

What can we learn from good foreign language learners? A qualitative study in the Japanese foreign language context

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Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study conducted in the Japanese foreign language (FL) context about good foreign language learners, in which the author analyzes the strategy use reported in 67 books on “how I have learned a foreign language.” Results suggest that there are strategies especially favored in the Japanese FL context and that the use of some strategies seems to be closely connected to specific stages of learning. Some research implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Early studies on good language learners (GLLs), such as Naiman et al. (1978), Rubin (1975), and Stevick (1989), among others, show that GLLs tend to share some behaviors (i.e., strategies) for learning and thus indicate that research on their strategies might help facilitate our understanding of the learning process of a second/foreign language. Since then, a large number of empirical studies have been conducted to ascertain the strategies favored by GLLs and the factors affecting their use (see Oxford, in press, for review). Recently, attempts to teach strategies also have been made around the world (Cohen, 1998; Dadour and Robbins, 1996; Ikeda and Takeuchi, 2003; Thompson and Rubin, 1996; among others).

Some studies, however, argue that the strategies frequently used by GLLs in an Asian FL (foreign language) context differ drastically from those in the North American SL (second language) context (Gu, 1996; LoCastro, 1994; Takeuchi et al., 1999; Takeuchi and Wakamoto, 2001). They also argue that the strategies preferred in the beginning stage of learning are not the same as those preferred in the advanced stage (Kimura, 1999; Takeuchi, 2002). Researchers, therefore, begin to feel the pressing need to go back once again to the contexts in which they are doing research and “dig out” the learning strategies preferred by GLLs in these contexts, while paying attention to the stages of learning. The study to be reported below has that purpose.¹

2. The study

2.1. Purpose

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the strategies preferred by GLLs in the Japanese FL context. In Japan, books on “how I have learned a foreign language” written by successful language learners are abundant. These books, based on the writers’ experiences, tell us how they had learned a foreign language. They are thus gold mines for strategy research. An analysis of these books was conducted to ascertain the preferences of strategy use by GLLs in the Japanese FL context.

2.2. Subjects and method

A total of 67 books were analyzed in this study.² Since some of the books were collections of essays on learning a foreign language, the data of 160 GLLs were available for the analysis. In all cases, their starting age of learning a foreign language was confirmed to be above 12, which is considered to be after or near the end of the critical period (Scovel, 2001). Their proficiency was estimated through the

descriptions in the books. All of the books were written in Japanese and published in Japan. Most authors (159 out of 160) were of Japanese nationality, and 25 of them were female. Foreign languages they had learned include Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Thai (in alphabetical order), but about 69% learned English (EFL).

For the analysis, the author read all 67 books and underlined the descriptions that contained learning strategies and/or the information on the stages of their use. These descriptions were then categorized according to the pre-determined definitions and categories of strategies. In categorizing, some samples were randomly selected and checked by another researcher. No significant discrepancy was found.³

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Metacognitive strategies

Special attention seems to have been paid by GLLs to the use of metacognitive strategies such as “maximizing opportunities to use the language,” “pushing oneself into using the language,” “learning intensively,” “learning regularly,” and “having a concrete need/plan for learning.” GLLs had tried very hard to find and increase their opportunities to use a foreign language as a means of communication. This seems to be especially important in a FL context, in which relatively few occasions to use the language are available. According to the data, finding and increasing opportunities started just after their learning of a foreign language had begun. GLLs also expressed the importance of pushing themselves into a situation where they had to use a slightly more advanced form of the foreign language to finish the task at hand. The data suggest that “pushing oneself into using a foreign language” started at the intermediate stage and continued to be used even at the advanced stage of their learning.

Another important finding is that most GLLs reported that they had literally immersed themselves in a foreign language at the intermediate stage of their learning process. Asleep or awake, they fully devoted themselves to the learning of a foreign language. Also, learning regularly is a key for the success of language learning. In the data, the author found many times words such as “everyday,” “every morning,” or “at least several times a week.” These words or phrases seem to suggest that our subjects had done the same kind of activities regularly. Metacognitive strategies have been considered to be vital for successful learning in SL literature (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990). The results reported above indicate that this seems to be also and especially true of a foreign language environment, such as Japan, in which contacts with the foreign language are relatively scarce, and thus strong commitment to learning and careful planning are indispensable for successful learning.

2.3.2. Strategies in a specific skill area

2.3.2.1. Listening.

GLLs often mentioned the “deep listening” strategies, which include such activities as dictation and demand deep processing of aural input. GLLs reported that they had spent much time on deep listening at the beginning and the intermediate stages of their learning and then, approximately at the middle of the intermediate stage, shifted to broad listening, in which listeners look for the outline of the input.

2.3.2.2. Reading.

Reading aloud many times and reading a lot are the two strategies preferred most by GLLs in the Japanese FL context. They seem to regard reading aloud as a strategy effective for internalizing the linguistic foundation or resources of the language they are learning. Through reading aloud many times, while paying attention to the phonological and the semantic aspects, they reported that they had internalized the linguistic system and obtained a “feel” for the language. This strategy was preferred especially at the beginning and the early intermediate stages. After gaining a “feel” for the language, they reported that they had begun reading a lot in the field in which they had an interest.

Another strategy preferred in the Japanese FL context is reading analytically. According to some GLLs, the strategy seems to promote deep processing of passages and thus to facilitate the language-learning process especially at the intermediate stage of their learning.

2.3.2.3. Speaking.

The most often used strategies were “memorizing basic sentences by vocalizing many times” and “pattern-practicing them thoroughly.” Many GLLs wrote that these strategies were helpful in increasing their linguistic resources and had them gain a “feel” of the language. The latter strategy was also effective for promoting the smooth utilization of the resources acquired. Another important finding is that at the intermediate and the advanced stages of their learning, GLLs emphasized accuracy over fluency. They seem to realize that once fluency is achieved, efforts for accuracy are indispensable for attaining highly advanced ability in a foreign language.

2.3.2.4. Vocabulary.

A first finding is that GLLs seem to think much of increasing basic vocabulary to a certain level (about 2500 words) at the beginning stage of their learning. A second finding is that extra attention has been paid to pronunciation in their vocabulary build-up. They first checked the pronunciation of a new word and then memorized the word by both reading it aloud and writing it down many times.

Lastly, as for guessing, they certainly guessed at the meaning, but at the same time, they made a note of unknown words and later checked their meanings in dictionaries.

2.3.2.5. Pronunciation.

Strong concern for pronunciation accuracy has been observed among GLLs. They reported that they had listened to the sounds and prosody of a foreign language many times, imitated them as perfectly as possible, and then checked the differences, if any, between the models and their speech. Strong concern for pronunciation accuracy reported in this study is compatible with the findings of some empirical studies such as Purcell and Suter (1980) and Moyer (1999), in which concern for pronunciation accuracy and receiving training on suprasegmental aspects might be good predictors for native-like pronunciation in adult learning. The other strategies frequently mentioned by GLLs are watching the mouth and lips of native speakers, and “shadowing” practices, which are often used in training interpreters.⁴

2.3.2.6. Writing.

The analysis suggests that reading a lot is a prerequisite for writing well. Reading materials can be good samples for their writing, and GLLs seem to have borrowed many expressions from the materials they read. Reading, however, does not automatically guarantee good writing. To improve their writing ability, GLLs reported that they had written regularly, had their writing corrected, and then memorized the corrected versions.

2.3.2.7. Grammar.

To GLLs, grammatical knowledge seems to be indispensable. They often wrote that child language acquisition and adult language learning are different. For adult learning, they said, conscious knowledge of grammar should play an important role to compensate for the partial loss of innate ability to learn a language. Some GLLs also reported that grammatical knowledge had contributed to the consolidation of their fragmented understanding of the language, and also to the re-analysis of memorized chunks.

3. Discussion

Table 1 is a summary of the findings, which seems to confirm that there are some strategies uniquely preferred in the Japanese FL context. They are (a) metacognitive strategies related to maximizing

input and, above all, the opportunities to use a foreign language; (b) skill-specific strategies related to conscious learning; (c) memory strategies related to internalizing the linguistic system; and (d) cognitive strategies for practicing, such as imitating, shadowing, and pattern-practicing. As for (a) above, since all the subjects in this study were in the FL environment, opportunities to use the language had to be sought vigorously, which resulted in the unique use of some metacognitive strategies. As for (b), in adult learning, as some empirical studies (e.g., DeKeyser, 2000) indicate, conscious learning seems to play an important role and thus the subjects often used some strategies related to conscious learning. As for (c) and (d), in the FL context, building and expanding the linguistic foundation or resources do not come as easily as they do in the SL context.

Learners in the FL context must devote time and energy to memorizing a certain number of basic sentences, and also must be sensitive to foreign sounds/prosody and imitate them as perfectly as possible. Accumulating static knowledge, however, does not promise any success in learning. Learners have to spend time and energy on pattern-practicing and then putting the knowledge to practical use. This is why some memory strategies for internalizing the linguistic system and cognitive strategies for practicing are preferred uniquely in the FL context.

Another finding is that the use of some strategies is common not only to the learners in the FL context, but also to those in the SL context reported in the North American literature. For example, emphasizing fluency over accuracy at the beginning stage is a strategy also often mentioned in the SL literature. The author thus assumes that the use of the common strategies might well fit the underlying learning process, which is common to us all. On the other hand, the use of context-specific, or environmental-unique, strategies might promote the survival of learners in the environment. So, the distinction between the common strategies and the context-specific strategies could be important in categorizing strategies.

Lastly, the results indicate that the use of some strategies seems to be closely connected to a certain stage of learning. Subjects often reported a shift in their strategies according to their learning stages. More attention, therefore, should be paid to the concept of the stages of learning in the future research on strategies.

Table 1
Summary of the strategies reported and the estimated learning stages in which they were used most.

Strategies	PLLs	GLLs	HALs	SLLs	Stage
Metacognitive strategies					
Knowing their own strategies concretely		X	X	X	ALL
Having concrete need/plan for learning				X	
Practicing regularly			X	X	BEG-INT
Maximizing opportunities to use the language		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Learning intensively			X	X	INT
Pushing oneself into using English		X	X	X	INT-ADV ?
Strategies in a specific skill area					
Listening					
Deep listening		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Broad listening	X	X	X		INT
Reading					

Reading aloud		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Reading analytically	X	X	X	X	INT
Reading a lot		X	X	X	INT
Reading in a specific field		X		X	INT
Avoid Translation			X	X	ALL
Speaking					
Memorizing sentences		X	X	X	BEG
Pattern-practicing		X	X	X	BEG
Speaking to oneself in English		X	X	X	INT
Emphasizing fluency over accuracy			X	X	BEG-INT
Emphasizing accuracy over fluency			X	X	ADV
Vocabulary					
Increasing basic vocabulary				X	BEG
Embedding new words in sentences		X	X	X	BEG
Always checking pronunciation of new words			X	X	BEG
Vocalizing and writing many times		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Guessing and confirming meanings		X		X	INT
Making a word list and memorizing words	X				BEG
Pronunciation					
Paying special attention to sounds/prosody		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Imitating, (recording,) and correcting		X	X	X	BEG-INT
Shadowing			X	X	INT
Watching carefully NS's lips and tongue			X	X	
Writing					
Borrowing expressions from good samples			X	X	INT
Writing regularly/having their writing corrected			X	X	INT
Grammar					
Learning consciously/ Attention to forms			X	X	INT-ADV

Legend: "X" in Table 1 indicates that the strategy was frequently mentioned. "PLLs" means "poor language learners," while "GLLs" indicates "good language learners" in Study 1. "HALs" means "highly advanced learners" in Study 2, and "SLLs" stands for "successful language learners" in Study 3. "Stage" indicates the estimated learning stage in which the strategy was used most (BEG: Beginning, INT: Intermediate, ADV: Advanced, ALL: All stages). A blank in the "Stage" column means "not enough data available for estimating the learning stages in which the strategy was used."

Notes

1 See Takeuchi (2002, 2003) for related studies.

2 Originally for this study, a total of 97 books were collected. Of these, 67 books were selected, based on the following seven criteria established by the author of this article. The first five criteria involve the book author's personal history: (1) foreign language proficiency (confirmed to be excellent by test scores, qualifications, and/or by an experienced language teacher); (2) family background (i.e., no bilingual elements); (3) academic background (no special language training worth mentioning at school); (4) overseas experiences (very little or no experience); and (5) starting age of learning (no earlier than age 12). The remaining two criteria concern the descriptions in the books: (6) descriptions should be based on the book author's personal experiences, not on his/her beliefs or philosophy; and (7) descriptions should be concrete and with examples.

3 The agreement of the analyses was approximately 80%.

4 Shadowing is "an act or task in which (the) learner tracks the heard speech (in a foreign language) and vocalizes it as exactly as possible while listening attentively to the incoming information" (Tamai, 2001).

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