

## A Review of the Findings of Communicative Strategy Training in Japan

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### BACKGROUND

Initial CS research (Selinker, 1972; Varadi, 1973; Tarone, 1977) sought to identify the characteristics of techniques proficient learners adopted to minimize the demands of L2 interaction. The assumption existed that once identified these skills, in addition to the language itself, could be explicitly taught to those linguistically less proficient. These early studies resulted in the identification, classification, and description of CS and strategic techniques associated with effective language production. Research then proceeded to assess the specific influence these skills exerted on language development, which, since this early identification research, had generally accepted the benefits of enhanced strategy use on communicative proficiency. Despite this recognition, it needs to be acknowledged that this research was conducted with learners from non-collectivist countries, whose L1 (both grammar and mutual intelligibility), and learning experiences share many common features with those from the L2 country. Such concordance could explain the success many learners had in improving oral proficiency, and ultimately with the acquisition of the strategies themselves. In contrast, learners from Japan, more versed in teacher-centered learning approaches, and faced with a grammatically opposite L2, are more likely to experience difficulty in their acquisition of these linguistic tools.

The incentive for this review stems primarily from a lack of any systematic overview of research into CS instruction in the Japanese setting. Admittedly, this is a reflection of the limited CS research available in general, which is almost exclusively restricted to cognitive strategy applications for vocabulary learning tasks (e.g. Poulisse, 1990; Kitajima, 1997). In the limited number of papers which have attempted to corroborate CS contribution

to discourse performance (see Tsuchimochi, 2001; Nakatani, 2005), the focus has been how they assist communication and how this use represented the extent of discourse in the oral proficiency tests. Such restricted findings, in addition to a lack of validated, reliable evidence into the effectiveness of CS in developing communicative ability, hinders whether similar conclusions can be reached in Japan. A comprehensive review of research evidence could contribute to providing an overview of CS influences, and highlight possible areas which prove problematic for Japanese language learners.

### COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

Since no person's linguistic repertoire or command of the language is flawless, both native and non-native English speakers sometimes struggle to concoct the appropriate expression or grammatical construction during communication. As this also affects native speakers, such instances do not originate entirely from lack of linguistic proficiency, but merely represent a linguistic, retrieval, or proficiency shortfall (Oxford, 1990:18). At such times:

The ways in which a speaker manages to compensate for this gap between what they wish to communicate and their immediately available linguistic resources are known as CS. (Bialystok, 1990:23).

It is these skills, representing a subset of language use strategies, which deal specifically with language production problems and whose influence is recognized in improving learners'

ability to interact despite insufficient language proficiency. Proponents (Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei, 1995; McDonough, 1995; Cohen, 1998) advocate their effectiveness in improving communicative proficiency by relating language competence, or knowledge of language, to the speaker's knowledge of structures and the features of the context in which communication takes place. This performance assessment, planning, and execution, function in determining the most effective means of achieving a communicative goal. It is for these reasons that CS are regarded as being such beneficial skills for developing language competence.

#### Classification

CS can be broadly characterized according to the options employed by the learner, and relate directly to individual language users' experience of communicative problems and the solutions they pursue. These strategies demonstrate a deliberate approach to maintaining communication and can be broadly categorized into:

#### Achievement strategies

Learners can compensate for deficiencies by employing an alternative plan for reaching their intended message. This includes adopting techniques which allow the learner to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication, and represents active behavior in repairing and maintaining interaction.

#### Reduction strategies

Alternatively, when learners face impediments to executing their original message, they can avoid communication breakdown by abandoning, reducing or simplifying their intended message. They may also seek assistance from their interlocutor through confirmation or clarification.

Figure 1 lists the most common individual strategies included in each category.

Figure 1. Communication Strategies

Reduction Strategies	Achievement Strategies
Topic Avoidance	Code Switching
Message abandonment	Transfer
Semantic Avoidance	L1 Based Strategies
Message reduction	Cooperative Strategies
	Non-linguistic Strategies

(Corder, 1983:17; Faerch and Kasper, 1983:36-56)

#### THE STUDIES

A total of 27 relevant references were found through EBSCOhost® database searches. These studies, to varying degrees, address CS and learners' ability to acquire, use, and benefit from these skills.

Although, it should be noted not all the studies exclusively addressed CS, as some included them along with other learning strategies. In establishing the criteria for the search, the studies needed to meet the following conditions:

1. Teaching of CS (either embedded or directly) took place during a foreign language communication class over a minimum period of 1 month.
2. An attempt was made to 'measure' the significance (if any) on the learners speaking proficiency and/or acquisition of the CS themselves.
3. The learners were Japanese nationals living in Japan.
4. The research was carried out post-1990.
5. All research papers appeared in established peer reviewed education journals.

Table 1 summarizes the number and year of the studies.

Table 1: Studies by year

1990	1
1991	0
1992	0
1993	2
1994	1
1995	1
1996	2
1997	3
1998	3
1999	2
2001	2
2002	2
2003	1
2004	0
2005	3
2006	2
2007	0
2008	2
2009	0
Total	27

In total over 500 learners participated in the studies, with the sample sizes ranging from 10 to 50 (mean: 20). The majority of studies (n=20) were carried out at Japanese universities, with the mean age being approximately 24. The average length of the research was four weeks.

Table 2 summarizes the study size and duration for each of the studies.

Table 2: Sample size in studies

No. participants	No. studies	Ave. Duration (weeks)
01~05	2	3
06~10	4	4
11~20	4	6
21~30	5	6
31~40	7	6
41+	5	8

Despite the varying focus of these studies,

they do share enough common features for them to be grouped according to which CS they addressed. When multiple CS are taught, all are individually included in the analysis. As Table 3 indicates, the type of strategy taught varies quite widely from vocabulary acquisition techniques to more expansive circumlocutory skills, with the most common covering different aspects of paraphrase (n=12). In many cases (n=15) the studies had multiple facets so this table is only illustrative of the individual type of CS focused on.

Table 3 summarizes the most frequent CS taught in the research.

Table 3: The most common CS taught.

Communication Strategy	No.studies
Paraphrase	12
Generalization	8
Guessing	8
Circumlocution	4
Clarification	2
Vocabulary acquisition	2

## FINDINGS

In general, the studies suggest positive findings regarding the beneficial effects of strategy instruction on both strategy use, and in developing language proficiency. Of the surveys, most (n=20) report only positive results of CS instruction, while a minority (n=5) report mixed findings. Only two studies report finding only a negative influence. In accordance with accepted research (see Dornyei, 1995; Nakano, 1996), findings also highlight the proficiency of the language learner determines the number and variety of strategies used, in how the strategies are applied to the task, and in the appropriateness of the strategies themselves. It appears conclusive that this type of instruction is more beneficial to lower level learners, and may be more effective in certain language areas than others.

Despite these positive results, the limitations, reliability and validity of the studies must also be acknowledged. The limitations are evident with the small sample numbers, short duration, and lack of comprehensive pre/post testing. Furthermore, criticism (Tarone & Yule, 1989) of the data collection methods commonly used (e.g. picture description used in 80% of the studies) for failing to produce meaningful, actual communication questions the validity and reliability of the conclusions reached. This lack of an interactional dimension between subjects during observations, with the focus being on the way a learner communicates a concept without necessarily reaching agreement on meaning with an interlocutor, appears to predictably elicit responses which the researchers are attempting to measure. Such constraints of the testing methods constitute a significant difference with establish research conducted outside of Japan. Restricted testing methods are often adopted because of the uncertainty surrounding how 'observable' CS are. In order to ensure that learners have opportunities to adopt these strategies, tasks are employed which

are purposely devised to elicit the use of CS. In which case, tasks specifically designed for this purpose means learners are not making conscious decisions regarding how to overcome a linguistic hurdle, they are merely attempting to solve a linguistic problem to 'show' they are able to adopt the linguistic skills required to navigate the problem.

Due to the narrowness of the testing methods employed in a majority of the studies, a multi-method approach to assessing the effects of CS is advocated to measure surface evidence from observations, in addition to extensive use of introspective methods in order to elicit data regarding cognitive processes underlying each interaction. Although many CS are unobservable, some are associated with an observable behavior, therefore the most accurate means to measure empirically whether learners have used CS during an interaction is by to asking them. Learners can be asked to describe their strategies through:

- a. Stimulated recall interviews: an introspective model employed to elicit data about thought processes involved in carrying out a task or activity to gauge learners' covert strategy use.
- b. Questionnaires: useful in yielding information about learners' beliefs and perceptions, they can also provide evidence about learners' actual strategic behaviors when engaging in specific tasks.
- c. Verbal reports: used to allow learners, while watching a recording of their interaction, to explain and describe specific reasons for their choices, in an attempt to capture the mental processes engaged in at the time.

The comprehensive evaluation methods mentioned above need to be reflected in the standardization of testing and assessment instruments to enhance validity of assessment methods, enable easier aggregation of findings across studies, and possibly enable research funding to be used more efficiently. Validation of testing and measurement tools, or greater use of naturalistic settings and standard tests would also contribute to a harmonization of approach in the research community. Only then will the real influence of CS on language performance be able to be accurately observed, assessed, and measured. The fragmented, limited nature of the studies only offer a partial view of how learners are able to employ those CS which can be observed. Without more extensive analysis the picture remains incomplete whether or not the surface evidence displays superficial use or in fact the CS leave a 'trace' and demonstrate covert strategic thinking. Until that time it remains unclear if conclusions drawn from Japanese learners are comparable to those from countries where comprehensive testing has been carried out.

## CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the research evidence surrounding the training and use of CS among Japanese language learners. As stated, the motivation was to assess whether Japanese learners, more versed in teacher-centered approaches, would be able to demonstrate similar acquisition, adoption, and use as those from more learner-centered teaching approaches. Much of the evidence assessed demonstrates that although learners are able to employ CS during interaction, doubts remain regarding the level of acquisition that has occurred. From the author's own experience, Japanese learners are accustomed to cramming information before tests or assessments, resulting in much of this information only being committed to short-term memory. Therefore, in terms of effectiveness, clear evidence regarding improvement in overall language ability would be of great value, particularly if it could be shown to last over an extended period of time.

Evidence of CS use, in addition to language development only utilized if it offers accurate, reliable, and valid representation of what it aims to measure. One dimensional word games provide insufficient data for accurate comparisons to be made with established research findings. The author acknowledges that several reasons exist for the limited nature of many of the testing (e.g. ease of testing, observable data etc.), however, with CS use being so highly valued it seems imperative that efforts are made to try and implement CS teaching into the Japanese classroom. Only then with the data be produced which illustrates how successful learners are in acquiring their use, and any resulting influences on language proficiency. The alternative is that, along with many other Asian countries, in the Japanese language classroom, grammatical knowledge will continue be emphasized over linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Despite wide recognition that grammar practice and vocabulary drills are insufficient in developing speaking proficiency, current teaching practices still continue to produce stereotypical learners, whose extensive knowledge of syntax is countered by their lack of practical linguistic ability. Such poor oral proficiency persists despite government recognition that national economic competitiveness is threatened due to Japanese learners' poor English linguistic ability compared to neighboring countries. Such fears were one of the reasons which prompted the introduction of native assistant language teachers into Japanese schools with the specific purpose of improving oral proficiency (Ministry of Education, 1987)). If one of these goals of language teaching is to produce independent, skillful L2 strategy users, and if we think it is important for our learners to be able to participate in real communication outside the classroom, then can we ignore CS in our L2 lessons?

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