

Language Learning Strategies and the Japanese Student

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Abstract

As Rubin (1975) suspected some thirty years ago, successful second language learners consciously employ language learning strategies. However, in Japan, where pre-university level education is organized around rote memorization to help students pass college entrance examinations, university students need to learn a completely new set of strategies to successfully learn a second language for the purpose of communication. It would serve our Bunkyo Gakuin University students well if, beyond instruction in ESL, we offered our students more practical lessons on *how* to learn English as a second language such as through an extensive reading program.

Almost all people learn their first language to some degree of fluency. Yet, as university teachers of English as a foreign language we have all seen that some students learn a second language with greater success than others. Some may say that the successful learners have a gift for languages or “a better ear for language,” but the research of Rubin (1975) and Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978, 1996) suggests that language learning strategies (LLS) may be the difference between good language learners and poor language learners.

Language learning strategies have been found to correlate with language proficiency and performance (Bialystok, 1981; Huang & Van Naerssen, 1987; Kamarul Shukri et al., 2008; O'Malley et al., 1985; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Therefore, most educators now accept the idea that the learning strategies can distinguish high from low level learners (Brown et al., 1983). They also recognize the influence that learning strategy use may have on the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot, 1987; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; Wenden, 1991). Furthermore, they acknowledge that students can be taught how to learn a language if they are taught the strategies that aid in language acquisition (Chamot, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

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Language Learning Strategies Defined

Language learning strategies (LLS) are described as any set of steps, operations, plans or routines used by the learner to facilitate the storage, retrieval and use of information (Brown et al., 1983; O'Malley et al., 1985). In other words, LLS are what learners do to learn and to improve their learning (Rubin, 1975). These strategies include cognitive and metacognitive activities. Cognitive strategies are often specific to distinct learning activities and include steps in learning that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials (Brown, 1982). Metacognitive learning strategies can generally be used in a variety of learning tasks and include maximizing opportunities to use the language, learning intensively, learning regularly, pushing oneself into using the language, and having a concrete need/plan for learning. These strategies are considered vital for successful learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

As Lee and Oxford wrote in "Understanding EFL Learners' Strategy Use and Strategy Awareness" (2008), "Most investigators have agreed that awareness helps students to learn a language and use the strategies and, in turn, to learn a language." They went on to say:

"Chamot (1998) stressed that learning strategies are teachable, i.e., that students can become more aware of strategies through strategy instruction. Chamot (1998) also stated that awareness of one's own strategies is closely related to metacognition, adding that more successful learners have better and more metacognitive awareness."

For learners to take advantage of LLS, they need to be taught how to use the strategies, and at the same they must be conscious of what they are doing.

Identifying Language Learning Strategies and SILL

Various research studies have identified strategies used by good language learners. Naiman et al. (1978) suggest that good language learners will:

- * Actively involve themselves in the learning task by responding positively to the given learning opportunity, by identifying and seeking preferred learning environments and exploiting them.
- * Develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system by referring to their native language or analyzing the target language and making inferences about it.
- * Develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction.

- * Accept and cope with effective demands of the second language.
- * Constantly revise their second language system by inferencing and monitoring.

More specific techniques uncovered by Naiman et al. include repeating aloud after the teacher and/or native speaker, following rules as given by the grammar books or textbooks, making up vocabulary charts and memorizing them, listening to radio, TV, recordings, etc., interacting with contact with native speakers and reading any materials including magazines, newspapers, comics, etc.

Rubin (1981) studied adult learners' learning strategies and concentrated on the cognitive processes they used. The strategies they employed were:

- * Clarification/verification: the learner asks for examples of how to use a word or expression, asks for visual reinforcement of correct forms and looks up words in the dictionary.
- * Monitoring: the learner corrects his or her own or others' pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, etc.
- * Memorization: the learner takes note of new items and finds some association with them for purposes of storage and retrieval.
- * Guessing/inductive inferencing: the learner uses clues to guess rules.
- * Deductive reasoning: the learner looks for and uses general rules. He compares his language to the target language to identify similarities and differences.
- * Practice: the learner experiments with new sounds, uses a mirror to practice, talks to himself in the target language and drills himself on words in different forms.

In a study of ESL learners, O'Malley et al. (1985) identified 26 learning strategies. The metacognitive strategies were to use advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, advance preparation, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation and self-reinforcement. The cognitive strategies were repetition, resourcing (using target language reference materials), directed physical attention, translation, grouping or classifying materials, note-taking, consciously applying rules, combining known elements of language in a new way, imagery, auditory representation, using key words, contextualization, elaboration; transfer, inferencing and questions for clarification and cooperation.

Oxford (1990) attempted to build on some of these earlier strategy lists by suggesting two categories: primary strategies and support strategies. These are similar to the terms Rubin (1981) used to describe her strategy classifications, but the actual definitions and specific strategies

are different. In Oxford's classification, primary strategies include nine subcategories (e.g., inferencing, mnemonics, summarizing, and practice), while support strategies include eight subcategories (e.g., attention enhancers, self-management, affective strategies, planning and cooperation). Furthermore, within each of these subcategories, additional examples of strategies are mentioned, producing an extended list of some sixty-four strategies in all—basically every strategy that had ever been previously cited in literature. This ungainly list was problematic in that it failed to prioritize learning strategies and generated subcategories that appear to overlap (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995, p.103).

However, Oxford's extended classification scheme served another purpose. It provided the foundation for generating items for a questionnaire designed to assess uses of learning strategies in second language acquisition (Oxford 1986). The Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (better known as "SILL") is based on the primary and support strategies identified in Oxford's classification. SILL was later augmented by linking strategies to specific language tasks (speaking, listening, reading, writing). SILL has been revised many times until it has become the shortened version used today containing 135 items.¹⁾

Korean Case Study on ESL Learners

Using the SILL questionnaire, Lee and Oxford (2008) examined the LLS of over a thousand Korean students. Lee and Oxford noted that LLS changed depending on the students' level of language study. The results of their study on the students' use of learning strategies (379 middle school students, 438 high school student and 293 university students) are in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Different Strategies by Different Education Levels* (Lee & Oxford, 2008, p.10)

	Strategy
Middle School Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -write to memorize English a lot -make a pen pal to write English letters regularly -read books written in English -put new words everywhere to read and memorize the words -memorize whole sentences—repeat recorded material often -record own voice and listen to make corrections -listen to English one hour a day -watch movies without subtitles -learn English through games
High School Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -write to memorize a lot of English -prepare a notebook to gather wrong answers -write new expressions and read them very often -don't give up despite bad scores -come up with a motivation for studying English -associate words or sentences with what is liked
University Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -repeat new words a lot to memorize -dictate while listening to English tapes -read English novels or newspapers -read various English materials about something interesting (book, internet...) -read books written in English -make English sentence for every expression -use monolingual dictionaries instead of bilingual dictionaries -try to come up with the next line when watching movies -try to find incorrect scripts while watching movies -imitate an actor or an actress in movies and radio/TV programs -travel to an English speaking country -make friends with a native speaker and talk in English -try to think in English

This study also found that the repetitive memorization required of high school students to study for college entrance exams, similar to the situation in Japan, was the reason more than half of the Korean high school students questioned did not enjoy English. (Ibid, p.10) “Some of them explicitly mentioned the entrance examinations, saying that the examinations had prevented them from relating English to fun and emphasizing that they never studied English for fun.” (Ibid, p.11)

Language Learners in Japan

While LLS use is beneficial to language learners in general, some learners, such as Japanese university students, are in particular need of LLS training. For the six years prior to university, three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school, these students have basically relied on memorization to give them the information they need to know to pass college entrance exams. In other words, they study “examination English” that requires them to show their linguistic knowledge of the language rather than whether they can communicate in the language (Law, 1995). After advancing to university, however, their learning becomes less about testing and more about building communication skills. Without training or exposure to new strategies in learning, students will rely on their tried and true learning strategies and study methods that, though once useful for examination preparation, are not the best strategies for the communicative activities they are expected to learn in college (Watanabe 2000).

The Current Situation at Bunkyo Gakuin University

From April of 2009 Bunkyo Gakuin University and College allowed the English Skills Committee to arrange special classes for the freshmen students in both the university and college through the “Shonenji Kyouiku” (freshmen education) courses. We taught the entire freshman university class, about 250 students, on three separate occasions in a large lecture hall.²⁾ These classes were followed up the next week with classes of twenty students performing pre-arranged tasks to reinforce the information given the week before in the group lecture.

In the three classes we taught the university students, we focused on different areas. The first class introduced details about the different facilities within the school that students could use to improve their English—the Chat Lounge, an in-house CALL learning system, the library and its materials, etc. The second class introduced different language learning strategies that we felt the students could employ to improve their English more quickly. The third class examined overseas study programs that we hoped would motivate students to study more and act as a goal for them during their time at the university.

Though I taught only one class of freshmen this year, a twenty-student writing class, I often asked them about the English Skills lectures in their “Shonenji Kyouiku” course. For my own personal feedback and to act as a review, I had the students write their opinions about the English Skills lectures, about the LLS they tried, and finally whether they thought their English was progressing using the LLS they had chosen.

Unfortunately, though my students reported high motivation after the English Skills lectures, when they tried the strategies, those described in our second lecture in particular, they were unable to use the techniques on their own. For instance, during the second lecture I gave a brief explanation on how to use English DVDs as a study tool. Several students tried to do this on their own, but the exercise ended in frustration for them. The reasons for their frustration varied from choosing inappropriate material for their level to being unable to choose a scene with commonly used vocabulary. I believe they need more hands on training before being able to complete the strategy successfully on their own.

Currently, the English Skills classes attempt to cover the 4 skill areas of English. With a full syllabus, however, there is barely enough time for teachers to complete the outlined tasks let alone have time to teach students new language learning skills. One solution would be to have a department-wide program that all teachers support. The program that would have the greatest impact for the least amount of investment would be a reading program.

In *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* (1998), authors Day and Bamford quote researcher Stephen Krashen:

Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however. Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers.

Day and Bamford go on to say that “students who learn to read through an extensive reading approach develop positive attitudes and become motivated to read in the second language. (1998, p.38)

In a recent lecture given by Professor Paul Nation at Bunkyo Gakuin University, he, too, spoke at length about the use of graded readers in an extensive reading program and the wide-reaching benefits of such a program. Indeed, the number of graded readers in our library would have to be expanded before such a department wide program could begin, but the benefits seem too great to ignore. Although speaking to the students about all of the different LLS available to them seems valuable, teaching specific LLS for reading seems to be the most practical, easily initiated program and the program that would have the most potential for quick improvement of students’ all-round English skills.

At the university level Japanese students finally have a chance to study English for reasons other than doing well on an exam, but most students have no notion of how to proceed. As

a matter of fact, the LLS they have learned in order to do well on tests, prevent them from embracing the benefits of alternative LLS more appropriate to communicative English. Therefore, we must make the most of more appropriate LLS training and encourage LLS awareness and use. Tremendous educational benefits await students who are familiar with and able to use a wide-range of LLS.

- 1) For a close up look at SILL, take the test yourself online at: http://ell.phil.tu-chemnitz.de/cing/frontend/questionnaires/oxford_quest.php
- 2) We were only scheduled to teach the freshmen college (短期大学) students one time. On that occasion we repeated the first class we taught the university students that introduced the facilities for extra study on campus.

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