

The Potential Role of Learner Training as an Awareness-building Strategy in Compulsory University English Classes

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日本の大学における必修英語授業の学習意識向上戦略
—学習者トレーニングの潜在的役割に焦点を当てて—

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ABSTRACT

This paper will theoretically discuss the potential role of learner training in the context of a regional university in Japan with no dedicated English department. Learner training and strategies will be explained, and, as strategy selection is context-dependent, the context will be described. A fully simulated strategy training activity will be introduced to explain the potential merits and demerits of learner training in the context. As learner awareness of language learning habits is low, and affective factors that prevent participation and language use are high, an activity that asks learners to examine these factors was selected for theoretical investigation. The results of the theoretical examination will show that although there are some merits to awareness-raising and introducing strategy training, low learner proficiency and limited teaching time are likely to restrict the potential benefits of learner training in the context of this study.

Keywords: Learner training, learning strategies, explicit instruction

1. What is learner training?

Learner training or strategy training has its origins in the study of the ‘good’ language learner (Crabbe, 1993; Wenden, 1991; Hassan, et al., 2005). This branch of second language acquisition (SLA) research looked at individual language learners to identify traits that made them successful in the hope that, if traits of successful language learners were known, these habits and behaviors could be taught to less successful learners

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(Rubin, 1975; Wenden, 1991). Studies into good language learners, however, were unable to reach definitive conclusions as the habits and behaviors of such learners varied greatly. This shifted the focus from the good language learner to language learning strategies (Plonsky, 2011), the study of specific learning and communication strategies and how learners might be trained to use strategies to improve their language learning and use (Crabbe, 1993; Hassan, et al., 2005). Strategy training is a learner-based approach where the responsibility for the learning process is, at least in part, passed to the learner (Nguyen & Gu, 2013).

Ellis and Shintani (2014) situate learner training as one way of coping with learner differences in the classroom. Learner or strategy training has been broadly defined as interventions used by language learners to develop their proficiency or task performance (Hassan, et al., 2005) or as a way of developing learner autonomy (Wenden, 1991; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). It is the idea that learning how to learn is more important than being taught something by a teacher who unilaterally decides what is to be taught (Brown, 2007). Rather than the teacher tailoring lessons to individual learners with diverse learning needs and goals, learner training seeks to help learners maximize their learning from the instruction available (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Learner training represents a paradigm shift in language learning where language teaching and learning are understood as being inherently strategic actions (Grenfell & Harris, 2017).

Learner training involves explicit instruction in language learning and the use of strategies, which are designed to raise learners' awareness of how they learn, increase the strategies that learners can use, and train them in selecting appropriate strategies for specific language learning or language use situations (Cohen, 2003). The following section defines learning strategies and explains how they can be classified.

1.1. What are learning strategies?

Rubin (1975:43) refers to learning strategies as 'techniques or devices' that learners use to gain knowledge. Bialystok (1978:76) defines learning strategies as "conscious enterprises in which the language learner engages" and "optional methods for exploiting available information to increase the proficiency of second language learning." As research into the field of learning strategies continued, the number and scope of definitions of strategy grew. Some recent research has focused on the problem of the multiple definitions of learning strategy (Wenden, 1991; Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 2017). For strategies to be both teachable and replicable, they must be defined in terms of specific behaviors, and this spurred the need for a comprehensive definition.

From a review of literature, Macaro (2006) developed three underlying propositions for defining learning strategies stating that they must be described in terms of a goal, a situation, and a mental action, that they must be the raw material of 'conscious cognitive processing', and that they needed to be distinguishable from subconscious activities. Oxford (2017:48) expanded on Macaro's parameters by including affective factors and social factors of the learners and their learning situation, which have an impact on the selection and success of learning strategies. As affective and social factors play a significant role in the context discussed in this paper, Oxford's comprehensive definition was used to inform strategy training activity implementation.

Classification provides a theoretical framework that allows researchers, teachers, and learners to discuss learning strategies. One way to classify strategies is according to whether they are being applied in language learning or use (Dornyei, 1995; Cohen, 2003). This distinction has been debated in more recent research. As strategies for language use involve using strategies to communicate with others, there is the possibility that such experiences will

lead to learning (Williams, et al., 2015; Oxford, 2017). In short, there is an overlap between learning and use.

Strategies for learning have been broken down into sub-categories which differ from author to author. This paper will include the commonly agreed-upon strategy classifications in meta-analysis literature from the past two decades. Table 1 shows that learning strategies have been broken down into the main categories of cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective (or socio-affective) and gives examples of each of these strategy types and how the definitions are realized as language learning activities using examples from literature.

Table 1 Examples of language learning strategies according to strategy type found in the literature.

Strategy type	Examples of language learning strategies in literature
Cognitive	-finding a way to remember a new word (Williams, et al., 2015:124) -listening for gist (Hassan, et al., 2005:1)
Metacognitive	-planning what to do and monitoring progress (Williams, et al., 2015:124) -setting goals (Nguyen & Gu, 2013:11)
Socio-affective	-joining a group (Hassan, et al., 2005:1) -discussing motivation (Hassan, et al., 2005:1)
Affective	-encouraging themselves with positive self-talk to talk with a stranger (Williams, et al., 2015:124)
Social	-asking for clarification (Williams, et al., 2015:124)

All types of strategies are important for language learning and use and must be thought of flexibly, not committed to one category type, as many strategies contain more than one element type. Oxford (2017:142) usefully suggests a change in terminology to descriptions that highlight the roles played by given strategies rather than labeling the strategy a certain type. Using an example from Table 1, asking for clarification in a group discussion could have a social role, as listed in Table 1, and a cognitive role, as it may also require finding a way to remember a new word or process. In this light, strategy training activities could be examined to identify the elements they contain (Williams, et al., 2015; Oxford, 2017), allowing for their multi-dimensional aspects to be better understood.

1.2. How learning strategies are applied

Strategies can be taught separately or embedded into activities, and it is considered that strategies embedded in activities are more successful (Plonsky, 2011). The economy of embedding strategies into classroom activities has resulted in built-in strategy training in commercial language learning materials (Rees-Miller, 1993; Ellis & Shintani, 2014). The coursebook used in the context, 'Smart Choice 1', contains strategy suggestions in the form of 'Tips' in each unit (Wilson, 2020). Explicit explanations of strategies and their applications are still required on the part of the teacher for learners, especially those with low awareness, to be aware of the strategies they are applying and why (Cohen, 2003; Ashman, 2021).

The application of strategy training involves explicit instruction and practice. Explicit teaching is planned and sequenced to lead learners from active presentation of new concepts to meaningfully building on

those concepts. It requires extensive scaffolding with frameworks for strategy training such as those found in Cohen's (2003:6) report and Nguyen's (2013:16) study, echoing the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) model. It has been stressed that strategy training should contain collaborative learning (Grenfell & Harris, 2017) to allow learners to explicitly practice and discuss the strategies they are using. In explicit instruction, the teacher is not simply a facilitator but a director of the learning (Ashman, 2021). In the presentation phase, learners are instructed on how, when, and why to use certain strategies (Ellis & Shintani, 2014), and the role of the teacher in this phase is to model the strategy. In the practice phase of the lesson, learners are given the opportunity to try the strategy in a variety of tasks and finally evaluate their performance in the production phase. The effectiveness of strategy training depends on not only the explicit explanation of learning strategies to learners but also the appropriateness of the strategies selected for the target learner population.

Cohen (2003:7), drawing on research from Oxford (1990), compiled seven steps for strategy instruction implementation. The steps begin with determining learner needs as well as resources available for training. Resources include materials, time, and human resources. From this, strategies can be selected considering the benefits of embedded strategy training (Plonsky, 2011). The fourth step is considering motivational issues, as learner motivation is essential for learning (Ashman, 2021). Materials then need to be prepared, and activities planned. Once strategy training is conducted, the final step is to evaluate and revise the training to meet the future needs of the learners.

To select a strategy that is appropriate for a given context, local conditions, including the cultural perspective of language learning, must be examined (Grenfell & Harris, 2017). The success of strategy training can be affected by learner context variables, treatments, and outcome variables (Plonsky, 2011:1000). Context variables refer to the learners, their proficiency, the environment where instruction is taking place, and factors such as previous learning experiences. Treatments refer to how strategy instruction is conducted, including teaching methods, what strategies are employed, and for how long. Outcome variables refer to both skill-specific outcomes as well as dependent variables, such as the learners' beliefs and attitudes, used to measure the effects of strategy instruction. Learner context, treatments, and outcomes will be considered when discussing whether the introduction of strategy instruction has the potential for success in the context of this study.

3. Implementing strategy instruction in my context

Context influences many aspects of the learning process, including the learning strategies learners know of and use (Williams, et al., 2015). This theoretical investigation focuses on the merits and drawbacks of learner training in first-year compulsory English communication classes, classified as pre-intermediate level by the university. In examining learner and environmental factors that could influence the selection and success of learner training, three aspects of the context: English learning in Japan, the learners, and the learning environment will be considered.

3.1. Learner and environmental factors

Previous language learning experiences not only impact learners' beliefs, attitudes, and motivation for learning English, but they also influence communicative language proficiency and learner awareness of their language use. English is a compulsory school subject in Japan from elementary school to high school. While

there are some communicative aspects in the early years, English education after elementary school involves the deconstruction and examination of language and translation of passages for high-stakes examinations, where accurate knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary is considered a great advantage (King, 2013; Ryan, 2009). With no speaking element in the exams, there has been little pressure on schools to introduce English for communication, resulting in learners arriving at university unprepared for the active learning environment and with very little experience in speaking English (O'Halloran, 2019; Harris & Leeming, 2022). Pre-tertiary English language learning experiences have shaped not only what learners know but also their understanding of the purpose of English language learning.

The first-year learners in the context are classified as low intermediate in proficiency and, in general, lack English language resources to communicate entirely in English. Along with the barrier of linguistic competence, learners also struggle with cultural factors, which include fears of standing out, expressing opinions, and making errors, which can lead to classroom silence (King, 2013; Ryan, 2009). As most learners in the target classes are Japanese, learners frequently resort to using their first language (L1) in student-led activities, reducing their opportunities for output in the target language (TL). When learners share the same L1 and learning environment, it can be difficult for them to identify gaps between their language use from the TL (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Strategy training may be a way to raise learners' awareness of their language learning and provide them with opportunities to examine how they use English.

The context of the university that was examined is situated in a regional area of Japan with few opportunities for engaging with English outside of the classroom. As the university has no dedicated English department, all learners are studying English as a compulsory subject. Compulsory English communication classes at the university were developed in line with the policy from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2014) with the dual aims of providing learners with a broad education and creating global human resources (O'Halloran, 2019). The goal of first-year compulsory English communication classes is to revisit English vocabulary and structures covered in high school with a focus on communication. These classes are conducted once a week for 90 minutes over 15 weeks, followed by a one-week examination period where compulsory examinations take place. Class sizes range from between 30-40 students. Factors important for selecting an appropriate training task for the context will be discussed in the following section.

3.2. Selecting a training task

To fully examine the theoretical possibilities of implementing learner training, task selection was performed in a manner closely representing real applications. In selecting a strategy task appropriate for the context, environmental and learner factors were considered before simulating strategy selection using Cohen's seven steps for strategy task selection (Cohen, 2003) as outlined in 2.3.3. After considering an area of need, a task for raising learner awareness of language learning strategies and self-examination of affective factors in communication was selected from research materials. This task was selected due to its multi-applicability to many educational settings in compulsory courses for first-year students and because it can be performed within the time constraints of the course. Extensive scaffolding is essential to the success and reproducibility of new learning strategies (Grenfell & Harris, 2017), so a worksheet was prepared to scaffold the task to the proficiency

level of the learners (Appendix 2). As PPP is highly applicable in the Japanese context (Sato, 2010; Harris & Leeming, 2022), similar steps were adopted for the treatment. The task selected will next be described in detail.

A training plan to introduce conscious use of learning strategies was constructed for the context. The plan consists of eight sessions over the 15-week compulsory English communication course: the first session is planned in week one for one hour, and seven 15-minute sessions are held within every second class for the remainder of the semester. Although English is the planned language of instruction, due to the level of the learners, support would be provided through Japanese instruction, scaffolding with materials, and collaborative learning (Grenfell & Harris, 2017) using the teaching tool Think, Pair, Share (Lyman, 1981).

An awareness-raising task, inviting learners to think about their previous learning experiences, language learning strategies, and affective factors involved with their TL communication, was adapted from Williams (2015:131). A modified version of the worksheet for the task can be found in Appendix 2, and notes for the proposed lesson plans adapted from Nguyen and Gu (2013:16) can be found in Appendix 3.

The first session plans to guide learners from generally considering the ways they have learned English to specifically examining how they learn new things in English, communicate in English, and ways they control their feelings to enable them to speak English. In this session, learners would complete a heavily scaffolded interview task to exchange learning strategies with other learners. The final task of the first session would be to have learners choose a strategy to try in class over the following two weeks. Sessions from Week 3 to Week 13 would involve reporting and further strategy selection to try in class. The final session would be reserved for learners to make an overall evaluation of not only the learning strategies they tried but also their opinions about strategy training itself. All tasks over all sessions would be supported by explicit explanations and modeling by the teacher and applied to coursebook activities.

As evidence from literature strongly suggests that learners who understand and deploy metacognitive strategies are more effective in their language learning (Macaro, 2006; Williams, et al., 2015), the main aim of the task would be for learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate how they learn. If learners are thinking deliberately about their language learning, they can become able to select strategies for learning and use and set appropriate goals for English communication.

An aim of strategy training in the context would be to have learners move from performance-orientated goals, where learners measure their abilities in relation to others or in terms of test scores, to mastery goal orientation, defined as learning for the satisfaction of successful language learning and use (Williams, et al., 2015:104). While performance criteria in the form of assessments exist in the context, the planned strategy training offers an opportunity for learners to focus on mastery for improvement of language performance and self-growth. The proposed plan would allow learners to become conscious of their language learning habits and strategies that may help them improve their communicative abilities. The strategy factors which are contained in the task selected will be outlined in the next section.

3.3. Strategy roles contained in the task

As suggested by Oxford (2017), it can be useful to identify the strategy roles within a learner training activity. In this section, the task selected (see Appendices 2 and 3) in this simulation will be examined to identify specific strategy roles. Table 2 shows some of the main learning strategy classifications and their roles in the task

selected.

Table 2- Roles of strategy factors in the selected task.

Strategy type	Examples of language learning strategy roles in the task
Cognitive	Looking up words in a dictionary and recalling words previously learned to complete the chart in Step 2 of the worksheet, rehearsing what to say in the group discussion before talking, and taking notes on new vocabulary.
Metacognitive	Planning what to write in Step 2 and the Strategy Diary sections of the worksheet and monitoring progress over the 15 weeks of the training.
Affective	Joining a group and making pairs to complete Step 3 of the worksheet, taking a breath before speaking, and using positive talk to self-encourage before speaking in the class brainstorm.
Social	Asking another student how to say something and using gestures to express something during pair or group talk.

The task contains the roles of all main strategy classifications with a focus on planning, monitoring, and evaluating language learning and affective factors. The planned sessions include explicit explanations and modeling of the strategies in the task and multiple opportunities to try out new strategies through collaborative worksheet activities and coursebook activities. It is proposed that through repetition of strategy use and reporting in the Strategy Diary, learners could not only monitor their learning but also achieve some degree of automatization (Macaro, 2006), allowing learners to call on strategies they try in other language learning situations.

4. Potential advantages and drawbacks in my context

When learners are helped towards greater responsibility in their planning, monitoring, and evaluation of their learning, their awareness of the metacognitive and affective factors in their learning also increases (Macaro, 2006; Usuki, 2003). Strategy training presents a way of encouraging learners to think about their language learning beliefs and behaviors (Williams, et al., 2015), potentially leading to experimentation with new strategies and improved learning (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

The activity selected would be useful and economical for learners as it could be applied to several learning situations (Macaro, 2006), mainly across the four compulsory English communication courses learners will need to complete at university. As the strategy training would be introduced through explicit instruction, where activities are explained, modeled, and then practiced, similar to the PPP model, which has proven successful and the preference of learners in the Japanese university context (Harris & Leeming, 2022), it has a high chance of being accepted by learners despite its lack of compatibility with their previous learning experiences. The treatment method would likely be successful in the context.

The drawbacks of introducing learner training in the context include learner factors such as the impact of previous language learning experiences and low proficiency, as well as limits on instruction time. In contexts where language education is strongly associated with competitive testing, learners are likely to measure their language development in terms of test scores (Williams, et al., 2015) with the over-emphasis on correctness, hurting language learning and learner motivation (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). It is not uncommon for learners in the context to

practice what Brown (2017:77) calls ‘defensive learning’, where a learner learns to protect themselves from failure, criticism, competition, and possibly punishment in the educational setting through non-participatory behavior, as observed in the Japanese context by King (2013). While strategy instruction could encourage learners to value mastery of language for their learning and use, it potentially creates conflict with the familiar values of broader society education ideals (Usuki, 2003).

Low language proficiency of the learners presents the need to deliver strategy training in Japanese, reducing learner exposure to English. It is also reported that when learners are below a certain linguistic threshold, strategy deployment can ‘short-circuit’, even in cases where strategies have been learned and practiced (Macaro, 2006:331), making strategy use difficult for low proficiency learners, reducing the potential of strategy training outcomes. Strategy instruction reportedly promotes learning if carried out over lengthy periods (ibid). With only fifteen weeks of instruction, the benefits of implementation of strategy instruction must be weighed against the direct instruction of curriculum content (Plonsky, 2011), especially when considering the proficiency of the learners.

5. Discussion

The success and feasibility of strategy training are context-dependent (Grenfell & Harris, 2017) and reliant on the needs of the learners and the available resources, including time, materials, and human resources (Cohen, 2003). This simulation of the introduction of strategy training in my context found that the introduction of learner training with a focus on metacognitive strategies could provide learners with a new awareness of strategies to enable more successful language learning and use. This theoretical discussion shows that while explicit instruction is well suited to the Japanese context, the cost-benefit ratio of strategy instruction must be considered in terms of not only time but also the usefulness of strategy instruction to low-proficiency learners. As a result of these considerations, learner training should be introduced into the context with caution and a good understanding of the factors that would reduce its benefits.

6. References

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6. Appendices

Appendix 1. Strategy training worksheet.

English 1. Thinking about how you learn English worksheet

Step 1. Think of all the ways you have learned English. Write them in the box.

Share your answers in your group, then share them with the class.

Step 2. By yourself- Think of two ‘strategies’ for each section of the chart. Look up English words you don’t know.

Ways I learn new things in English	Ways I communicate in English	Ways I control my feelings so I can speak in English

Step 3. In a group- Ask three other people how they learn English and communicate in English and control their feelings. Write their information in the chart. Use this conversation- A: (Greeting) What’s your name?

B: (Greeting) My name is _____.

A: What is one way you learn new things in English?

B: I look up words I don’t know in the dictionary.

A: Thank you.

Name	Ways I learn new things in English	Ways I communicate in English	Ways I control my feelings so I can speak in English

Step 4. Look at the chart. What ways of learning new things in English, communicating in English, and controlling your feelings do you think might be useful for you? Choose one strategy to try. Write the strategy in the first box of your strategy diary.

Strategy diary

Week	The strategy I tried	Report
1		
3		
5		
7		
9		
11		
13		
15		

Final step- Did thinking about how you learn English change the way you learn? Why?/ Why not?

Appendix 2. Strategy training lesson plan notes based on Nguyen & Gu (2013:16).

English 1. Thinking about how you learn English- Proposed Plans

Materials for all proposed plans

-A double-sided worksheet that can be folded and stuck into the coursebook. A digital version so learners can choose their preferred format.

-Blackboard, whiteboard, or electronic source for showing class brainstorming results.

Session One. Proposed Session plan.

Warm up-	Using Think, pair, share (Lyman, 1981) have learners first think about ways they have learned English on their own. Give learners a worksheet. Have one learner read the instructions for Step 1. Ask learners to roughly write their ideas, discuss them in pairs, and then share their ideas in a class brainstorm. Write some examples on the board.	Teacher and learners
Preparation and explanation-	Define 'strategy' using the examples on the board. Explicitly explain the target of worksheet activities. Explain each section on the worksheet.	Teacher
Demonstration 1-	Have a learner read the instructions for Step 2. Model what learners need to do in Step 2 of the worksheet using an example from the brainstorm activity.	Teacher and learners
Activity-	Have learners complete Step 2.	Learners
Demonstration 2-	Have a learner read the instructions for Step 3. Model the conversation in Step 3 using the example on the worksheet. Have learners make up the addition questions required to complete the interview section of the worksheet.	Teacher and learners
Activity-	Give learners time to complete the interview section of the worksheet using the model conversation.	Learners
Evaluation-	Think, pair share. Ask students to think about what strategies were useful in the interview activity. Echoing the Warm up, add their answers to the list on the board.	Teacher and learners
Activity-	Have a learner read the instruction for Step 4. Model how to complete the chart in Step 4. Give learners time to complete Step 4.	Teacher and learners
Summary-	Have learners recall the definition of strategy. Ask learners to share a strategy they are going to try for the next two weeks.	Teacher and learners

Proposed plan for subsequent sessions

15 minutes will be allotted for group strategy reports at the beginning lessons every two weeks.

Demonstration-	Model how to report strategy use using the conversation.	Teacher and learners
Activity-	Have learners discuss their use of strategies using the conversation- A: What strategy did you try? B: I tried _____. A: What is it the strategy for? B: (Ways to learn new things English/ Ways to communicate in English/ Ways I control my feelings so I can speak in English). A: Will you keep using this strategy? B: _____.	Learners
Activity-	Ask learners to go through the strategies from Session One and select a strategy to try. Have learners add it to their Strategy Diary and repeat the process.	Teacher and learners

Proposed plan for the final session

15 minutes will be allotted for group strategy reports at the beginning of the lesson.

Demonstration-	Model how to report strategy use using the conversation.	Teacher and Learners
Activity-	Have learners discuss their use of strategies using the conversation- A: What strategy did you try? B: I tried _____. A: What is it the strategy for? B: (Ways to learn new things English/ Ways to communicate in English/ Ways I control my feelings so I can speak in English.) A: Will you keep using this strategy? B: _____.	Learners
Demonstrate-	Have a learner read the instructions for the Final step. Model how to answer the question.	Teacher and learners
Activity-	Give learners time to answer the question in the Final step.	Learners
Evaluation-	Ask students to evaluate their strategy use and share their opinions in their groups.	Learners