A Study on Learning Strategies in Significant Correlation with Oral Proficiency in Japanese

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Abstract. In this paper, the correlation between Japanese learning strategies and oral proficiency is examined through investigation on the oral proficiency of Japanese learners as well as current situation of their application of various learning strategies by means of a variety of statistical methods such as SPSS frequency statistics, correlation analysis and independent sample T test in order to provide empirical evidence for learners to effectively grasp and apply such oral Japanese learning strategies. Besides, Investigations are made on the differences in the application of oral language learning strategies between good and poor learners and various key learning strategies significantly correlated to Japanese oral proficiency are analyzed to help learners broaden horizons for learning strategies and adopt effective strategies to improve their oral proficiency as well as provide inspirations for learners' self-learning and classroom teaching practices.

1 Introduction

Oral proficiency is an important symbol of the comprehensive language abilities and a touchstone for testing language level of learners. Learning strategies, as one of influencing factors of individual differences among learners, play an important role in acquisition of language knowledge and mastery of skills, making them an important factor affecting the oral proficiency in language [1]. Exploring learning strategies significantly correlated to oral proficiency in Japanese can provide inspirations for oral learning and teaching practice, promote the formation of individualized learning methods for learners and improvement of their self-learning ability and therefore create conditions for lifelong learning [2]. The study on foreign language learning strategies marks the transformation of researches in the field of applied linguistics from how teachers should teach to how students should learn [3]. At present, there have been plenty of studies on language learning strategies at home and abroad, where English learners are taken as mainly objects and great attention is paid on theories and classification of learning strategies. However, there are still many problems to be discussed and properly solved in research related to Japanese learners’ oral learning strategies[4].

2 Definition and Classification of Learning Strategies

Learning strategies refer to the methods and means adopted by learners to improve the learning effect, which is a combination of psychological processes and specific behaviors as well as a dynamic system composed of cognitive concepts and skills[5]. According to Oxford (1990), foreign language learning strategies should be divided into direct strategies and indirect strategies, of which direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies while indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies[6]. To be specific, the memory strategy refers to a strategy of constructing a knowledge system by comprehensively mobilizing senses and media, effectively integrating interpretation, image and pronunciation and making repeated practice. The cognitive strategy refers to the conceptual work that learners adopt to perceive, receive, extract, decode, analyze, and transmit information in order to establish rules and structures for information communication. Compensation strategy refers to the learning strategy that learners adopt to overcome communication limitations in order to maintain
social communication and improve the performance such as reasonable speculation, detour and gestures. Metacognitive strategy refers to a comprehensive learning strategy which reflects learner's understanding of learning activities, including learning attitudes, coordinating learning planning and self-monitoring evaluation. Affective strategy refers to those adopted by learners during the learning process with the purpose of anxiety resistance, self-motivation as well as adjustment and control of personal emotions. Social strategy refers to one adopted by learners to ensure information transmission and maintain communication channels by means of active questioning, cooperation and assistance and empathy communication.

3 Research Design

In this paper, 99 Japanese learners at intermediate level from Jilin Foreign Studies University are taken as the research object. In order to keep samples of learners taken in this study from other affecting factors, all objects are selected from those whose foreign language of college entrance examination is English, with no learning experience of Japanese language before college or overseas study to Japan.

First of all, with reference to the evaluation system of oral proficiency test, the oral proficiency of all research objects are evaluated in the form of face-to-face interview from four aspects, task and scenario, topic field, type of conversation and accuracy. When it comes to OPI, great importance is attached to practical communication skills, where research objects are guided to make the language output through step-by-step communication and the whole process includes four stages, warm-up, level checks, probes and wind-down. In the process of thorough understanding and limit exploration, two modes of conversation and role-play will be used for alternate test. All research objects will be required to make real and specific answers to actual questions in the conversation. In the task mode, a virtual situation will be set up where research objects and testers are required to play different roles to complete the session together. Through alternating conversion between reality and virtual situation, testers can examine response strategies, accuracy of language expression, language type as well as depth and range of topic so as to comprehensively and objectively evaluate their language application abilities.

After that, a questionnaire on learning strategies is conducted, with a total of 99 valid questionnaires collected. In terms of questionnaire design, Oxford (1990) Language Learning Strategy Scale is revised into an Oral Japanese Learning Strategy Scale suitable for Japanese learners. The scoring method of Likert five-level scale system is adopted with 50 items to test the current situation of application of three direct strategies, namely memory strategy (7 items), cognitive strategy (9 items) and compensation strategy (9 items) as well as three indirect strategies, namely metacognitive strategy (9 items), affective strategy (8 items) and social strategy (8 items).

4 Data Collection and Analysis

After the questionnaire is collected, social science statistical software spss23.0 is adopted to run the Alpha reliability statistics and KMO sampling suitability test. The reliability of strategy scale is 0.922 and validity 0.738, which guarantees the scientific and reliable research results.

4.1 Correlation between learning strategies and oral proficiency

Results of correlation analysis between oral proficiency and learning strategies show that the pearson correlation coefficient is 0.707, with significant correlation at the 0.01 level, indicating that there is a significant correlation between learner's Japanese learning strategies and oral ability. That is to say, flexible application of oral language learning strategies brings excellent oral proficiency; on the contrary, unsatisfactory mastery of oral learning strategies will restrict the improvement of oral proficiency (See table 1).
Table 1. Correlation Analysis of Learning Strategies and Oral Proficiency.

|                  | Oral proficiency | Learning strategies |
|------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                  | Pearson          | Sig. (2-tailed)     | N                         |
| Oral proficiency |                  |                     |                           |
|                  | 1                | 0.707**             | 99                        |
| Learning strategies | 0.707**    | 0.000               | 99                        |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Current Situation of Application of Oral Language Learning Strategies

In accordance with Oxford, those learning strategies with a SILL score of 3.5 or higher are frequently used strategies, while those with score below 3.5 belong to strategic projects requiring enhanced training [7]. Targeted at the application status of oral language learning strategies of 99 Japanese learners, the average application of various learning strategies by the top 20 (good learner) and last 20 (poor learner) learners is counted. The results are shown in the following figure.

As shown in the results of questionnaire, various oral language learning strategies are widely used by Japanese learners. To be specific, good learner take up a dominant proportion among learners who “frequently” and “always” apply various oral language learning strategies, while poor learners show more tendency of "never", "rare", "sometimes" apply learning strategies, indicating their relatively weak awareness of strategies. From the overall application level of oral language learning strategies, it is obvious that the order should be compensation strategy, cognitive strategy, social strategy, affective strategy, metacognitive strategy and memory strategy in terms of application frequency, showing that learners are good at independent thinking in oral communication, with a strong sense of self-awareness, flexible application of compensation strategies such as avoidance and seeking success as well as great attention paid on communication and cooperation. However, they still learn through mechanical memory and rote memorization, with a lack of self-planning management and monitoring awareness as well as skills for self-relief of stress and adjustments of bad mood.

Good learners show a high frequency of application in the six learning strategies, which are higher than those of poor learners. Poor learners show a lower frequency in the application of memory strategies, metacognitive strategies and affective strategies with an average of overall application of strategies of 3.35, which is within the range of low-frequency application, indicating poor learners have only unsatisfactory mastery of oral Japanese learning strategies and need to be further improved.
4.2.1 Analysis on the application of memory strategies

Although input is always the premise of oral proficiency output in Japanese, learners fail to show ideal application of memory strategies, especially in terms of "Auxiliary memory with word cards and other tools", "deepening memory with gestures and movements in reciting", "memorizing new vocabulary in sentences" and "regularly reviewing to strengthen memory" whose application shows low frequency, reflecting that learners often make rote memorization when reciting, rarely adopt image memory and fail to effectively link contexts for better understanding of the context in order to grasp the overall language structure. Besides, there are also obvious problems like bluntness of explanation of knowledge largely relying on textual expressions in domestic textbooks and reference books and education on cultivation of memory habits not included into daily teaching and practice.

4.2.2 Analysis on the application of cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies refer to the methods and steps taken by learners to achieve effective language input and output. Most learners often manage to adopt strategies such as "solving problems in oral practice with dictionaries and other reference books", "making rehearsal oral exercises", "focusing on the main subject of conversations and avoiding interference from the surrounding environment", "predicting the meaning of the whole sentence based on current understanding when facing incomprehensible content" and "understanding meaning and usage of new words and grammatical expressions in connection with other language knowledge like mother tongue". However, two strategies, "organizing ideas before speech and listing outline of conversation" and "making detailed records while listening to the other party's speech" are generally far from effectively utilized.

4.2.3 Analysis on the application of compensation strategies

The compensation strategy is the most familiar and frequently used learning strategy of all strategies, which can help learners to quickly seek remedies in time of frustration in oral communication to maintain normal communication, enhance their confidence in oral communication and relieve anxiety. For example, high frequency can be seen in the application of strategies such as "starting conversation with familiar topics", "connecting known information when encountering unapprehending content", "inferring meaning by observing expressions, tones and gestures of the speaker", "striving to grasp the main idea of speaker’s conversation and taking easy with uncomprehending details", "using gestures in time of failure in language description in the process of communication", "Trying to make communication by creating words or using your mother tongue or English", "Seeking help from other people present" and "making timely adjustment and changing topics".

4.2.4 Analysis on the application of metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies reflect learners’ capacities in establishment of goals, development of plans, strategy selection, self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-adjustment in the learning process, which play a key role in improving the quality and efficiency of oral language training. Most learners show strong capacity in "avoiding speaking as much as possible and focusing on the other party's speech when unable to control the current topic", "making serious analysis on feedbacks and further improvement", but the strategy of "proactively confirming the questions to be answered and topics to be discussed before the speech of other party" is almost exclusively adopted by good learners. "Testing the communication performance through recording, mirrors and so on" and "clarifying the oral proficiency goal of each stage and striving to achieve them" are rarely adopted by learners.
4.2.5 Analysis on the application of affective strategies

With effective application of affective strategies, learners can develop a positive attitude, which is conducive to stimulating learning interest, developing learning potential and improving learning efficiency. On the contrary, anxiety and negative attitudes often lead to fear, resentment and evasion, which will seriously harm language learning. The survey results show that most students fail to realize the impact of personal emotions on oral ability during the learning process. Apart from the strategy of “trying best to relieving tension, relaxing mind and making positive hints in time of oral communication”, other affective strategies including “making timely adjustment of the practice plan according to the learning performance” and “selecting interested content and carrying out personalized exercises” and "making self-evaluation and recording experience after communication" are only effectively applied by good learner. However, low frequency in the application of strategies such as "actively exploring oral language and sharing feelings and experiences" and "rewarding yourself whenever the oral proficiency is improved" is found in both good and poor learners.

4.2.6 Analysis on the application of social strategies

With the help of social strategies, learners can be exposed to and participate in oral communication activities as much as possible and strengthen interaction and cooperation between teachers and students as well as among students. There are three strategies including “initiatively asking those good at oral Japanese for help when facing problems ”, " asking others to slow down or repeat the content If failing to understand" and “actively encouraging and trying to ensure the smooth conversation in time of failure in the other party's expression”, which are widely adopted by learners. However, strategies like “actively asking the other party to correct my misrepresentation” and “mutual discussion and collaborative practice among students” are only adopted by good learners, with low frequency of application in strategies like “asking the target audience, teachers or classmates for feedbacks on the performance”.

4.3 Differences in application of learning strategies between good learners and poor learners

The independent sample T test is conducted on the application frequency of six learning strategies by good and poor learners, whose results are shown in Tab. 2.

Table 2. Correlation analysis on learning strategies between good and poor learners.

| Learning Strategies | t     | Sig (2-tailed) | Significant differences |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Memory              | 3.212 | 0.003          | Yes                     |
| Cognitive           | 1.792 | 0.081          | No                      |
| Compensation        | 1.962 | 0.057          | No                      |
| Metacognitive       | 3.066 | 0.004          | Yes                     |
| Affective           | 2.975 | 0.005          | Yes                     |
| Social              | 2.272 | 0.029          | Yes                     |
Based on the above results, there is extremely significant difference between good and poor learners in memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies (Sig<0.05), which is to say that the frequency of application of memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies of good learners is significantly higher than that of poor learners, which has a positive promotion and significance for the improvement of oral ability; However, no significant difference is found in the application of cognitive strategies and compensation strategies between good and poor learners in this study. To be brief, good learners have more clear learning goals, more active learning attitudes and better at adjusting learning emotions, motivations and attitudes so that they can reasonably formulate learning plans, evaluate learning effects and summarize learning methods. They also follow the rules of memory and develop rich associations to improve memory with excellent skills for collaborative learning.

4.4 Key learning strategies for improving oral proficiency

The correlation statistical analysis is conducted between oral language scores and 50 learning strategies and the independent sample T test is conducted on the application frequency of 50 learning strategies by good and poor learners to draw learning strategies in significant correlation with oral proficiency and significant difference in application by good and poor learners. The results are shown in Tab. 3.

Table 3. Key learning strategies for improving oral proficiency.

| Learning Strategies                                      | Classification | Mean | Pearson    | Sig (2-tailed) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------|------------|----------------|
| Reading aloud rhythmically to supplement memory          | Memory         | 3.65 | 0.495**    | 0.010          |
| Making image memory with pictures or video materials     | Memory         | 3.33 | 0.429**    | 0.019          |
| Memorizing passages in Japanese by keyword and topic sentences | Memory         | 3.87 | 0.426**    | 0.038          |
| Watching Japanese film and television works and following the pronunciation | Cognitive    | 3.84 | 0.539**    | 0.000          |
| Imitating the communicative style and way of talking of Japanese people | Cognitive    | 3.42 | 0.407**    | 0.040          |
| Guessing the following message of the other party in connection with topics | Compensation | 3.60 | 0.476**    | 0.007          |
| Seizing various opportunities for Japanese practice      | Metacognitive  | 3.23 | 0.565**    | 0.000          |
| Ensuring daily special training for oral proficiency through reasonable planning | Metacognitive | 2.84 | 0.495**    | 0.010          |
| Collecting books and information on learning methods for oral abilities | Metacognitive | 3.37 | 0.442**    | 0.033          |
| Carefully looking for objects for conversations in Japanese | Metacognitive | 3.16 | 0.402**    | 0.042          |
| Challenging the limitation of oral level                 | Affective      | 3.39 | 0.531**    | 0.000          |
| Overcoming the fear and actively answering questions with Japanese | Affective    | 3.65 | 0.403**    | 0.036          |
| Actively understanding Japanese society and culture      | Social         | 3.88 | 0.450**    | 0.014          |
| Observing the situation and flexibly adjusting the content of conservation for affective resonance | Social         | 3.87 | 0.379**    | 0.035          |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in the results, the true purpose is to understand Japanese in the real context and apply what they have learned for strategies such as "ensuring daily special training for oral proficiency
through reasonable planning”, “carefully looking for objects for conversations in Japanese”, “seizing various opportunities for Japanese practice”, “making image memory with pictures or video materials”, “Imitating the communicative style and way of talking of Japanese people”, "overcoming the fear " and "challenging the limitation of oral level". This coincides with the concept of a whole-language education, which has been valued and gradually applied to classroom teaching in the United States since the late 1970s. Whole-language scholars agree that language is a communication tool that emphasizes the integrity of language and advocates the simultaneous development of four language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. They also hold the belief that language ability is learned by being in a natural and rich language environment as well as through verbal communication and exchange of ideas with others. It can be said that the key learning strategy to improving oral proficiency is to regard language as a whole communication system, create an actual two-way communication situation, cultivate pure pronunciation, language sense and authentic thinking mode for inter-cultural communication, eliminate concerns, open up and make active interactions.

5 Conclusion

In summary, oral Japanese learning strategies are important scales to measure individual learning ability of learners as well as one of the important factors that restrict the learning effect. In this paper, the author explores the correlation between oral Japanese learning strategies and oral proficiency and provides an empirical basis for learners to master various oral Japanese learning strategies, which is not only conducive to enriching the vision for strategies of learners, enhancing their strategic awareness and improving their learning efficiency, but also beneficial for teachers to understand strategic orientation of learners and implement targeted optimization strategy training for individual differences, thus improving the overall strategy application of learners and ensuring individualized teaching and objective orientation in the process of oral Japanese teaching.

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