CHAPTER 10
LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY ASSESSMENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TASK BASED INVENTORY FOR LEARNERS OF JAPANESE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

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Abstract

The concept of language learning strategy measurement is of great relevance to researchers concerned with language strategy assessment and more widely, in the field of second language acquisition. Despite a long research tradition, Japanese language has mainly featured as the target language in published research about strategy use in regards to orthography, specifically kanji learning. Although strategy measurement inventories have been developed for kanji learning, “holistic” strategy use inventories have not been a focus for researchers. In this regard, holistic means all modes of language use, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This chapter describes the process of developing a holistic task-based strategy measurement survey, sensitive to the demands of a specific target language (Japanese) in a foreign language learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies are actions a learner consciously or unconsciously takes to improve the rate of language acquisition either in a foreign language learning environment or a second language learning environment. Language learning strategies are important determinants of language proficiency, and are affected by a variety of learner and non-learner variables including ethnicity (Grainger, 1997), gender (Green & Oxford, 1995), learning styles (Oxford, 2001), target language and proficiency (White, 1995). Oxford (2001) noted that language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how, and how well, our students learn a second language. In short, strategy use in second language learning (L2) is related to proficiency or achievement.

This chapter describes a study that investigates the process of developing a task-based strategy measurement survey, sensitive to the
demands of a specific target language (Japanese) in a foreign language learning environment.

RATIONALE

Language learning strategy researchers have used various methods to gather and record data on learning strategies. In addition to the retrospective questionnaire or survey, researchers have also used retrospective interviews, think aloud protocols and task-based strategy measurement instruments. Each of these data gathering methods has their own distinctive advantages (Cohen, 1998). The main advantages of questionnaires or surveys are that they are quick, easily collated and analysed and able to be used for statistical analysis of large numbers of participants. The advantage of interviews and think-aloud protocols is that in depth and personal responses from participants can be gleaned and ambiguities explained. A drawback to data gathering using surveys is the possibility of a learner not fully understanding a particular survey item due to ambiguous wording and an inability to clarify the meaning of a specific question. Part of this confusion by learners relates to the lack of context in which learners are asked to make decisions about their strategy use. Most strategy surveys do not require a student to complete a language task and hence, reliance on strategy surveys for measuring strategy use is totally reliant on the learner’s memory. Further confusion is possible due to the fact that as learning strategies become automatic, usually at higher levels of proficiency, they become an unconscious process (Cohen, 1998) and may not be reported in a retrospective survey, although they in fact may be used regularly.

Task-based strategy measurement instruments represent a relatively new direction for strategy assessment described by Oxford, Cho, Leung and Hae-Jin Kim (2004, p.2) as “examining specific strategies used when students do a particular task.” The rationale for analyzing strategy use whilst on task is further enhanced by the fact that successful learners choose task appropriate strategies in specific combinations and sequences for certain tasks, known as a “strategy chain” and it is exactly this choice of appropriate strategies for appropriate tasks that also characterizes the distinction between successful and unsuccessful language learners.

STRATEGY USE

A review of the literature reveals that this relationship between task and strategy use was first recognized almost two decades ago by Long (1985). Chamot and Kupper (1989) found that certain macro skills
encouraged certain strategies. For example, listening and reading tasks/skills encouraged inferencing, whereas writing tasks encouraged planning and self-evaluation. A study by Ikeda and Takeuchi (2000) emphasized the importance of including real language tasks when assessing strategy use. Takeuchi (2003) followed up this study to measure strategies of good language learners conducted in the Japanese ESL/FL context (Japanese nationals). Takeuchi used specific skill area strategy categories in addition to the metacognitive category, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The relevant finding is that skill-specific strategies related to conscious learning were discovered as being unique to the Japanese EFL/FL environment. “The distinction between the common strategies and the context specific strategies could be important in categorizing strategies” (Takeuchi, 2003, p.11).

Oxford et al. (2004) also noted the increasing role of task-based strategy assessment. The authors completed a replication study in order to control for certain variables that confounded some of the results of the Ikeda and Takeuchi study. The significance of the study is the conclusion that general strategy surveys like the Strategy Inventory For Language Learning (SILL), (Oxford, 1990) should be complemented by task-based strategy surveys.

The review of the literature reveals the majority of research in this field has focused on English, either as a second language or as a foreign language, and there is only a small body of research related to Languages Other Than English (LOTE) including some Asian languages, such as Japanese. Additionally, the majority of research has classified strategy use based on two major systems, of which Oxford’s six factor model and the accompanying SILL is one of the most widely used.

The six SILL factors are:

1. **Memory strategies**, such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information.

2. **Cognitive strategies**, such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means.

3. **Compensation strategies**, like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge.

4. **Metacognitive strategies** allow learners to control their own cognition—that is, to coordinate the learning process by
using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating.

5. **Affective strategies** help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes.

6. **Social strategies** help students learn through interaction with others.

As a result of stringent testing, use and review over many years, the SILL is highly regarded by researchers in all conceivable language learning contexts and with a great variety of languages, as a reliable research instrument and is used in either its original form or in a modified form. Despite its reliability, however, there is a need to create language specific inventories in order to cater for structural differences in languages. Oxford (1989, 236) noted that the “Language being studied has an influence on the strategies that are used.” In a later study Oxford (1996, p.249) noted, “Different target languages and different native languages might have major influences on language learning strategy selection...Researchers have considered this issue to a small degree but more thought and investigation is merited on this topic.” Oxford and Schleppegrell (1988) noted that there are languages in which it is much easier to master speaking and listening skill language learning strategies than reading and writing.

The relevance of this argument is that different languages have special characteristics that may require the use of specific strategies (Grainger, 2005). Hence, in order to measure these specific strategies, the data gathering instruments used by researchers must take into account these characteristics. A concrete example which illustrates this point is that if a target language does not have script based writing systems (like Japanese), then strategy use surveys have no necessity to include questions that ask learners about how they go about learning ideographs (like kanji). If the strategy use survey is not designed to include items that seek information about strategies used to learn or recall kanji, then this data will not be forthcoming.

A number of published strategy surveys have been developed specifically for learners of Japanese. These include those by Bourke (1996) and Gamage (2004). However, these inventories focus specifically on kanji learning and ignore the oral/aural aspects of learning Japanese.

**RESEARCH OVERVIEW**

This chapter focuses on the research undertaken as part of a doctorate where the purpose was to create a Japanese language specific strategy
measurement instrument using multiple data gathering techniques. This would form a “pilot” survey which would be trialed and analysed using appropriate statistical techniques. This chapter describes the process of creating the pilot survey. In the process of creating the pilot survey, the major research questions were:

1. What are the language learning strategies used by learners of Japanese in a foreign language learning environment?
2. Are different strategies used at different levels of proficiency?
3. To what extent are the strategies used different to those on Oxford’s SILL?

RESEARCH METHOD

Twelve university students studying Japanese at a regional institution volunteered to participate in the study involving think aloud protocols and retrospective interviews. There were three males and nine females. Students were all from the same faculty and ranged in age from 16 to 26. Participants were all native English speakers.

The relationship between proficiency and strategy use was not a focus of the study. Nevertheless, students from different proficiency levels including beginner (three participants), intermediate (five participants); and advanced (four participants) took part in the study. Proficiency was measured by course grade and cross-checked by an oral proficiency interview using a recognized proficiency interview framework (International Second Language Proficiency Rating, ISLPR, Ingram and Wylie 1997, formerly ASLPR) conducted by an accredited proficiency interviewer. Each participant had varying degrees of experience in studying the Japanese language, ranging from six months to eight years. The oral proficiency ratings were conducted by this author, and confirmed by two other experienced raters, both native speakers of Japanese. The oral proficiency interview was a formal assessment requirement of the Japanese language course each participant was undertaking at the university, and not conducted specifically for this study. Proficiency in listening, reading and writing was determined by formal course grade for the year. The materials used in listening, reading and writing were developed by the same native speaker instructors. The data gathering was completed over two semesters of study. Demographic information was gained via responses to a language background questionnaire. All participants were briefed about the purpose of the study prior to completing the data gathering sessions.

To gather data on strategy use, each participant was asked:
1. to complete a think aloud protocol (TAP) and

2. to undertake a retrospective, task-based strategy use interview lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

The purpose was to reveal the strategies used by students in actual task-based situations. Students completed listening and reading tasks and were asked to describe their “method of attack” whilst completing the tasks. Due to the poor results from an earlier trial, speaking and writing were not “tested” using this procedure. The content of the materials used in the protocols was both authentic and teacher made. The protocols were audio taped, transcribed and analysed. Every strategy used was written down and recorded. Frequency of strategy use was not considered as a criterion. The strategies used were then classified into a pre-determined framework based on macro skills. Any strategies that did not fit the macro skill framework (listening, speaking, reading, writing) were also noted, resulting in the creation of an additional category of strategies, and roughly equivalent to the commonly accepted and used category of metacognitive strategy use. The protocols allowed the direct observation of the strategies used by learners as they engaged in the tasks, rather than solely relying on the information given by students regarding the habitual strategies they claim to use. A major limitation of the TAP was the lack of different strategies forthcoming as a result of the very specific nature of the tasks given.

Secondly, each participant completed a task-based virtual interview, describing strategies to be used in hypothetical language learning situations, once again defined by macro-skill (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing). A number of pre-designated situations were outlined to each participant. The interviewer was free to pursue any potentially interesting situation, defined or not defined beforehand. Situations were defined in terms of the task/situation, the context/environment, the roles and the participants. For example, “You are in Japan as an exchange student, catching a train by yourself at the train station. There are many people on the platform. You hear an announcement in Japanese that you don’t understand. What do you do?” All interviews were taped and transcribed. Strategies were identified and classified by macro skill. All strategies noted by students were recorded, irrespective of frequency. Participants were able to seek clarification from the interviewer if needed. The interviews were conducted in English.
RESULTS

The results will be discussed in relation to the three research questions.

1. What are the language learning strategies used by learners of Japanese in a foreign language learning environment?

The 12 respondents identified a total of 116 different strategies across the data gathering techniques, covering the four macro skills. A total of 25 listening strategies, 25 speaking strategies, 26 reading strategies and 22 writing strategies were identified by all respondents. In addition to the macro skill based strategies, which were easily classified, an additional 18 strategies were identified, related to metacognitive use.

2. Are different strategies used at different levels of proficiency?

The beginner learners revealed 38 strategies, the intermediate learners revealed 50 strategies and the advanced learners revealed 40 strategies. Due to repetition of strategies across the proficiency levels, the total number of different strategies was reduced from 128 to 116. Although proficiency in this study was not a focus, some attempt was made to analyse the differences in strategy use between the proficiency levels.

Comparing the strategies across the three levels of proficiency revealed some interesting patterns. All learners, regardless of proficiency level, used many strategies. All learners liked to listen to native speakers in a variety of contexts. All learners listened selectively for key words and phrases in order to understand the gist of the messages they were hearing. Although the dictionary was used at all levels, more proficient learners used it as a last resort. All learners used a variety of common media, including familiar movies and Japanese songs. The use of music is a common theme with all learners of Japanese, culminating in the penchant for Karaoke at the highest levels. Traditional compensation strategies (e.g. asking for repetition, expressing a lack of understanding) were used at all levels.

Looking at the different proficiency levels, the number of contextual resources increased to facilitate guessing. Learners also became more confident in using their Japanese to paraphrase what they thought they had heard in order to clarify meaning. Pretending to understand was a characteristic of the two higher levels, although students at all levels also had no fear in expressing their lack of understanding at certain times. Surprisingly, even the most proficient students used translation as a strategy, although at times they also expressed a strong desire to avoid translation. It seems that with proficiency also comes the ability to discriminate the
times when translating is needed. Having said this however, the most
proficient users refused to ask for meaning in English from their native
speaker partners, although they themselves admitted using translation as
a last resort, preferring to make sense of the Japanese they had heard.
This is evidenced by the readiness to ask for repetition in Japanese, and
not English.

Strategies common to specific levels revealed no specific patterns, but
a hypothesis could be that this was probably due to the limited number
of participants at each level. However, at the advanced level there was
an increase in the contextual factors that learners used to comprehend
spoken Japanese, to the extent that the most proficient learner would
regularly ask for meaning of something she had heard via the written
word (kanji). This is also evidence of the lack of desire to have to refer to
English in order to comprehend something heard. The use of karaoke as
a means of improving listening ability was a striking feature of all learners
at the advanced stage only. Evidence of increasing language ability is the
strategy of asking for a simile, noted by one learner at the intermediate
stage. Only beginners indicated the strategy of listening to non-native
speakers. This is most likely indicative of the classroom learning situation,
rather than the target language environment that many of the higher level
students may have used to contextualise their strategy use.

Some strategies revealed the influence of the foreign language learning
environment which promoted and highlighted the use of certain types
of strategies more suitable to classroom learning. For example: “I speak
Japanese with non Japanese friends”; “I read my written corrections”; “I
read non authentic materials like text books”; “I am prepared by carrying
all my language learning materials like text books.” However, students
also identified strategies that are more applicable in a second language
learning environment. For example: “I immerse myself in the language”;
“I read authentic texts”; “I listen to authentic radio programmes”; “I watch
Japanese media like movies, DVDs”; “I look for learning opportunities
around me”.

The influence of the written characteristics of Japanese is evident
in the emergence of the strategies which emphasize the use of different
resources for learning different aspects of Japanese (e.g. a specialist kanji
dictionary). Hence, use of a kanji dictionary is a resource not needed in
alphabet- based languages.

3. To what extent are the strategies used different to those on
Oxford’s SILL?
Research question 3 related to comparison with the SILL. In comparison with the SILL, different strategies were revealed, including such strategies as “I create new words using English”; “I substitute English words”; “I make English words sound Japanese”. Once again, this is a specific characteristic and flexibility of the Japanese language, where words are borrowed from other languages and Japanised by using the sound system of the Japanese language to sound out foreign words using a Japanese pronunciation. Many languages borrow words from other languages and they become common use (e.g. sushi). However, the Japanese language seems to do this more than other languages. It is particularly commonplace in the environment in which this study took place. This was an environment in which native speakers of Japanese studied daily alongside English native speakers, some proficient in Japanese and others not, resulting in the development of a kind of “hybrid” language characterized by a large amount of code switching between both sets of speakers.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the study suggest that the strategies used by learners of Japanese in a foreign language learning environment are different to strategies used by learners of other languages. The multiple data gathering methods were successful in revealing a large number of strategies, evenly distributed across the four macro skills.

Due to the ethnic homogeneity of the 12 respondents it is not possible to estimate the impact of nationality or ethnicity on the choice of strategies. Indeed, this is a significant determinant of strategy use (Grainger, 1997). This is particularly so in the case of a script-based language like Japanese which has some similarities to other Asian languages (Chinese and Korean). Many learners of Japanese, who are from Korean and Chinese backgrounds, reach levels of proficiency far beyond that of speakers with native English backgrounds (personal observation). Future studies involving these nationalities learning Japanese should also be undertaken and compared.

A further limitation to the current study is the gender imbalance in favour of females. Given the fact there is strong evidence to suggest that gender differences impact upon strategy use (Green and Oxford, 1995), a recommendation would be to correct the gender imbalances evident in many of the studies of language learning strategies in the Japanese learning contexts.
A major focus for future research should also be one which targets learners of Japanese in the second language learning environment, namely in Japan itself. Certainly, it is surprising that such studies, written in English, are yet to be done. Such a study would allow comparisons of patterns of strategy use to be made between the L2 and the FL environments, thereby enlightening researchers about the specific impacts of environment upon strategy use. This comparison is not possible with the current study. Hence, the results of this study, specifically, the likelihood that strategy factors and specific strategies used by learners of Japanese in a foreign language learning environment, are influenced by the learning environment, is not yet fully supported by research evidence.

One of the weaknesses of the current inventory is the lack of detail with regard to Kanji learning strategies. This is inevitable given the holistic nature of the survey which attempts to measure strategy use across the four modes of language use, rather than targeting specific modes. At present the inventory numbers 116 items. This is not considered ideal given the length of time required to complete the survey. However it is acknowledged that specific mode based inventories like that developed by Bourke (1997), provide specific focuses for researchers and invaluable detail. It is hoped that the inventory reported in this study will complement these existing inventories.

The most significant recommendation is that the survey reported here be trialed with a large number of participants and then tested for reliability and validity in the same way as the SILL was (forthcoming). This would ensure that learners of Japanese have access to a reliable survey instrument that has been designed for Japanese as a target language, and hence, accurately measures strategy use. Statistical analysis of this trial will enable the survey to be trimmed by eliminating items which do not predict proficiency well.

REFERENCES


