



Language Learning Strategies Used by Successful English Learners

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Reference Data:

Aizawa, A. (2024). Language learning strategies used by successful English learners. In B. Lacy, R. P. Lege, & P. Ferguson (Eds.), *Growth Mindset in Language Education*. JALT. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2023-11>

In this study, the author referred to an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to explore the use of English language learning strategies by first language (L1) Japanese speakers: those recognised at a level of CEFR B2 and above. Notably, the manners of language learning strategies varies between individuals. Thus, through examining the strategies employed by successful language learners, fellow learners can potentially enhance their own language learning processes by adopting and adapting these effective strategies. Four participants took part in the study, with five kindred characteristics emerging through their demonstrations: 1) doing extensive reading and listening; 2) using the grammar translation method; 3) reading aloud; 4) creating opportunities to use English; and 5) seeking feedback. As all the participants understood the importance of selecting appropriate learning strategies, it is suggested teachers may help learners through incorporating direct strategy training in their lessons, helping them become independent learners.

本稿では英語習熟度がCEFR B2以上の日本語を第一言語とする英語学習者の英語学習方略の使用について、自由記述式の質問紙調査と半構造化インタビューを用いて明らかにする。個々人が選択する学習方略、また個々人に適した学習方略は異なるものの、英語学習成功者と呼ばれる学習者の学習方略を明らかにすることによって、英語学習者全体に応用可能な方略が見いだされることが期待できる。本研究には4名の英語学習成功者が参加し、以下の5つの学習方略が研究協力者に共通していることが分かった。すなわち、1)多聴多読、2)文法訳読法の使用、3)音読、4)英語を使う機会を自ら作る、5)産出した英語に対してフィードバックを求めること、である。4名の協力者全員が自分に適した学習方略を選択することの重要性を理解していたことから、英語教師は授業内で学習方略に関するトレーニングを実施することで、自立した学習者を育む手助けができることが示唆された。

This paper covers the use of language learning strategies (LLS) by successful English learners, to whom Japanese is their L1. Ordinarily, research on LLS concerns individual learners rather than language learners in general, as the selection of a particular LLS is highly dependent on the individual learner, the task, and the environment they are learning within (Oxford, 2017). Studies on LLS have been developed predicated on the notion that strategies used by successful language learners can be universally applied to language learners, enhancing their proficiency to a greater end (e.g., Pawlak, 2021; Rubin, 1975). Through their desire to remedy an absence in active research, the researcher posed the following research questions in the present study:

RQ1. What types of LLS do successful L1 Japanese learners of English use?

RQ2. For what reason did they pursue these manners of education?

The study used a semi-structured interview to uncover the notably qualitative nature of LLS selections made by successful L1 Japanese learners of English.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies

LLS concerns a suite of conscious thoughts and actions learners select and employ to manage different tasks, from the early to advanced stages of language use (Cohen, 2012). These strategies are both complex and dynamic, aimed at regulating cognitive, emotional, and social elements. Through these behaviours, one may freely achieve language tasks, improve performance, and enhance their long-term proficiency (Oxford, 2017).

LLS are the measures learners elect to facilitate through their own language learning outside the classroom, primarily for self-study. Pawlak (2021) illustrated the importance of investigating the different factors that influence the use of LLS: encompass enjoyment, positive emotions, willingness to communicate, and a working memory were of primary

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interest. Through this, base concepts may emerge: boredom, curiosity, and perseverance. Additionally, motivation, personality, and emotions play crucial roles in the use of LLS. Consequently, this indicates factors regarding age, gender, beliefs on language learning, prior experience, environment, task types, task difficulties, and various psychological factors can impact the selection and, in turn, effectiveness of these strategies. Moreover, Pawlak (2021) raised a series of questions, interrogating whether the use of LLS remains stable over time or changes, with respect to their intensity, the range of strategies employed, and their functions. This underscores the imperative for empirical research to test the ultimate dynamism of LLS, recognising their quantitative and qualitative value over extended periods of time.

Successful Language Learners

Research on the choice of LLS between successful and poor language learners has been of particular interest to researchers, educators, and students in equal measure. Regarding the latter two, students want to be successful in their learning and teachers want their students to be successful (Cohen & Henry, 2019). Successful language learners can also be referred to as self-regulated learners who can plan, monitor, and evaluate (i.e., self-regulate) their learning (Chen et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2018). In order to become a self-regulated learner, students are expected to independently select LLS, rather than their teachers (Lee, 2017). Habók and Magyan (2017) found LLS selection to alternate according to the learners' proficiencies, attitudes, and achievements at school. For example, more proficient learners employed a broad range of strategies: namely cognitive strategies for analysing information, in tandem with metacognitive strategies for planning and monitoring their learning. Learners of a lesser proficiency, however, used these strategies in fewer instances to lower efficacy.

Method

To examine the use of English LLS by successful L1 Japanese speakers, an open ended-questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants.

Participants

The participants were four Japanese learners of English. Each were selected according to Takeuchi's (2003) criteria, albeit with some adaptations:

1. The learners were born in Japan.

2. The learners started to study English seriously after the age of 12.
3. The learners have studied English mainly in Japan. If they have study abroad experience, it should be at a later stage in their language learning process and the duration should be limited.
4. The learners do not primarily use English at home, eminently expressing Japanese.
5. The learners use English in their work.
6. The participants are judged by Takeuchi to have an "exceptionally high" proficiency in English.

Criterion 5 in Takeuchi's (2003) research was not fulfilled, as the author was unable to contact participants who used English in their work on a daily basis. The judgement of Criterion 6 was made by the author, rather than Takeuchi. The data below details the profile of each participant, Kana, Misa, Toko, and Saki (all names are pseudonyms). G1 to G12 refers to the first year of elementary school to the third year of high school. Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior refer to their years of undergraduate studies.

Table 1
Participant Information

	Kana	Misa	Toko	Saki
Age	22	22	22	22
English proficiency	Eiken Pre-1 (Freshman), TOEIC 910 (Sophomore)	Eiken Pre-1 (G11), IELTS OA 7.5 (Senior)	IELTS OA 8.0 (Freshman)	TOEFL iBT 98 (Junior)
Learning experiences at private schools	<i>Eikaiwa</i> (G3-G4)	<i>Eikaiwa</i> (G1-G4), <i>Juku</i> (G9-G12)	<i>Juku</i> (G10-G12)	<i>Eikaiwa</i> (G4-6)
Study abroad experiences	Australia (3 weeks, G10)	Australia (3 weeks, G10), USA (4 weeks, G11)	Canada (4 weeks Freshman)	Canada (4 weeks, Sophomore)

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	Kana	Misa	Toko	Saki
Current English use	Occasionally asked to create or translate work documents in English	Preparation for postgraduate degree in an English-speaking country	Daily reading of English journal papers	Not using

Context

With the exception of Toko, all the participants attended *eikaiwa* schools during their primary school years. Nevertheless, these *eikaiwa* sessions - around an hour in duration - are designed to court familiarity and enjoyment in the English language, rather than instruct students on vocabulary and grammar. Misa and Toko attended a *juku* (cram school) to prepare for university entrance exams. Each participated in an English study abroad programme, though none had previously lived abroad.

The author studied at the same junior and senior high schools and university as the participants: they shared a compulsory first-year English class at university, occurring twice a week. Kana and Saki worked in Japanese companies, Toko was studying English-related subjects at postgraduate level, and Misa was preparing to study non-English-related subjects at postgraduate level within an English-speaking country. Consequently, the author characterised them as successful English learners, reserving great means of comprehension; this judgement was predicated upon classroom interactions and English proficiency test scores.

Questionnaire

The study consisted of two parts: first, a questionnaire, followed by an individual, semi-structured interview with the author. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, including four questions designed to explore the participants' erstwhile learning experiences and proficiency:

1. Have you ever studied English in private schools (e.g. *eikaiwa*, *juku*)? Please write down when and what type of school you went to.
2. Have you ever lived or studied abroad? Please write down the name of the city, purpose, length of stay and when you left.
3. How often and why do you use English now?

4. If applicable, please write down the results of any English language tests you have taken. Please indicate the year or grade in which you took these tests.

Interview

The interviews, conducted via Zoom, featured the following questions:

1. What methods did you use to learn English?
2. Why did you choose these study methods?
3. How did you learn to use these study methods?
4. Have these study methods helped you to learn English?
5. Would you recommend these study methods to other learners of English?

The participants were asked to reflect on when they were actively studying English (i.e., junior high to university). The non-technical term “study methods” was used instead of “learning strategies” to make it easier for participants to understand what the author wanted to hear from them.

Procedures

The author sent the participant information form to some potential participants and asked if they were willing to participate in this research. Then, the consent form was sent to the individuals who agreed to participate. They completed the approximately fifteen minute questionnaire prior to a one-hour, semi-structured interview. Participants reaffirmed their consent before the start of both. The participants could choose to be interviewed in either English or Japanese: all chose Japanese, as they felt more comfortable talking in Japanese to explain the details of their English learning experiences.

Ethics

The consent form and the research information sheet were created under the provision of a module conductor, whose class the author was enrolled in for their postgraduate studies. The forms were distributed to the participants prior to the start of this study. Before their direct involvement, participants read the research information and completed the consent form. Furthermore, participants agreed that the interviews would be videotaped, with their pseudonyms and anonymised comments reserved for research purposes. Ethical approval for publishing this paper was obtained



from the Research Ethics Committee, within the Graduate School on Intercultural Communication, Rikkyo University (#2023-21).

Results and Discussion: Overall Characteristics

All participants were able to answer clearly and precisely for what purposes they used specific LLS. They addressed all four language learning skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), in tandem with a variety of LLS, to improve their skills. Similar results were found in a study conducted in South Korea reporting that effective language learners were motivated to exercise a great number of LLS, with their learning balanced across these four skills (Shin et al., 2018). The participants understood that to use English productively, they needed to have sufficient, receptive knowledge of the language. It was evident from the interviews that they wanted to learn all four skills equally, though each mentioned that they primarily wanted to use English to communicate with people from abroad.

Furthermore, the participants were interested in adopting these learning strategies in other subjects. Saki, for instance, had more English lessons than other subjects in junior and senior high schools, yet she consciously balanced the amount of time to study all subjects. She believed a fluency in English attained through neglecting other subjects would ultimately hinder her communication skills, as it would lessen her general knowledge. Misa reflected on her greater focus on extracurricular activities (e.g., being a member of the English Drama Club), noting her experience in these activities to have motivated her to improve her English. As self-regulation is an important factor of successful learning (Oxford, 2017), the author could clearly understand from the interviews that participants balanced their English learning with other important matters (e.g., university entrance exams, extracurricular activities).

The participants' English learning goals varied, yet they settled on two types of goals: short-term and long-term goals. The former included achieving satisfactory exam results or using English when travelling. The latter, however, were grander in design: studying in English-speaking countries, or becoming a Japanese-English translator. Short-term goals are those that are relatively easy to achieve and are updated frequently; long-term goals can be challenging, though they may motivate learners to draw closer to their ideal selves (Dörnyei & Henry, 2022). Participants reported that having multiple goals at each stage of their learning journey significantly heightened their motivation to study English; achieving incremental progress was highly meaningful to them.

Language Learning Strategies for Receptive Skills

Extensive Reading and Listening

All participants emphasised the importance of engaging in a great volume of reading and listening; three asserted that this LLS was highly practical. Consequently, they began reading and listening to content befitting of their aptitude after attaining a high level of proficiency. As beginners, their primary focus was on learning through reciting exercises. They advanced from this behaviour after finding themselves at a certain end - though each found this point to be rather vague. Toko mentioned that she changed her manner of study after passing Eiken Grade 3. She began to learn English through osmosis, heightened exposure raising her fluency. As she was studying English in Japan, she had to seek out alternate means of language input independently. When listening, she tried not to just play the sound, rather raising her awareness through concentrating on listening and identifying the context. Through rote practice, she would be able to understand the content without excessive concentration. Toko, for instance, tried to remember short sentences she had read or heard; she then used this knowledge to effectively produce thoughts in English.

When they came across unfamiliar vocabulary, all of them mentioned that they initially guessed its meaning from context alone. Even if they could understand the context without knowing the meaning of the word, they tried to learn as much vocabulary as possible through extensive reading. Thus, they highlighted or made notes of unknown words to ensure their guesses were correct, using dictionaries or internet searches after reading. Although three participants noted the efficacy of extensive reading through graded readers, introduced as part of their schooling, Saki mentioned that she could not find interesting books, finding the process boring. From this, one may conclude students' assessment of useful LLS to differ in practice.

Grammar Translation Method

Three of the participants commented on the use of Japanese when learning English and their preferences for grammar translation methods, switching between the two respectively. Kana and Misa referenced an English teacher in high school who often asked them to translate short sentences from Japanese into English: both preferred this method, rather than listening to grammatical explanations delivered through lecturing. They endeavoured to translate literally, rather than idiomatically, to refine the vocabulary and grammar they were learning at the time. Misa said that memorising these sentences helped her to learn fixed English expressions. She was not asked to practice translating



the sentences for their homework. However, as she preferred methods exhibited in class, she decided to adopt this strategy for their self-study. The interview revealed that some learners prefer revising English through the grammar translation method, despite MEXT having advocated for a shift towards more communicative teaching methods from the 2014 academic year onward (MEXT, 2014).

Language Learning Strategies for Productive Skills

Reading Aloud

Participants all used materials featuring several dialogues and reading exercises. Saki raised the importance of reading longer sentences aloud, believing simply reciting individual words would not teach her how to speak fluently in English with appropriate intonation and punctuation. Furthermore, she mentioned that she used the shadowing method, wherein she did not refer to a script, instead listening to the audio and imitating it immediately after its conclusion. Shadowing is a regarded method in Japan, proven to be an effective LLS for beginners (Hamada, 2019). Then, Kana explained the use of audio players. When she was in junior high school, the homework for the English class involved listening to the audio, before copying the dialogues and example sentences. Her parents had to evaluate her success, or at least put their stamp on the worksheet to confirm she had completed the task, indicating whether she had performed suitably or otherwise. Kana noted that during her junior high school years, reading aloud was little more than another of her assigned homework tasks. However, as her proficiency in English advanced, she acknowledged this practice as notably beneficial, opting to continue reading aloud - irrespective of its prescription, completing it independently. Audio players can be replaced by smartphones or PCs, wherein learners can access English listening materials in a variety of ways; YouTube and podcast platforms serve as popular platforms.

Creating Opportunities to Use English

As the participants all mentioned that they did not have the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom, they tried to use English frequently within school, which was a practice continuously advised by most of their English teachers. Regarding their endeavours, Misa was a member of the English Drama Club when she was in junior and senior high school, whilst Toko was a member of the English Speech Society at university; each had ample opportunities to employ English through extracurricular means. All the participants in this study took part in a study abroad programme,

motivated by a desire to improve their English. Through their travels, their confidence in expressing English increased, thus encouraging them to further improve their skills via heightened study after returning to Japan. This exchange, moreover, motivated Misa to pursue her postgraduate degree within an English-speaking country.

Asking for Feedback

Ordinarily, people do not explicitly correct learners' mistakes or ask for explanations if they could not quite understand the meaning, even if what the learners said was incorrect or unnatural. All the participants mentioned that they asked their host family or friends among them, to address their mistakes or mispronunciations in order to improve their speaking skills. Kana believed that the mistakes should be corrected immediately, less those errors became fossilised: ingrained to a degree difficult to excise.

In a similar respect to speaking, participants asked for feedback upon practicing their writing. Saki mentioned that she wrote diaries in English every day, recognising it as a positive LLS. However, in the absence of outside feedback, the vocabulary and grammar she used became inextricable that she was unable to use different ways of writing to achieve a sound flow, nor express more complicated structures. Toko, additionally, addressed the importance of receiving feedback in writing which did not have to be from L1 English speakers. In her instance, peer scrutiny helped to improve her writing skills. She believed that any form of guidance would be helpful, as she understood that her ability to produce English would not improve all at once but it would grow in small increments.

Conclusion

The study illustrates the importance of selecting effective LLS tailored to individual needs, thereby optimising English language learning. All participants recognised the importance of using a variety of LLS that cover all four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). They actively sought opportunities to practise these skills, requesting feedback for further refinement. This approach highlights the interdependence of strategic choices and the pursuit of continuous improvement, thus demonstrating strategic, deliberate practice is crucial to language acquisition.

The findings of this study are of particular pertinence to both language learners and teachers. For learners, understanding and implementing different LLS can lead to more efficient and effective language acquisition. Conversely, language teachers can facilitate this process by incorporating strategy training into their curriculum and guiding learners

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in identifying and using strategies that suit their learning styles and goals. Participants' experiences suggest that teacher guidance and the integration of multiple strategies into classroom activities and homework can significantly increase their awareness of the ultimate flexibility of LLS.

Moreover, the setting of both short and long-term language learning goals was identified as a critical factor in maintaining motivation and encouraging diligent study habits. The participants' ability to articulate their goals and their commitment to recording incremental progress further emphasises the importance of goal setting in language learning. Also, setting language learning goals was found to encourage learners to study more diligently and select effective LLSs.

This study offers insights that can inform teaching practice and learner strategies, thereby sanctioning improved English language teaching. Further, valuable guidance can be gleaned for those involved in language teaching and learning through practical demonstrations of different LLS, highlighting the benefits of strategic learning and goal setting.

Two limitations of this study are that only four learners were interviewed, each having attended the same school. Through interviewing a more diverse pool of learners across a suite of institutions, future researchers could possibly identify other characteristics, noting if a particular LLS is more popular than others among successful learners. Additionally, further research could focus on languages other than English learnt by L1 Japanese speakers. For example, due to the similarities in script between Chinese and Japanese, mutual learners may use different types of LLS to optimise their learning. Therefore, the strategies employed by successful Japanese learners can be observed, thus recognising how Japanese can best be studied.

Bio Data

Ayako Aizawa is a PhD student in Intercultural Communication Studies at Rikkyo University. Her research interests include second language acquisition and language testing, with a particular focus on testing L1 Japanese speakers' knowledge of English formulaic language.

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