

Does ethnicity influence the choice of language learning strategies?: A case study in New Zealand

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Introduction

There has been very little research on learning strategies used by learners of Japanese as a foreign language (Grainger 2006). Furthermore, ethnicity has not attracted much attention as an influential variable in such studies (Grainger 1997).

The study

This study aims to fill the gap by investigating the types of learning strategies used by learners of Japanese in New Zealand and the relationship between their use of learning strategies and their ethnicity.

The research questions of this study were: (1) what types of learning strategies are reportedly used by learners of the Japanese language as a foreign language?; and (2) to what extent does the use of language learning strategies vary depending on learners' ethnicity?

Methodology

Twenty-nine participants were divided into two groups: those of Asian Background (AB: n=16) and those of English-Speaking Background (ESB: n=13), according to their self-reported ethnicity. Data were collected through the questionnaire 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 5.1' developed by Oxford (1990), and semi-structured, one-to-one interviews.

An interview schedule was designed to elicit what types of learning strategies the participants found useful and were using for their own learning of Japanese. There were 25 participants who agreed to be interviewed: 14 (56 %) were in the AB and 11 (44%) were in the ESB. Both questionnaires and interviews were carried out in English. It was considered appropriate as all students learning at this institution needed to obtain 6.5 or higher in IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examinations before they enrolled.

The questionnaire and interview data were analysed by means of Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) which is a quantitative analysis tool and NVivo which is computer software designed to manage qualitative data and assist qualitative analysis.

Findings

The types of learning strategies reported

The descriptive statistics indicated that for both the AB and the ESB groups, Compensation Strategies were most frequently reported while Memory Strategies were least frequently reported. However, in the interviews, Memory, Cognitive, and Social Strategies were frequently reported, while Compensation Strategies were hardly identified.

There are some possible explanations for this phenomenon. Regarding Memory Strategies, the learners of Japanese frequently reported the use of lists as a way to learn vocabulary, but this strategy was not offered in the questionnaire although the use of flashcards was included. The rigid nature of the wording of the questionnaire items may account for the discrepancy. Compensation Strategies such as guessing the meanings and using body language were included in the questionnaire and received a high mean. However, they were hardly mentioned in the interviews. It can be argued that some learners might not have recognized these as language learning strategies, unless they were prompted.

Some statements could not be grouped into any of Oxford's categories. Therefore a new category was created, named 'Avoidance Strategies'.

The extent to which the use of language learning strategies varied depending on learners' ethnicity

The results of the independent-samples *t*-test analyses indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of the reported use of the six language learning strategies. However, an ethnicity difference was identified in the interview data related to Social and Affective Strategies. The learners in both the AB and the ESB were keen to find opportunities to use the Japanese language outside the classroom, but a difference was that Asian learners tended to involve people they knew and felt comfortable with.

Several statements related to Affective Strategies were reported by learners in ESB, but not by those in the AB. These statements were related to self-encouragement and willingness to make mistakes.

Conclusion

Although the results did not show a statistically significant difference in the preferred use of learning strategies depending on learners' ethnicity, it can be argued that teachers should be aware of a possible difference. The analysis of the interview data suggests some limitations in the SILL: the questionnaire did not capture all possible strategies; the learners of Japanese were not necessarily aware of all the measured language learning strategies; the influence of ethnicity on the use of language learning strategies may not be identifiable through SILL. Researchers

should therefore collect both quantitative and qualitative data to capture a more complete picture of the role of ethnicity in the use of language learning strategies.

This study was the first one to investigate the relationship between the use of language learning strategies by learners of Japanese in New Zealand and their ethnicity. Further research would be necessary, involving bigger numbers of participants, to see whether the findings in this study can be generalised.

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(Note: The three references to be included in our report are indicated in red.)

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