Language Learning Strategies of Japanese Students Joining "English Speaking Society"

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Abstract

This research report aims to investigate what sort of factors make Japanese learners of EFL successful, especially in public speaking activities in universities. The present study focuses on university students who are engaged in English speech activities in a student group called the English Speaking Society (E.S.S.), which most of the Japanese university have. The present study identifies what sort of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) Successful Learners (SL) in E.S.S. use. The results show that cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies are used more frequently than the other strategies of Oxford (1990). The discussions are followed by some implications for non-SL to improve their speaking skills.

Key words: English Speaking Societies (E.S.S.); Japanese; Language learning strategies

Introduction

In Japan, although some English majoring students have speaking classes regularly at university, most students are not familiar with English conversation or presentation. Under such circumstance, many universities have a student group called the English Speaking Society (ESS). E.S.S. is organized by university students from different backgrounds to provide themselves with opportunities to use English in daily life. Through different activities, such as public speaking, discussion, debate and drama, students help each other to improve their English skills. Intriguingly, the majority of students in E.S.S. are those who have never been abroad or have little foreign experiences. However, some students are surprisingly more proficient than the other students, though most of them have learned English in Japan. This paper aims to reveal what makes some learners successful, especially in speech activities. By identifying what sort of language learning strategies they use, the study aims to suggest some implication for the learners to become better English speakers.

In the speech activity division, which is usually called 'the Speech Section', students write their own speeches and participate in oratorical contests held all over Japan. Usually, applicants have to pass the preliminary rounds first to proceed to perform their speeches on the stage in front of audience, and typically 8 or 10 final contestants are chosen. Since impromptu speech activities impose great deal of cognitive burden on learners, it is especially difficult for those who have never studied

abroad. However, it is not always the case that returnee students win the contests. Rather, there are many speakers who have no foreign experience but outperform the returnees. This study focuses on such learners who mainly studied English in Japan, participated in and won several impromptu speech contests. The following section explains the previous findings about Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and the details of technical terms, which are used in E.S.S. activities.

Oxford's (1990) Learning Strategies and E.S.S.

The term "successful learners" is abstract and difficult to define, since the definition changes depending on language learning contexts (Takeuchi 2003a). However, it is an undeniable fact that there are some language learners who learn languages quicker, better and more successfully. There are several definitions for the term Successful Learners (SL), and one of them is Takeuchi's (2003a). He argues that successful language learners share the following four characteristics: they (a) have no or little experience abroad, (b) started studying English at the age of 11 or 12, (c) use one's first language at home in everyday life, and (d) learned English mostly in classroom and through studying by him/herself (Takeuchi 2003a:41). Since his definition was constructed in similar Japanese EFL environment, the current study modifies and applies his for the definition of SLs. Impromptu speech activities have no objective test for measuring students' ability. Therefore, this study adds the following definition to Takeuchi's (2003a:41): E.S.S members who (e) participated in and won several impromptu speech contests.

Impromptu speech activities in E.S.S. put learners in relatively different learning contexts from their learning experiences in the classroom. Usually, E.S.S. English Oratorical Contests have prepared-speech sessions, and sometimes they also have impromptu speech sessions, where speakers are given 4-15 minutes to prepare after they are given several topics about social issues such as territorial disputes, cyber-bullying among children, consumer tax hike in Japan, etc. Then they have 4 minutes to present their speeches. Preparation time depends on each contest, but usually it lasts for 4 or 15 minutes. Some contests even have question-and-answer sessions with judges after each impromptu speech. Let us now briefly review Oxford (1990), which the present research is based on.

One of the leading academics in this domain of research is Oxford, whose book (Oxford, 1990) has been one of the most renowned works in the field of LLSs. Oxford defines LLSs as "steps taken by students to enhance their own learning" (Oxford 1990:1). This definition is closely related to the Oxford's model of LLSs, which attempts to capture the whole picture of learners' behaviors in the learning processes. Learners use various kinds of

strategies when learning languages. Among a variety of classification systems, Oxford's (1990) is the most commonly used. Collecting data from a number of language learners, Oxford divided learning strategies into two major classifications: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Each division has the three subordinate strategies: memory, cognitive, comprehensive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Direct strategies are directly connected to the actual use of the learners' four skills in learning languages, whereas indirect strategies are concerned with non-linguistic factors such as autonomy and anxiety. Among all six categories, metacognitive strategies have been shown to be the best predictor of SLs (Chou 2011; Heo, Stoffa and Kush 2012; Takeuchi 2003a). Since it is logically difficult to utilize other learning strategies without metacognitive monitoring of learners' own learning processes, the mainstream studies have been based on the assumption that metacognitive strategies lead learners to success the most (Oxford 1990; Wenden 1987). This has been later supported by many empirical studies (Oxford 2002; Takeuchi 1999; Takeuchi 2002 and others) that show the frequency of metacognitive strategies usage significantly correlates with the learners' success in language learning.

Direct strategies include three subordinate strategies: memory, cognitive and compensatory strategies. First, memory strategies are memory-enhancing methods that help learners to have better memory skills (Juffs and Harrington 2012). Making connections in the mental lexicon for instance, can enhance learners' ability of memorization. Second, cognitive strategies decrease the cognitive load; for example, speakers repeat the same phrases and expressions until they become able to use them without much attention paid to the forms. Finally, compensatory strategies supplement the lack of knowledge or ability when facing difficulties; guessing the meanings of sentences from contexts, for instance (Takeuchi 2003a).

Indirect strategies include the strategies learners use to self-regulate their own learning processes, rather than actual techniques to deal with languages. First, metacognitive strategies monitor and regulate one's own learning processes. For example, by setting aims and making schedule for learning, one can achieve the goals more effectively. In the E.S.S. speakers' context, metacognitive strategies appear as ability to schedule well one's own practice, calculating how many days are left before the contest, for instance. Second, affective strategies control one's own anxiety (Saito and Samimy 1996). Listening to the music while studying so that one can feel relaxed, and take some rest each time they make speeches, for example. Finally, social strategies enable learners to learn from other language users or learners of the target languages. It includes studying abroad, cooperative learning with others, and holding training sessions jointly with other E.S.S. (Takeuchi 2007).

Methods

Revealing what exactly those LLSs are and how frequently SLs use them, this study aims to provide scaffoldings for non-SLs, who have never passed preliminary rounds or won any prizes in E.S.S. speech contests. As Oxford (2011) emphasizes, among all six classifications of LLSs, metacognitive strategies are the most important, since they enable learners to control his or her learning processes. However, since there has never been any previous research about the LLSs in E.S.S. contexts, especially in the discourse of impromptu speech activities, it is too soon to conclude that the framework of LLS researchers also holds in E.S.S. contexts. Mikuma (2003) states that E.S.S. speech section offers students different learning environments from classroom learning, since it especially focuses on learning, since it especially focuses on speech activities, which are usually less considered in classroom learning than the other skills, namely reading, listening or writing (Mikuma 2003). Therefore, it might be worthwhile to focus on this specific E.S.S. context, since it has possibility to contribute to the mainstream of LLS research by providing some E.S.S. specific findings of LLS use, such as how to improve learners' speaking skill efficiently and what is needed for learners to make persuasive presentations. Followings are the research questions:

1. What LLSs do successful speakers use in order to prepare for impromptu speech contests?
2. What kind of tendency is there on successful speakers' use of LLSs?

Participants

The participants are five college students who are in E.S.S. speech sections in their own universities. They started learning English around the age of 12, soon after they entered junior high school, which is common in Japan. None of them have lived or studied abroad in English-speaking environments for more than three years. Two of them are currently juniors and the others seniors in their universities. Usually in E.S.S., students finish their speech activities in ESS when they become juniors or seniors. Therefore, two junior participants are still taking part in several speech contests, while the seniors are actively supporting their junior friends in speech sections, helping them with practicing delivering speeches, brainstorming for speech making, and serving as judges in practice contests for freshmen, sophomores and juniors. Therefore, all the participants are still involved in speech activities in E.S.S. contexts.

Table 1.
Basic Information of the participants for this study.

Participant	Age	Grade	TOEFL iBT	TOEIC	EIKEN[1]
1	22	4	-	810	-
2	22	3	82	-	-
3	21	3	-	885	Pre-1
4	23	4	-	870	Pre-1
5	21	3	96	-	-

Procedures

In this research, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, (SILL) (Oxford 1989) is used to reveal learners' overall frequency of strategy use. Then, through semi-structured interviews (Mackey and Gass 2012) based on Oxford's (1990) framework of LLSs, this study aims to elicit what sort of LLSs they used for impromptu speech activities. The following four questions are asked in the interview session.

1. Describe retrospectively what you would do for practicing impromptu speeches after you received acceptance letters/emails for speech contests, in chronological order.
2. What exactly have you done to prepare for impromptu speech contests? Describe in detail.
3. Other than practicing, what have you done for impromptu speech contests; for example, dealing with extra-linguistic factors such as anxiety and motivation?
4. Other than impromptu speech activity, what do you usually do in order to improve your English skills, especially speaking?

The interviews were conducted in Japanese, audio-recorded, and later transcribed and analyzed. SILL and interview session took about 120-150 minutes for each participant. This study followed the Oxford's (1990:277-282) General Instructions to Administrators of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning in implementing and analyzing SILL questionnaire.

Analysis

Since this study aims to explore the LLS use of E.S.S. language learners, the data were collected mainly through interview session. The whole processes were audio-recorded, coded and classified into six categories according to the Oxford's (1990) classifications of LLSs. Classifying actual LLSs is not a black-and-white question, since there are some LLSs which cut across the boundaries of the six categories. For instance, "reviewing the outlines of speeches he/she had made before" can be classified into both cognitive and affective strategies, since it enables learners to deliver their speeches more fluently, and also to be more confident, making sure how much he/she had practiced so far. Therefore, this

study allows some overlaps among categories. This research applies detailed classification of Oxford (1990:18-21). Based on her exhaustive listing of LLSs, each strategy coded from the interview session was classified into the six categories.

SILL is also taken into consideration. It is true that this is an exploratory study, which is based on qualitative inspection among 5 participants' use of LLSs. Although its main focus is on the qualitative speculation through the semi-structured interview session, the study aims to use data from SILL to observe the overall tendency of LLS use among the participants. This study follows the analytical method of Oxford's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL)* (Oxford 1989). First, the sum of each six section are calculated, then the means and standard deviations are calculated on the basis of the sum and number of questions in each section. Finally, the averages of six categories are checked against the five-level scale (from 1 the lowest to 5 the highest) of evaluation standard, which ranges from low: never or almost never used (1.0 to 1.4) and generally not used (1.5 to 2.4), medium: sometimes used (2.5 to 3.4), and high: usually used (3.5 to 4.4), and always or almost always used (4.5 to 5.0).

Results

Research Question 1:

All the data collected from the interview sessions were first transcribed one by one by the author. Then, each answer from the 5 participants was analyzed and classified into six categories: Memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensatory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Since there are some strategies that are difficult to classify exclusively into one of the six categories, this study allows some overlaps among them, following Oxford's (1990) classification of LLSs. Note that the strategies described in (1) through (43) are based on the raw data from the interview sessions. The interview session was semi-structured as mentioned before; hence it is not that each participant answered yes/no to 43 question below each. Rather, the set of strategies in (1) through (43) is the list of the results built from the scratch.

Tables 2 to 7 below show that the participants tended to use more cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies than the other strategies. As for these LLSs, except for several general strategies such as speaking English with friends on Skype, the majority of LLSs were E.S.S. specific (e.g., Always trying to finish preparing a speech within 10 minutes though the preparation time is usually 15 minutes. Using the rest (5 minutes), he/she actually practices his/her speech before presenting in front of the audience). It is logically possible that five of them used different sort of LLSs to the extent there is little shared characteristics. Interestingly however, almost all the LLSs were used and shared by several learners in common. In the next section, we will see the tendency among the participants' frequency of LLS use from the results of SILL.

LLS Use of the Five Participants Found in this Current Study.

Table 2:
Memory Strategies

1.	Not always but trying to look up the vocabulary and expressions he/she couldn't come up with in speech making. 80%
2.	Watching movies he/she likes so that not only does he/she memorize vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, but also learned in what contexts he/she should use them (e.g., "I'm on it!"). 20%
3.	Making lists of vocabulary/collocations about certain topics and trying to connect new words with the lexical items one already knows. 20%

Table 3
Cognitive Strategies

4.	Always trying to avoid using formats, so-called PHCS[1], which are frequently used by many speakers, but instead thinking about the most appropriate outlines for each topic. 40%
5.	Trying to have some opinions (deciding at least pros or cons) and summarize them when he/she watches some news stories so that he/she can make impromptu speeches more easily. 80%
6.	Using a sheet of paper as notes but not as scripts, so that he/she can take more eye contact with the audience members and to naturally delivery his/her speech. 80%
7.	Always trying to finish preparing a speech within 10 minutes though the preparation time is usually 15 minutes. Using the rest (5 minutes), he/she actually practices his/her speech before presenting in front of the audience. 80%
8.	Reviewing the outlines of speeches he/she made before so that he/she can be more confident/Practicing making speeches about the same topics several times so that he/she can speak more fluently. 60%
9.	Trying not to write down anything on a sheet of paper, but just speak up the whole speech after making a brief outline. 20%
10.	Trying to monitor what he/she says during presentations so that he/she can make his/her speech coherent from the beginning of presentations to the end. 20%
11.	Watching and listening to news programs in English after gaining background information in Japanese. 20%
12.	Trying to say occasionally what he/she thinks about in everyday life in English. 20%
13.	Self-monitoring his/her grammar while speaking. 20%
14.	Making short outlines of speeches about various topics without actually writing down the scripts so that he/she can practice effectively and deal with more topics. 60%

Table 4
Compensatory Strategies

14. Looking for alternative ways of saying what he/she wants to say when he/she can't come up with the right expression. 100%
15. Trying to choose simple topics like "red", "ocean" and such (so-called "one-word topic"), or proverbs so that he/she doesn't need to have wide variety of background knowledge about social/international issues in advance. 100%
16. Choosing topics with longer sentences, which usually contain more information, when deciding one topic because it helps him/her to think about what sort of answers judges want to hear. 20%

Table 5
Metacognitive Strategies

18. Guessing what sort of topics he/she will get at contests from the past topic lists. 60%
19. Trying to think about what he/she can do within limited amount of time, he/she focuses on practicing impromptu speeches when he/she can have someone else to give him/her feedbacks. 100%
20. When he/she is alone, he/she has never practiced impromptu speeches but instead focuses on other things such as studying his/her major and practicing prepared speeches. 60%
21. Scheduling what sort of practices he/she would need soon after he/she passes the preliminary rounds so that he/she can practice at least three weeks before the contests. 100%
22. Taking several English conversation classes at university so that he/she can speak and write (produce output) English more. 60%
23. Writing notes neatly so that he/she can actually refer to it in the presentation without problems. 20%
24. Reviewing basic grammar textbooks along with practices so that he/she can speak more accurately. 20%
25. Getting him/herself more concentrated in making constant efforts by imagining the worst-case scenario on the stage. 20%
26. Asking friends before each contest to practice together in addition to the regular meetings so that he/she can get more feedbacks/Asking other members in the E.S.S. and teachers to listen to his/her performance so that he/she can get feedbacks on the presentation. 80
27. Listening to speeches of other members in E.S.S., he/she gained basic information about various topics, and also he/she could apply those outlines to his/her own impromptu speeches. 100%

Table 6
Affective Strategies

28. Telling him/herself when he/she feels nervous that if he/she does his/she best there is nothing to worry about whether he/she wins or not because that is the best he/she can do. 20%
29. Reviewing the outlines of speeches he/she had made before so that he/she can be confident/Practicing making speeches about the same topics several times so that he/she can speak more fluently. 60%
30. Intentionally, trying to do something else one or two days before contests so that he/she doesn't have to deal with too much pressure. 40%
31. Trying to practice impromptu speech constantly regardless of contests so that he/she can have more confidence. 20%
32. Practicing in front of a mirror and in places such as bath at home and emergency stairs at school where he/she can deliver speeches with resonant voice so that he/she can feel more confident. 20
33. Listening to his/her own English, so that he/she can feel good and be motivated. 20%
34. Getting him/herself more concentrated in making constant efforts by imagining the worst-case scenario on the stage. 20%
35. Intentionally taking eye contact with audience members who are nodding during the presentation or seeming to empathize with his/her speech. 20%

Table 7
Social Strategies

36.	Practicing constantly with the other members in E.S.S. at the regular meeting with feedback sessions, which is held three times a week. 20%
37.	Asking friends before each contest to practice together in addition to the regular meetings so that he/she can get more feedbacks/Asking other members in the E.S.S. and teachers to listen to his/her performance so that he/she can get feedbacks on the presentation. 80%
38.	Listening to speeches of other members in E.S.S., he/she gained basic information about various topics, and also he/she could apply those outlines to his/her own impromptu speeches. 60%
39.	Trying to have conversations in English on Skype with his/her friends in E.S.S. and to exchange comments on Facebook in English/Having English conversations occasionally with his/her Japanese friends so that he/she can speak English without feeling pressure. 20%
40.	Trying to come up with various types of topics with the other members in the E.S.S. 20%
41.	Practicing speaking through online English conversation courses with native speakers of English from the Philippines. 20%
42.	Taking several English conversation classes at university so that he/she can speak and write (produce output) English more. 40%
43.	Trying to think about what he/she can do within limited amount of time, he/she focuses on practicing impromptu speeches when he/she can have someone else to give him feedbacks. 100%

Research Question 2: What kind of tendency is there on successful speakers' use of LLSs?

Tables 8 to 14 show the results of SILL for the overall six strategy uses of the five participants. All the five students' results show that basically they use LLSs frequently. As for the cognitive and compensatory strategies, means of the students are classified as "high (usually used)" in the measurement approach of Oxford (1990) explained above. On the other hand, for the other memory, metacognitive, affective and social strategies, the means diverge depending on each student.

Table 8
SILL Results for the Memory Strategies (9 questions).
The average: 2.864 (the scale: from the lowest 1 to the highest 5)

Memory Strategies	M	SD	Frequency
Student 1	3.33	0.82	mid
Student 2	3.22	0.79	mid
Student 3	2.44	1.07	low
Student 4	3.00	1.15	mid
Student 5	2.33	0.82	low

Discussion

Data from the interview session provides some interesting points to discuss. First, there were noteworthy commonalities among the strategies of all the participants. As for the memory strategies, four of the five participants mentioned (1) in the Table 2: "Not always but trying to look up the vocabulary and expressions he/she couldn't come up with in the dictionary, soon after making speeches." For the cognitive strategies, (5) "Trying to have some opinions about topics one hears from others or watches on TV (deciding at least pros or cons) and summarize them so that he/she can make impromptu speeches more easily" was reported by four of the participants. Equally likely, several other cognitive strategies are mentioned by them, such as (6) and (7) in the Table 3. As for the compensatory strategies, all the five students mentioned that they used strategies such as (15) "Looking for alternative ways of saying what he/she wants to say when he/she can't come up with the right expressions." For the metacognitive strategies, (21) "Scheduling what sort of practices he/she would need soon after he/she passes the preliminary rounds" in the Table 3 was also reported by all of the five participants." For the affective strategies, (29) "Reviewing the outlines of speeches he/she had made before so that he/she can be more fluent and confident" was mentioned by three of the participants. As for the social strategies, (37) "Asking friends several times a week to practice together" and (38) "Listening to speeches of other members in E.S.S." were reported by

all the participants.

In order to analyze the common denominators among the frequently reported LLSs through the interview session, this research follows the interview procedures of Takeuchi's exploratory research (2003a: 109-137) about the SLs (Tatsujin in his term), and Takeuchi's (2003b) qualitative analysis of the LLSs from 67 books on "how I have successfully learned a foreign language" written by SLs. Results from the interview session of this current study show that all of the participants relied on certain strategies which enable them to focus on communicating the message they have through their speeches. Under the time pressure, they have to deliver their speeches in front of the audience within 4 minutes. Rather than resorting to avoidance, they try to find alternative ways to say what they want to say according to the participants. In addition, as one of the cognitive strategies, some of the participants reported that they repeatedly practice delivering same speeches several times. One of them even mentioned that she repeats the same speeches when she practices since she learned this is an effective way to improve fluency. Cognitive strategies of this sort actually enable learners to gradually automatize these expressions to communicate what they want to say more smoothly (O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

Another highly important point is that most of the participants mentioned that they put high priority on increasing the output opportunities, as illustrated in the table 13 (the social strategies). More interesting is that four of the five participants reported that they always asked other students in E.S.S. or teachers to listen to their speeches and they also asked for feedback. Not only do they get advice from people who actually listened to their speeches, but also they can get used to the stage because they can deliver their speeches in front of others. It is interesting that five of the participants mentioned that they were worried that they would fail in delivering their speeches smoothly. Three of them even said that they asked their friends to listen to their speeches because they never wanted to feel embarrassed on stage. In other words, the five E.S.S. learners are highly concerned about whether they can perform their speeches communicatively, and so it leads them to use cognitive strategies in combination with social strategies.

Another important commonality found in the LLS use of the five participants is that all of them tried to become familiar with various kinds of social issues, which they have to talk about in impromptu speech activities. Some of the participants mentioned that they tried to watch news programs frequently, read newspapers occasionally, and search information on the internet so that they can obtain background knowledge of social issues, such as "territorial disputes", "cyber-bullying among children", and "consumption tax hike." Others reported that they visited as many English oratorical contests as they can in order to get familiarize themselves with various kinds of issues other speakers were dealing with. They also mentioned that regular meetings of E.S.S. were good opportunities for them to share ones' ideas on various kinds of topics they have to deal with in the impromptu speech activity, with the other members so that they could learn from each other. All of the five participants reported that they tried to have their own opinions about a variety of controversial

issues such as abortion, death penalty and gay marriage, at least to be able to state pros or cons. Thanks to this strategy, they became able to deal with a wide-range of social issues in speech contests.

The third shared characteristics is that all of the participants constantly had opportunities to practice English speaking skills and making impromptu speeches, not just before each contest. It may suggest that they have certain attitudes in common toward leaning English, say, not just to win speech contests, but rather to improve one's ability to speak fluently. Commonalities found among these five SLs in E.S.S. are the following three characteristics:

1. Focusing on increasing their fluency, so that they can better communicate their speeches.
2. Familiarizing themselves with various kinds of news topics and other social issues so that they can deal with wide-range of topics given in speech contests.
3. Practicing speaking English and making impromptu speeches constantly not just before each speech contest.

Findings in this section may shed light on the study of LLS. The previous theoretical underpinnings argue that SLs tend to rely on metacognitive strategies the most (Chou 2011; Heo, Stoffa and Kush 2012; Takeuchi 2003a). However, this is not always the case considering the results in this exploratory research, conducted in a certain environment, namely E.S.S.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to reveal the LLS use of SLs in E.S.S. speech section, especially for the impromptu speech activities. Research on LLSs was originally a study of SLs: Questioning what sort of LLS they use to be successful (Oxford, 2011). This exploratory research applied the most commonly used framework of Oxford (1990), and SILL (Oxford 1989) which is designed to examine how often learners use certain sorts of LLSs. Through semi-structured interviews, actual LLSs used by five university students who belong to E.S.S. speech section were investigated. In addition, their overall tendencies of LLS use were examined with SILL. It is too early to conclude that all the SLs in E.S.S. speech section utilize the LLSs found in this exploratory research, since the number of participants is relatively small in this research. Further studies are required to confirm the hypothesis that SLs in E.S.S. have three commonalities found is truly shared by the majority of SLs in E.S.S., but not by the others.

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