Learning Strategies and Low Proficiency Students

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This pilot study explored the use of specific Language Learning Strategies (LLS) by 168 first- and 2nd-year Japanese university students enrolled in a compulsory English course. Students consisted of non-English majors from various departments with TOEIC Bridge scores ranging from 60 to 140. Participants were given a 4-part survey, which included 8 questions adapted from Oxford's (1989, 1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) in order to investigate strategy use, preference, and English study habits. The results of this pilot survey suggest that future research relating to the use of LLS by low proficiency Japanese university students would benefit from a more qualitative approach in order to understand student awareness, beliefs, and actual use of English learning strategies in the classroom.

　本予備調査は、必修科目英語を履修する日本人大学生1年生および2年生168名を対象に、ある特定の言語学習ストラテジー（LLS）の使用について検証したものである。対象の学生は、TOEIC　Bridgeスコアが60～140点で、英語非専攻の、さまざまな学部の学生で構成されている。被験者にはOxford (1989, 1990) の Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) を参考にした8設問を含む、4項目に分かれたアンケート調査票を配布し、ストラテジー使用状況、好み、英語学習習慣について検証した。本予備調査の結果から、習熟度の低い日本人大学生によるLLSの使用に関する今後の研究において、学生の意識、言語学習観（ビリーフ）、言語学習ストラテジーの使用実態を把握するためには、定性的アプローチをより一層深めることが有効であると考えられる。

DURING THE 1970s English language teaching became more focused on the learner's role in the classroom. This lead to several researchers examining *good language learners* (GLLs) in the hopes of finding fundamental traits or practices that could be taught to students of lower language proficiency. Initial research into the identification of characteristics associated with GLLs by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) found that through the conscious use of appropriate learning strategies, learners are able to achieve higher language proficiency (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2003).

Oxford (1989) defined LLS as being specific actions that a learner takes to make the process of learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more effective, and more useful when dealing with new learning situations. The benefit to learners engaged in effective LLS use has been found to allow "students to become more independent, autonomous and lifelong learners" (Oxford, 2003, p. 8). Oxford clarified her definition of LLS, noting that strategies are neither good nor bad, and went on to state that an effective strategy needs to

- relate to the task,
- relate to the learner's style, and
- be used effectively by the student.

Defining Language Learning Strategies

Current research suggests that there are a wide variety of strategies that learners can use. The exact number of strategies available to learners to make learning easier is still highly debatable (Oxford & Cohen, 1992). Furthermore, methods of classification have been varied and contested by Skehan (1989) and more recently Dörnyei (2005), with new classifications continually being introduced (Rose, 2012).

Possibly the most recognized taxonomy of strategies was developed by Oxford, which also led to the creation of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1989, 1990). Even though the validity and the reliability of the SILL have been challenged, it remains the most extensively used taxonomy of strategic language learning by researchers throughout the world (Bremner, 1999). It was for this reason that the SILL was chosen as the source of the items selected for this pilot study.

The SILL, which consists of 50 items, is designed to identify the frequency of strategy use for each strategy type and measure the frequency with which a student uses a particular strategy. Figure 1 shows how the SILL is divided into two main sections: direct and indirect strategies.

The direct strategies are used in dealing with a new language. The three groups that belong to the direct strategies are memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Direct strategies involve the mental process of receiving, retaining, storing, and retrieving language.

The indirect strategies are used for language learning management, organization, and the handling of the physical and so-cial aspects associated with language learning. The three groups that belong to the indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Indirect strategies involve the process of planning, identifying feelings, and engaging with other language learners, as can be seen in the chart below (Rausch, 2000).

Table 1. SILL Sections

Direct Strategies	Indirect Strategies
Memory strategies • Connecting new language to images or pictures • Reviewing new language and English lessons	Metacognitive strategies • Arranging and planning learning • Scheduled Evaluation of learning
Cognitive strategies • Saying and writing new language • Analyzing and negotiating meaning	Affective strategies • Trying to relaxing and lower anxiety levels • Identifying feelings
Compensation strategies • Guessing meaning • Overcoming limitations through adaptation	Social strategies • Asking questions • Practicing with others students

Note. Adapted from Oxford (1990).

This pilot study specifically focused on the usage of selected memory and cognitive strategies among low proficiency Japanese learners. The reason for selecting these two groups was based on published research in the area of LLS highlighting that these strategy groups are frequently used among good Japanese learners (Takeuchi, 2003).

Memory Strategies

Memory strategies help language learners connect one item of language or concept with another. These strategies are most commonly associated with learning vocabulary and include grouping, using imagery, and using flashcards. Memory strategies are directly related to helping students store and retrieve new language (Oxford, 1996).

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways. These strategies have been found to significantly relate to language proficiency and include note taking, summarizing, or reasoning deductively. Cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new language (Oxford, 1996).

Purposes of This Pilot Study

This pilot study was motivated by a need to identify the present usage and awareness of standard memory and cognitive strategies among low proficiency Japanese learners in a university context. There were two key purposes:

- to identify the specific type of memory or cognitive strategies used and the frequency of their use by low proficiency Japanese learners at university; and
- to identify additional strategies or other ways students studied English.

Research Questions

1. Do low proficiency Japanese university students use commonly researched memory and cognitive language learning strategies?

2. What other language learning strategies do low proficiency Japanese university students report using and how many hours do they self-study per week?

Method

Participants

Data was collected in December 2011 from 168 students at a private coed Japanese university. There were 113 first-year students and 55 second-year students, consisting of 28 female students and 140 male students. These students represented 1st- and 2nd-year students of various majors enrolled in a compulsory English program, with TOEIC Bridge scores ranging from 60 to140 (TOEIC Bridge score 140 is equivalent to TOEIC score 395). The specific goal of the program was for students on completion of 2 years of study to graduate with a TOEIC Bridge score of over 140.

The students had one 90-minute English conversation class per week (30 classes per year) with a native English teacher and one 90-minute English class per week (30 classes per year) with a Japanese teacher. The English conversation classes specifically focused on improving basic communicative listening and speaking skills.

All students participated in a vocabulary program over the 2 years of English study. The 1,600 most frequent spoken and written English words were selected from the Longman *Eiwa Jiten* [English-Japanese dictionary] and presented over 10 weeks each term. The goal of the program was for the students to master these words. Pre- and posttests were mandatory for all classes. Teachers required students to complete a vocabulary notebook each week followed by a weekly vocabulary quiz. This notebook usually required approximately 2 hours of homework per week.

Generally these students had low motivation and did the minimum work required to complete the course. Their TOEIC Bridge scores suggested that they did not exhibit or employ the traits of good language learners, especially concerning the use of strategies.

Description of Instrument

This survey consisted of four parts:

- Part A requested student background information.
- Part B identified frequency of strategy use.
- Part C asked students what other ways they studied English.
- Part D asked students to state the amount of time they studied English outside of scheduled classes.

The key part of the current study involved Part B (see Appendices A and B). This part consisted of eight strategy statements adapted from Oxford's SILL and was used to collect information on frequency of strategy use. The strategy statements were translated from English into Japanese by Japanese native-speaking colleagues. The Japanese version was then back translated. Some minor modifications were then made in the wording of certain strategy statements to ensure comprehensibility of translation. Students were asked to rate each strategy statements on a 6-point Likert scale of *never*, *very rarely*, *rarely*, *occasionally*, *frequently*, and *always*. The survey was designed to be completed in 5 to 10 minutes prior to the commencement of a class.

Note that two statements were adapted to better fit with the students' situation. Statement 3 was changed to *vocabulary notebook* from the original *flashcards* to reflect the use of vocabulary notebooks in the students' program. Statement 7 was also changed from *I do not translate word-for-word* to *I translate word-for-word* to keep all statements positive.

Findings

The results of this pilot survey showed that both 1st- and 2nd-year students reported using all eight strategy types. Table 1 is a summary of the mean reported frequency of language learning strategy use by 1st- and 2nd-year students. Table 1 shows that across all eight statements, student strategy utilization was found to be moderate. The data show that students used cognitive strategies at a greater frequency than memory strategies and interestingly, 1st-year students used strategies at a slightly higher frequency than did 2nd-year students.

An important point to note is the response to Item 7 *I translate word-for-word*. This item was reported as the most used strategy by all students. The 1st-year students reported greater use than the 2nd-year students. This reported use of a less effective strategy may be one which 1st-year students used in their high school grammar-translation-style classes. The high reported use of word-for-word translation may also suggest that 1st-year students still have a limited repertoire of cognitive strategies and rely on what they used in high school English classes. This reinforces the idea that both good and not-so-good language learners use strategies—but quite possibly good language learners use more, use them more effectively, and reevaluate when and where to use a given strategy. Lower reported use by the 2nd-year students may suggest that after exposure to communicative language learning in the 1st year of university, they are able to use varying strategies when analyzing and negotiating new vocabulary.

Table 2. Frequency of Language Learning Strategy Use

| Survey Item | Statement | Reported Means | | |
		1st-year students *n* = 114	2nd-year students *n* = 54	All students *N* = 168
1	I use new English words in sentences so I can remember them.	2.67	2.60	2.65
2	I remember a new English word by connecting it to an image or picture.	3.26	3.04	3.20
3	I use a vocabulary notebook to remember new English words.	3.05	3.01	3.33
4	I review English lessons.	2.97	2.96	2.97
5	I say new words several times.	3.55	3.00	3.36
6	I write new words several times.	3.28	3.14	3.24
7	I translate word-for-word.	3.84	3.75	3.82
8	I practice the sounds of English.	3.11	2.98	3.07
	Overall mean reported frequency of use	3.27	3.06	3.21

Note. Students rated items of a 6-point Likert scale: 1 = never to 6 = always.

In Part C of the survey students were asked "What other ways do you study English?" In Table 2 the data indicate that a large number of students used no other strategies when studying English. This may be due to a lack of study skill training, as more than 55% of the students left this part of the survey blank. That some students actually chose to report their own ways to study (see Table 3) is encouraging but it bears further examination into how students actually watch English TV or movies to study.

Table 3. Student Self-Report Comments Regarding Own Ways to Study

Student self-reported comment	Number of comments
Nothing	22
Watch English TV or movies	10
Listen to English (international) music	9
Do class homework	9
Use the university E-Learning system	8
Write new words several times	7
Listen to English learning CDs	6
Read Japanese and translate to English	1
Check Japanese meaning in dictionary	1
Imagine English questions	1
Do not translate	1

The survey results may offer suggestions on how English teachers could greater engage with Japanese students in the classroom or with homework assignments, especially low proficiency learners.

Conclusion

The focus of this pilot study was to explore the use of memory and cognitive strategies among low proficiency Japanese learners in university education. The results reveal that the students used similar types of strategies regardless of their academic year and that across all eight statements, student strategy utilization was found to be moderate. Based on these findings, one could argue that language learning strategy instruction needs to play a greater role in Japanese classrooms. English language teachers in Japan could introduce LLS during a student's initial exposure to English, thereby providing students with the tools needed to study autonomously. We believe that increased exposure to LLS at an earlier age may result in greater learner autonomy among Japanese learners.

It should be noted that this pilot study had limitations that should be addressed in future research. The central limitation was the fact that interviews with a sample group of students were not conducted initially to establish what strategies are most relevant to low proficiency Japanese learners. Furthermore, a fundamental drawback to survey results is that they do not report exactly how students interpret the questions. As suggested by Woodrow (2005), future research relating to the use of LLS by Japanese university students needs to take a qualitative approach in order to understand student awareness, beliefs, and actual LLS use.

In the future, we plan to conduct qualitative research to focus more on which strategies are most relevant to learner types and learner objectives. Through student interviews, we plan to investigate how students implement the strategies they report. It is hoped that future research in Japan will look at using student interviews and qualitatively validated survey items to truly investigate what happens when Japanese learners study English.

Bio Data

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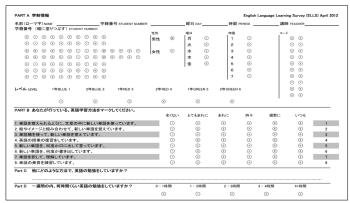
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Appendix A
Japanese Version of LLS Survey 2012

Appendix B
English Version of LLS Survey 2012