The second article is ‘Pragmatic Comprehension in Japanese as a Foreign Language’ by Naoko Taguchi from *The Modern Language Journal*. The article is an empirical study of how elementary and intermediate Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) learners comprehend three types of indirect communication common to Japanese (indirect refusal, conventional indirect opinions and nonconventional indirect opinions). The author poses two research questions: 1) Does overall language proficiency affect accuracy and speed of comprehension? and 2) Does the type of indirect implicature affect understanding or speed of understanding?

The data for the study is the results of an experiment using two groups of JFL learners. Each group completed a listening test in which they heard 12 short conversations between two people speaking Japanese in which one speaker uses indirect language as a refusal or to express an opinion. Through a multiple choice test, the subjects were assessed on their ability to understand the pragmatic content of the conversations and the time taken to respond. The findings revealed that proficiency level correlates with accuracy though not speed, while the type of implicature impacted upon both accuracy and speed, with indirect refusals easiest to understand. The author additionally interviewed some of the subjects to assess the means through which they were able to understand the illocutionary force of the utterances.

Critique

Overall, the article is quite convincing and yields valuable results that mirror previous research into ESL/EFL learners and pragmatics that have a clear pedagogical value. However, while most elements of its methodological approach are very robust, others (including those raised by Taguchi in the article) are slightly unorthodox and seem less reliable.

The methodological design of this study is very strong and features various means through which its reliability and validity were strengthened. Taguchi lists two pilot studies with L1 Japanese speakers to assess the appropriacy of the items with subsequent revisions. All results are presented with statistical values. Also, reading speed was a controlled variable when measuring speed of response.

Another asset of the experimental design is the use of triangulation through interviews with study participants. 10 students were asked to describe the means through which they arrived at their answers for 12 items. This is particularly interesting as it describes the various strategies used by the students (knowledge of form itself, intonation, hesitation, adjacency pairs etc.).

Taguchi lists two main limitations to the study, namely in assessing the proficiency levels of the student participants and in the selection of the items tested. Students were assigned to
either the elementary or intermediate category based on their length of Japanese study. This could be seen as problematic because most language teachers would agree that duration of study and ability are not always connected and that even within one classroom, abilities can vary greatly. Related to this but not listed by Taguchi, an individual student’s ability to perform the four skills is not always balanced and as this exercise focuses on aural comprehension, good listeners will automatically have an advantage. The research designed attempted to control for this by keeping the conversations simple and delivered at a slow rate but given the rigour with which other variables were isolated, it is something of a surprise that this key issue could be flawed.

Secondly, in selecting the items to be tested, Taguchi reports having collected data via a survey of 22 Japanese adults residing in Japan and taking field notes, the source of which is not noted. This appears to be a slightly unorthodox method of selecting items, especially as there is no data included as to the gender/region/dialect/class/age of the respondents, all of which could affect the representativeness of the items. The author lists this as a limitation and suggests a corpus-based approach only after a larger survey as an alternative. Corpora are not without their own methodological drawbacks, but are generally seen as reliable sources of representative data. Although this issue would not impact the results of the study in a meaningful way, from a pedagogical perspective, knowing which items are most frequently employed would afford teachers and materials developers the ability to better cater to students’ needs in this regard.

There are two ancillary issues stemming from the selection of participants not mentioned by Taguchi, both of which may have the possibility of affecting the results of the study. First is the students’ level of familiarity with the items in question. It is noted in the article that ‘conventions need to be taught explicitly’ if they are to be understood by learners (Taguchi, 2008: 559), and in results from the interview, several students cited what they had learned in class as the reason for being able to identify intended meaning. However, whether or not these forms are a part of the syllabus or whether all participants had been taught them prior to the study is unclear. If only a portion of the student had been taught the forms, the reliability of the results could be impacted.

The second issue is that of positive transfer from L1 pragmatics. Pragmatics is an area with clear connections to culture and positive transfer is likely possible. For instance, providing an excuse to a request without explicitly denying the request is tested as a form of indirect refusal in the study. This is a form of implicature that most L1 speakers of English would intuitively understand, and as over 50% of the participants in the study are from this group, their task in this regard could be easier than that of the other students, the balance being L1 speakers of Asian languages and one L1 Spanish speaker. It is equally possible that speakers of
Asian L1s might comparably benefit from linguistic or cultural similarities. The only practical method to control for this (barring an in-depth study of the pragmatics of each language and culture) would be to select only participants from a common L1.

This article makes a valuable contribution to the literature surrounding pragmatics, particularly as it focuses on learners of a language other than English. Understanding the pragmatics of an utterance is a challenge for learners of any language and a deeper understanding of the means through which implicature is achieved in other languages is of value to teachers and learners of not only that language, but also those from that group studying another L2.