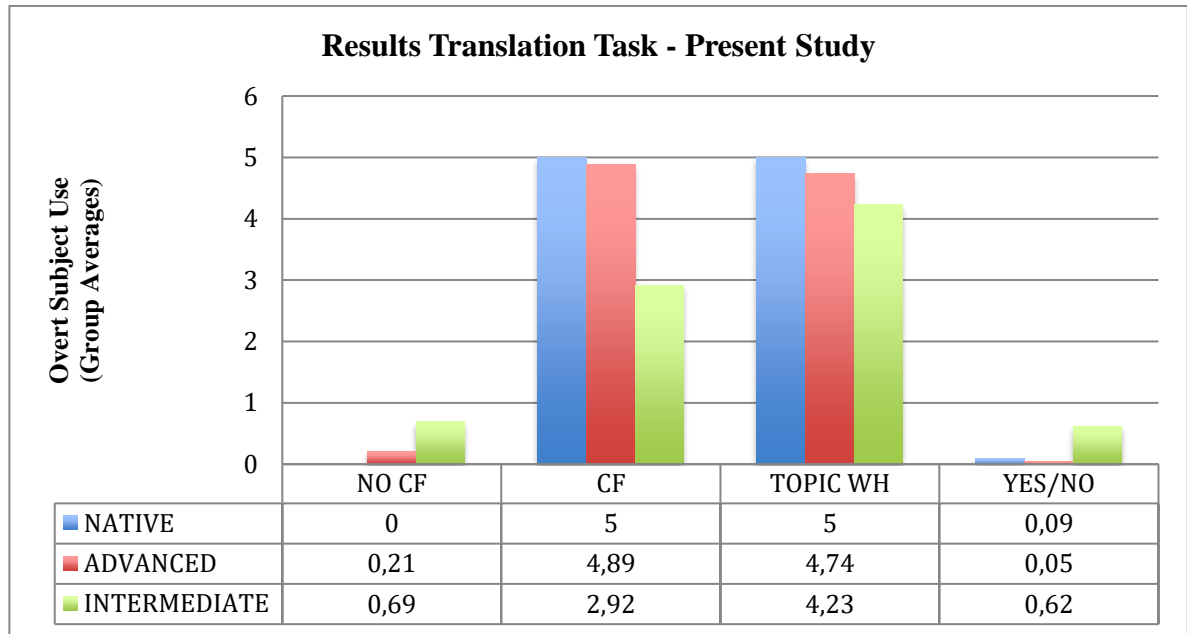


Figure 2. Present study translation results

NO CF = contexts without contrastive focus, null subjects expected; CF = contexts with contrastive focus, overt subjects expected; TOPIC WH = answers to topic-WH questions, overt pronouns expected; YES/NO = answers to yes/no questions, null subjects expected.

Statistical Analysis

A one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to compare the number of overt pronouns used in each context. Significant differences were found in all of the context categories: NO CF (non-contrastive focus) $F(2, 40) = 3.51$ $p < .05$; CF (contrastive focus) category $F(2, 40) = 10.39$ $p < 0.001$; TOPIC WH (answer to a

topic question) $F(2, 40) = 6.29$ $p < .05$; YES/NO (answer to a yes-no question) $F(2, 40) = 6.14$ $p < .05$. Table 1 shows the results of two-sample independent t-tests. They revealed the following results: (i) a significant difference between the native speaker control group and the advanced learners in the NO CF and TOPIC WH, however no significant difference was found in the CF and YES/NO contexts; (ii) a significant difference between the native speaker control group and the intermediate learners in all of the contexts; (iii) a significant difference between the intermediate and advanced learners in the CF and YES/NO contexts, but no significant difference between them in the NO CF and TOPIC WH contexts. Although t-tests found a significant difference between native speakers and advanced learners in the NO CF and TOPIC WH, a post-hoc Tukey test revealed no significant differences ($p < .05$). Furthermore, the means for both groups in the NO CF environment (natives = 0.00, advanced L2 = 0.21) show that the advanced L2 learners produce overt pronouns as little as only 21% of the time. For the TOPIC WH contexts as well, the means for both groups (natives = 5, advanced 4.74) show that the advanced L2 learners reliably produced overt pronouns over 94% of the time.

Table 1. Results of translation task (intergroup comparisons)

	No			CF			Topic			Yes/No		
	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	d.f.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	d.f.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	d.f.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	d.f.
NS vs. Adv L2	-	<0.001	18	1.455	.019	18	2.041	.001	18	.392	.440	28
NS vs. Int L2	-	.005	12	2.864	<0.001	22	3.825	<0.001	12	-2.265	.001	16.128
Adv L2 vs. Int L2	1.732	0.40	30	-	<0.001	12.285	-	.199	30	2.565	<0.001	13.477
				2.949			2.224					

Discussion

The performance of the intermediate group in Rothman and the present study differed in that Rothman’s learners used many overt subject pronouns in all four contexts revealing their inability to reliably discriminate between instances where either an overt or empty pronoun is pragmatically licensed. In contrast, the intermediate learners in the present study showed more of an ability to discriminate. In other words, despite showing statistical significance from the native speakers in the CF and Yes/No contexts, they still produced a lower number of overt subject pronouns in the cases where they were pragmatically odd, and a higher number of empty ones where they were pragmatically licensed.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results from the context translation task, the adult L1 English learners of Japanese in the intermediate group showed more knowledge of the pragmatic constraints on overt and empty subject pronouns in Japanese, than Rothman's (2009) intermediate group. The results show that although the advanced learner groups in both studies showed knowledge of the constraints, thereby offering evidence that knowledge of the constraint is not fossilized, but rather that it takes time to develop. Further research is needed.

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Appendix

Test Questionnaire 1 – Translation task

Instructions: Please read the following four short English contexts. After each context there is a sentence to be translated. Please translate the sentence into Japanese based on the previous short context.

Context1

(1) My friend Akira is a scientist who is currently in the Australian outback. He is very lonely since he doesn't have a television, radio, or the internet. I recently received a letter from him suggesting that I come visit him this month.

Translate: I don't like traveling, but I want to visit him because we are good friends.

(2) I tell my mother that I am going to Australia for a while. She tells me to make a list of everything I need and to not forget to pack a little sunscreen since the ozone layer is thin over Australia. Right at that moment, my stepfather, who caught the very end of the conversation, walks into the room. He asks, "Who did you say is going to Australia?" I respond:

Translate: I'm going to Australia to visit Akira.

(3) My stepfather starts asking me a lot of questions about the trip. He wants to know how I'm getting there, how long I'll be gone, if I have the proper equipment, etc. He asks me when the last time was that I went to Australia and if Akira has any experience living in the outback.

Translate: I've never visited there, but he has lived there for two years.

(4) My visit to Australia was fantastic and I was sad when I left. It's been two years since I made the trip. But, finally, Akira has finished his research and is able to come home. Since I haven't seen him for a long time, I am very excited. My stepfather can see this and says, "I see you're pretty excited. Akira gets home today, doesn't he?" I respond:

Translate: Yes. He arrives at the airport at three o'clock.

Context 2

(1) My older sister Jane goes to college in Ohio and I still live at home with my parents and little brother in Michigan. When we were little, Jane and I were very close and we did everything together. However, after she went to college, we have seen less and less each other over the past few years. Right now, I don't have a car so the only way to visit her would be to take a bus.

Translate: I want to see my older sister, but I don't like the bus.

(2) While discussing it with my parents, my little brother Henry says that he wants to join me on the trip, and so he and I decide to buy a bus ticket to Ohio for the following weekend. I then call Jane and tell her that we are visiting, and she says that she will pick us up from the bus station. My parents want us to take our sister a new computer as a present, and they give us the money for both the computer and the bus tickets. I know that my little brother is very busy this week so when my father asks which one of us will go out to buy the computer, I respond:

Translate: I will go to buy the computer.

(3) Just then my mother asks, "Hey, didn't we buy Jane a new cell phone last year for her birthday?" I respond:

Translate: Jane didn't get a cell phone, but I did.

(4) The following week our father takes Henry and I to the bus station. Before we get on the bus my father asks me, "Jane will pick you guys up from the bus station in Ohio, right?" I respond:

Translate: Yes. She will pick us up at two o'clock.

Context 3

(1) Ken and Dave went to the library after class to do some research for a paper they are writing. They ask the reference desk librarian what sources they should use for their paper. She suggests that they look through the stacks at books and magazines about their paper topic. In the end they both decided on two different kinds of sources. After they checked out the books, they passed by the reference desk to thank the librarian. The librarian asked Dave if he borrowed some books and magazines. Dave responded:

Translate: I borrowed a book, but I didn't borrow a magazine.

(2) The librarian didn't catch what Dave said then asked, "Who borrowed the book?" Ken responded:

Translate: I borrowed the book.

(3) When they got back to their dorm room their friend Cindy came by. She is also in their class and has to do the same paper so she was curious about the sources they borrowed. She saw the sources on the desk and asked Dave if Ken was the one who borrowed the magazine. Dave responded:

Translate: Ken didn't borrow the magazine, but I did.

(4) After they wrote their papers, Ken and Dave needed to return the books and magazines to the library. Ken told Dave that he could return them this week.

When Dave asked Ken what day he would return them, Ken replied:

Translate: I will return them tomorrow.

Context 4

(1) My aunt Mary went shopping at the department store for a gift for my mother. When she came back from shopping I asked her what she bought, and she replied:

Translate: I bought a wallet, but I also bought an umbrella.

(2) Just then, my father came in asked, “Who bought a wallet?” Aunt Mary responded:

Translate: I bought a wallet.

(3) Aunt Mary then told my father that she bought an umbrella too for my mother, but that everyone should keep it a secret since it was for my mother’s birthday. My father then asked us who buy the birthday cake. Since he had to be out of town for a conference the week of my mother’s birthday he said that he couldn’t pick one up. I knew that Aunt Mary also wouldn’t have time to buy the cake so I said:

Translate: She can't buy the cake, but I can buy it.

(4) My father seemed relieved that at least one of us could buy the cake. Then he asked me, "When can you buy it?" I replied:

Translate: I can buy the cake tomorrow

Context 5

(1) This year I won a scholarship to study abroad in Japan for one year. My plan is to study at both Kyoto University and Nagoya University. When my parents found out the good news, they asked me where I would be studying. I replied:

Translate: I will go to Kyoto, but I will also go to Nagoya, too.

(2) My mother seemed happy that I would be studying in Japan, but she seemed a little worried. Since I had never cooked the whole time I had been living with my parents, my asked me, "Well, who is going to cook for you? Is there a cook in the dorm?" I replied:

Translate: No. I will cook.

(3) That's when my mother seemed to get more worried. She seemed to think that there was no way that I could cook for myself. After a while, I was finally able to reassure her and told her that I would be fine living on my own. Then I

tried to change the subject by telling her that my best friend Joe will also be studying in Japan. My mother asked me if we would be studying in the same part of Japan. I replied.

Translate: No. I will study in Kyoto and Nagoya, but he will study in Kyushu.

(4) On the day that I left for Japan, my mother still seemed worried. At the airport we said a tearful goodbye. Before I got on the plane, my mother asked me when I would call home. I replied:

Translate: I will call when I arrive in Kyoto.