

FEATURE ARTICLE

Acquisition of English Article Uses by Japanese EFL Learners

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College-level Japanese learners of English find articles difficult to acquire. To determine which uses of English articles pose the greatest difficulties to this population, the current study examined first-year students' ($N = 178$) performance on an article assessment instrument. Results indicated patterns of difficulty somewhat different from those reported by Liu and Gleason (2002), who conducted research on ESL learners from diverse L1 backgrounds. In the current study, participants displayed greater accuracy on uses that could be captured by easy-to-apply rules involving linguistic form (i.e., those consistently marked by specific lexical items, iterative use of lexical items, or grammatical constructions) and lower accuracy on uses captured primarily by semantic rules. The results are useful to EFL teachers in determining which uses of the articles should receive primary focus in instruction aimed at first-year Japanese college students.

英語の冠詞の習得は、大学生レベルの日本人英語学習者にとってかなりの難題のひとつとなっている。本研究は、これらの学習者にとって冠詞のどの用法の習得が最も難しいかを特定化するために、冠詞を試す測定テストで大学1年生 ($N=178$) の成績を検証した。結果として、英語以外の言語を第1言語としてもつESL学習者を調査したLiu and Gleason (2002) によって報告された難しさととは幾分異なるパターンが出た。本調査において、被験者は、(特定の語彙項目、語彙項目の反復的な使用、あるいは文法構文といった) 言語形式を含む適用しやすい規則によって捉えられる用法では正確さがより高く、他方、主に意味規則によって捉えられる用法では正確さがより低い結果を示した。本研究の結果は、日本の大学1年生の英語教育において、どの冠詞の用法に主たる焦点を置くべきなのかを決定する際に、EFL教師にとって有益となる。

The current research examines Japanese college students' knowledge of the English article system, with the primary focus on the definite article. The English definite article is the most frequently occurring word in English (Francis & Kučera, 1982). In spite of its pervasiveness, its use presents a major challenge to Japanese learners, who, even at advanced levels, only attain around 70% accuracy (Yamada & Matsuura, 1982). The difficulty can be partly attributed to crosslinguistic differences (Larsen-Freeman, 1975). Japanese, like most languages (Lyons,

1999), lacks an article system, and as a result, Japanese pedagogical materials often attempt to convey article use through L1 lexical glosses (e.g., *sono* [that], or *hitotusuno* [one]) that fail to convey the full range of article uses (Kuno & Takami, 2004). Other factors hindering acquisition include semantic complexity (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001), a multiplicity of functions (Young, 1996), lack of phonological salience (Collins et al., 2009; DeKeyser, 2005), the redundancy of information provided by articles which results in blocking (Ellis, 2018), difficulty in integrating multiple sources of information when processing an L2 (Papadopoulou & Clahsen, 2003), and faulty explanations in pedagogical materials (Lopez & Sabir, 2017), such as the conflation of definiteness and specificity (Ionin et al., 2004). In light of these difficulties, teachers and materials designers have a crucial need for guidance regarding the systematic features of this system that pose the greatest challenge to L2 learners at each stage of L2 development.

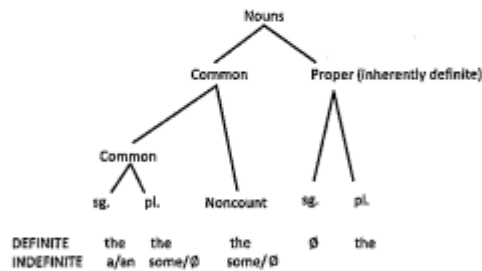
The current paper reports an analysis of learners' knowledge of articles based on an empirical study involving 178 Japanese college students. The first section discusses some mainstream linguistic analyses of articles before turning to empirical research on L2 acquisition of the system. The paper then briefly describes the design of the instrument used to collect the current study's data and the results of the analysis, which sheds light on which uses of the definite article present the greatest challenges to Japanese learners. The final section discusses the pedagogical implications of the study.

Literature Review

According to Bickerton (1981), English articles can be largely understood in terms of two binary discourse features: whether a noun phrase involves a specific referent (+SR) and whether the hearer knows the referent (+HK). This results in four types of noun phrases. Those in which the hearer lacks knowledge (-HK) require the indefinite article if the referent is singular, and no article if the referent is plural. Noun phrases with a specific referent (+SR) and hearer knowledge (+HK) require the definite

article. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) provide another commonly used set of criteria based on countability, number, and definiteness as shown in the decision tree depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Criteria for Selection of Articles (adapted from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 283).



Other researchers have provided more fine-grained analyses. Those in this paper primarily come from Hawkins (1978) while taking into account some clarifications put forth by Huebner (1983). When discussing the article use categories, the corresponding categories employed by Liu and Gleason (2002) will also be noted in order to facilitate comparisons of the current study's results with their results. The categories are described below.

Encyclopedic uses of 'the' are instances in which the hearer relies on general world knowledge to determine the referent as in, 'The sun was bright yesterday'. Also included would be encyclopedic knowledge that is limited to a local context. In a small village, for example, someone might say, 'There's a potluck at the church tonight' if there is only one church, and people in the village generally know about it. Liu and Gleason (2002) call this a *cultural* use since it relies on cultural knowledge.

Anaphoric uses of 'the' are instances in which a referent is mentioned again, often in a subsequent clause or sentence. An example would be the use of 'the' before *apple* in 'She held out an apple and a pear. Her horse ate the apple'. This use of the English definite article is often taught in pedagogical materials aimed at L2 learners.

Associative uses of 'the' are similar to anaphoric uses but do not involve repetition of the same word. In many cases, mention of a previous referent implies the existence of a subsequent referent. Examples include 'I went to a wedding last weekend. The bride was beautiful'. The definite article is appro-

priate here since our mental model of a particular wedding taking place makes the notion of a bride present at the wedding highly accessible (cf. Ariel, 1990). As Lyons (1999) points out, association need not involve the same part of speech. For example, in 'I fished all day, but the trout just weren't biting', although *fish* is a verb, it sanctions use of the definite article before the noun *trout*. Liu and Gleason (2002) classify both anaphoric and associative uses as *textual*.

Nonexplanatory modifier (hereafter, *nonexplanatory*) uses of 'the' are instances in which a modifier limits the scope of the noun phrase. In English, a specific group of adjectives (e.g., *first, same, only*) and the superlative have this function. Learners of English as an L2 often memorize the co-occurrence of the definite article and these words as rules or as collocations (although as Hawkins, 1978, notes, there are exceptions).

Cataphoric uses of 'the' involve instances in which a noun phrase is modified with an explanation. An example would be 'The movies shown here are all rated R'. This use often coincides with the occurrence of relative clause constructions which modify a head noun marked with 'the'. Learners can use this correlation between modifying grammatical structures and the definite article to establish easily applied albeit imperfect rules of thumb (e.g., If you see a relative clause, put 'the' before the head noun). Liu and Gleason (2002) refer to both nonexplanatory and cataphoric uses of 'the' as *structural* in apparent reference to their close association with regularities involving linguistic form (i.e., lexical and grammatical patterns).

A further use, which occurs frequently in face-to-face communication, involves the visible and immediate uses of 'the'. In these instances, the referent is readily accessible due to its presence in the immediate environment. For example, in the sentence 'Can you hand me the salt?' the referent is knowable by the hearer since there is presumably only one saltshaker on the table in the immediate vicinity of the hearer. Liu and Gleason (2002) refer to these uses as *situational*.

The current study examined Japanese learners' sensitivity to specificity when choosing indefinite articles. According to Von Heusinger (2002), a noun phrase is specific when it is "functionally linked to the speaker of the sentence or to another referential expression in the sentence such as the subject or object" and when the interpretation of a specific noun phrase "does not depend on the interpretation of the matrix predicate or semantic operators such as modal verbs" (p. 247).

While the above treatments of articles capture many of the main features of the system, it should be noted that English articles are notoriously full of exceptional cases, complicating learners' attempts to inductively acquire the rules and patterns from the input, whether this be accomplished through implicit or explicit learning mechanisms, or their synergy. For example, consider the null use of articles found in many common phrases (e.g., *abandon ship*) or the use of so-called weak definites (e.g., *When should babies go to the dentist?*)

The linguistic categorization of article uses has provided the impetus for research that seeks to specify the nature of L2 learners' interlanguage systems in greater detail. As perhaps the most cited investigation of this type, Liu and Gleason (2002) conducted a study of 128 ESL students from various L1 backgrounds. All the learners had TOEFL scores below 500 (paper version) and were divided into "low", "intermediate", and "advanced" learners. In terms of the CEFR levels (Council of Europe, 2001), the participants would therefore be primarily at the B1 level or below. The participants took a test with 91 sentences and supplied the missing articles. The results indicated that participants achieved greatest accuracy on anaphoric and associative (textual) items, followed by nonexplanatory and cataphoric (structural) items, visible/immediate items (situational), and then encyclopedic (cultural) items.

Like the Liu and Gleason (2002) study, the current study addresses the question of which uses of English articles pose the greatest challenge to college students. To answer this question, the current study examines Japanese learners' knowledge of English articles but with a finer grained analysis than that used in the Liu and Gleason (2002) study. Based on six types of definite article use and some indefinite article uses as discussed above, the current study goes beyond previous empirical research through the use of more specific categories that avoid conflation of anaphoric and associative uses or conflation of nonexplanatory and cataphoric uses. Moreover, by focusing more narrowly on Japanese learners, the study's results are more readily generalizable to the Japanese EFL context.

Method

The participants ($N = 178$) were Japanese EFL students from eight first-year English classes. Participants from four of the classes ($n = 124$) attended a large public university, and those from the remaining four classes ($n = 54$) were students at a private women's university. The participants were roughly at the B1 level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001).

An articles assessment instrument was created similar to that used by Liu and Gleason (2002). The instrument presented sentences with most of the required articles missing. The directions asked participants to supply the necessary article (or articles) but to make no changes to the sentence if an article was unnecessary. There was nothing to indicate where an article might be required. Participants were asked to make a V-shaped mark to indicate where the missing article should be inserted and then write the missing article. There were 52 points (hereafter, *items*) in the sentences where the definite article was needed, and 22 where the indefinite article was needed.

Among the 52 items requiring the definite article, 5 items targeted encyclopedic, 10 anaphoric, 10 associative, 5 nonexplanatory, 10 cataphoric, and 10 visible uses. In addition to these items, which targeted the article uses that were the main focus of the study, 2 items targeted the use of 'the' before plural proper nouns. These final two items were not of theoretical interest in this study but were included to make the items on the instrument more varied and realistic.

To ensure that participants considered the indefinite article as a possible choice, 22 items targeted 'a' or 'an'. Among these, 10 items involved specific referents, and 10 involved nonspecific referents. The former use is exemplified by the sentence '*I finally found a woman to marry*'. In this case, the speaker has a particular referent in mind. Nonspecific uses of the indefinite article occur when the specific referent is unknown by both speakers. Consider the sentence '*Jerry didn't read a book on Egypt for his history class because he couldn't find one*'. The sentence does not suggest that the speaker has a particular book on Egypt in mind. Two further items involved the use of the indefinite article in equative constructions (e.g., *I am a student*). These were not of theoretical interest but were included to make the items on the instrument more varied and realistic. Participants were given 40 minutes to complete the test. In scoring, errors involving the choice between *a* and *an* were ignored.

Results

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. For ease of explication, all results are shown as percentages.

Statistical tests were conducted using SPSS. Type-Subtype combinations (e.g., cultural-encyclopedic) served as the independent variable and were treated as a within-subjects factor. Since the study focused on uses subsumed by the Liu and Gleason

Table 1

Item Type, Number of Items Per Category, and Participants' Mean Level of Accuracy

Type #	Article	Type (Liu & Gleason, 2002)	Subtype	Items	M % (SD %)
1	THE	cultural	encyclopedic	5	36.7 (22.1)
2	THE	textual	anaphoric	10	64.1 (19.6)
3	THE	textual	associative	10	36.4 (18.8)
4	THE	structural	nonexplanatory	5	52.0 (32.5)
5	THE	structural	cataphoric	10	73.3 (15.2)
6	THE	situational	visible, immediate	10	58.7 (19.4)
7	THE	N/A	plural proper noun	2	14.3 (23.3)
8	A/AN	N/A	specific	10	67.5 (17.0)
9	A/AN	N/A	nonspecific	10	74.7 (17.8)
10	A/AN	N/A	equative	2	70.5 (32.1)

categories, only six type-subtype combinations (the first six rows in Table 1) and two indefinite article types (specific and nonspecific) were included in the statistical analysis. Percentage accuracy scores were treated as the dependent variable. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there was a significant effect of Type-Subtype on percentage accuracy scores, Wilks' Lambda = .138, $F(7, 171) = 152.3$, $p < .001$. Follow-up pairwise analyses showed that at an alpha of .05, accuracy on each set of items was significantly different, except for the differences between Category #6 and #4 and between Category #1 and #3. This would suggest the acquisition order #5 > #2 > #6, #4 > #1, #3, as depicted in detail in Table 2. The table is to be read from left to right. Looking at the first line, for example, it can be seen that participants were more accurate on Category #5 (the cataphoric use of the definite article) than on Categories #2, #6, #4, #1, and #3, and that the differences between Category #5 and each of these other categories were significant at $p < .001$. The differences that fall short of significance at $p = .05$ have been shaded.

If the results from the current study are analyzed using the same four categories employed by Liu and Gleason (2002), that is to say, by collapsing the anaphoric and associative categories as well as the nonexplanatory and cataphoric categories, the percentage accuracy would be 62.6% for structural uses, 58.7% for situational, 50.3% for textual, and 36.7% for cultural. If we then collapse the Liu and Gleason results across proficiency level (i.e., regard all of their participants as a single group), their participants achieved 73.0% accuracy on situational items, 64.8% on structural items, 56.9% on textual items, and 36.0% on cultural items. The two sets of results are shown in Figure 2.

As can be seen, the results of the current study closely parallel those in Liu and Gleason (2002), except for markedly lower performance on situational items. Except for this discrepancy, the order of difficulty for article use is similar for both groups. Unfortunately, the coarse-grained categories used by Liu and Gleason do not show the whole picture. For example, the participants in the current study

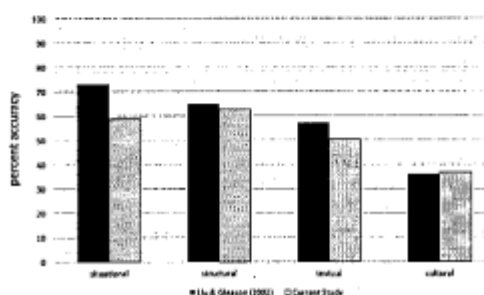
Table 2

Accuracy Order (From Left to Right) of Key Uses of Definite Article

	Highest accuracy		← →	Lowest accuracy	
#5	#2 ($p < .001$)	#6 ($p < .001$)	#4 ($p < .001$)	#1 ($p < .001$)	#3 ($p < .001$)
	#2	#6 ($p < .027$)	#4 ($p < .001$)	#1 ($p < .001$)	#3 ($p < .001$)
		#6	#4 ($p < .067$)	#1 ($p < .001$)	#3 ($p < .001$)
			#4	#1 ($p < .001$)	#3 ($p < .001$)
				#1	#3 ($p < .001$)

were nearly twice as accurate on the anaphoric use types than they were on the associative use types, both of which were treated as the single category "textual" in Liu and Gleason's study. Similarly, the current results for the cataphoric and nonexplanatory categories were strikingly different, suggesting that there is little value in treating these as part of the same broad category of "structural uses". In short, the more specific categories of the current study are able to capture important features of learners' interlanguage that would be missed using more general categories of article use.

Figure 2
Comparison of the Results of Liu and Gleason (2002)
and the Current Study



The current findings, when viewed in terms of the more specific categories employed in this study, suggest that learners' accuracy largely reflects the use of easily applied rules. Consider the discrepancy between the high scores on anaphoric and low scores on associative use types. This may be explained by the fact that learners can achieve accuracy on the former by applying a simple rule such as, if a noun repeats, use *the* for the second occurrence. Associative contexts involve greater subtleties. Consider the sentences, 'I went to a wedding. The bride was beautiful'. In this case, the learner must recognize that the noun *bride* requires the definite article due to the close association between brides and weddings.

Regarding the results related to the indefinite article, pairwise comparisons showed significantly higher accuracy on items involving nonspecific (#8) versus specific contexts (#7), $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.29, 11.02]. This finding is in line with the Fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin, 2006; Ionin et al., 2004), which suggests that learners' interlanguage representations of the indefinite article initially fluctuate between representations based on definiteness

(as in native speakers' English) and specificity (as occurs in languages such as Samoan). This should result in the overuse of *the* in specific indefinite contexts and overuse of *a* or *an* in nonspecific definite contexts. The current study is therefore in accordance with other studies which confirm the Fluctuation Hypothesis in learners from a range of backgrounds; this includes Korean-L1 (Ionin et al., 2004), Chinese-L1 (Snape, 2009), and Japanese-L1 (Tanaka, 2011) speakers. Looked at from the perspective of prototype theory (Rosch, 1978), the Japanese learners in this study apparently developed interlanguage representations that regard nonspecific and indefinite contexts as the prototype of the indefinite article category, and specific and definite contexts as the prototype of the definite article category.

Discussion

The analysis of this study suggests that first-year college-level Japanese learners find it relatively easier to master article uses that are governed by easily stipulated rules that are generalizable. While not part of the main analysis, the low accuracy on plural proper nouns is an exception and suggests that Japanese learners would benefit from instruction on this easily applied rule. Participants' accuracy declines considerably when it comes to uses that rely heavily on semantic considerations. The associative use appears to be particularly challenging, so classroom instruction and pedagogical materials may benefit from closer attention to this use. It may be worth pointing out to learners that many instances of associative use involve whole-part relationships (e.g., the definite article use in 'I like my new smartphone, but the screen's a bit small').

The current study's findings related to the indefinite article are of theoretical interest as they lend support to the Fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin, 2006). At a practical level, they suggest that a great deal of exposure to English within naturalistic discourse contexts may be necessary for learners to develop sensitivity to key semantic features that are relevant to article use. Inconsistencies between the current study's findings and those of Liu and Gleason (2002) strongly suggest that their use of overly broad categories is problematic. Future researchers should therefore use more detailed distinctions. Ideally, even more specific than those used in the current study.

This study has several limitations. First, it focused on L2 learners from a specific L1 background (Japanese) and at a specific level of proficiency. More research therefore needs to be conducted to

determine whether the patterns of acquisition are the same for learners from other L1 backgrounds as well as for untutored learners in an immersion setting. Second, the results are based on limited sets of items representing each type of article use. As is often the case when using discrete response formats such as the test used in the current study, there is always the possibility that participants' performance was affected by extraneous features of items such as vocabulary or grammatical structures. For this reason, future researchers adopting this methodology may want to reduce the number of categories being examined while increasing the number of items representing each type of article use.

Finally, learners should be made aware of the inherent difficulty in acquiring articles and should not hold unrealistic expectations of acquiring the system after short periods of instruction. Teachers may remind them that even native speakers fail to acquire this system fully until the relatively late age of five (Warden, 1976, 1981). At the same time, teachers also need to have realistic expectations. There is still considerable debate over whether explicit teaching or error correction involving articles has any value. Some researchers claim that such instruction is essentially a waste of time (Dulay et al., 1982; Umeda et al., 2019). Others have voiced a more optimistic view (e.g., Akakura, 2012; Muranoi, 2000; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Sheen, 2007). Taking a middle position, Master (1997) argues that instruction, while ineffective for most learners, may have some benefits for intermediate learners in particular. Master (1990) suggests that instructors teach the system by focusing on a single binary distinction at a time (e.g., countability). Future researchers should also consider which particular uses of the definite article benefit most from explicit instruction. It is likely that some uses are amenable to pre-planned explicit instruction or to incidental interventions such as focus on form (Muranoi, 2000), whereas other uses can only be mastered through implicit learning mechanisms that require copious input.

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Charles M. Mueller conducts research on second language acquisition based on a cognitive linguistics (CL) framework. His recent research has focused on the potential advantages of using a CL framework in second language instruction and CL analysis of metaphor within religious discourse.



Yasuhiro Tsushima conducts research on various linguistic constructions from the perspective of English studies and comparative linguistics using a cognitive linguistics framework, drawing specifically on the cognitive grammar analysis proposed by Ronald W. Langacker.



Appendix

Articles Test

To save space, only the sentences are shown here. In the actual test, difficult words such as "equator" appeared with a Japanese gloss. In some sentences, more than one article is required.

次の文のうちいくつかは、本来入るべき冠詞("a", "an", "the")が抜けています。各文を読み、例A・Bにならって正しい冠詞を書き加えなさい。抜けている冠詞が複数ある文もあれば、何も加える必要のないものもあります。

1. I look after a little girl and a little boy on Saturdays. Little girl is smart, but boy isn't.
2. Sarah wants to meet friend of mine named Keiko Suzuki. Keiko's really famous.
3. This is book that I was telling you about.
4. Jane must read book about horses for her class, but she can't find one.
5. If you buy this car, you'll need to repair brakes before you drive it.
6. Painting on this wall was very expensive.
7. President of the U.S. lives in White House.
8. Tomorrow afternoon is only time I can meet you.
9. Did you hear that house we saw last week burned down last night?
10. When Jane grows up, she wants to marry millionaire.
11. Water in this glass is dirty.
12. The wife hears a noise and tells her husband, "Doorbell is ringing. Answer door."

13. Man I met in New York later became my husband.
14. Sally Ride was first woman to fly into space.
15. David's looking for girl. She dropped her purse and David found it. He wants to return it to her.
16. When you're in class, you should listen carefully to what teacher says.
17. I need to buy computer, but I can't decide which model I should get.
18. Our office got new computers last week. Someday, I really think that computers will replace people everywhere.
19. Can you please turn on light?
20. He put two-dollar stamp on his package, so he must be package letter overseas.
21. Sun is shining. It's a beautiful day.
22. Tom is student we discussed in our office.
23. Many people are coming to our city these days.
24. While driving in their car to work, the father says to his son, "Please turn on radio."
25. Jerry didn't read book on Egypt for his history class because he couldn't find one.
26. We went to a basketball game on Saturday. Players at game were all very tall.
27. This is example of what I was talking about.
28. After you're finished using the ketchup, put lid back on top of bottle.
29. I have papers you asked for.
30. I read a few science-fiction books this semester. Science-fiction books are really interesting.
31. If you want to meet next week, Friday is only day I have free.
32. Handle of that cup is broken.
33. The boss says to his employees, "I'm not happy with your work. Things are really going to have to change around here."
34. I saw man walking his dog yesterday. Man was walking so fast that dog could barely keep up with him.
35. We got new TV for our house. I enjoy watching some programs, but in general I think that people shouldn't watch TV so much.
36. Phone that I wanted to buy is sold out.
37. Jane bought a ring and a necklace for her mother's birthday. Her mother loved ring but hated necklace.
38. I went to concert last night. I had a great time at concert. Singer's voice was so lovely.
39. I heard that you were in an accident. I know how you feel. I had similar experience last year.
40. When you make green tea, you should heat water to 60°C.
41. I'm doing research and would like to talk with student from one of your classes. Any student is fine.
42. I invited our neighbors, Yamamotos, over to dinner tomorrow.
43. I read book about Japan. Author was from Sapporo.
44. This is third time I've been to Hokkaido.
45. Did you see letter I left on your desk yesterday?
46. The manager asks her secretary, "Could you please check schedule for me?"
47. Student cheated on math exam that we had last week. We're trying to figure out who it was.
48. I'd like to see movie this weekend. Do you have any suggestions?
49. My husband met us at airport. From there, we went to our neighbor's house for small party.
50. Woman who lives next door just called and said she'd like us to come over for coffee.
51. June is sixth month of the year.
52. When you eat with chopsticks, you shouldn't set them on table.
53. While driving in their car to work, the husband asks his wife, "Could you open window please?"
54. I bought smartphone last week. Unfortunately, screen is too dark.
55. Mary might be meeting friend tonight. I called her, but she didn't answer.
56. Day and night are of equal length at equator.
57. John is looking for pretty girl to ask to the dance party.
58. I saw a man in a car this morning. At first I wasn't sure, but then I realized that man driving car was a friend of mine.
59. When I listened carefully, I could hear woman who lives next door talking to her son.
60. Man just asked me out. I'm too embarrassed to tell you who it was!
61. She lives in Russia, next to Ural Mountains.
62. If man is in the girls' dressing room, tell me. No men should be in there.
63. I'm in Sapporo to visit friend from college.
64. Mount Aso, in Kumamoto, is active volcano.
65. In a bright, sunny room, the woman asks the man, "Could you close curtains? It's too bright in here."