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## Training Students to Learn On Their Own

Linda J. Viswat & Susan A. Jackson,  
Himeji Dokkyo University

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The first encounter of an American (or any 'Western') teacher with a Japanese EFL class, or the first encounter of a Japanese student with an American teacher, is a time of culture shock—sometimes quite painful. From the student's point of view, the teacher is impatient, not giving him/her enough time to think carefully before demanding an answer; she gives the student assignments that seem embarrassing or silly, such as roleplaying or language games; she asks questions for which no answers can be found in the textbook; and she does not even explain things in Japanese! From the teacher's point of view, the students are agonizingly slow to answer even the simplest of questions; they are too apt to say, "I don't know" when asked questions about their opinions or questions that require them to make an inference; they take so long getting ready to begin an assignment that there is not enough time left to complete it properly; and they seem so nervous about making errors that, given the chance, they may take several minutes of valuable class time to write or say just one short sentence. The result is frustration on both sides.

To lessen this frustration, we feel that it is incumbent on the teacher to try to understand the Japanese students' educational background and expectations about learning, and to teach the students in a way that they find as comfortable and nonthreatening as possible. It is also necessary, however, to encourage these students to abandon some habits and learning methods they have acquired that clearly interfere with language learning. For this task, it seems most useful to try to help students to expand their repertoire of learning strategies beyond a set useful for learning English to pass a paper test to a set useful for learning English to use as a means of communication. By trying out these new strategies and seeing positive effects on their learning, the students can decide for themselves to be more active, autonomous learners, without feeling that their teacher is trying to force them to stop being Japanese. The culture shock is lessened and more learning takes place as students and teachers meet and interact in a less culture-specific and more communication-enhancing atmosphere.

Traditionally, teachers of English in Japan have relied on the grammar-translation method. In class much time is taken up with the teacher "explaining" reading passages to students. As Yoshitake (1991: 63) points out, "... the students are constantly told from childhood to sit quietly and listen to the teacher, and not to stand up and speak out unless called upon." In response to this type of instruction and because the main objective of English teaching has been to prepare students for university entrance examinations, most of our students appear to rely on a very limited number of learning strategies. In fact, the majority seem to depend

almost exclusively on memorization strategies. Other strategies, such as guessing or seeking clarification, which seem particularly useful for language learning are often openly discouraged by teachers. Students are given no practice in using metacognitive strategies such as setting goals for themselves since they are supposed to think of themselves as members of the group and therefore their individual goals are subordinate to the goals of the group. Also, since the teacher is viewed as the fount of all knowledge, a teacher-dependency is fostered, which is a major obstacle to developing learning autonomy. Students come to believe that they cannot learn on their own. They lack affective strategies such as being able to praise themselves for doing something well or having confidence in themselves. Studies conducted by Koike *et al* (1985) under the sponsors of the Ministry of Education (Mombusho) reveal that over the course of their studies in junior high school and high school, the majority of students lose interest in learning English.

For several years we have been trying to introduce our students to the concept of learning strategies in the belief that students would become better equipped to manage their own learning through being exposed to a program in which they were helped to recognize the strategies that they have been using, were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies with regard to their personal goals, and were presented with alternative strategies. From a variety of sources such as Stern (1975), Rubin (1975), Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Cohen (1990), and particularly Wenden (1985, 1987, and 1991), we have gained insights into the learning process from which we have gleaned the following:

- all learners use strategies but effective learners have a broader repertoire of strategies from which to choose
- the choice of which strategies to use depends on the task to be accomplished; good language learners show greater flexibility in their selection of strategies
- learners can be given training in the use of strategies
- people learn in different ways

When we first began to integrate learner training into our courses on a systematic basis, we used Rubin and Thompson's book, *How to Be a Better Language Learner* (1982). As part of the course requirements, students had to keep learning journals in which they reported on problems and successes they were having in learning English. Class time was allocated for discussions on the various strategies introduced in the text as well as others presented by the teacher. Students were encouraged to share their learning strategies. A particularly enlightening session for one of the teachers was when students were talking about mnemonic devices they employed. All students had something to contribute since this was a strategy that they had all used in many different ways: imaging, making word cards, repeating

words to be learned, putting signs up in their rooms, devising phrases in Japanese that sounded like words to be memorized (e.g., “hito ga saigai [calamity] ni karamareru”), creating stories, and so on. What one person said triggered a memory on the part of another student.

The discussions and learning journals served as the inspiration for an additional component of the training program: videotapes of people talking about strategies that they have employed to learn languages. By taping other people we were able to provide examples of strategies that we ourselves did not use, to introduce strategies that we felt were particularly useful, and to get students to begin to view the world of language learning outside the classroom. Most importantly, rather than continuing in the traditional role of teacher, we wanted to provide other models of learning, and to show teachers as learners. Each “unit” of the videotape consists of a single person talking about a strategy, method, or technique that she or he had found helpful in learning a foreign language. We emphasized that we did not want them to talk about what students should do, but rather what they themselves had done.

In one episode a German professor talked about how he had decided to avoid overreliance on the dictionary when he was reading books in English. Instead he began to try to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context. Prior to watching the video, the following questions were written on the blackboard:

- 1) What method did Prof. N. used to use?
- 2) What method does he use now?
- 3) Why did he decide to change his methods?
- 4) What has been the result?

The questions served as advanced organizers and focussed the students’ listening. Students viewed the video twice and then got in to small groups to discuss their answers to the questions. They were then given an exercise in which they were required to guess the meaning of several unknown words. In groups they discussed their guesses and reasons. After reconvening as a whole class, various methods of making “good” guesses were introduced, and the point was made that it is not always possible or wise to guess. Later, in their learning journals, many students acknowledged that they had always been reluctant to guess (in fact, they had been taught not to) but that they intended to try to do so more often in the future.

Another segment featured a Japanese professor talking about how he had sought out opportunities to use English by joining the ESS (English Speaking Society) at his university. After watching the video, students were asked to compile a list of ways that they could use English in Japan. The final list, which was a composite of all the suggestions students had made, was quite a surprise. Students hadn’t realized that there were so many ways in which they could use English right here in Japan.

Other episodes included an American professor talking about how she “talked to herself” in Japanese, rehearsing anticipated conversations or reviewing conversations that had already taken place. Another segment featured an American professor talking about how she used the strategy of circumlocution, and in a separate episode the same professor explained how she had used “learning from mistakes” as an affective strategy to overcome her embarrassment when she misunderstood what some friends had said and was laughed at. The strategies covered in our videotape series include: listening for key words, circumlocution, rehearsing, using mnemonic devices, looking for opportunities to use a foreign language, guessing from context, keeping a journal.

The training program has been viewed positively by students as evidenced by feedback students have given in their journals and as reported in final course evaluations. In the following excerpts from student journals, the underlined sections refer to strategies that were introduced in class through video and discussions. Student “T” wrote: “Until now, I had studied English only with a dictionary. For example, when I was reading . . . if I found some words that I couldn’t understand . . . I looked them up . . . (in) a dictionary whose meaning were written clearly in Japanese. And when I studied for tests . . . I learned the words which were included in the range of possible questions by heart. But it was nonsense to do such because I forgot them completely after the test was over . . . We should consider the methods of learning English. I have changed my way of studying English . . . I’m guessing the meaning of words by myself if there are some which I can’t understand. As Prof. N. said, we should think about the meaning from the context. I found the fact that I couldn’t make progress in English without doing so.” Student “T2” adds: “Reading without a dictionary is very useful and interesting. I can read faster than before.”

Student “D” wrote in her journal: “I have changed my strategies during this academic year . . . in solving questions, I have read all of the long sentences and then answered the questions until now. In this case, I had to read the long sentences again to look for each of the questions. I found that it was not a useful way. So I decided to read the questions first. This way is much better than my first method because I can read the long sentences with an aim.”

Student “M” wrote in his final evaluation: “Remembering this academic year, I think that my view of English has changed revolutionally since I was in this university. When I entered into this school, I thought that English is a ‘reminding’ subject, so I only reminded words and constructions as many as I could. But, as days I’d been to school passed, I came to know that English is a subject to study for myself, not only to learn or remember words or constructions. Then, my strategies for studying English have come to change. First, I thought that I had to speak more fluently, and I (started) to talk to myself in English whenever I could.”

Miss “F” wrote: “When I was a high school student, I studied just for a examination. And I entered this university, then I must study English for myself. I know that I have to study hard, but I don’t know what to do. I was lucky to know someone’s strategies, because I wonder what I should study . . . Listening for key words helps me. I tried to hear all parts in English, but it was not good. I began to try listening for key words and phrases. I came to understand more than when I tried to hear all of conversations.”

And Student “Y” wrote: “During the academic year, my strategies to learn English changed. When I was a high school student, I think I studied English as only knowledge. I learned many things about English, but I think it was not very useful. During this academic year I thought about real English. I was taught how to learn English by myself. Until entering this university I had a passive style when I learned English. But I have some new strategies. For example, guessing and key word. When I see unknown words, I guess the meaning from context or I try to find key words in the sentence. It is not a passive style. It is very important to look for opportunities to use English, too, not only in class. I tried to listen to radio English programs everyday while cooking or cleaning. I wrote my penpals in English.”

Several students found our video series useful not only as a source of new ideas of strategies, but also as a source of material to improve their listening comprehension skills. Ms. “T” wrote: “it’s very interesting for me that to watch the video which someone (native English speaker) speak some story in English. Because it’s real teaching material, I think and I can hear the opinion of many persons. So it’s very nice.” Ms. “M” agreed: “To watch the videos which professors talk about their experiences is very interesting and useful for me. At first time, I can understand them only half. But by listening to the same story again and again, I can understand almost all of it. So I think I will be able to understand much less time.”

The fact that non-native speakers of English and teachers of other subjects besides English were part of the series also had an impact: “I listening to the tape about teacher’s project. I respect him for making the effort to be able to speak and read in English . . . I am surprised that the teacher who is not a English teacher speaks English fluently,” according to Mr. “H.” Other students also commented on the tapes of those professors in particular, perhaps finding them good role models as people who have mastered English.

One other feature of the program that had a great impact on the students was the idea of setting personal goals and choosing strategies that would help them to attain those goals. This idea was introduced by us in the classroom, but frequently reinforced by the video presentations. Most presenters chose first to tell a specific goal that they had had and then to tell the strategy or strategies they had found helpful in reaching that goal. The practice of setting goals for themselves, rather than

always having them imposed by the teacher or school, was very exciting for many of our students, especially since using English for pleasure was presented as an acceptable goal. As Ms. "K" explained: "To tell the truth, I think I had studied English to take an examination. I studied English against my will in my high school days. But when I entered the university, my study made a 180 degree turn. I can study for pleasure. I sometimes watch the video (foreign movie), sometimes listen to music. In short, I like studying English better than before." By the time they reach university, students are tired from the "examination hell" of studies to pass the entrance examinations. They are also experiencing a great deal of freedom after passing through a rather rigid junior high school and high school system. Part time jobs, club activities, and fun take precedence in their minds over studies. For Ms. "K" the idea that she actually could enjoy learning English was a revelation. In addition, she now had a purpose for studying English: to be able to understand the movies she watched and the music she listened to.

Ms. "U" also wrote about the importance of being interested in her studies, making the connection of interest-level and personal goals clearer: "Through this year, strategy was very useful to me. I knew that there were many methods for studying English. If I study recklessly, I must be disgusted. It is important to have interest when we learn something. If we do so, we enjoy studying more and more. I think that I use several strategies from now on." It is refreshing to read comments such as Ms. "U's". It seems that the concept of selecting personal goals can motivate students to learn.

Ms. "F" wrote: "I think that in reaching my personal goal, the strategy of 'I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English' and 'I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English' seem especially useful to me. In the limited personal studying time, I needed to study for my personal goal. So I had to plan my schedule of study." Among Japanese university students this concept of personal studying time is rare.

Ms. "Y's" comments provide more evidence of how important it is for students to engage themselves in the process of setting goals: "I felt gloomy every time I wrote my strategy [a weekly report of what strategies the student has been using and her opinion of or experience with the strategy they had heard about in the previous class]. Because I didn't have my real goal. I do want to find my real goal the rest of my school day." In contrast, Ms. "H," demonstrates how having a goal helped her: "My personal goal, I . . . speak English fluently. I don't feel that I made progress toward my goal. I made little progress. But I reach my goal still more. I think my goal is difficult for me, but I don't give up. I will try. Next year, I want to reach my goal. I have to study hard. I don't have to negative. I have to positive. I seem especially useful to me, I speak English only. It is easy but very difficult. Because I

haven't opportunity speaking English. I want to more opportunity speaking English. I don't have to shy. I don't have to afraid mistakes. If so, I make progress toward my goal. And I'll reach my goal. I hold out!"

We realize that viewing strategies in isolation is not enough. As Anita Wenden points out, "Complexes of strategies rather than individual strategies may characterize successful learning." (1991:22) The videos do have several positive features: they provide models of people discussing strategies that have been successful for them; they provide models of other Japanese who have been successful language learners; they serve as a method for students to get to know various teachers in a non-threatening manner; they give students an opportunity to listen to other varieties of English and can be used for various listening comprehension activities that are themselves linked to learning strategies, e.g., listening for main ideas, making inferences, guessing from context, listening for key words. Students are never forced into a position of having to accept or adopt the strategies that are presented. In fact, the teachers admitted that they would reject some strategies presented thus enabling students to feel comfortable about doing likewise.

In the future we would like to continue to expand our library of videotapes to include students serving as informants, and tapes in which people are given specific tasks and asked to explain on tape how they solved the problem.

We believe that it is important to engage students in the process of evaluating their learning and to help them to become better learners. Our students can gain control over their learning and become more autonomous as language learners by becoming more aware of the strategies they use. In doing so they become able to discard those strategies that are ineffective and adopt new more effective strategies.

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### About the Authors

*Linda Viswat and Susan Jackson have made numerous presentations and published several articles on training Japanese students to use more effective learning strategies. They have both taught in Japan for more than ten years. They are currently embarking on a research project designed to measure the effects of specific strategy training techniques on language acquisition.*