

Exploring How Japanese Second Language English Readers Respond to Proper Names

Investigação de como japoneses leitores de inglês como segunda língua reagem a nomes próprios

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Abstract: An assumption in second language (L2) vocabulary and reading research is that L2 readers can easily understand the proper names they encounter, though empirical support for this conjecture is lacking. The aim of this study is to explore how L2 English readers perceive and respond to proper names. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Japanese low-intermediate L2 English readers ($N = 4$) to investigate: the affective factors involved when encountering unknown proper names in texts; what strategies they use when encountering new names; and any difficulties they experience in proper name processing. The participants were also asked to read aloud a short text and report the referents of several proper names, using modified think-aloud protocol. It was found that main source of confusion for the interviewees stemmed from their inexperience with proper names; that is, uncertainty about which proper names are family names and personal names; the gender of names; nicknames; and proper name phonology. Participants also reported on various strategies they use when encountering novel proper names, such as doing online searches, and using contextual and orthographic clues. The findings suggest that it may be incautious to assume unfamiliar proper names are a low burden to L2 readers of English.

Keywords: second language readers, proper names, lexical analyses, interview, read-aloud.

Resumo: Um dos pressupostos das pesquisas sobre ensino de vocabulário e leitura de segunda língua (L2) é o de que os leitores de L2 podem facilmente entender os nomes próprios que encontram, embora falte fundamentação empírica para esta conjectura. O objetivo deste estudo é investigar como leitores japoneses de L2 inglês percebem e reagem a nomes próprios. Foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas com leitores japoneses de L2 inglês de baixa intermediação ($N = 4$) para investigar quais são os fatores afetivos envolvidos ao encontrar nomes próprios desconhecidos em textos; que estratégias eles usam ao encontrar novos nomes e qualquer outra dificuldade que tenham para o processamento adequado de nomes. Os participantes também foram solicitados a ler em voz alta um pequeno texto e relatar as referências de vários nomes próprios, usando uma versão modificada do Protocolo do Pensamento em voz alta (*think-aloud protocol*). Foi constatado que a principal fonte de confusão para os entrevistados estava relacionada com a in experiência com nomes próprios; ou seja, incerteza sobre quais nomes próprios são sobrenomes, prenomes ou apelidos; qual é o gênero; e como é a fonologia dos nomes próprios. Os participantes também relataram várias estratégias que utilizam quando encontrar nomes próprios novos, tais como fazer pesquisas *on-line* e usar pistas contextuais e ortográficas. Os resultados mostram que é temerário pressupor que nomes próprios desconhecidos nunca pode ser fonte de dificuldade para os leitores de inglês como L2.

Palavras-chave: leitores de segunda língua, nomes próprios, análises lexicais, entrevista, leitura em voz alta.

While it has often been assumed in second language (L2) vocabulary and reading research that proper names are known or easily recognised by L2 readers (e.g. Horst, 2013; Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2006), there is to date no empirical support for this claim. This handling of L2 proper names as known vocabulary has significant implications not only for

research, but also for L2 teaching and testing materials in which L2 readers need to process proper names. The treatment of proper names as known items in lexical analyses in L2 vocabulary research seems to be underpinned by the philosophical view that proper names represent encyclopaedic information as opposed to lexical (e.g. Cobb, 2010). There are, however, alternative linguistic positions on proper names which warrant consideration with respect to how L2 readers respond to proper names.

One aspect of the debate on proper names among philosophers and linguists concerns whether proper names have meaning and whether they are part of the language system. Those who take a Millian stance maintain that proper names do not have meaning because while proper names refer to entities, they do not signify any features of those entities (Mill, 1865; Strawson, 1950). Another significant position on proper names is that they do have ‘sense’ (Frege, 1892 [1960]) or ‘meaningfulness’ (Van Langendonck, 2007). In this view, while proper names are predominately associated with encyclopaedic information, there is also minimal lexical sense (Anderson, 2007), for example, categorical (e.g. woman, city, country), and associations and connotations. This lexical meaning constitutes a “necessary minimum” without which one would not be able to use or understand a particular proper name (Shcherba, 1940 [1995]). In this regard, proper names are part of language. (For a more detailed treatment of this debate and implications for L2 reading, see Klassen (2022)).

The question of whether proper names have meaning as other words do, and whether they belong to language is a complex one to which the answer might not be universal (Lyons, 1977). An important consideration with regard to L2 language users is how proper names function in context, and how L2 readers make sense of unfamiliar proper names they encounter. As Van Langendonck (2007) argues, to ask whether names have meaning is the wrong question: The right question is “in what way the meanings are construed and function” (p. 38). Lyons allows that:

In the learning of a language the distinction between proper names and common nouns may not always be clear-cut, so that there might be a time when 'chair', for example, is treated as a name which happens to be associated with several otherwise unrelated objects, and conversely, when all the people called 'Horace' are thought of as having one or more other properties by virtue of which the name 'Horace' is peculiarly appropriate. (1977: 220)

The possibility that L2 users may analyse proper names differently than first language (L1) users has direct implications for how proper names are handled in lexical analyses in L2 vocabulary and reading research.

To date, very little research has looked at how L2 users respond to proper names. One exception is Kobeleva (2012), who investigated how L2 listeners respond to proper names in news stories, found that detailed listening comprehension was higher when proper names were known than unknown. Her participants also rated the listening tasks as more difficult when proper names were unknown. Another exception is Klassen (2021), who looked at how well L2 readers are able to use sentential context to identify proper names as such, and found that proper names were correctly identified in about only a quarter of cases.

To add to the research on how L2 users respond to proper names, a qualitative study is presented here that explores L2 readers' perspectives of proper names. The aim of the study is to learn more about: affective factors related to L2 proper name processing; strategy use for handling unknown proper names; and any particular processing difficulties specific to proper names. In these aims, the study is exploratory in nature, and can be seen as a springboard to further research into L2 proper name processing. Theoretical motivation for the study is drawn from the philosophical and linguistic debate on proper names outlined above. That is, proper names might be analysed by the L2 reader as lexical items with some minimal, categorical meaning to which they may or may not be privy to. Alternatively, it may be that proper names are analysed as referring expressions representative of world knowledge. The research questions are:

1. How do Japanese L2 readers of English feel when meeting unfamiliar proper names in texts?
2. What strategies do they use when encountering unfamiliar names?
3. How well are they able to decode and comprehend unfamiliar names?

Method

Participants

Four participants were recruited¹ from two English classes taught by the author at a private university in Japan. The four students (two women and two men) were all in their first year of university (18 or 19 years old). They had studied English for about six years, though one participant had studied for ten years. Their English language proficiency was low intermediate (A2/B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR). They were English majors, studying in a program that included eight 90-minute classes per week of academic English with L1 English teachers. A non-obligatory goal of the program is that the students will spend their third year abroad in an English-speaking country at one of the university's partner schools. Because of this goal, the students were typically motivated to do well in their courses.

The sampling strategy in recruiting participants was purposive: the sampling was driven by theoretical objectives, typical of qualitative research (Dornyei, 2007: 126). Two criteria were established. Of primary interest were those students who had previously remarked on having difficulties with proper names while reading. That is, during the academic year, there were occasions when students had commented on, either in tutorials or in writing, difficulties with proper names. The author had kept a record of any comments made by students related to

¹ The University's ethical research procedures were followed and ethical approval was obtained.

proper names (in the interest of research). When recruiting for this interview study, this record was checked for current students who had noted problems with proper names while reading. A secondary criterion for recruitment was reasonable confidence in speaking English. Japanese university students are typically hesitant to speak English (King, 2013). For purposes of an interview, interviewees' hesitancy to speak could have a negative effect on the quantity or quality of data collected. Therefore, reasonable confidence in speaking English was another consideration in the sampling strategy. Table 1 summarises details pertaining to four participants who were selected for interviews. In accordance with identity protection regulations at the Japanese university, the students are not referred to by their real names, but by the first initial only. While a sample of four participants for a semi-structured interview study is a potential limitation, rather than broadening the call for participants, only those students who had independently noted a difficulty with proper names were selected to interview. It was predicted that with these four interviewees, the data would be insightful and informative with respect to the research questions.

Table 1 *Interview participant details*

| Participant | Gender | Years of English study | Proper name difficulty | Oral English confidence |
|-------------|--------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| T | male | 6 | citations | high |
| K | male | 6 | extensive reading | high |
| W | female | 10 | extensive reading | low |
| A | female | 6 | extensive reading | high |

Instruments

Interview schedule.

In order to direct the interviews and ensure that the interviews were consistent across participants, an interview schedule was prepared (see Appendix A). A semi-structured format was chosen: the questions on the interview schedule were meant to serve as a guide for the

researcher to elicit information about the learners' attitudes about and strategies for handling proper names in reading texts.

Read-aloud task.

A read-aloud task was given to each participant after the interview questions. The read-aloud task is an adaptation of think-aloud protocol. In a think-aloud task, participants are asked to focus on a task and articulate, without explanation, any thoughts that occur. In the read-aloud task used here, participants were asked to read aloud a short passage, and each time they meet a proper name, to verbalise what that name refers to. This read-aloud task differs from think-aloud protocol in that participants are not asked to verbalise all thoughts that occur to them while reading the text, but rather, to identify proper names and say who or what they refer to.

The purpose of the read-aloud task was to gain insight into whether proper names are always recognised in context, and what information can be inferred about each name (to address Research Question 3). Participants were asked to read aloud a short excerpt (323 words) and say who or what each proper name in the text refers to. The excerpt was taken from a graded reader, *My Family and Other Animals* by George Durrell, published by Penguin Readers (see Appendix B for the text excerpt). Graded readers are condensed books for L2 readers in which the vocabulary has been graded or matched to certain vocabulary levels. The reader was designated Level 3, the same level that these participants were reading in their extensive reading program. The excerpt has ten proper names: names of four people and a pet (*Larry, Leslie, Margo, George* and *Roger*) and five place names (*England, Greece, Spain, Italy* and *Corfu*). I predicted that most of the names would be familiar to the participants, while three would be unfamiliar: *Leslie, Margo,* and *Corfu*. This mix of familiar and unfamiliar names was considered appropriate, as participants would have confidence with most of the names; however, a few unfamiliar names would present a challenge so they could demonstrate their decoding and inferencing skills.

Procedure

At the beginning of each interview session, before recording began, I reiterated the purpose of the interview and gave the participant a consent form to sign. The interviews were recorded on a MacBook Pro using Audacity software version 2.0.6. The interviews lasted between 18 min 13 s and 23 min 15 s, including the read-aloud task. The average length of interview was 20 min 25 s. The interviewer asked questions and waited for the participants to answer. If the interviewees did not understand the question, it was rephrased. Where interviewees gave very short answers, they were encouraged to give an example or to explain further.

The read-aloud task was conducted after all the interview questions had been asked. Instructions given to students (orally) were to read aloud and stop reading every time they came to a name of a person or place, and to say who or what that name referred to. I modelled the read-aloud task for each student by reading a short paragraph from a different graded reader (*Strangers on a Train* or *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*). When one participant (student T) did not stop reading after several proper names had been mentioned in an extended portion of the text, he was interrupted and asked if there were any names in that portion of the text; he was also reminded to say what or who the names referred to.

Data analysis

Transcription of interviews and read-aloud tasks.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher/interviewer. Guidance on transcribing speech orthographically was taken from Wray and Bloomer (2012). The main interest of this study was the content of *what* the participants said as opposed to *how* they said it. Therefore, it was felt appropriate that the transcription focused for the most part on the information provided by the interviewees. Only the following detailed features of speech were transcribed: any non-verbal communication, such as laughter; unusual pronunciation of lexical items; and long pauses. Any comments or explanations that may aid the reader of the scripts

are included in brackets (e.g. explanation of Japanese utterance). The main features of speech that were transcribed are shown in the key in Table 2.

Table 2 Key: *Main features of transcription*

| Symbol | Feature |
|----------|---|
| I: | interviewer's speech |
| A/K/T/W: | participant's speech (initial letters of interviewees' names) |
| [] | non-verbal communication, e.g. laugh |
| / / | non-standard pronunciation in phonetic script |
| (.) | long pause |
| () | comment or explanation |

Punctuation symbols are not normally included in orthographic speech transcriptions. However, to facilitate reading of these scripts, the following regular punctuation conventions were included: question marks to signal questions, periods to mark the end of statements, and commas to indicate short pauses. The participants' speech was transcribed as it was heard on the audio recording by the transcriber; that is, no grammatical errors in their speech were corrected, and no vocabulary choices were altered.

For the read-aloud task, it was felt that non-standard pronunciation of names or other vocabulary items that were not names should be noted in the transcription. Since uncommon pronunciation of names might be indicative of the participants' unfamiliarity with the items, this feature was important for analysis. Unusual pronunciations were noted using phonetic script. For example, this unusual pronunciation of *Corfu* is taken from T's interview:

- (1) T: George says /kɔ:f/ is wonderful. Why don't we go there?

Data coding.

Typological analysis was used to analyse the data. In typological analysis, the data is divided into categories based on pre-determined typologies, which can come from theory, common sense or the research objectives (Hatch, 2002). For this study, the typologies were derived from the research questions. First, with regard to participants' affective responses to proper names (Research Question 1), the code 'difficulties' was given to passages where

interviewees mentioned challenges with processing proper names; it was also given to entries in the read-aloud task where participants demonstrated problems with decoding proper names (Research Question 3). The code ‘helpful’ was used for entries where interviewees mentioned how proper names aided comprehension (Research Question 1). Lastly, the code ‘strategies’ was given to entries concerning approaches to handling unfamiliar proper names (Research Question 2).

A summary sheet was made based on the three typologies and examined for patterns. Then, a secondary analysis of data was done to code for the patterns identified in the summary. Under the ‘difficulties’ typology, three patterns were identified in the interviews and read-aloud task: distinguishing between first and family names; understanding proper name referents; and phonology of names. Under the ‘helpful’ typology, no further patterns emerged. Under the ‘strategies’ typology, seven specific approaches to handling unfamiliar proper names were identified across the data: ignoring; guessing from context; using pronoun references; using name charts; looking for orthographic clues; using grammatical knowledge; and doing an online or dictionary search.

Finally, the data was checked for examples that contradicted the patterns identified, and links were identified between the interviews and the read-aloud task. Generalisations were formulated as themes that emerged from the data. These generalisations are presented as sub-headings in Results and Discussion, and data excerpts are presented to support the patterns identified under each theme.

Results and Discussion

In this section, three major themes that emerged from the data will be presented: difficulties that L2 readers have with proper names; ways that proper names can aid comprehension; and strategies that L2 readers use with unfamiliar names. Under each theme,

patterns identified in the data will be explained and illustrated using data excerpts that best exemplify those regularities.

Difficulties in understanding or pronouncing proper names

From the challenges with proper names that participants mentioned in the interviews or demonstrated in the read-aloud task, three patterns emerged: problems in distinguishing between personal and family names; difficulties in understanding or identifying proper name referents; and challenges related to the phonology of names. Excerpts from the data are given to illustrate each of these patterns. Findings are interpreted in reference to relevant literature. The key for transcription symbols was listed above in Table 2. Ellipses (. . .) within the quotes denote that some speech has been omitted.

Distinguishing between personal and family names.

It may be unsurprising that Japanese readers of English would have difficulty distinguishing between personal and family names: Japanese names are usually written with the family name first, followed by the personal name. Korean and Chinese names are also written this way. This is the reverse order of how names are usually written in English, with the notable exception of academic citations. Name order can be a source of confusion for Japanese students. When looking at an author's name on a book cover, for example, they are uncertain which is the family name; if they draw on L1 knowledge, they might infer that the name that appears first is the family name. Three of the interviewees mentioned the difficulty in differentiating between family and personal names. W raises the problem with regard to citations, a new academic skill she is learning:

- (2) W: I can't decide the first name or the last name... In Japanese, I can find this is the last name or the first name. But in English, I can't imagine that so, for example, in citation, I can't which is one should put down the statement.

This difficulty can result in citations listed by personal names, not family names. There are other situations where this confusion over name order results in inappropriate usage, for example, addressing people with a title and personal name (e.g. *Professor Mike; Ms. Elizabeth*).

Identifying proper name referents

A prevalent assumption in L2 vocabulary research is that L2 readers can easily understand proper names in context (e.g. Horst, 2013; Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation, 2006). In contrast, the participants in these interviews discussed various struggles they had identifying proper name referents from context. For example, two participants mentioned problems related to the gender of personal names; this seems unsurprising in that they are processing names from a different culture. Also, two participants referred to mix-ups with unknown place names; this is to be expected as place names are often not explained in context (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). Another difficulty that participant A remarked on is when characters in stories are referred to by more than one name. When I asked her if she had anything further to say about proper names, A remembered a story she had been reading recently. She describes the confusion that resulted when a character in the story was called *brother* by his sister, and referred to by his personal name by his friend:

- (3) A: Last month I read the book... There are three persons, the main character was a girl, and second is her brother, older brother. And he is the friend of the brother. And she called her brother, brother. But he called . . . his name, and so sometimes . . . friend is talking about her brother but I confused who is he. Because usually . . . the main character call her brother, brother. . . in her conversation but sometimes, suddenly appeared the name.

Just as one character can be called by different names, different characters in a story can have the same name, perhaps creating a burden for the working memory. As the American author Elif Batuman observes of the characters in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

Anna's lover and her husband had the same first name (Alexei). Anna's maid and daughter were both called Anna, and Anna's son and Levin's half brother were both Sergei. The repetition of names struck me as remarkable, surprising, and true to life. (2010: 8)

This is a good illustration of how difficulties with proper names are not limited to L2 readers. It also demonstrates how context, descriptions and nicknames can be necessary for proper name differentiation (Anderson, 2007: 117). However, as A has shown in example (3), L2 readers might not always be successful using context to understand who is being referred to and by what name.

Nicknames also present a challenge for L2 readers. While nicknames and the link to the original name might seem obvious to L1 users, this connection might not be so clear to L2 users. When I asked A if it was important to learn about English names, she raised this point about nicknames. She explained how her lack of knowledge regarding nicknames resulted in confusion about her American friend:

- (4) A: Yeah, because I have exchange student, name Tom. Actually his name is Thomas. Often the American or other foreign people say Thomas, Tom and I didn't know such things before I come to here (to university). So sometimes when I'm talking with other people I'm not sure who is he. So it's important.

Although example (4) did not come from reading but from her campus life, one can easily think of examples in literature where characters are referred to by nicknames. While nicknames or diminutive forms might seem so obvious as to not warrant explanation (e.g. *Tom*, *Thomas*; *Mike*, *Michael*), that is not the case for L2 users, as A has conveyed in example (4).

Some examples of misunderstanding proper name referents were observed in the read-aloud task. Recall that participants were asked to read aloud a short excerpt and to stop at each proper name to say what or who the name referred to. For two participants, proper names without overt referents in the text were misunderstood. In the text excerpt, the oldest brother Larry is trying to convince his mother to relocate the family and escape the rainy English weather. He mentions someone named George, who has told him that Corfu is a nice place. No information is given to the reader as to who George is or where Corfu might be. This lack of

specificity creates difficulties for two participants. In example (5), A guesses that both names, *George* and *Corfu*, might be members of the family. The text is presented first as it appears in the book; this is followed by A's reading of that text.

(5) Text: 'George says Corfu's wonderful. Why don't we go there?'

A: George, George is brother, hmm (.) George? George, says Corfu's wonderful (.) Corfu. George and Corfu, heh (.) [laughs] Why don't we go there? Maybe they are family, members of the family.

Later in the excerpt, the family is sailing towards Corfu, and this is the second mention of Corfu in the text. In example (6), A remembers her earlier guess as to the meaning of Corfu (i.e. a family member), and retains this inference.

(6) Text: We slept when the boat left and then, very early the next morning, we watched for Corfu.

A: We slept when the boat left and then, very early the next morning, we caught (*sic*) for Corfu, the family.

A seems to remember her guess about the meaning of Corfu from the first mention (i.e. that it refers to a family). She does not check whether the guess is correct in the context of the second mention, though at the second mention, it could feasibly be a person. Huckin and Bloch (1993) noticed similar behaviour in their L2 readers. They found that when their participants had made an inference about a word, they did not use context to ascertain the plausibility of the guess; rather, they would retain the incorrect guess, even when contextual clues refuted that inference.

Pronouncing unfamiliar proper names.

Two participants mentioned difficulties related to the phonology of proper names. When I asked A about the strategies she used when meeting new names in graded readers, A talked about her struggles with pronunciation of unknown names.

(7) A: Sometimes, for example, the last book I read, there are two persons, the names begin with A. I very confused. So in such situation I really concentrate on the name, very look carefully but usually I don't sure how pronounce especially English name or Indian name, it's very difficult. But I can understand . . . who is he if I can't pronounce so I not so care.

A's strategy use in (7) is an example of what Koda (1995) noted in her study with Japanese readers: when meeting new L2 words that they are not sure how to pronounce, they treat them as Kanji (Chinese script), and try to remember them visually. Also, in excerpt (7), A seems to suggest that knowing how to pronounce the name is not important; later in the interview, however, she changes her mind. When I asked her about recognising names in Japanese and in English, she reconsiders the importance of pronunciation to comprehension. She tries to explain the difference between reading Japanese names, which are written in Kanji, and English names in excerpt (8):

- (8) A: Of course I think pronounce is very important. Because if I know how to pronounce the name, it's easy to memorise because I think I can understand from eyes and ears. . . . Japanese is Kanji so Kanji usually can read only one or two ways. So one letter has only one or two ways to read. . . . Like Kanji is if I wrote like this (gestures on hand) it's meaning 'one'. But English is o, n, e and English makes the word use many letters so it's difficult.

Here, A has articulated the importance of having both an orthographic representation ("understand from eyes") and a phonological one ("and ears") for proper names. As Hulstijn (2001) notes, processing new lexis more elaborately, that is, through more than one dimension, will lead to greater retention. Thus, having both representations available to her is what makes processing Japanese names easier, and why processing English names is more difficult for her (i.e. the phonological representation is absent). When we discussed unfamiliar L2 proper names, A agreed that knowing how to pronounce the name can aid comprehension.

- (9) A: Yes, yes. Because the book like Romeo and Juliet, it's very famous, so it's easy to understand ah, this is Romeo's phrase and if I could pronounce the name so I think it help me to read.

What A seems to say in excerpt (9) is that being familiar with the name is useful because she can pronounce it. And because she can pronounce it, this helps with comprehension.

It has been suggested that there may be more plausible phonological sequences for names than for other words, thus making names more difficult to recall or learn (Brennen, 1993; James & Fogler, 2007). In his plausible phonology hypothesis, Brennen (1993) suggests that learning of new phonology is done more often for names than it is for other words. He does not suggest that there are novel phonemes but rather new sequences or syllables. Brennen (1993) argues that when one encounters a new proper name with a novel phonological sequence, the name essentially represents a new word to be learnt; this can make recall difficult. He gives an example of such a novel name he came across: a researcher's name, *Intriligator*. It is important to note that Brennen (1993) presents his plausible phonology hypothesis in the context of L1 users. Whether the same is true for L2 users, that the learning of new phonology is done more often for names than for other types of words, is difficult to say; L2 users arguably learn a lot of new vocabulary. However, it is interesting to consider this hypothesis in light of the difficulties that the interviewees mention related to proper name phonology.

For instance, K also mentions struggles with proper name pronunciation. When asked what he finds difficult about names, K tries to explain why names might be harder to pronounce than other types of words. He uses the name of one of his teachers to illustrate:

- (10) K: Because the pronunciation of name is quite different from the spelling. I learned a lot of words from junior high school and there are many words and almost pronunciation is same as spelling. So I can pronounce the word I don't know with the spelling. But name is quite different from spelling. Name pronunciation is different so I can't guess how to pronounce it. . . . Ah, like Miss Zoë Jenkins. Her name Zoë is difficult for me. Because the z, o and e (gestures a dieresis). And also Jenkins is difficult for me, maybe for Japanese to pronounce. I only could know its pronounce Jenkins after she said, I'm Zoë Jenkins.

K's explanation in example (10) for why names are more difficult to pronounce seems to lend some support for the plausible phonology hypothesis for L2 users. K feels that he can work out the pronunciation for words, but when it comes to proper names, the orthography seems more distant from the phonology. It may be the case that he finds proper names difficult to pronounce

in that they are low frequency items. As novel items, with potentially more plausible phonologies, proper names might seem more difficult to pronounce than other words.

From the read-aloud task, there are two instances noted in which participants misread a proper name. While it is very difficult to say what has occurred during a miscue in oral reading (Goodman, 1969), these two examples are presented here as possible demonstrations of difficulties related to proper name phonology and orthography. Recall that in the read-aloud task, the participant stops at each name and says to whom or what it refers. In the text excerpt, Larry and Leslie are brothers; the narrator has distinguished between the two by noting that Larry is the older brother, and Leslie has problems with his ears. At the second mention of *Leslie*, both A and W misread the name *Leslie* as *Larry*.

Let us look first at A's misreading. In the example (11), A misreads *Leslie* as *Larry*. Then, because she wants to say who this refers to, she looks back in the text, searching for the name *Leslie* to check if she has correctly remembered which brother it is (i.e. the brother with the problem with his ears). She finds the first mention of *Leslie* where reference is made to his problem with his ears. But when she returns to the current point in the passage, she does not alter her pronunciation of the name, again pronouncing the name as *Larry*. The original text is presented first in example (11), followed by A's reading of it and her explanations of the proper name referents.

- (11) Text: We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother's cookbooks, Leslie's guns, something for Margo's spots, Larry's books, my favourite insects and Roger, my dog.

A: We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother's cookbooks, Larry's, Larry, Larry is brother who has illness . . . (looks back in text). Ah yeah, with ears. Larry's guns, something for Margo's spots, Margo is sister, Larry's books, my favourite insects and [rɒgə] my dog, dog.

Notice that A does not say to whom *Larry* refers in the phrase *Larry's books*, perhaps because she feels she has just given the referent. She might think Larry has both guns and books to take on the trip. This is unlikely, however, as she seems aware that there are two brothers, one of

whom has a problem with his ears. She does not seem aware that she has misread the name. I suggest that a possible explanation of her misreading of *Leslie* as *Larry* could be that she has not carefully analysed the individual letters in the name, and has focused on the initial letter only. If so, this could be an example of how L1 logographic readers do not analyse intraword components (i.e. individual letters) in English words as carefully as alphabetic readers do (Akamatsu, 2003& Koda, 1996).

Considering this possible explanation, it is interesting that W also misreads the same name at the same point in the text. For W, *Larry* seems to be an unfamiliar name because at the first mention of his name, she hazards a guess that *Larry* is a woman. Later, in example (12), she says that *Larry* refers to a person, and then, a man. Just as with A's misreading, W does not seem to notice reading Larry's name twice in this list of family members and their possessions. In example (12), the original text is presented first, followed by W's reading of the passage and explanation of proper name referents.

(12) Text: We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother's cook books, Leslie's guns, something for Margo's spots, Larry's books, my favourite insects and Roger, my dog.

W: We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother's cook books, Larry's guns. Larry means people, something for Margo's spots, Margo maybe person, Larry's books, Larry the man, my favourite insects and Roger, Roger is the dog, my dog.

Unlike A, W does not demonstrate whether she understands how the characters are related (i.e. by referring to them as sister or brother). Like A in example (11), W does not notice that she misreads *Leslie* as *Larry*, and thus repeats the name twice in the list. It may well be that both participants were fully aware of the two brothers and their names, and had simply misread the names due to anxiety of reading aloud, for example. As noted above, it is very difficult to conjecture what has happened in an oral miscue (Birch, 2007; Goodman, 1969). It is of course possible that the participants had difficulty pronouncing the phonemes in the name *Larry*; it is difficult for Japanese speakers of English to make distinctions between the /l/ and /r/ phonemes. For that reason, the participants may have been overly focused on or worried about the name

Larry. However, since two participants misread the same name at the same spot in the text, I offer it here as a possible illustration of how L1 logographic readers might not carefully analyse the individual letters in words, and instead focus on the initial capital letter.

Proper names aid comprehension

Proper names might not cause only disruptions for L2 readers; indeed, names might aid comprehension by serving as an anchor to the events in a text. For example, when characters are introduced by proper names rather than their role names, they are usually more prominent in a text; also, named characters are usually more accessible to the reader for anaphoric reference (Sanford et al., 1988). Thus, while recruitment for the interviews was purposive in that students were selected who had mentioned difficulties with proper names, I did not want to focus the interviews on negative aspects of proper names. When asked if understanding proper names can aid reading comprehension, two participants gave examples of how they felt proper names were helpful. K suggests that knowing place names can help with reading.

- (13) K: It's important for us Japanese to know the geographic because if the person will study about geographic, person will understand many countries name. Then it will be hint for reading. But I'm a little poor at geographic so sometimes it will be weak point.

K recognises the usefulness in knowing place names for text comprehension. T agrees that understanding proper name referents can help comprehension. He explains:

- (14) T: Because the more we get to know the name, the more we can get easily remember and remember the story too. So yes it's important I think. . . . Because in the story, so for example, in the test, in the story, in the novel, we have to remember or we have to imagine for ourselves what the character looks like. And that's of course connected to name. And under the name, we make character for our own. But if we don't know name, that's we often forget what this character doing or not.

He seems to be saying that the more information one can infer about a name, the more helpful it can be for making connections in a text. This points to ways that teachers can support L2 readers, for example, by alerting them to characteristics that might be inferable from literary proper names in particular. Crystal (2006) notes that L1 children are taught from a young age to recognise characteristics behind names (e.g. *Goldilocks*). Such training would benefit L2

readers, for whom these connections are most likely not obvious. Training in looking for traits behind names might help L2 readers imagine characters and retain related information.

Nevertheless, there might be a limit to the connections readers can make from proper names. Certainly not all literary characters have names that indicate aspects of their appearance or personality; furthermore, not all characters have names. As Batuman notes in her discussion of names in Russian fiction:

Chekhov's characters, many . . . didn't have names at all. In "Lady with Lapdog," Gurov's wife, Anna's husband, Gurov's crony at the club, even the lapdog, are all nameless. *No contemporary American short-story writer would have had the stamina not to name that lapdog.* They were too caught up in trying to bootstrap from a proper name to a meaningful individual essence. (2010: 20)

Batuman's point here is that the scope for proper names to develop characterisation is limited. In this respect, proper names as a tool for L2 readers to create effective connections might be finite.

L2 readers' strategies for unfamiliar proper names

The final theme to be explored concerns the various strategies that these participants reported using when meeting unknown proper names. Several strategies were identified in the data: ignoring; guessing from context; searching in a dictionary or online; using pronoun references; using grammatical knowledge; using orthographic clues; and using name charts. Each of these strategies will be looked at in turn, drawing on excerpts from the interviews for support.

Ignoring

As was noted above, one problem for Japanese readers is that if they are not familiar with a particular L1 proper name, the pronunciation and referent might not be inferable from the Kanji (Cook & Bassetti, 2005). The reader will need to either research the name or ignore it. It was of interest how these participants handled L1 proper names because of possible transfer effects to L2 reading. When asked how they approach unfamiliar L1 proper names, two participants reported that they ignore the name and continue reading. As A suggests in (15), knowing how to pronounce the name is not important to understanding the main idea.

- (15) A: I don't care. Because I want to know the . . . contents of article. So I don't care if I couldn't read the person's name correctly.

T agrees, saying that when he sees an unknown L1 proper name over and over again, it becomes more familiar and does not disrupt his reading.

Guessing from context

The other two participants reported that when meeting unfamiliar L1 proper names, they try to guess from context. As K explains, he first tries to guess from context, and if he is still not sure, he does some research to find out about the name.

- (16) K: I guess the meaning from the context. . . . I often asked my mother or grandmother how to read. They will know about it.

As for using context to infer L2 proper name referents, none of the participants mentioned doing so.

Doing online searches or using a dictionary

Three of the participants mention searching in a dictionary or doing an online search to find more information about unfamiliar L2 proper names. The two comments in examples (17) and (18) are also illustrative of difficulties related to insufficient contextual clues and pronunciation.

- (17) A: I thought the person's name is the place name. I misunderstood it is a place name. So I searched in dictionary. But it was person's, man's name. So dictionary said it's a man's name (.) It has very popular names.

- (18) K: I will check it on the Internet and because spell is very complex and I really don't know how to even pronounce it. So I copy the spell, on Internet, it's easy for me. In Internet, I can know in Japanese because there are many facts on Internet dictionaries. . . . Like Wikipedia or Google maps.

The interest that participants show in knowing more about new proper names they meet is important: it indicates they consider proper names important enough to comprehension of the text to take time to research them. Perhaps they expect to come across those names again. In any event, L2 readers tend to look up lexical items that they consider relevant to

understanding the text, and ignore those that are not considered relevant (Hulstijn, 1993). For that reason, it is important to note that these participants report taking time to research unfamiliar proper names.

Using pronoun references

Participants mentioned using pronoun references to keep track of different characters in stories. The gender of proper names is not always clear to L2 readers. A explains in excerpt (19) how she used pronouns to distinguish between two characters whose names both started with the letter A.

- (19) A: The last book I read, there are two persons, the names begin with A. I very confused... They were related, one of them is a girl, and the other is a man, an uncle of her so often they appear at the same time. The main character called the girl she or her, but uncle is he or him so I could organise the two person.

Excerpt (19) also points to the difficulty L2 readers can have when they do not have phonological representations of names. In this particular case, because both names start with the same letter, the participant was not able to distinguish between them from the initial letters (this strategy is discussed further below). So instead, she relies on pronouns to make distinctions.

Using syntactic knowledge.

One participant mentioned using his grammatical knowledge to differentiate between unknown proper names and other unfamiliar lexis. T explains this strategy:

- (20) T: Ah, look the words like the or a. We don't say a before the name. So first that's a strategy.

While one can think of exceptions (e.g. *the United Kingdom*), T has demonstrated that how his knowledge of English grammar helps him to recognise unfamiliar proper names.

Orthographic clues in English

Because proper names are capitalised in English, one might consider this a reliable clue for L2 readers. Three of the participants noted using the initial capital letter clue to identify

proper names. Relying on the initial capital letter only to distinguish between characters is not always practical, especially when both names start with the same letter, as was noted in excerpt (19). This same difficulty arises in the read-aloud task for W. After W finished the read-aloud task, I asked her what strategies she would use to remember so many different characters, like the ones in this text.

- (21) I: Ok, for example, this story has two people with the letter L, Larry and Leslie, so how could you distinguish between those two because almost same length, Larry and Leslie. How could you distinguish between those two?
W: Hmm (.) the atmosphere.
I: Ok, from the character?
W: Yes.
I: Ok, from what you read, what do you know about Larry?
W: He is the man.
I: Yes. What do you know about Leslie?
W: Leslie is the sister.
I: Yeah?
W: Hmm (looks back at text). Oh, Leslie is the brother.
I: Yes, he is also brother. So they are both men and they both start with L. So what strategy would you use then?
W: [Laughs]

W is a very reserved, quiet student, and in pointing out her referencing error about Leslie, I may have embarrassed her: she offered no further comment, only laughed. This strategy of relying on the initial capital letter to differentiate between characters illustrates how a lack of phonological representation can cause processing difficulties for L2 readers. Also, as previously noted, the /l/ and /r/ phonemes in the name *Larry* may have been causing processing difficulties for this Japanese participant.

Name charts and family trees.

One way that publishers of graded readers offer support for proper names is by providing names charts or family trees to show the relationship between characters in the story. These kinds of charts are found in L1 novels as well, especially epic works spanning generations. In graded readers, the characters' names sometimes appear under head sketches, which match the action sketches throughout the book. In this way, the reader is supported with

both pictures and a name chart to keep the various characters organised. K says that he sometimes refers to these charts if there are many characters in the story.

- (22) K: But when names often appear, commonly the book has the page to list the names... Hmm, the characters. At first or at last. So when I confused, really confused, I check it, return back to the page and check it, who it is.

When there is no chart to refer to, both K and A report making their own notes on characters and their roles in the story. This illustrates how useful such name charts are for readers: not only do L2 readers seem to make use of such charts, but the charts also provide examples to the students of how to keep characters organised in longer pieces of fiction.

Summary of results

In answer to Research Question 1 (i.e. what affective factors are involved in proper name processing), these interviewees reported feeling confused by unfamiliar names. For example, it is not always clear to them which are family or personal names (excerpt (2)), or which are male or female names (excerpt (21)). They also expressed frustration at not knowing how to pronounce new names because having a serviceable pronunciation can help to remember and follow the characters in a story (see excerpts (8) and (10)). On the other hand, some participants noted that proper names can aid comprehension; for example, knowing places names, and using names to build images of characters can help comprehension (excerpts (13) and (14)). Regarding Research Question 2 (i.e. strategy use), the participants discussed several strategies they use to approach unfamiliar names. These strategies included: ignoring; guessing from context (for L1 names); checking dictionaries or doing online searches; using pronoun references; drawing on grammatical knowledge; using orthographic clues; and checking name charts or making notes (see excerpts (15) to (22)). As for Research Question 3 (i.e. difficulties in decoding and understanding proper names), a few examples from the interviews illustrated problems in identifying proper name referents (e.g. nicknames and place names, in excerpts (4) and (17)). From the read-aloud task, some examples were observed of how similar looking

names (i.e. *Leslie* and *Larry*) caused decoding and inferencing difficulties for two participants (see excerpts (11) and (12)).

Conclusions

Participants self-reported having difficulties identifying proper name referents. Reasons for these difficulties included unfamiliarity with family and personal names, the gender of personal names, and nicknames. This finding suggests that it might be incautious to assume proper names do not present a burden for L2 readers. Other challenges that the interviewees remarked on concerned the phonology of unknown names. Some interviewees agreed that it would help comprehension to be able to pronounce unfamiliar names. Because proper names can be low-frequency items, it seems intuitively correct that L2 learners might have difficulty with pronunciation. In support of this conjecture, the plausible phonology hypothesis (Brennen, 1993) was considered from the perspective of L2 readers: it may be that they need to learn new phonological patterns more often for proper names than they do other lexical items.

The interviewees also provided examples of various strategies they use when meeting new names in reading texts. These strategies ranged from drawing on syntactic knowledge and orthographical clues, to doing online or dictionary searches and making notes on proper names. That the participants reported using these various strategies is important: strategy use suggests that proper names might present a processing difficulty. Furthermore, since some of these of strategies (i.e. using context to infer meaning, looking in a dictionary) are also used for unfamiliar lexis, this may suggest that these L2 readers were analysing unfamiliar proper names as lexical items.

In the read-aloud task, it was observed that these participants made wrong inferences about names either because contextual clues were lacking or they did not check the inference against the context. For example, one participant wrongly inferred that *Corfu* was a family

member; the contextual support² was not rich enough to indicate it is a place. This finding supports other research that has shown L2 readers are not very successful at using context to infer meaning, either because contextual clues are lacking or readers do not always confirm their guess against the context (Bensoussan & Laufer, 1984; Nassaji, 2003). In this respect, it would have been good to have used a control in the study: the text used in the study may not have been rich in contextual clues for the participants to make inferences. Grabe (2009), in his discussion of background knowledge and how it affects comprehension, notes that weak readers can draw on the wrong information and make wrong inferences (p. 74). The findings from this study suggest this can happen with proper names as well.

There are several limitations to note concerning this study. The first is the small sample size of four participants. As noted earlier, only these four participants were selected for interviews as they had independently remarked on having difficulties with proper names. Also, while several interesting themes emerged from the interviews, the L2 oral proficiency levels of the participants constrained the amount of data collected. Possible solutions to conducting interviews with participants of lower proficiency levels include conducting the interviews in the L1 so that participants are able to express their answers more fully and completely. Another possibility is to give the students the questions in advance of the interview. That way, they could have time to consider the questions, and to think of examples to support their answers. Indeed, it was often at the end of the interviews, when asked if they had anything further to add, that participants were able to offer specific examples of difficulties they had, or strategies they used for L2 proper names. Thus, having time to prepare answers to the questions might have reduce anxiety and in turn, produced more insightful comments.

² Contextual support here refers to the other words in the sentence that may have helped the participant understand what *Corfu* referred to.

Another limitation to the study concerns the read-aloud task. The aim of the task was to identify decoding difficulties, and to learn more about how information is inferred about proper names. However, it is very difficult to know what has occurred during an oral reading miscue (Goodman, 1969). Reading aloud requires much processing and attention (Birch, 2007). Thus, the data from the read-aloud task needs to be interpreted with caution. The participants were probably anxious about the task (i.e. reading aloud while being recorded). This anxiety would have taken away from their attention for the reading task. In these respects, the task was not ideal to capture decoding and inferencing difficulties related to proper name processing.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, more questions may have been raised than answered about L2 readers' processing of proper names, in particular, whether they perceive unfamiliar names as lexical items or as referring expressions. As Van Langendonck (2007) argues, perhaps there should be less concern with whether proper names have meaning or not. More attention needs to be given to how proper names function in context and are understood by the L2 reader.

Appendix A

Interview schedule

1. What is your first language? How long have you been studying English?
2. When you read something in Japanese, like a news article, does it ever happen to you that you see a name in Kanji that you don't know? What do you do when that happens?
3. When you read something in English, do you ever see names that you don't know? What do you do when that happens?
4. How do you feel when you are reading a text with lots of English names? Or a text that has names you aren't sure about?
5. How would you describe your level of knowledge of English names? Would you say you know a lot of names, enough names, or a few names? Do you think it's important to know about English names, for example, which are family names and which are first names?
6. Do you recognise names easily/quickly while reading? How do you recognise a name in English (what clues do you look for)? Do you think it's easier to recognise names in Japanese or English?
7. Is there anything you'd like to add? What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

Appendix B

Text excerpt for read-aloud task: Larry's Idea

After July came the cold winds and the grey skies of August. My family had all their usual illnesses. My mother and I had bad colds. My brother Leslie had a problem with his ears. My sister Margo's spots were worse than ever. Only my oldest brother, Larry, was healthy, but he found the rest of us very difficult to live with. 'Why do we stay in England in this weather?' he asked Mother. 'They're ill and you're looking older every day.'

'I'm not,' Mother replied. She was reading at the time.

'You are,' Larry said. 'We need sunshine...a country where we can grow.'

'Yes dear, that's a good idea,' Mother answered, not really listening.

'George says Corfu's wonderful. Why don't we go there?'

'If you like, dear.' It was important to keep Larry happy.

'When?' asked Larry with surprise.

Mother realized her mistake and put down her book. 'Perhaps you can go first and look at the place,' she said cleverly. 'If it's nice, we can all follow.'

Larry looked at her. 'You said that last time. I waited in Spain for two months and you didn't come. No – if we're going to Greece, let's go together.'

'But I've only just bought this house!' Mother answered.

'Sell it again then!'

'That's stupid, dear,' said Mother. 'I can't do that.'

So we sold the house and ran from the English summer.

We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother's cook books, Leslie's guns, something for Margo's spots, Larry's books, my favourite insects and Roger, my dog.

From Italy we caught a boat. We slept when the boat left and then, very early the next morning, we watched for Corfu. The sea turned blue, then purple, and suddenly there was the sleeping island in front of us. We sailed nearer and, above the noise of the ship, we could hear the high, clear sounds of the insects.

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