Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy in Learning Japanese

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The Japanese language is very popular among many youths as it is viewed as a means to secure better employment, in addition to understanding popular Japanese culture. Language learning strategies and learner autonomy are two key dimensions in learning Japanese as a foreign language. This study aims to identify language learning strategies used and perceived extent of learner autonomy among tertiary students in a Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) preparatory class. It also attempts to find the relationship between language learning strategies and learner autonomy in the context of learning Japanese in Malaysia. The results of the quantitative method show that the students are medium users of language learning strategies and possess learner autonomy extent at an average level. In addition, it is found that there is a high significant correlation between language learning strategies and learner autonomy in learning Japanese. It is hoped that this study could contribute towards more efficient and effective language learning process of Japanese language specifically and other foreign languages.

1. Introduction

Possessing the ability to communicate in foreign languages is a recognisable added value in the present day. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education through its latest national Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) has outlined 'Language Proficiency' as one of the six student aspirations, where learning at least one additional global language is highly encouraged [1]. Many Malaysian students have thus become well-aware of the fact that foreign language learning is important.

Japanese language is perhaps one of the most popular foreign languages studied by language learners in Malaysia, despite the notion that it is often perceived as a difficult choice compared to other foreign languages [2, 3]. Interest in the Japanese language among Malaysians probably stems from the general positive perception towards Japan, which is commonly associated with impressive achievements in the economy, innovation and technology aspects, to name a few [4]. Moreover,

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Malaysian youngsters also view the Japanese language as a valuable advantage in securing jobs as well as understanding Japanese popular culture and entertainment [5].

Yet, not everyone who undergoes foreign language courses seems to be successfully proficient in the target languages, let alone becoming communicatively competent in using the language. In the case of the Japanese language, the fact that it features three different writing scripts, has a distinctive sentence structure in comparison to the Malay and English language, and has not much environment where it is widely spoken in Malaysia, might be the reasons that discourage learners to master this language [6].

One way to facilitate foreign language learning is through the use of language learning strategies. This is because various studies have shown the use of language learning strategies to benefit language learners. According to [7], the purposes of learning strategies are not only to make learning easier, but also to make learning deeper, more productive and more lasting. As the study on language learning strategies further expands, the focus has been gradually shifted from teacher-centred environment to learner-centred kind of learning.

Foreign language learning is a continuous journey, not only limited to what is taught in a language classroom alone. Throughout the learning process, students should be guided to become autonomous so as to improve their language skills, be able to grasp the most out of what is taught in class and explore more about the language they are learning. In short, efficient and effective language learning experience requires both learning strategies and learner autonomy [8]. Recent literature in relation to language learning strategies and learner autonomy mostly focuses on learning English, with Japanese language learning strategies hardly receiving much attention [9], particularly in a foreign language learning environment. Additionally, literature on language learning strategies and learner autonomy tend to focus only on one or the other. On top of that, research that looks at both the use of learning strategies and learner autonomy is relatively limited and has only received recent attention. The present study thus intends to fill this gap. First, by identifying the language learning strategies used by Malaysian university learners, and then, by investigating the extent of learner autonomy with regard to learning Japanese as a foreign language. This study also attempts to find the relationship between language learning strategies and learner autonomy in the context of learning Japanese. By carrying out this study, it is hoped that the link between both learning strategies and learner autonomy can be obtained, thus contributing towards more efficient and effective language learning process of the Japanese language specifically, and other foreign languages in general.

Based on these aims, the research questions addressed are as follows:

1. What are the learning strategies used by students when learning Japanese language?
2. What is the extent of learner autonomy of students in learning Japanese language?
3. How are the uses of language learning strategies and the extent of learner autonomy related to one another?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are the various options that learners use in order to make sense of the new language that they are learning. The study of language learning strategies forms one branch of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, which began in the late 1970s and 1980s. Language learning strategies are also defined as behaviours, steps or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning [10]. A more detailed definition has been put forward

by [11], who explains that language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more selfdirected, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

Language learning strategies have been classified into two main classes which are direct strategies and indirect strategies [11]. These strategies are further subdivided into six strategy groups (i.e. Memory, Cognitive and Compensation under direct strategies; Metacognitive, Affective and Social under indirect strategies). Direct strategies are defined as the strategies involving mental process and directly influencing the target language. On the other hand, indirect strategies refer to the strategies that support and manage the learning effort without directly involving the target language.

Memory strategies are the strategies used in order to remember information more effectively. Cognitive strategies are the strategies that enable learners to make sense, understand and produce the new language. Compensation strategies are the strategies that allow learners to use the language despite the missing knowledge. As for metacognitive strategies, they allow learners to evaluate their own language learning pattern and coordinate the learning process. Affective strategies are the strategies that help learners to gain control and regulate personal emotions, attitudes and values, while social strategies are the strategies employed when a learner involves other people in the language learning process.

The six strategy groups were then be developed into an inventory to gauge language learning, which is known as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). In comparison to the earlier research and classification of language learning strategies, Oxford's SILL is more comprehensive and detailed. The list of learning strategies compiled in a form of a questionnaire by Oxford is a useful instrument to test second or foreign language learners' strategy use. Not only it has been extensively used by researchers with proven reliability and validity, researchers also claim that SILL has valuable influence on language proficiency [12-14].

Language learning strategies have been considered as one of the key determinants of language acquisition and educational achievements [15]. A successful language learner, according to [16], has to be in control of the way he learns first. This is supported by [17], who proposes that learners use language learning strategies in order to learn something more successfully. Furthermore, many teachers and educationalists also see learning how to learn as the most basic and important educational objectives [18]. That being said, some learners might need guidance in finding out the strategies that really work for them [19]. Hence, there is a vital need to train learners to be able to use strategies flexibly and independently [8]. Language learning strategies have been studied by researchers in many different contexts and across many languages. For instance, it is reported that compensation strategies were the most popular among Hong Kong university students studying English [20]. Another study that uses Taiwanese junior high school students as the sample found memory strategies to be the most frequently used by students in learning English [8]. Affective strategies were discovered to be the least popular in both studies. In a study conducted by [6], it is reported that metacognitive strategies were employed most frequently by Malaysian students studying Japanese, while compensation strategies appeared to be used the least. Apparently, the results of many studies were not always consistent, probably due to the differences in terms of target respondents, sample sizes and target languages. Apart from that, there are also many other factors affecting the use of language learning strategies among students that need to be taken into consideration.

2.2 Learner Autonomy

The emergence of the term 'learner autonomy' is the result of the shift of distribution of power and authority, from teacher-centred learning towards communicative approaches in second or foreign language teaching that emphasises on the learner-centred learning [21, 22].

However, the definition which describes learner autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' [23], has been widely accepted by many researchers. The definition further extends to describe the situations of holding the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning, which encompass determining the objective, determining the content and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition and evaluating what a learner has been acquired. It is important to note that autonomy can be thought of in terms of departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of participants in the learning process [22].

According to [24], learners take their first step towards autonomy when they realise that they need to be responsible for their own learning. Learner autonomy also holds the idea of learners determining their own learning goal, contents and progression as well as selecting methods and proper techniques to be used during the learning journey [25]. Apart from that, it is believed that learner autonomy is activated when learners have power and right to learn for themselves [26]. Basically, the concept of learner autonomy revolves around the idea of learners as human beings that are free from external constraints.

A number of previous studies on learner autonomy have been conducted in the context of learning English language. It is found respondents did not perceive themselves as sufficiently autonomous, were unwilling to take responsibility, and still regarded teachers as a dominant figure in the classroom [27]. In another study, it is discovered that students, especially in East Asia, were reluctant to get involved in class management and still had a strong belief that their teachers should be the only responsible party [28]. Moreover, the findings from [29] indicate that even though students do understand what autonomy is and what they are capable of doing, they do not have the confidence in their ability to take responsibility for their learning. Another study carried out in the Malaysian context by [21] suggests that different cultures and learning styles may not affect students' autonomy extent, as autonomous students are able to adjust themselves to various teaching styles and approaches. In brief, it appears that students perceive themselves as less autonomous and would prefer to depend on their teachers most of the time, even though they have the capability to take charge of their learning.

2.3 Relationship between Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Exploring the relationship between the notions of language learning strategies and learner autonomy is a rather new field. Nevertheless, many researchers agree that both language learning strategies and learner autonomy are interrelated in many different ways and contexts [8, 30-35]. If learners are more conscious and responsible of the language learning strategies they use, they are more likely to be successful in their language learning [29]. Apart from that, having a repertoire of learning strategies can help students to learn better and become more autonomous [31]. The use of language learning strategies has also been found to have high correlation with learner autonomy, thus serves as a good predictor of the level of autonomy [34, 35]. It is also pointed out by [36] that language learning strategies are often related to the features of control, goal-orientedness, autonomy and self-efficacy. Taking such belief into consideration, it can be said that

both learner autonomy and language learning strategies are important aspects that contribute to the success in language learning.

3. Methodology

This pilot study was conducted in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai, Johor Bahru on June 2017, which was at the end of a semester. Convenient sampling was used to select the participants for this study. The respondents of this study were 20 UTM students; 15 males and 5 females, who attended the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) preparatory classes.

A set of questionnaire was used as the research instrument in this study. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (A) demographic information which includes gender, faculty and year of study; (B) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which was adapted from Oxford (1990); and (C) Learner Autonomy Inventory about Language Learning, which was developed based on the questionnaires used by Ustunluoglu (2009) and Sakai, *et al* (2010).The questionnaires were distributed during class time, with the help of the respective Japanese language teachers. Each item in the questionnaire comprised five Likert-scale responses for the respondents to choose from.

Oxford's SILL was employed to measure the frequency of the use of language learning strategies by the students. The items included direct and indirect strategies, which used the following scales: 1) I never/almost never use this strategy; 2) I rarely use this strategy; 3) I use this strategy sometimes; 4) I use this strategy often; and 5) I use this strategy very frequently. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the questionnaire was found to be 0.929, which suggests reliability and consistency of responses.

The Autonomy Inventory of language learning comprised three separate sections, involving responsibility, ability and activities. The items in the responsibility section used the following descriptors: 1) Not my responsibility at all; 2) Hardly my responsibility; 3) It is my responsibility to some extent; 4) Mostly my responsibility; and 5) I am totally responsible for it. The descriptors used for ability section are 1) Very poor; 2) Poor; 3) Average; 4) Good; and 5) Very good. As for the activities section, the scales used were 1) Never; 2) Rarely; 3) Sometimes; 4) Often; and 5) Usually. This autonomy part of the questionnaire also has a relatively high consistency, with an alpha coefficient value of 0.92.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22.0. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to find answers for the research questions outlined in this study. Specifically, the mean and standard deviation were derived to find the frequency of language learning strategies used, as well as the extent of learner autonomy of the students. Next, Pearson correlation coefficients between language learning strategies and learner autonomy were also calculated and analysed to find the relationship of both elements.

4. Results

4.1 Use of Language Learning Strategies

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations obtained from Part B of the questionnaire. The results were used to determine the strategies employed by the students as well as the frequency of the strategies used. One-sample t-tests were performed to examine whether each subscale's respective mean score was significantly different from the midpoint score (the accepted mean = 3.0 in a 5-point Likert scale).

From the results, it is found that students generally use all language learning strategies (Item B1-B60) at a medium level of frequency (M=3.2, SD=0.488), which is at the range of 'sometimes' to 'often'. Specifically, the students employed compensation strategies (M=3.46, SD=0.564) more frequently than other strategy groups. This is followed by cognitive strategies (M=3.39, SD=0.564), social strategies (M=3.37, SD=0.599), metacognitive strategies (M=3.25, SD=0.653) and memory strategies (M=3.1, SD=0.614), which were also employed at a medium level of frequency. However, students used affective strategies (M=2.607, SD=0.725) at a slightly low level of frequency, which is at the range of 'rarely' to 'sometimes'. Statistical significance was only found in the compensation strategies, which means the use of compensation strategies is the most frequent among the students who learn Japanese language.

Table 1
Use of Language Strategies by Students

Strategy Group	Item No.	Mean	SD
Memory strategy	B1-B12	3.10	0.614
Cognitive strategy	B13-B24	3.39	0.610
Compensation strategy	B25-B32	3.46*	0.564
Metacognitive strategy	B33-B45	3.25	0.653
Affective strategy	B46-B52	2.61	0.725
Social strategy	B53-B60	3.37	0.599
Overall	B1-B60	3.20	0.490

Note: *$p<.01$; 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Very Frequently

4.2 Extent of Learner Autonomy

The extent of learner autonomy of the students was measured in terms of three dimensions, which are responsibility, ability and activity. One-sample t-tests were conducted on the scores of the students' perceived autonomous responsibility, ability and activity. This was done to determine whether the mean scores were significantly different from the test value=3. The value is chosen as it is the midpoint score in a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 2
Extent of Students' Learning Responsibility (Test value=3)

Item	Item No.	Mean	SD
To decide your own goal of Japanese language study	C1	4.50*	0.688
To check how much progress you make	C2	4.00*	0.795
To decide the textbook and materials you should use	C3	2.75	0.967
To decide the topics you should learn and activities you should do	C4	2.80	0.951
To identify your strengths and weaknesses in learning Japanese	C5	3.75*	1.019
To decide the pace of each lesson	C6	2.85	1.089
To stimulate your interest in learning Japanese language	C7	4.50*	0.761
To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework	C8	2.75	0.967
To decide ways of assessment (e.g. attendance, essay, self evaluation	C9	2.55	1.099
To evaluate your language learning	C10	3.40	1.046
Overall	C1-C10	3.39	0.582

Note: *$p<.01$; 1=Not my responsibility at all, 2=Hardly my responsibility, 3=It is my responsibility to some extent, 4=Mostly my responsibility, 5=Totally my responsibility

Table 2 shows the extent of learning responsibility among the students. Overall, students perceived their Japanese language learning process to be their own responsibility to some extent (M=3.39, SD=0.582). Students also possessed a higher extent of responsibility in a number of specific items. For example, they believed that they were responsible for deciding their own goals of Japanese language study (Item C1), checking how much progress they make (Item C2), identifying their strengths and weaknesses (Item C5) and stimulating their interest in learning Japanese language (Item C7). In contrast, they perceived that they had less responsibility towards deciding the amount, type and frequency of homework (Item C3), deciding on the textbook and materials they should use (Item C8) as well as deciding on ways of assessment (C9).

Table 3 displays that in ability dimension, students' perceived overall autonomy extent was slightly below average. However, they did demonstrate a high autonomous degree in some specific ability items. For example, they believed that they would be able to decide their own goal of Japanese language study (Item C11), identify strengths and weaknesses in learning Japanese (Item C15) and evaluate their language learning (Item C20). On the other hand, students think that they possessed poor ability in deciding the textbook and materials they should use (Item C13), deciding the topics they should learn (Item C13), deciding the types of activities in the classroom (Items C17) and deciding on the amount, type and frequency of homework (Item C19).

Table 3

Extent of Students' Learning Ability (Test value=3)

Item	Item No.	Mean	SD
Deciding your own goal of Japanese language study	C11	3.95*	0.826
Checking how much progress you make	C12	3.25	0.851
Deciding the textbook and materials you should use	C13	2.30*	1.081
Deciding the topics you should learn	C14	2.40	1.095
Identifying your strengths and weaknesses in learning Japanese	C15	3.65	0.933
Deciding the pace of each lesson	C16	2.75	0.967
Deciding the types of activities in the classroom	C17	2.40	1.231
Deciding the amount, type and frequency of homework	C18	2.65	1.309
Deciding ways of assessment (e.g. attendance, essay, self-evaluation)	C19	2.90	1.252
Evaluating your language learning	C20	3.35	0.988
Overall	C11-C20	2.96	0.765

Note: *p<.01; 1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, 5=Very good

Table 4 presents the extent of student's learner autonomy in terms of the dimension of activities they do. The data shows that students carried out certain activities more often than others. For example, they perform well in taking notes while listening to the teacher in classroom (Item C33), listening to Japanese songs (Item C25), watching shows or dramas in Japanese (Item C4), practising writing Japanese characters (Item C28) and noting down new words and meanings (Item C30). However, they rarely go to see their teachers in order to discuss their work (Item C34), read books or materials in Japanese language (Item C21) as well as do group studies for Japanese lessons (Item C30).

4.3 Relationship between Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Table 5 illustrates that there are positive correlations between six groups of language learning strategies and three dimensions of learner autonomy. The overall results show that there is a high significant correlation (r = 0.729, p<0.01) between language learning strategies and learner

autonomy, which indicates that students who use language learning strategies more frequently tend to have a higher extent of learner autonomy in learning the Japanese language.

Table 4
Extent of Students' Learning Activities (Test value=3)

Item	Item No.	Mean	SD
Reading books/ reading materials in Japanese	C21	2.35	1.089
Reading books/materials on how to learn Japanese language	C22	2.60	1.142
Watching/listening to Japanese language learning/educational programs	C23	2.60	1.188
Watching TV shows/dramas/movies in Japanese	C24	4.15*	1.137
Listening to Japanese songs	C25	4.25*	0.910
Talking to native speakers of Japanese	C26	2.60	1.273
Practising speaking Japanese with your friends	C27	3.10*	1.071
Practising writing Japanese characters (Hiragana/Katakana/Kanji)	C28	3.90*	1.071
Doing group studies for Japanese lessons	C29	2.25	1.164
Noting down new words and their meanings	C30	3.90*	1.210
Preparing and reviewing before Japanese classes	C31	3.20	1.322
Asking the teacher questions when you do not understand	C32	3.70	1.129
Taking notes while listening to the teacher in classroom	C33	4.45*	0.887
Going to see your teacher in order to discuss your work	C34	2.40	1.142
Attending seminars/events about Japan and Japanese languages other than your own classes	C35	2.95	1.317
Overall	C21-C35	3.05	0.622

Note: *$p<.01$; 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Usually

Table 5
Pearson Correlation Analysis: Relationship between Six Learning Strategy Groups and Three Dimensions of Learner Autonomy

Strategy Group/ Learner Autonomy	Responsibility	Ability	Activity	Overall
Memory strategy	0.282	0.472	0.547	0.537
Cognitive strategy	0.297	0.376	0.687*	0.551
Compensation strategy	0.167	0.355	0.518	0.428
Metacognitive strategy	0.61*	0.787*	0.737*	0.879*
Affective strategy	0.085	0.409	0.308	0.344
Social strategy	0.331	0.588*	0.726*	0.679*
Overall	0.378	0.643*	0.746*	0.729*

Note: *$p<.01$

Significant correlations can also be found in a few other relationships. For example, between cognitive strategies and the dimension of activity ($r = 0.687$), metacognitive strategies and the dimension of ability ($r = 0.787$) as well as social strategies ($r = 0.726$) and the dimension of activity.

Relatively, the correlations between each strategy group and the dimension of responsibility are found to be low, except for metacognitive strategies. The highest correlation is between metacognitive strategies and the overall autonomy ($r = 0.879$), which indicates that students who employ metacognitive strategies more frequently are very likely to be more autonomous learners.

5. Discussion

The results establish that students use most of the language learning strategies at an average level of frequency. Compensation strategies appear to be used most frequently by the students, which is the same as the result of the study made by [20]. Similar to a study made by [8], affective strategies are used the least by the student. It is also postulated by [8] that students may get nervous easily when learning a target language, hence not willing to share their own learning experience to others.

In terms of learner autonomy extent, the results show that students do understand and acknowledge their responsibility with regards to autonomous learning tasks, but feel that they do not have enough ability to carry out those responsibilities well. According to [24], learners take their first step towards autonomy when they realise that they need to be responsible for their own learning. Therefore, the students can be considered to be on the right track towards learner autonomy. In addition to that, they also depend on teachers in many learning activities inside and outside the classroom. In spite of that, the overall results for the extent of learner autonomy reveal that students do possess learner autonomy extent at a medium level. This is akin to what [37] categorises as 'reactive autonomy', which helps learners to regulate the activity once the direction has been set.

On top of that, it is also found out that there is a high significant correlation between language learning strategies and extent of learner autonomy, which is similar to the study made by [34]. Metacognitive strategies are found to have the highest correlation with the overall learner autonomy, while the dimension of activities has the highest correlation with the overall language learning strategies. According to [38], students who are more willing to take action to enhance their language effectiveness are also more willing to engage in language learning activities.

6. Conclusion

This study attempts to provide more insights into the relationship between language learning strategies use and the perceived learner autonomy in the context of learning Japanese. The overall results reveal that students use most of the language learning strategies at an average level of frequency. In terms of learner autonomy extent, the results show that students do understand and acknowledge their responsibility with regards to autonomous learning tasks, but feel that they do not have enough ability to carry out those responsibilities well. It was also found that there is a high significant correlation between language learning strategies and extent of learner autonomy.

Regardless of the different language learning strategy groups and learner autonomy dimensions, it can be seen that some items are used more frequently than others. For example, students believe that they have the ability to decide their own learning goals and identify their strengths and weaknesses in Japanese language learning. Moreover, they also demonstrate that they often watch Japanese shows or dramas, listen to Japanese songs, practise writing Japanese alphabets and note down words and meanings. These findings could indirectly give some general hints and ideas for the teachers to understand students' patterns and preferences in learning Japanese language.

By having a grasp on students' language learning pattern, it is hoped that language teachers, lecturers and instructors can further help and encourage students to improvise their language learning process, as well as be able to influence learning environment in the positive ways.

Penerbit
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