Strategy Instruction for Learners of Japanese: How do you do it and what's in it for them?

Andrew D. Cohen

Abstract

The paper describes and illustrates the recent upsurge in ways that learner strategy instruction has contributed to enhancing both the learning and the use of English and other second languages in the classroom, on internet sites, and elsewhere. This chapter starts by defining and classifying language learner strategies in general, and then noting strategies that may be particular to the learning of Japanese. Second, attention is called to possible venues for strategy instruction. Then the primary characteristics of strategy instruction are presented, as well as their application to adult learners. Next, the impact of strategy instruction on learners is reviewed, and suggestions are made for future research. Since the successful integration of learner strategy instruction into the curriculum depends in no small part on the knowledge, understanding, and skill of the teacher, the paper also deals with obstacles faced and the implications for teacher education.

Keywords: strategy instruction, language learner strategies, communication strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies, social strategies, speech acts, styles- and strategies-based instruction

1 Introduction

It is now likely that second language (L2) teachers will agree in principle with the statement that it is important not only to teach the L2, but also to support students in being strategic in their learning and use of the L2, since students' use of strategies has been proven to enhance outcomes. It remains a challenge for even the best informed and motivated teachers of Japanese to figure out how to provide strategy instruction. For the purposes of this paper, the term strategy instruction will be used

1 L2 is being used as a generic term to cover both second language and foreign language instruction and learning. Undoubtedly there are genuine differences in terms of how strategy instruction may impact learners in these two contexts.
as a cover term for any efforts by teachers, textbooks, or websites to focus attention on strategies that learners could utilize in order to facilitate their learning and use of the L2. Strategy instruction is intended to support students in their efforts to become more effective and efficient foreign language learners through gaining greater awareness of their language strategy repertoire.

2 Language Learner Strategies

Before getting into the workings of strategy instruction, let us first define and classify language learner strategies. Language learner strategies are processes consciously selected by learners to assist them in learning and using language in general, and in the completion of specific language tasks. Such strategies have been classified in different ways. One basic distinction is between language learning strategies (i.e., learning language material for the first time) vs. language use strategies (i.e., using the material that has already been learned). It could be argued that communication strategies are a type of language use strategy. When learners encounter problems or breakdowns in communication, they are likely to seek “first aid” devices to remain in communication. They may, for example, use communication strategies to steer the conversation away from problematic areas by expressing their meaning in some other way. Students paraphrase words or concepts, coin words, or use facial expressions or gestures in creative attempts to communicate and to create more time to think. Learners can also compensate for gaps by using literal translation from their native language or switching to their native language altogether. Finally, communication strategies can also include conversational interaction strategies such as asking for help, clarification, or confirmation, and using fillers and other hesitation devices that are used by those fluent in the language.

Strategies can also be classified by skill area, which includes the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing. There are also skill-related strategies that cut across all four skill areas, such as vocabulary learning. Learners need to learn some words just to be able to understand them when they hear them, while others are needed for speaking or writing. Still other words are learned for reading (e.g., academic terms or key newspaper vocabulary). Translation strategies also cut across all four skills. For instance, learners may translate strategically when they listen to someone talking or listen to a TV show – that is, they may just translate certain words or phrases to help in comprehension, rather than attempting to translate everything. A strategic use of translation in reading would also mean not embellishing the text with translations, but rather finding the words and phrases that must be translated for basic comprehension. Finally, grammar strategies also cut across all four skills, since they may play a role in how learners listen or read, as well as in the production of spoken or written language.

In addition, strategies can be classified as cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social (Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1990). Cognitive strategies cover many of the processes or mental manipulations that learners go through in both learning the target language (e.g., identification, grouping, retention, and storage of language material) and in using it (e.g., retrieval of language material, rehearsal, and comprehension or production of words, phrases, and other elements of the target language). Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their language learning by planning what they will do, checking how it is going, and then evaluating their performance on a given task. Affective strategies help students regulate their emotions, motivation, and attitudes and are often used to reduce anxiety and provide self-encouragement. Social strategies involve learners’ choices to interact with other learners and native speakers, such as asking questions to clarify social roles and relationships, asking for an explanation or verification, and cooperating with others in order to complete tasks.

3 Strategies for Learning Japanese

Now that we have defined language learner strategies, let us briefly take a look at strategies that an English-speaking student might consider helpful in learning Japanese. These are simply suggestions based on my own experiences as a learner of Japanese. Since learners differ in terms of their learning style preferences and other characteristics, it is likely that they will also differ in terms of their preferred strategies, according to their level of proficiency in Japanese, the level of the material they are studying, and their needs in terms of what they wish to accomplish in their studies. Nonetheless, there are probably certain strategies that might be useful to a cross-section of students of Japanese. For example, students will probably want to use mnemonic strategies for remembering hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Especially the logographic characters can pose a challenge to learners who have dealt only with the Roman alphabet in previous efforts at literacy in other L2s. With regard to mastering Japanese grammar, English speakers may well want to use strategies for how to organize Japanese sentences in terms of word order and particle use. In addition, it can be helpful to have strategies for grouping verbs and then for producing the appropriate verb forms in discourse, especially in embedded clauses. With regard to vocabulary, there are most likely strategies preferred by better learners for using the appropriate particles to mark seniority, in-group vs. out-group status, gender, and other features, whether in regard to kinship terms, address forms, or other areas.

Let us now consider what strategy instruction might entail and how it could be utilized with learners of Japanese.

4 The Venue for Strategy Instruction

Strategy instruction can be offered to students separate from language
instruction, as I have been doing for some years at the University of Minnesota through a course entitled "Practical Language Learning for International Communication." The objectives of the course are: (1) to provide students with background readings on what it means to informally acquire and formally learn a new language. (2) to engage them fully in diagnosing their own learning style preferences and language strategy preferences (through completing a series of inventories and then preparing a midterm paper on the findings from their self-study), (3) to have them conduct empirical data collection with three language learners of their choice, as a means of improving their ability to diagnose their own and others' language learning abilities, potential, and practices, and (4) to have them participate in a series of classroom exercises intended to simulate real language learning and language use situations, and to have them reflect in pairs, in small groups, and in whole-class discussions regarding what they have gained from these activities.

Since it is unrealistic to assume that college teachers of Japanese would have students in their classes who have taken such a course, a viable alternative is to introduce it into the language classroom in an integrated manner – that is, within regular instructional contexts, starting from the initial phase of Japanese instruction. This may only entail modest changes in what they would ordinarily do in the language classroom. And that extra time spent either previewing the strategies that learners could use to perform a classroom or homework task or debriefing the strategies that they actually used to do so may well assist their learners of Japanese in becoming more effective partners in the learning process. The good news is that at least some language teachers are finding ways to ensure that learners are taught not only the language, but also directed toward strategies that could promote more effective learning (Rubin et al., 2007). And this would mean that at least some language teachers are engaging in explicit strategy instruction, with an emphasis on explicit development of metacognitive strategies (i.e., strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning and use of language; Wenden 1999; Anderson, 2002, 2005).

5 The Elements of Strategy Instruction

As Rubin et al. (2007) point out, a number of models for teaching language learner strategies in both L1 and L2 contexts have been developed (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Pressley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Alma, & Brown, 1992; Cohen, 1998; Chamot, 1999; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Macaro, 2001; Graham & Harris, 2003; Harris, 2003; National Capital Language Resource Center, 2003, 2004a, b). The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is one such model designed to increase the school achievement of students who are learning through the medium of an L2. The CALLA model fosters language and cognitive development by integrating content, language, and strategy instruction (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Chamot, 2005).

Common to various models of strategy instruction is a sequence of steps to having learners take responsibility for using strategies independently (Chamot et al., 1999):

1. Raising awareness of the strategies learners are already using.
2. Presenting and modeling strategies so that learners become increasingly aware of their own thinking and learning processes.
3. Providing multiple practice opportunities to help learners move towards autonomous use of the strategies through gradual withdrawal of teacher scaffolding.
4. Getting learners to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used and their efforts to transfer these strategies to new tasks.

The effectiveness of strategy instruction with any given learner is determined in part by the specific learning context and task at hand, as well as by each learner's background knowledge, goals for learning Japanese, style preferences, and language strategy repertoire. So, the impact of strategy instruction will depend on the teachers' ability to deliver it and on the learners' receptivity to it. So let us say that the teacher provides strategy instruction to support learners in efforts to improve their speaking in Japanese by suggesting a number of communication strategies, like the use of paraphrase. Some learners will have sufficient depth of vocabulary, motivation to participate actively in speaking situations, a tendency to be more extroverted than introverted in terms of style preferences, and an openness to bolster strategy repertoire in the areas of speaking. These are likely to be the learners who will benefit most from strategy instruction in this area.

Now, let us take a look at efforts at strategy instruction with adults, in order to get a better sense of what it may look like in the field.

6 Efforts at Strategy Instruction for Adults

While the stakes for learning Japanese L2 quickly and effectively may be great among adults, the learning itself may not come easily at all. All the more reason, then, to take a strategic approach to language learning, which in turn calls for a fine-tuned awareness of what strategies are all about and of how well they are likely to work for a particular task and for a particular learner. Awareness can be raised through asking how learners performed specific classroom tasks (e.g., through retrospective verbal report), encouraging question and answer sessions in class about language learning and use, administering style and strategy questionnaires, conducting discussion

The particular role that strategies may play in a given task depends both on the task and on the learners. The nature of the task and the given learners will also determine whether to use individual strategies, strategy sequences (e.g., the string of strategies necessary for successfully looking up a word in a dictionary and using the information found), or strategy clusters (e.g., the cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies that might be necessary in order to successfully break into a conversation between two native speakers). A suitable approach for an instructor might be to first describe and model possible strategies for, say, learning vocabulary, then to give learners experience deploying one or more of these strategies, and third, to leave it up to the learners to pick and choose which ones they will actually use. The activity devised some years ago for encouraging the use of the keyword mnemonic device for learning vocabulary in the Andean language Aymara is one example of how to do this (see Cohen, 1990; also in Paige, Cohen, Kapper, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006). The exercise offers learners the opportunity to consider which kinds of mnemonics work best for them. It is also possible to invite learners who have strategies that work well for them in learning vocabulary to model these strategies for their peers, so that they can see someone in their own class engaged in effective strategy use (Cohen & Weaver, 2006; Rubin et al., 2007).

It is important that learners develop their own strategy tool kit or repertoire of strategy knowledge, as well as a sense of which strategies work best for them in general and for the task at hand. Insights into what has worked for them in the past can help them. It is ultimately the learners’ mental lexicon and mental grammar that will carry them through the continued learning and performance of Japanese once they are no longer taking classes. So, it is recommended that through strategy instruction, teachers help students in developing their metacognitive awareness and strategies—such as through (1) setting their own goals in advance for a particular task, (2) identifying which strategies might work for them, (3) determining their criteria for success, and then (4) noticing after completing the task how well those strategies worked.

Fortunately, there are materials that learners can access for ideas as to language strategies in the skill areas. For example, the volume by Paige et al. (2006) contains numerous self-access exercises for students who have either been on study abroad or are planning to do it in the future, as well as for students who wish to enrich their intercultural experiences at home. Its intended purpose is to enhance the students’ language (and culture) strategies, as well as suggesting new ones. The volume offers numerous strategies for improving the receptive skills of listening and reading, and the productive skills of speaking and writing, as well as strategies for vocabulary learning and translation. There are also teachers’ guides that provide numerous examples of activities to be used by an instructor for the purposes of strategy instruction. The Cohen and Weaver volume (2006) is an example of this kind of

---

3 A set of strategies, whereby one or more of them together would be recognized as constituting the speech act in question, when uttered in the appropriate context. For example, expressing an apology and offering repair are two strategies within the apology speech act, as is acknowledging responsibility.
volume, where teachers are expected to administer and supervise the activities.

Now let us take a look at what the research literature has to say about strategy instruction.

7 The Impact of Strategy Instruction on L2 Learners

What has made it somewhat problematic to compare strategy instruction studies is that the level of detail for the description of the research and the instructional methodology used has varied considerably (Rubin et al., 2007). Some studies have been more informative than others as to the strategies that were taught, how they were taught, the level of explicitness of the instruction, the types of activities students were engaged in to practice the strategies, how the use of strategies was evaluated, the length of time devoted to strategy instruction, and whether the instruction included metacognitive awareness raising. In addition, it is not always the case that the study includes investigation of the impact of strategy instruction on language proficiency. Studies often look just at the relationship between strategy instruction and student self-report of strategy use.

A recent review of strategy instruction in language learning identified many (but not all) intervention studies since 1961 that were experimental in design (Hassan, Macaro, Mason, Nye, Smith, & Vanderplank, 2005), that is, studies in which the effectiveness of strategy instruction for a group of language students was compared to that for a similar group of students who either received a different type of treatment or no treatment at all. Of the 38 studies that the researchers found to meet the established criteria, 11 were of younger, school-aged students, and 27 were of older learners. Whereas the research indicated that strategy instruction was effective in enhancing strategy use in the short term, evidence is lacking as to whether its effects persist over time. While strong evidence supported strategy instruction for L2 reading and writing, there was only weak evidence regarding the effectiveness of strategy instruction for listening, speaking, and vocabulary acquisition based on the studies reviewed.

It should be noted that Hassan et al. inadvertently left the Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1998) study of strategy instruction in speaking out of their review. In that study, 55 intermediate learners of French and Norwegian at the University of Minnesota either received strategy instruction in L2 speaking or were Comparison students receiving the regular ten-week language course. Both groups filled out a pre-treatment questionnaire and then performed a series of three speaking tasks on a pre-post basis, along with the Strategies Inventory for Language Learning and the Strategy Checklists filled out after performing each of the three tasks. Twenty-one of the Experimental and Comparison group students also provided verbal report data while they filled out the posttest Strategy Checklists – indicating their rationale for their responses to certain items, as well as their reactions to the instrument itself. Strategy instruction was found to make a difference in speaking performance in that the Experimental group outperformed the Comparison group on the third task, city description, in the posttest, after adjusting for pretest differences. In addition, the Experimental group students were rated as higher on the vocabulary scale for the self-description task.

Since the checklists for strategies used before, during, and after each speaking task contained strategies that were, at least to some extent, designed specifically for the given task, the intention was to make a fine-tuned link between strategies and their use on specific language tasks. Such a link had been missing from previous research which reported strategy use in broad terms but not necessarily linked to specific tasks. For the Experimental group, it was seen that an increase in certain preparatory strategies (e.g., translating specific words, writing out sentences, and practicing the pronunciation of words) and monitoring strategies (e.g., monitoring for grammar, paying attention to the pronunciation of words, and analyzing a story for its key elements) related to an increase on one or more of the rating scales — self-confidence, grammar, vocabulary, and identifying and ordering elements in a story. For the Comparison group, an increase in the use of certain strategies during the self-description and city description tasks was positively related to an increase in ratings on task performance.

A recent review of strategy instruction by Chamot’s (2005) reminds readers of the O’Malley and Chamot (1990) study which found that instruction in vocabulary learning strategies was effective for learners who had not previously developed alternative effective strategies. In addition, the learners’ listening comprehension was found to improve when instructed in strategies if the texts were at a comprehensible level. The review cited other listening comprehension studies where strategy instruction contributed to performance (Ross & Rost, 1991; Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Ozeki, 2000; Carrier, 2003; Vandergrift, 2003). Strategy instruction in other skills areas was also seen to have an impact (speaking: O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998; Nakatani, 2005; reading: Chamot & Keatley, 2003; Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2003; vocabulary: Cohen & Aphek, 1981; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; writing: Macaro, 2001). Chamot’s conclusion was that explicit strategy instruction makes the most sense. We could add to her list the study by Cohen and Ishihara (2005) on the Japanese pragmatics website since the material had strategy instruction embedded in it, and since there was some positive impact to providing suggested strategies for performing Japanese speech acts.

While some progress has been made in research on strategy instruction, there are still numerous areas left to research. The following are some of them, based in part on Rubin et al. (2007) and Cohen and Macaro (2007):

- What is the role that strategy instruction actually plays in learners’ strategy use? For example, what is the extent to which learners perceive the strategy instruction that
they receive it as relevant to the specific tasks at hand?

- To what extent should strategies be taught in chains or sequences (for example, in looking up a word in a dictionary or summarizing a text) or in clusters (for example, using both metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategies to break into an L2 conversation between two acquaintances)?
- What do learners take away from the strategy instruction in terms of knowledge about how to use the strategies for the given task?
- What is the relationship between the particular way that learners use given strategies (separately, in chains, or clusters) and the learners’ success at given language tasks?
- What is the influence of the particular speech community (or community of practice) on the nature of the learners’ metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategy use? How, for example, do social strategies for L2 use differ from one speech community to another?
- What are the longitudinal effects of strategy instruction (e.g., some months or even years after the intervention)? So, the question could be phrased as follows: Once students have been taught to use learning strategies to facilitate their L2 learning, do they continue using the strategies (or continue to develop their use of more sophisticated strategies) over time?
- With regard to learners’ continued use of strategies, what is the nature of the strategy retrieval process (e.g., how easy is it for learners to remember and retrieve the strategy from their repertoire)?
- To what extent are learners able to transfer strategy use from one context to another? (New work in this area promises to provide insights that can help teachers teach for transfer; see Harris, 2004).
- To what extent do different types of learners need periodic reminders about their strategy instruction and possibly even ‘refresher’ courses?
- What is the role that teachers may play in learners’ strategy use? What does “providing the right amount of scaffolding for learners” actually mean?
- What is the relationship between the use of the strategies and the style preferences of the learner?

We also need to get a better handle on how to make comparisons across studies since there are significant differences in learning settings, the periods of time over which it is undertaken, and the nature of the strategy instruction itself. In addition, it would be helpful to document in our future work how the choice of skill areas and strategies has been tailored to meet learners’ age, stage, and proficiency level (Rubin et al., 2007). While Macaro (2001, p. 267) provides a brief overview of possible strategy instruction for students at the different levels of proficiency, there are still numerous issues that need to be considered aside from proficiency level, age, and motivation.

Here are two such issues:

- The optimum way of grouping strategies for strategy instruction – e.g., by purpose (i.e., for language learning or for language performance), by skill area (receptive skills – listening and reading, productive skills – speaking and writing; also vocabulary learning, learning grammar, translation), or by function (e.g., metacognitive, cognitive, social, or affective strategies).
- The number of strategies to teach in any given course and how many in any one lesson, and the manner in which to teach them (e.g., strategies in sequence as in looking up a word in the dictionary, strategies in clusters such as in high-stakes request situations).

8 Preparing Teachers of Japanese to Deliver Strategy Instruction

While Japanese teachers may study L2 learning processes as part of their teacher preparation, this theoretical knowledge about how learners learn language may not easily translate into specific practices for helping students become better learners of Japanese. Some of the reasons for this include: no time for strategy instruction, no room in the curriculum (especially in teaching large classes), fear that strategy instruction would take them out of their comfort zone given their teaching style, and lack of knowledge about how to enhance student learning through the use of strategies and/or lack of skill in how to do it (Vieira, 2003). With regard to teaching style, there is a difference between just transmitting information about strategies and expecting students to memorize it on the one hand, and providing a set of strategy choices for a given task and supporting the learners in choosing from among these strategies or other ones based on their prior knowledge and their personal preferences (Rubin et al., 2007).

Researchers tend to agree that teacher preparation for strategy instruction is enhanced by using an experiential approach which enables teachers to discover their own strategies, consider new ones, and learn how to model and teach them (see, for example, Harris, Gasper, Jones, Ingyvadottir, Palos, Neuburg & Schindler, 2001). This approach to teacher development characteristically includes opportunities for teachers to plan how they will integrate strategy based instruction into the curriculum. Anderson (2005) argues that in order to have metacognitively aware learners, we must have metacognitively aware teachers.

At present, there appears to be an increasing number of venues for teachers to participate in short strategy instruction courses or institutes. Two of the longer running programs include the one at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota, “Improving Language Learning: Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction,” which began providing 30-hour teacher institutes focusing on strategy instruction in 1994, and the 1-2 day workshops
offered by the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), Washington, D.C., which became available somewhat more recently.

Whereas there has by now been increasing numbers of research studies looking at the impact of strategy instruction on learners, there have not been that many studies on the effects of teacher preparation for strategy instruction. What is the differential effect, for example, of different amounts and types of orientation to strategy instruction on practicing L2 teachers? What is the ultimate impact that such exposure has on teachers at the level of implementation – to what extent have they been able to successfully implement learning strategy instruction.

9 Conclusion

Once it is clear to teachers what language learner strategies are, they can then engage in strategy instruction, which starts with raising the learners' awareness of how being strategic can produce better results. Next, this approach would have teachers provide learners with a non-prescriptive description of possible strategies for dealing with specific tasks and a modeling of how these strategies could be applied. It then entails ample opportunities for learners to practice strategy use with the strategies that they choose to deploy. Learners also need to arrive at their own set of metacognitive strategies for planning their learning, monitoring its progress, and evaluating the results on a task-by-task basis. If strategy instruction is to involve language teachers, then these teachers need themselves to undergo preparation to ensure that they have clarity as to what it might entail for given learning tasks. The preparation will invariably call for teachers themselves to perform tasks strategically and to observe how they use strategies to complete the tasks. This chapter has also noted some of the findings in the research literature with regard to strategy instruction, and has listed a number of research areas that remain to be investigated in an effort to better understand the actual impact of strategy instruction on L2 learners.

References


