

STRATEGIES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SURVEY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE JAPANESE LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN USIM

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ABSTRACT

It is crucially important to know what strategies are used by language learners in learning the targeted language, so that teachers will have better insights to prepare classes that equally suit learners' behaviour. This is a pilot study aiming to identify what are the most and less frequent learning strategies used by Japanese language learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). A set of questionnaires adapted from the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) has been distributed to 259 USIM Japanese learners at the end of semester academic year of 2021/2022. 54 students volunteered to participate and answer the questionnaire. The average frequency for each category in SILL has been identified. As for the results, Japanese language learners at USIM are moderate users of metacognitive categories as the average frequency is at the highest. In contrast, strategies from affective categories have the lowest frequency of usage. It is a hope, that in the future, learners are introduced with a set of learning strategies before or during the classes in order to help them find the best way of acquiring the target language.

Keywords: *language learning strategies, language learning, Japanese language, undergraduates*

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education Malaysia states that language proficiency is among the attributes of student aspirations, as noted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 (Higher Education) (2015). Proficiency should not only be limited to the country's national language, Bahasa Malaysia and second language (L2), English, but also to a third or global language. This is because proficiency in a global language such as Mandarin, Japanese, French or German can provide students with more opportunities in the international job market (Zubairi & Sarudin, 2009), as well as develop more global and holistic students.

Following this aspiration, foreign languages have been offered at most public institutions of higher education in Malaysia. Among the foreign languages, Japanese was first offered as early as 1966 at University of Malaya's Faculty of Arts and has gained popularity over the years due to the influence of the Look East Policy (LEP). According to the Survey Report on Japanese Language Education conducted by the Japan Foundation, as of 2018, there are currently 14,720 students of Japanese language in Malaysian tertiary education.

Subsequent to the trend, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) also began offering Japanese language courses as an open elective in 2016. Each semester, there are, in total, around 300 students who register for the course. While there are papers reporting on the courses offered in USIM (Zoraida & Kumiko, 2019; Date & Zoraida, 2020), most only focus on the course itself and the textbook being used. Insights into what strategies the students use while learning the language, specifically for students in USIM have yet to be conducted.

An understanding of students' learning strategies is important because "it offers for delving into the "black box" of complex L2 learning mechanism, that is, what is going on inside the brain during L2 learning" (Takeuchi, 2019, p. 684). Furthermore, the main interest in learning strategies was initially to investigate the strategies utilized by successful language learners (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). Thus, by identifying the learning strategies used by students, it is possible to make suggestions that can aid in the effective acquisition of Japanese as a foreign language in Malaysia.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Language learning strategy

Language learning strategies are "specific actions the learners take to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Oxford has classified the strategies into two main categories, which are direct strategies and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies are the strategies that directly involve and require mental processing while learning the language. These strategies are further subclassified into three categories which are memory, cognitive, and compensation. Memory strategies are the strategies where the learners create mental linkage, applying images and sounds, reviewing the language, and employing action associated with the language. Cognitive strategies are practical strategies learners use when practicing the language. Meanwhile compensation strategies are strategies to aid learners in guessing unknown knowledge or overcoming their limitation in speaking or writing the language.

Indirect strategies support language learning without directly involving the target language. Strategies that categorized under indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective, and social. Metacognitive strategies help learners to take control of their learning in the way of planning, arranging, and evaluating their learning process. Affective strategies are the action learners take to regulate their emotions and feelings towards the language learning itself. Nevertheless, social strategies are the strategies that involve and invite other people in the learning process by having interactions using the language or about the language.

Table 1 shows the strategies for each category. Using these six categories, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) has been developed to determine language learning among language learners.

Table 1 Strategies for each category

Category	Strategies
Memory	Grouping; making associations; placing new words into a context to remember them; using imagery, sound, sound-and-image combinations, action, etc. in order to remember new expression; reviewing in a structured way; going back to review earlier material.
Cognitive	Repeating; practising with sounds and writing systems; using formulas and patterns; recombining familiar authentic situations involving the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing); skimming and scanning to get the idea quickly; using reference resources; taking notes; summarizing, reasoning deductively (applying general rules); analysing expressions; analysing contrastively via comparison with another language; being cautious about word-for-word translating and direct transfer from another language; looking for language patterns, adjusting your understanding according to new Information.
Compensation	Using all possible clues to guess the meaning of what is heard or read in the new language; trying to understand the overall meaning and not necessarily every single word; finding ways to get the message across in speaking or writing despite limited knowledge of the new language; for instance, using gestures. Switching to your own language momentarily, using a synonym or description, coining new words.
Metacognitive	Overviewing and linking with material you already know; deciding in general to pay attention; deciding to pay attention to specific details; finding out how language learning works; arranging to learn (schedule, environment, notebook); setting goals and objectives; identifying the purpose of a language task; planning for a language task; finding practice opportunities; noticing and learning from your errors; evaluating your progress.
Affective	Lowering your anxiety; encouraging yourself through positive statements; taking risks wisely; rewarding yourself; noting physical stress; keeping a language learning diary; talking with someone about your feelings/attitudes.
Social	Asking questions for clarification or verification; asking for correction; cooperating with peers; cooperating with proficient users of the new language; developing cultural awareness; becoming beware of others' thoughts and feelings.

Initially, research by O'Malley et al. (1985) as cited by Griffiths & Soruç (2020), found that "higher-level students reported greater use of metacognitive strategies" (p. 116) which concluded that students who manage their own learning are more likely to be successful in their language acquisition. However, recent literature eventually concluded that rather than a specific strategy, students who use multiple strategies more frequently achieve better language acquisition compared to low achieving students (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

Studies on English language learning strategy in Malaysia

Noor Zainab Abdul Razak et al. (2012) has done a survey of language learning strategy among English learners at secondary school in Johor, Malaysia. 90 male students and 90 female students took part in this survey. The result of the survey shows this group of English learners are the high user for all category of strategies with the usage of the strategies from affective category was at the highest frequency and compensation strategies at the lowest.

Meanwhile, Ong et al. (2019) explored the choice of language learning strategies employed by EFL students who took 12-week Intensive English Programme. A total of 10 learners who have finished their secondary education participated in this research. SILL was used to find out the selection of language learning strategies employed by learners in the development of speaking skills. As for the overall result, the participants of this study used strategies from metacognitive category most frequently and affective category most rarely.

Min et al. (2021) adopted SILL to identify the most preferred language learning strategies by Year 5 primary pupils in rural areas in Southern Malaysia and the least practised strategies in learning the English language. The data for this study was collected from 70 respondents. This study discovered that various strategies were practised by the respondents. However, the most employed strategy is memory strategies, while the affective strategies are favoured the least.

Studies on other languages learning strategy in Malaysia

20 Malaysian students from International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) took part in a study to identify the strategies in speaking Arabic (EL-Tingari, 2016). The questionnaire distributed to the participants contains only the direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation). As for the results of the survey, the usage of the strategies is either average, meaning that the type of strategy utilized is within the median, or high, which indicates that the students use the type of strategy frequently. Compensation categories have the highest frequency, followed by memory and cognitive.

For Mandarin, a study has been done to investigate vocabulary learning strategies applied by Mandarin learners at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) (Chin et al., 2021). A total of 171 sets of questionnaires have been analysed and the learners use strategies from cognitive category most frequently when learning Mandarin vocabulary. On the other hand, metacognitive category was the least favoured by the learners.

Studies on Japanese language learning strategy in Malaysia

While research interest in language learning strategies have been ongoing for years, language learning strategies focusing on students learning Japanese are still few and far between. In Malaysia, Zakaria et al. (2017) reported that students learning Japanese language at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) use compensation strategies most frequently, while affective strategies reported the lowest frequency of use.

In contrast, a study conducted by Hasan (2015) on Japanese language students in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) reported social strategies as the most frequently used strategy and compensation strategies as the least strategy used by students. Although both studies were conducted on Japanese language learners in Malaysian universities, there is a considerable difference in the most and least frequently used learning strategy. This begs the question whether students in other universities in Malaysia who also learn Japanese will have similar or distinct learning strategies.

Hence, this study aims to conduct a pilot study to investigate what is the most and least frequent learning strategies used by USIM Japanese language learners. The research questions that this paper aims to answer are:

1. What are the most frequently used language learning strategies by undergraduate students learning Japanese language?
2. What are the least frequently used language learning strategies by undergraduate students learning Japanese language?

METHODOLOGY

This research employs the quantitative method to identify students most and least used language learning strategies. Questionnaires adapted from Oxford's SILL were distributed at the end of semester to 259 students who enrolled for Japanese language course in 2021/2022 academic year. Students are from Japanese language 1, Japanese language 2 and Japanese language 3 courses. Questionnaires were shared via online chat to all class groups and students participate at their own convenience.

The questionnaire consists of two parts; (A) demographic information, which includes gender and current course, and (B) the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version for speakers of other languages learning English, which was adapted from Oxford (1990) and the wording of English have been converted to Japanese.

Questionnaire items were then classified into Part A (Memory) 9 items, Part B (Cognitive) 14 items, Part C (Compensation) 6 items, Part D (Metacognitive) 9 items, Part E (Affective) 6 items and Part F (Social) 6 items. All together there are 50 items in the questionnaires that can be selected by the respondents. The items included direct and indirect strategies, which used the following scales: 1. Never or almost never true of me; 2) Usually not true of me; 3) Somewhat true of me; 4) Usually true of me, and 5) Always or almost true of me.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Participants' demographic background

A total of 54 students volunteered to participate in the study. Figure 1 shows the demographic backgrounds of the participants who answered the questionnaire.

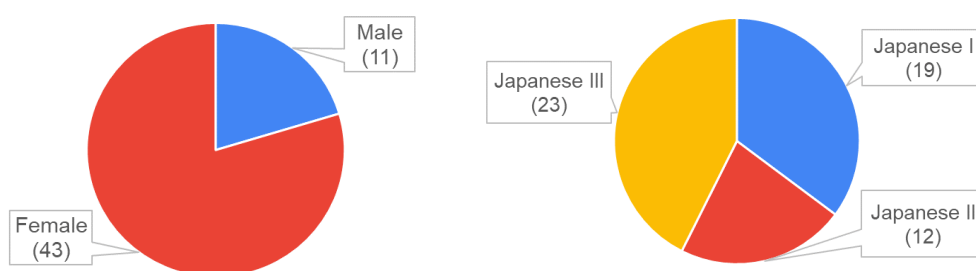


Figure 1 Demographic background of participants (left: gender, right: current course)

The number of female students participated in the questionnaires is higher than the male students. This is due to the background of participants who are mainly from the Faculty of Major Language Studies in USIM, where the overall programme is dominated by female students. As the students in Japanese 3 have a longer study period compared to Japanese 1 and Japanese 2, students in Japanese 3 are much more willing to participate in the questionnaire as portrayed in Figure 1.

Analysis on Oxford SILL strategies by category

The following section will show average frequencies of strategies used by students according to memory category, cognitive category, compensation category, metacognitive category, affective category, and social category. Results were then calculated into average and tabled in each category.

Memory category

Table 2 shows average frequencies for language learning strategies categorised under the memory category. For memory category, learners use the association strategies the most at average frequency of 3.98. Learners associate new sounds, vocabularies, and things to the knowledge they already know or to the things in their surroundings. On the other hand, using flashcards and rhymes seems to be an old-school method and the learners are not likely to use these strategies, at the low average frequency of 2.98. The strategies in this category is the second highest frequency chosen by USIM Japanese language learners.

Table 2 Average frequency for language learning strategies under memory category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
3	I connect the sound of a new Japanese word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	3.98
1	I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in Japanese.	3.81
4	I remember new Japanese word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	3.72
2	I use new Japanese words in a sentence so I can remember them.	3.69
8	I review Japanese lessons often.	3.50
7	I physically act out new Japanese words.	3.41
9	I remember new Japanese words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	3.33
5	I use rhymes to remember new Japanese words.	3.17
6	I use flashcards to remember new Japanese words.	2.98
Average frequency for memory category		3.51

Cognitive category

Strategies categorised under the cognitive strategy are the strategies a learner use to practise the language, receive and send messages using the language and analyse and reason the language with their own overview. The average of frequency for this category is shown in Table 3. Even though Japanese language learners in USIM practise the Japanese sounds at a high frequency of 3.78, they are unlikely to starting up a conversation in the language as can be seen in item number 14 with low average frequency of 2.83.

Table 3 Average frequency for language learning strategies under cognitive category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
12	I practise the sounds of Japanese.	3.78
15	I watch Japanese language TV shows spoken in Japanese or go to movies spoken in Japanese.	3.65

10	I say or write new Japanese words several times.	3.63
11	I try to talk like native Japanese speakers.	3.50
13	I use the Japanese words I know in different ways.	3.48
21	I find the meaning of Japanese word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	3.41
16	I read for pleasure in Japanese.	3.30
20	I try to find patterns in Japanese.	3.24
19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in Japanese.	3.17
18	I first skim a Japanese passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	3.07
22	I try not to translate word-for-word.	3.04
23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in Japanese.	2.94
14	I start conversation in Japanese.	2.83
17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in Japanese.	2.61
Average frequency for cognitive category		3.26

Compensation category

In language learning, compensation is the action a learner takes to intelligently guess the missing pieces of the language puzzle and overcome their limitations in speaking and writing. In this study, learners show that they often use body gestures and rephrasing the word they are stuck with during a conversation. The low frequency average for item number 27 reflected that, learners also tend to be looking up to every word they face when reading Japanese materials.

Table 4 Average frequency for language learning strategies under compensation category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
25	When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in Japanese, I use gestures.	3.54
29	If I cannot think of a Japanese word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	3.54
24	To understand unfamiliar Japanese words, I make guesses.	3.39
28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in Japanese.	3.20
26	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in Japanese.	2.89
27	I read Japanese without looking up every new word.	2.57
Average frequency for compensation category		3.19

Metacognitive category

Table 5 shows the average frequency of strategies that Japanese language learners used under metacognitive category. Strategies fall under metacognitive category are the strategies where the learners arrange, plan, and evaluate the learning process on their own. Under this category, Japanese language learners in USIM show high frequency in trying to find out on how to be a better learner and they often pay attention when someone speaks in Japanese. This is however in contrast with item number 34 and 35 which scored the lowest frequency. In other words, although there is effort in trying to find out how to be a better learner and paying attention when a person speaks Japanese, they do not actively plan their schedules or seek out people to speak Japanese with to actualize the strategies. Nevertheless, USIM Japanese language learners highly chose strategies under this category in pursuing Japanese language learning.

Table 5 Average frequency for language learning strategies under metacognitive category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of Japanese.	4.04
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking Japanese.	4.02
38	I think about my progress in learning Japanese.	3.96
31	I notice my Japanese mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	3.67
36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in Japanese.	3.67
30	I try to find as many as ways I can to use my Japanese.	3.61
37	I have clear goals for improving my Japanese skills.	3.61
34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study Japanese.	3.35
35	I look for people I can talk in Japanese.	3.35
Average frequency for metacognitive category		3.70

Affective category

The average frequency of strategies under this category is shown in Table 6. Strategies that associate with learners' feelings and emotion are categorised under the affective category. USIM Japanese language learners are likely to challenge themselves to speak the language even though they are afraid of making mistakes and whenever they feel anxious or tensed, they will try to relax. However, at the same time some learners chose to reserve their feelings and do not share with others either by talking about it or writing it down in journals as reflected in item number 43 with a low frequency of 2.33. The average frequency of these strategies is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Average frequency for language learning strategies under affective category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
40	I encourage myself to speak Japanese even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	3.70
42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using Japanese.	3.52
39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using Japanese.	3.48
44	I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning Japanese.	3.15
41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in Japanese.	2.91
43	I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.33
Average frequency for affective category		3.18

Social category

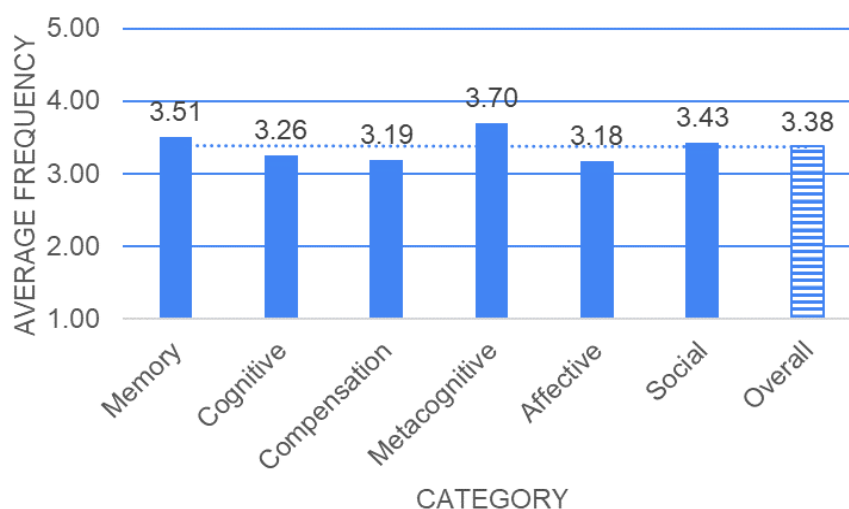
Asking questions, cooperating, and empathising with others are the strategies under social category. Average frequency for strategies under social category is shown in Table 7. USIM Japanese language learners chose strategy item number 45, to ask their Japanese speaking partner to slow down or repeat their word when conversing in Japanese language. However, it is likely a one-sided conversation as questioning in Japanese is the least chose strategy for this category.

Table 7 Average frequency for language learning strategies under social category

Statement Number	Statement	Average Frequency
45	If I do not understand something in Japanese, I ask other people to slow down or say it again.	4.02
50	I try to learn about the culture of Japanese speakers.	3.87
47	I practice Japanese with other students.	3.54
46	I ask Japanese speakers to correct me when I talk.	3.33
48	I ask for help from Japanese speakers.	3.04
49	I ask question in Japanese.	2.76
Average frequency for social category		3.43

DISCUSSION

Graph 1 shows the average frequency for each category. The most frequent category used by USIM Japanese language learners is metacognitive (3.70), followed by memory (3.51), social (3.43), cognitive (3.26), compensation (3.19), and the least frequent category used is affective (3.18). The overall average is 3.38, which means USIM Japanese language learners can be considered as moderate users of language learning strategies.



Graph 1 Average frequency of usage by category

The top five most frequent language learning strategies used by USIM Japanese language learners are shown in Table 8. There are three items from the metacognitive category in the top five. This result shows that learners are aware of their progress in learning the language and trying their best to learn it. Even though the average frequency for the affective category is the lowest, one item categorised under this category is the third most frequent strategy used by the learners. The strategy is "if I do not understand something in Japanese, I ask other people to slow down or say it again." The expressions like "もう一度お願いします(Please say it again)" and "もう少しゆっくり言ってください(Please talk slowly)" are introduced in an earlier chapter in the textbook; hence learners are familiar with the way to ask other people to slow down or repeat their words. This may lead the learners to use this strategy at high frequency.

Table 8 Most frequent strategies used

Strategies	Category	Frequency
(33) I try to find out how to be a better learner of Japanese.	Metacognitive	4.04
(32) I pay attention when someone is speaking Japanese.	Metacognitive	4.02
(45) If I do not understand something in Japanese, I ask other people to slow down or say it again.	Affective	4.02
(3) I connect the sound of a new Japanese word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	Memory	3.98
(38) I think about my progress in learning Japanese.	Metacognitive	3.96

Compared to the previous study as mentioned before (Zakaria et al., 2017), the study found that the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) preparatory course learners use strategies from the compensation category the most. The difference in this result can be considered as the result of the course aim and textbook used. As JLPT preparatory course, which is designed to prepare students to take the JLPT exam, it can be assumed that the nature of the course should be on tackling how to answer the questions. On the other hand, courses in USIM are using the Japan Foundation *Marugoto Nihon No Kotoba To Bunka* as the primary textbook and Can-do activities provided in the book indirectly contribute to the usage of metacognitive strategies in learners' language learning. Can-do statements in each lesson help learners to aware of the learning goals during each class. This somehow raise learner's awareness towards more 'self-controlled' in a learning process. Furthermore, USIM students are largely from religious school and long-term Arabic language learners may also affect the result of strategies chosen.

Five language learning strategies with less frequent usage are tabulated in Table 9. Japanese language learners in USIM seem to have difficulty using Japanese using their own initiative. Generally, it is likely that respondents background may also affect the strategies chosen as almost 80% of the respondents are female learners. However, other than cognitive, the other items from social, compensation and affective also appear as least chosen strategies by USIM Japanese language learners which may suggest that learners have problems with the Japanese language proficiency. This also suggests the lack of confidence in pursuing conversations in Japanese.

The results shown in Table 9, The item from the questionnaire with the lowest usage is "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary" (affective category), with an average of 2.33. Many learners do not have a language learning diary, as the teachers are not proposing it as one of the strategies for learning Japanese. Writing diary in language learning is a little out of fashion or trend since lately teachers are adapting blogging, vlogging, SNS status posting in language teaching and learning.

Table 9 Less frequent strategies used

Strategies	Category	Frequency
(14) I start conversation in Japanese.	Cognitive	2.83
(49) I ask question in Japanese.	Social	2.76
(17) I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in Japanese.	Cognitive	2.61
(27) I read Japanese without looking up every new word.	Compensation	2.57
(43) I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	Affective	2.33

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to provide more insights into Japanese language learning strategies adopted by Japanese learners, specifically those who are learning in Malaysian higher education. From the distributed questionnaire adapted from Oxford's SILL, USIM Japanese language learners used strategies from metacognitive category the most. This is probably resulted from the primary textbook used for the courses and learner's learning environment background. On the other hand, USIM Japanese language learners used least affective strategies in learning Japanese. Since this research is carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, where all courses were taught online, most learners are lacking physical meeting and socialising face-to-face skill. This may result in the lower frequency in affective and social category. Nevertheless, this study also suggested that teachers may also explicitly introduce the learning strategies to learners, so that learners may know the various strategies they can use when learning a language.

Thus, in future data collection site should be widened and collected from various demographic background to determine Malaysia Japanese language learner's strategies in learning Japanese language. To support the number shown in this study, a follow-up interview should be done to understand how the participants react to each item in the questionnaire. By doing that, more insights can be revealed, instead of just being supported by numbers.

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