

Title:

Language Learning Strategies for Learners of Japanese: Focusing on Ethnicity Variable

Abstract:

This study explored whether the learner ethnicity has any influence on the frequency and the choice of language learning strategy use by investigating learners of Japanese through the use of the SILL. The participants were 151 students of Japanese at an American university.

The results of the mean SILL scores of each ethnicity revealed that the learners' ethnicities seem not to influence their frequency of strategy use. Regardless of the learner's different ethnicity, the frequency of strategy use was similar throughout the ethnic groups, and they all used social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently. This result does not support previous findings regarding ESL learners. Yet, the results confirm the findings of Grainger's study (1997) investigating the strategy use for learners of Japanese. Thus, the tendencies found in this study may be one characteristic particular to Japanese language learner strategies.

However, the ethnicities affect the choice of the strategy use based on the ranking of the 80 strategies of the SILL. The results of the different choices of the least used strategies among American learners and Asian learners suggest that they chose different strategies particularly for memorization, possibly because of the different previous language learning experiences. Also, the discrepancies between the most used strategies among the different ethnic learner groups indicate that in addition to the ethnicity variable the distance between the learners' mother tongues and the target language may be one influential factor in their strategy choices.

Key Words:

Quantitative research, Language Learning Strategy, Ethnicity, Learner variable, SILL

1. Introduction

In the past twenty years, considerable research on L2 learning strategies has been conducted (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). One of the major findings of strategy research is that L2 learners seem to use compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies most frequently (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Shmais, 2000). However, strategy use differs according to many learner variables, such as learners' gender, motivation, ethnicities, and proficiency levels (Oxford, 1989; Oxford &

Nyikos 1989, Wharton, 2000). Among these variables, learners' ethnicities seem to have a strong influence on the kinds of strategies they use (Grainger, 1997; Oxford, 1994; Oxford & Crookall, 1989; Politer & McGroarty, 1985; Reid, 1987). Most of these previous studies, however, have studied mainly ESL learners' strategy use. Because the Japanese language is far different from Indo-European languages, there is need for a study investigating strategy use among learners of Japanese. Therefore, this study seeks to use the SILL to explore the relationship between ethnicity and language learning strategy use among learners of Japanese. The results of this study may help researchers and teachers further understand issues related to Japanese language learner strategy use.

2. Literature Review

Since the 1980's, L2 learning strategy has been widely studied due to increased attention to the individual learners and to understand how they learn a language (Chamot, et. al., 1996; Cohen, 1998; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). Language learning strategies are behaviors or techniques employed by learners to facilitate learning and acquiring a language (Oxford, 1990). Various strategies have been identified and classified in different systems, such as Rubbin (1981), Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Among them, the most recent research found that Oxford's (1990) strategy classification is the most consistent with learner's strategy use (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of the six language learning strategies are 1) memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information, 2) cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, 3) metacognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process, 4) compensation strategies for using the language despite knowledge gaps, 5) affective strategies for regulating emotion, and 6) social strategies for learning with others.

Considering a variety of language learning strategies, one of the major areas of strategy research is investigating L2 learners' frequency of strategy use. Peacock and Ho (2003) summarized previous studies and concluded that the most frequently used strategies

were compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies by L2 learners. However, strategy use differs according to many learner variables, such as learners' gender, motivation, ethnicities, and proficiency levels (Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos 1989, Wharton, 2000). In fact, earlier studies regarding the frequency of strategy use by ESL learners did not show the same results according to the SILL (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2000). Park's study (1997) investigated 332 Korean learners of English and Goh and Foong's study (1997) explored 175 Chinese learners of English, the results of both of these studies indicated that these subjects used metacognitive and compensation strategies most frequently. On the other hand, Lan and Oxford's study (2003) revealed that 379 Taiwanese learners of English used compensation and affective strategies most frequently, while Shmais's study (2003) argued that 99 Arabic learners of English used metacognitive and affective strategies most frequently. Therefore, the frequency of language learning strategy use may not be the same across all L2 learners, but rather individual learner variables seem to affect their strategy use, as Oxford (1989) has suggested.

Among these learner variables, research on strategy use in different learner ethnicities has shown that learner ethnicity has strong influence on the kinds of strategies they use. Grainger (1997) studied strategy use through the SILL for 133 learners of Japanese in an American university. The results showed that there is no significant difference in the frequency of overall strategy use among learners of Asian, European, and English-speaking backgrounds. The results relating to the frequency of strategy use revealed that regardless of their different ethnicities, all learners of Japanese sometimes use strategies, and that they use social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently. However, this study found significant differences in their choices of individual strategies. Asian learners were found to be better at managing their affective state, remembering more effectively, and compensating better than English-speaking learners

(Grainger, 1997). Based on this result, Grainger (1997) further suggested that learners' mother tongue may have influence on their strategy use, because Asian languages are more similar to the Japanese language compared with the English and Indo-European languages. On the other hand, Politer and McGroarty's study (1985) found that Asian ESL subjects showed fewer "good" learning behaviors than Hispanics. The Asian students in this study were found to prefer rote memorization and rule-oriented strategies. This result may indicate that learners' previous language learning experiences influence their strategy use (Politer & McGroarty, 1985). Similarly, Oxford (1994) found that Taiwanese learners of English tend to be more structured, analytic, memory-based, and metacognitively oriented in language learning. Therefore, there are different tendencies in strategy use among learners' different cultural backgrounds. Reid (1987) insisted that since ESL students of different ethnicities demonstrated the tendency to use or avoid certain strategies, more research should be conducted in this area.

Most of these studies, however; have primarily examined the strategy use of ESL learners. Since the Japanese language is far different from Indo-European languages, there is need for a study investigating strategy use among learners of Japanese. Therefore, this study explores the relationship between ethnicity and language learning strategy use by learners of Japanese by using the SILL. For the purpose of this study, the term "different ethnicities" refers to American (English speakers) and Asian (Korean and Chinese speakers) students of Japanese at an American university.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the frequency of strategy use differ among the different ethnicities of learners of Japanese when examining the variables of overall frequency of strategy use, as well as the frequency of strategy use among Oxford's six strategy categories (i.e. social strategies)?
2. To what extent does the choice of strategy use (i.e. a memory strategy, such as acting out

new words) differ in different ethnicities of learners of Japanese?

3. Method

Participants

The participants were 151 students of Japanese from Japanese courses at an American university in the spring term of 2005. The majority ($n = 120$) were English native speakers and the rest were Chinese ($n = 22$) and Korean ($n = 9$) speakers. The participants included 79 males and 72 females. Fifty students were majoring in Japanese, while 101 students were not majoring in Japanese.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 5.1 (Oxford, 1990), an 80-question, self-rating survey for English-speaking learners of a foreign language. The SILL examines the frequency of the strategy usage for L2 learning by learners' self-rating (from 5 with "almost always" to 1 with "almost never"). The SILL consists of six parts: part A deals with memory strategies (questions 1-15); part B covers cognitive strategies (questions 16- 40); part C deals with compensating strategies (questions 41-48); part D examines metacognitive strategies (questions 49-64); part E investigates affective strategies (questions 65-71); and part F seeks to identify social strategies (questions 72-80). These categories are based on the results of previous studies conducted by Oxford, and cover all four skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). The SILL was chosen because the survey has most often used to assess language learning strategies globally (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Wharton, 2000). Although self-rating questionnaires have potential problems for measuring learners' actual strategy use, there is a large amount of evidence which attests to the SILL's reliability and validity (see Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 292). In addition, a background questionnaire accompanying the SILL was used in this study. The questionnaire elicited the participants' background information regarding age,

gender, mother tongue, major, the length of study of Japanese, the degree of motivation, and the participant's attitude toward learning Japanese.

Procedure

Identical sets of the SILL with background questionnaires were distributed to all the Japanese classes during the last day of class (10th week) of the spring term in 2005. The participants were instructed to complete the SILL by the final exam day (11th week). The students' participation was voluntary and the students were advised that their responses were confidential. More than eighty percent of the students completed and returned the survey (n = 151).

Data Analysis

The data of all 151 SILL respondents were analyzed using Excel in order to find out the frequency and the choice of strategy use among the different ethnicities of learners of Japanese in the sample. The SILL results are reported as follows (Oxford, 1990, p.291):

Reporting SILL

High use (Always or almost used with mean of 4.5-5.0;
or usually used with a mean of 3.5-4.4)
Medium use (Sometimes used with a mean of 2.5-3.4)
Low use (Generally not used with a mean of 1.5-2.4;
or never or almost never used with a mean of 1.0-1.40)

SILL Strategy Categories

Part A = Remembering more effectively (Memory strategy)
Part B = Using mental process (Cognitive strategy)
Part C = Compensating for missing knowledge (Compensating strategy)
Part D = Organizing and evaluating learning (Metacognitive strategy)
Part E = Managing emotions (Affective strategy)
Part F = Learning with others (Social strategy)

First, in order to find out the frequency of the strategy use, an overall mean for each learner ethnicity group (English speakers vs. Chinese and Korean speakers) was calculated. Then, a mean of each of the six strategy categories of the SILL (A: memory strategy, B: cognitive strategy, C: compensating strategy, D: metacognitive strategy, E:

affective strategy, and F: social strategy) for the learners in each ethnicity was reported. Finally, a ranking of the mean scores of each of the 80 questions of the SILL for each learner ethnicity group was calculated to find out about learners' choices regarding specific strategy use.

4. Results

According to the SILL data of 151 learners of Japanese, the learners' ethnicities seem to not significantly affect the frequency of strategy use based on the mean scores of the SILL. However, the learners' different ethnicities seem to have a strong influence on the choice of individual strategy use, based on the rankings of the most and the least used strategies out of the total of 80 SILL questions.

Results and Discussion of the Frequency of Strategy Use

The overall mean as well as the mean of the six strategy groups of the SILL for English-speaking learners and Chinese and Korean-speaking learners are shown in Figure 1.

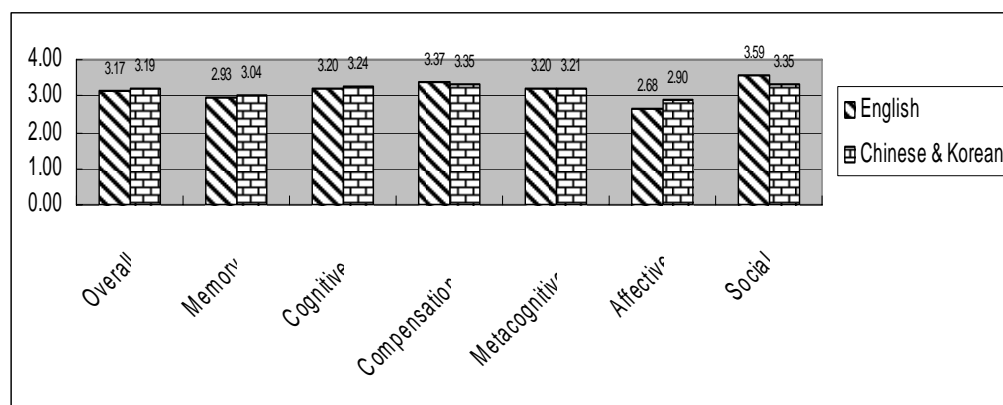


Figure 1: The mean of overall frequency and six SILL category frequencies for English and Chinese & Korean-speaking learners

According to Figure 1, the overall SILL mean for English-speaking learners is 3.17 and that of Chinese and Korean-speaking learners is 3.19. The difference of these two mean scores is only 0.02. Thus, the learners of both ethnic groups “sometimes use” (medium use) language learning strategies in learning Japanese, based on Oxford’s Reporting SILL (1990), and their different ethnicities seem to not affect the frequency of

their overall strategy use. Moreover, regardless of the learners' different ethnicities, social strategies are most frequently used, followed by compensating strategies, and then cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Affective strategies and memory strategies are used least frequently for both groups of learners. The discrepancy of these scores in different ethnic groups across the six strategy categories is small. Thus, the frequency of strategy use across the six strategy categories also seems not to be influenced by the learners' ethnic variable. Therefore, this result (that learners of Japanese sometimes use strategies, and they use social strategies most frequently, followed by cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and affective and memory strategies least frequently) may be one characteristic of strategy use particular to learners of Japanese.

In fact, the results above support Grainger's (1997) study which used the SILL to investigate the strategy use of learners of Japanese. The following Figure 2 and 3 compares the frequency means of the overall and the six strategy categories of the SILL by learners of Japanese from this study and from Grainger's study (1997).

	Mori (ThisStudy)	Grainger (1997)	Difference
Memory	2.95	2.85	0.10
Cognitive	3.21	3.38	0.17
Compensation	3.37	3.40	0.03
Metacognitive	3.20	3.41	0.21
Affective	2.72	2.69	0.03
Social	3.54	3.69	0.15
Overall	3.17	3.24	0.07

Figure 2: The comparison of the frequencies of strategy use for learners of Japanese from this study and Grainger's study (1997)

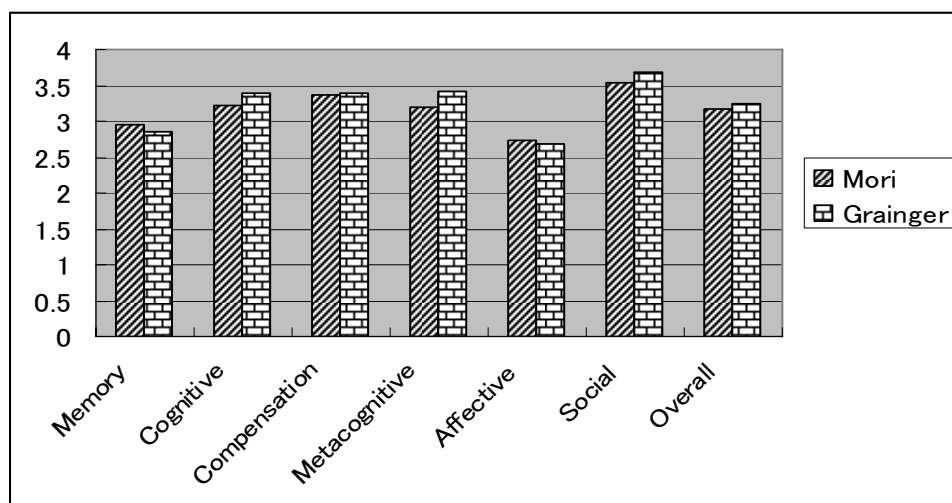


Figure 3: The comparison of the frequencies of strategy use for learners of Japanese from this study and Grainger's study (1997)

According to Figure 2, the discrepancies of the overall mean scores between this study (3.17) and Grainger's study (3.24) are very small (0.07), and both studies show that these participants, learners of Japanese, sometimes use strategies. Also, according to Figure 3, these subjects use social strategies most frequently, followed by compensating strategies, and then cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Affective strategies and memory strategies are used least frequently in both studies for the learners of Japanese. The discrepancies of the six SILL category frequencies between two studies are also very small. Thus, it may be said that regardless of the learners' ethnicities, all learners of Japanese share a similar frequency in using language learning strategies, and they use social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently.

Furthermore, the results of this study do not confirm previous findings investigating ESL learners' strategy use through the SILL. Figure 4 and 5 show the average of the means of the SILL results from previous studies for ESL learners' strategy use (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2000) and those of the learners of Japanese (Grainger, 1997 and this study).

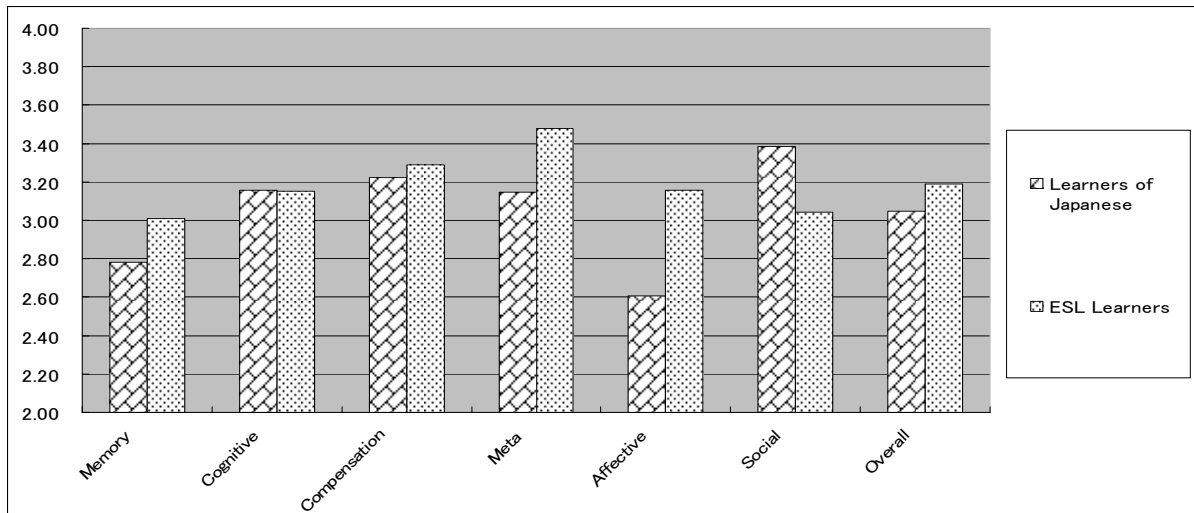


Figure 4: The average of the mean scores of ESL learners' strategy use (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2000) and learners of Japanese strategy use (Grainger, 1997 and this study).

Mean	Learners of JPN	ESL Learners	Difference
Memory	2.78	3.01	0.23
Cognitive	3.16	3.15	0.01
Compensation	3.22	3.29	0.07
Meta	3.15	3.38	0.23
Affective	2.61	3.16	0.55
Social	3.39	3.05	0.34
Overall	3.05	3.19	0.14

Figure 5: The average of the mean scores of ESL learners' strategy use (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2000) and learners of Japanese strategy use (Grainger, 1997 and this study)

According to Figure 4, ESL learners use metacognitive and compensation strategies most frequently, and social and memory strategies least frequently. On the other hand, learners of Japanese use social strategies most frequently, followed by compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, and affective and memory strategies least frequently. Moreover, according to Figure 5, the biggest differences in the average means of learners of Japanese and ESL learners are affective strategies (0.55) and social strategies (0.34). Therefore, since these previous studies for ESL learners' frequency of strategy use are significantly different from those of learners of Japanese (especially for social and affective strategies), it could be said that regardless of learners' ethnicity variable, learners of Japanese use social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently, which can be considered one characteristic of the frequency of strategy use by learners of

Japanese.

Results and Discussion of the Choice of Strategy Use

Although the frequency of strategy use seems to not be affected by learner ethnicities, the ethnicity variable seems to influence the choices of individual strategy use according to the ranking of the most and the least used strategies in different ethnic groups as shown in Figure 6.

English Learners				Chinese & Korean Learners		
Ranking	SILL Item	Mean	SILL statement	Ranking	Mean	Difference
1	Social 79	4.30	try to learn about the culture	8	3.7	0.6
2	Social 80	4.12	pay attention to the feelings & thoughts of interacting people	17	3.48	0.64
3	Comp 41	4.06	guess the general meaning			
80	Affec 70	1.34	keep a private diary			
79	Mem 12	1.67	physically act out the new words			
78	Mem 9	1.73	list all the words I know that are related	60	3.0	1.32
Chinese & Korean Learners				English Learners		
Ranking	SILL Item	Mean	SILL Statement	Ranking	Mean	Difference
1	Cogn 36	3.87	look for similarities & contrasts	17	3.58	0.29
2	Cogn 38	3.77	be cautious about transferring	33	3.38	0.39
3	Comp 41	3.77	guess the general meaning			
80	Affec 70	1.94	keep a private diary			
79	Mem 11	2.10	use flashcards	29	3.42	1.32
78	Mem 12	2.19	physically act out the new words			

Figure 6: The ranking of the most and the least used individual strategies for English-speaking learners and Chinese and Korean-speaking learners of Japanese

As Figure 6 indicates, the means of the most frequently used strategies for English-speaking learners are Social79, 4.30, (try to learn about the culture) and Social80, 4.12, (pay attention to the feelings and thoughts of interacting people). The mean of these strategies for Asian learners is 3.7 for Social79 and 3.48 for social80, and the difference in the means of these different ethnic groups is over 0.6. On the other hand, the means of the most frequently used strategies for Chinese and Korean learners are Cognitive36, 3.87,

(look for similarities and contrasts) and Cognitive38, 3.77, (be cautious about transferring), while the means for English learners are Cognitive36, 3.58 and Cognitive38, 3.38, which shows a difference of approximately 0.3 between the means of the two groups. Thus, this result may suggest that the learners' different ethnicities have a strong influence on the choice of individual strategy use. Furthermore, not only the learner's different ethnicity but also their mother tongue may be one influential factor in strategy choice, as Grainger suggested (1997). The Japanese language is far more similar to Chinese and Korean than with English, because of such factors as the similarity between *kanji* and Chinese characters, and similarities between particle usage in Korean and that of Japanese. Thus, since they can find the similarities and the differences, Chinese and Korean learners may look for the similarities and the differences between their language and Japanese, although they are cautious about incorrectly transferring aspects of their own language to the Japanese language. On the other hand, because English is considerably different from Japanese and the culture is also quite different, English learners may try to learn about the culture as well as pay attention to the feelings and thoughts of the interlocutor, instead of focusing on the similarities and the differences between English and Japanese. Therefore, the distance between the learners' mother tongues and the target language may influence strategy choices for learning Japanese, as Grainger (1997) has suggested.

In addition, while both groups tend not to use Memory12 (physically act out new words) and Affective70 (keep a private diary), surprisingly, the least used strategies for Chinese and Korean learners include Memory11 ($M = 2.10$) (use flash cards) and the least used strategies of English-speaking learners include Memory9 ($M = 1.73$) (list all the words I know that are related to new words). The mean of Memory11 for English learners is 3.42, which shows a discrepancy of 1.32 compare to the men of Chinese and Korean learners. The frequency mean of Memory9 for Asian learners is 3.0, and the difference in mean with English learners is 1.32. This result may indicate that strategy choice (especially for

memorizing materials) is different between Asian learners and English learners. Although there is no evidence of the reason for this distinction in memory strategies, the reason may possibly be attributable to learners' different language learning histories. For example, Asian learners seem to not have a habit of using flash cards for memorizing materials, and English learners do not seem used to listing the words for memorization when learning languages. Therefore, previous language learning experience may be an influential factor on their strategy choices in addition to the variable of ethnicity, as Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and Wharton (2000) have indicated.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated whether the learner ethnicity has any influence on the frequency and the choice of language learning strategy use by investigating learners of Japanese through the use of the SILL.

The mean SILL scores of each ethnicity revealed that the learners' ethnicities seem not to have any influence on their frequency of strategy use. Regardless of the learner's different ethnicity, the frequency of strategy use was similar throughout the ethnic groups, and they all used social strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently. This result does not support previous findings regarding ESL learners (Goh & Foong, 1997; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Park, 1997; Shmais, 2000). Yet, the results confirm the findings of Grainger's study (1997) investigating the strategy use for learners of Japanese. Thus, the tendencies found in the frequency of strategy use in this study may be one characteristic particular to Japanese language learner strategies. However, in order to make this generalization, a further study using a larger number of learners of Japanese (particularly Asian learners) and employing a variety of quantitative techniques would be needed in order to find out whether these same results and tendencies can be statistically reliable.

Although the learners' ethnicities seem not to influence the frequency of strategy

use, the ethnicities affect the choice of the strategy use based on the ranking of the 80 strategies of the SILL. The results of the different choices of the least used strategies among English learners and Chinese and Korean learners may suggest that they use different strategies particularly for memorization, possibly because of the different previous language learning experiences (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Wharton, 2000). Also, the discrepancies between the most used strategies among the different ethnic learner groups seem to indicate that in addition to the ethnicity variable the distance between the learners' mother tongues and the target language may be one influential factor in their strategy choices. However, before making a conclusion, follow-up research is needed to find out whether these suggestions truly apply to learners of Japanese or not. One potential area of research might be conducted qualitatively by interviewing the learners on how the resultant strategies are actually used and why they chose to use them, because using only the mean survey data, without listening to the learners' actual voices, limits the interpretation of the findings, as Ellis (1997) suggests. More importantly, there is a need for research investigating how effective these strategies are for learners of Japanese and how the strategies aid in learning Japanese, as Gass and Selinker (2001) claim. Such research can contribute to the important and necessary evolution of the Japanese language classroom in which students maximize their Japanese learning by applying varied and appropriate language learning strategies, as Oxford and Nyikos (1998) concluded.

Language learning strategy plays an important role in language learning. Yet, since the use of language learning strategies differ by learners' variable factors as this study revealed, researchers and teachers must consider these learner variables as well as their individual differences. Further studies are needed before making a conclusion regarding the influence of the learners' ethnicities on strategy use by learners of Japanese. However this study's findings have brought up some possible implications for further research.

6. Limitations

1. The learner variables are not only ethnic, thus, other variables, such as their gender and skill levels, may affect the results of this study. Furthermore, it may be difficult to find out the pure relationship between a particular learner variable and their strategy use.
2. The participants of this study consisted of only 31 Asian learners, although there were 120 American learners. Thus, this discrepancy in the demographic of the participants may have influenced the results.
3. This study only examines the use of the strategies found in the SILL. The strategies found in the SILL are not the only language learning strategies available, and learners may likely employ other strategies.
4. These results are based on the participants' self-ratings of their strategy use. Thus, these self-reported measurements may vary among the participants. Also, some strategies that are rated as "never used" may be employed unconsciously.
5. These results only look at the mean scores. Thus, the results may differ if the correlation between these variables and strategy use is reported using different statistical method

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