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原著論文
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‘Good’ Language Learner Characteristics Among Japanese
University Students:
A Case Study of Two Classes

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日本人大学生の「優れた言語学習者」の特徴：
2つのクラスにおけるケーススタディー

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要 旨

この稿で筆者は、ある日本の大学における上級クラスと基礎クラスで使用される学習ストラテジーの比較を行なっている。この目的は、「優れた言語学習者」に関するルービンの分析を論拠とし、2つのグループを分けている特徴とは、何であるのかを明らかにすることである。この2つのグループの間の学習ストラテジーには、統計的に有意な差があるという結果が出た。この結果を基に、両方のグループの学生が外国語学習者として、どのようにしたら上達できるのかについて論じている。

キーワード

外国語として英語、学習ストラテジー

Abstract

In this paper, the author compares the learning strategies used by one upper-level and one lower-level English class at a Japanese university. Using Rubin's profile of the 'good' language learner as a basis, the objective was to determine which characteristics separated the two groups. The results indicated statistically significant differences between the two groups. The implications for how students of both groups could improve as language learners are discussed.

Key words

English as a foreign language, learning strategies

1. Introduction

Why are some students more successful at learning a foreign language than others? In Japanese universities, many lower-level students who enter university struggle to communicate even the most basic information despite having studied English for six years

prior. Researchers in the area of Second Language Acquisition have sought to determine what specific characteristics are associated with successful and unsuccessful learners. One such study was Rubin's (1983) research on creating a profile of the 'good' language learner. Recent trends in SLA

research, however, have moved away from a singular profile of characteristics toward an inventory of strategies that learners can use. Should Rubin's original profile, therefore, be disregarded? To what extent can it still be utilized?

In this paper the author investigated a group of upper-and lower-level first year students at a Japanese university to determine what the 'good' language learner might look like in this context. The paper begins by reviewing the original 'good' language learner and other related studies. Following this, data from a questionnaire of students' reported use of 28 learning strategies will be presented. Each strategy corresponded to one of Rubin's 'good' language learner characteristics. The results showed statistically significant differences between the types of learning strategies used by the upper-and lower-level groups, suggesting that Rubin's original 'good' language learner profile can be a viable reference point for students wishing to improve. The author then discusses how both groups could take action to further improve as language learners. It will be argued that although Rubin's study provides a useful framework by which to analyse these two groups of students, applying Rubin's original profile of the 'good' language learner as a monolithic standard would be problematic.

2. The 'Good' Language Learner

Interest in 'good' language learner studies began in the late 1970's as a reaction to the trend that certain language teaching methods could bring success to all learners. Through classroom observation, questionnaires and

interviews with students Rubin (1983; cited in Brown, 2007) identified 14 characteristics of the 'good' language learner:

1. Good learners find their own way, taking charge of their learning.
2. Good learners organise information about language.
3. Good learners are creative, developing a "feel" for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words.
4. Good learners make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.
5. Good learners learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
6. Good learners use mnemonics and other memory strategies to recall what has been learned.
7. Good learners make errors work for them and not against them.
8. Good learners use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
9. Good learners use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
10. Good learners learn to make intelligent guesses.
11. Good learners learn chunks of language as wholes and formalised routines to help them perform "beyond their competence".
12. Good learners learn certain tricks that help to keep conversations going.
13. Good learners learn production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
14. Good learners learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation. (p.132-3)

By identifying the traits of successful learners it was hoped that less successful learners could know which traits to strive

toward developing and thus become more successful (Skehan, 1998). While the study has been praised for its influence on SLA research the accuracy of the study has been criticized (Brown, 2007, p.113 ; Skehan, 1998, p.264). Rubin (1994) would later modify the profile in favour of a more open definition of the 'good' language learner by expanding upon the original 14 characteristics. This reflects current SLA trends that focus on learner flexibility and the successful application of learning strategies as opposed to devising a single list designed for all learners.

After the initial 'good' language learner studies, Rubin and other researchers such as Oxford (1990) began to move away from finding a single set of characteristics common to all 'good' language learners. The focus shifted toward establishing an inventory of available strategies, which can be employed by learners. This shift is reflected in second edition of Rubin's (1994) book on successful language learners, which states that there is no stereotype of the 'good' language learner and that no one strategy is more important than another. Though Rubin does not provide a profile of the 'good' language learner in the 2nd edition, the original 14 points remain alongside other strategies that are grouped by chapter around themes such as planning your study, the 4 skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), vocabulary and grammar, and taking charge of your learning.

Whereas before, learners could assess their learning according to Rubin's 14-point checklist and adjust accordingly, now teachers and learners are encouraged to find and apply the strategies that work best for individual learners. With the evolution of the 'good'

language learner as a strategies-based paradigm, one can see a shift away from both ideal methods and ideal learner profiles. Some studies have tried to link students' success, or lack thereof, to the frequency and effectiveness with which they use strategies. Vann and Abraham (1990 ; cited in, Richards and Lockhart, 1996, p.65) studied unsuccessful language learners and found that, rather than lacking a repertoire of suitable strategies, unsuccessful learners fail to effectively match strategies with tasks, pointing to a lower metacognitive ability. O'Malley and Chamot (1990), in a study of 67 students of Spanish and 34 students of Russian, concluded that students across all proficiency levels used strategies but effective strategy users used more strategies more often. Hence, while learners are encouraged to focus on the strategies that work best for them, these two studies indicate that it cannot be assumed that by simply using strategies all students will achieve similar results.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) summarize the effect on pedagogy that accompanies a strategies-based paradigm in this way, "In a classroom, the goal of the sensitive teacher is to take learners' individual differences into account and to create a learning environment in which more learners can be successful in learning a second language" (p.75). What this means in practice though is open to interpretation. Breen has called for the joint construction of the classroom by both teachers and students (Breen, 2001). Holliday (1994) has urged SLA theory be interpreted in ways that are considerate of local contexts rather than importing SLA theory wholesale from English speaking countries to non-English speaking countries. Consequently,

different groups of people or different socio-cultural contexts may lead to different pictures of 'good' language learners.

Before resigning Rubin's original 'good' language learner study as historically important but no longer relevant, it is worth looking at a study conducted by Nunan (1991). Nunan studied 44 English teachers from Southeast Asia, who were considered to be 'good' language learners, and decided to investigate the strategies that had influenced them. Nunan reported that motivation, risk taking, and use of English outside the classroom surfaced as the strategies shared by most participants. This led Nunan (1991) to conclude, "I believe it is premature to reject the notion that there is no correlation between certain strategy preferences and the 'good' language learner" (p.175). Is it too soon to close the door on the original 'good' language learner? Is there such thing as a 'good' language learner? These questions are taken up in the next section.

3. Method

One group of upper-and lower-level first-year students from the same Japanese university were studied to see if Rubin's original 'good' language learner characteristics could explain the differences between the proficiency levels of the two groups. Students were placed in each level based on the university's English placement test, which is based on the Japanese national high school English exam known as the Center Test. Students in the upper-level class scored in the top 25% of the test. Students in the lower-level class scored in the bottom 50%. A mid-level class of students who scored in the second 25% were not studied. All students were

majoring in international tourism and were required to enrol in the class. The classes consisted of the following :

- First year lower-level : 23 males, 9 females, 32 total, all Japanese.
- First year upper-level : 10 males, 14 females, 24 total, including two female students from China.

Students were given a questionnaire describing 28 learning strategies and asked to rate how well the use of each strategy applied to them based on a five-point scale. The 28 strategies were divided into pairs, with each pair corresponding to one of Rubin's 14 characteristics of the 'good' language learner (Appendix 1). The questionnaire (Appendix 2) was created in English and translated into Japanese with the help of a Japanese colleague. The questionnaire was administered to all students in Japanese. There were two reasons for administering the questionnaire in Japanese :1) it was believed that the English version would be too difficult for some students, and 2) while two students were not native Japanese speakers, the working language of the university is Japanese and all foreign students have been deemed competent enough in Japanese to enrol as full time exchange students. The use of dictionaries was also permitted.

The data were analysed using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the statistical variance between the two classes for each of Rubin's 14 categories and each of the 28 strategies. The software used was SPSS 16.0.

4. Results

In the first analysis, 17/28 strategies (60%) were shown to be significant in variance between the two classes. In the second analysis, the results of the 14 strategy pairs were added together and analysed. The results showed that 12 of 14 characteristics

(85%) were shown to be significant in their variance, thus appearing to support Rubin's original profile. Figure 1 shows the degree to which Rubin's 14 characteristics apply to each class. Figure 2 shows the average score for each class's reported use of strategies.

Of the 12 characteristics that achieved

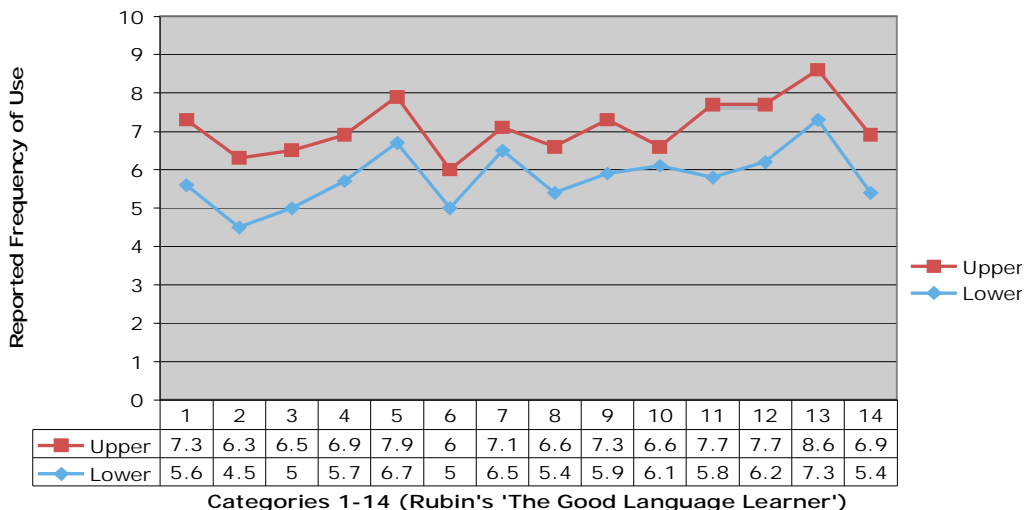


Figure 1. Average score of each class for 'good' language learner characteristics

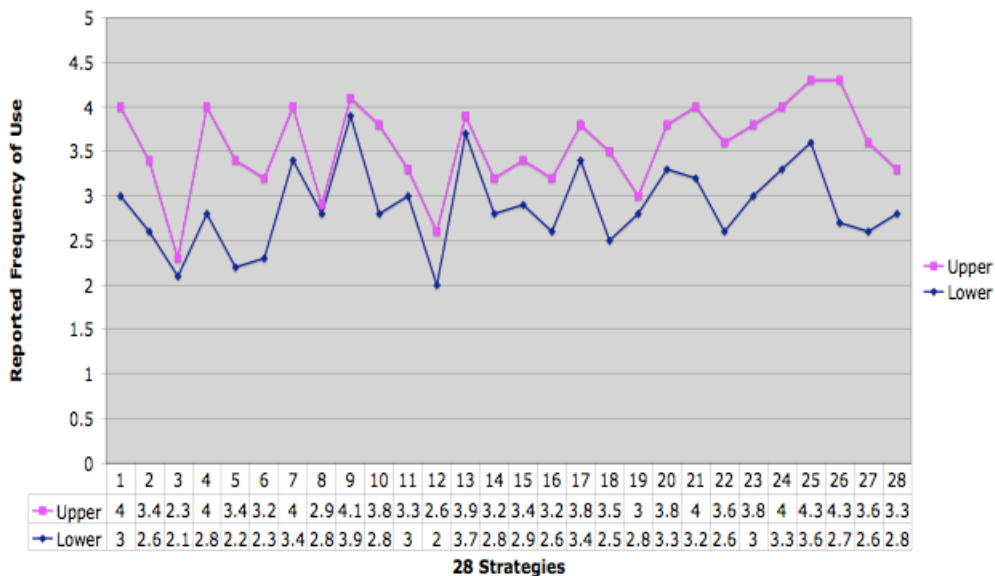


Figure 2. Average score of each class for learning strategies

statistical significance, five were deemed to be especially significant because both of the strategies that comprised them were also significant in their variance (Table 1). The other seven significant characteristics had one strategy that was significant and one that was not. Two of the 14 categories were not significant and neither were any of the

strategies associated with them. These are shown in Table 2.

4.1 Limitations of the study

The self-reporting may be inaccurate to the degree that students are not fully aware of which strategies they do and do not use. Also, the categories can be open to a wider

Table 1. Especially significant characteristics and related strategies

Category	Strategy
1. Good learners find their own way and take charge of their learning.	1. I have a goal for studying English.
	2. I have a regular study routine for English.
8. Good learners use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.	15. I look for words in English that are similar in sound and meaning to words in my first language.
	16. I look for similarities and differences between English and my first language such as grammar, word order, and word usage.
11. Good learners learn chunks of language as wholes and formalised routines to help them perform “beyond their competence”.	21. I learn expressions from textbooks dialogues, movies, books, or other speakers to use in specific situations.
	22. If I learn an expression and understand the meaning and when to use it then I don’t have understand every word of it.
12. Good learners learn certain tricks that help to keep conversations going.	23. I learn how to take turn in English in conversations.
	24. I seek clarification when I don’t understand what is said.
13. Good learners learn production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.	25. I use different words when I cannot produce the word I want to say.
	26. I use gestures when I cannot produce the word I want to say.

Table 2. Insignificant characteristics and related strategies

Category	Strategy
7. Good learners make errors work for them and not against them.	13. I see mistakes as an opportunity to learn.
	14. I take action so as not to repeat my mistakes.
10. Good learners make intelligent guesses.	19. I use logic to help me understand English.
	20. I use my knowledge of the world to help me understand English.

interpretation than is represented by the combination of only two strategies. But it is hoped that the strategies will be indicative of the designated characteristics.

5. Discussion

The data show that a greater reported use of strategies correlates significantly with higher L2 proficiency. Looking at the pattern of the graph for the 14 'good' language learner characteristics in Figure 1, in general, characteristics apply to both classes in similar proportions but to different degrees: the most/least common characteristics for one class tend to be the most/least common characteristics for the other class as well. This implies that learners from both classes may be employing the same characteristics but with the upper level students applying them to a higher degree. This would support the first part of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) hypothesis that the frequency of strategy use positively influences success.

On the other hand, the data demonstrate that it is not simple to predict proficiency for learners based solely on the amount of strategies that learners use. In looking at individual results from the questionnaire (the sum total for the 28 strategies), the data showed that 25% of students from the lower-level class reported using strategies to the same degree as some students in the upper level class. Thus, students in the lower-level class may be using strategies, but not as effectively as those in the upper-level class. This appears to support the second part of O'Malley and Chamot's hypothesis that effective use of strategies also correlates with success. Moreover, the data indicate support for Vann and Abraham's (1990) conclusion

that unsuccessful learners are less effective in their strategy use. However, this would require more research to verify.

In Nunan's research on English teachers in Southeast Asia, motivation, risk taking, and the use of the language outside the classroom were listed as common traits of 'good' language learners. Being English teachers, one could expect to find high levels of motivation among them. In this study, motivation, as represented by Category 1 (taking charge of one's learning) also correlated with higher proficiency $F(11.687) = 39.537, p < .001$. Upper-level students reported significantly higher levels of having a goal for studying and a regular study routine for English.

The second factor in Nunan's study, risk taking, is a very general term but can be represented by Category 3 (creativity and experimentation) $F(13.994) = 33.930, p < .000$. For strategy 5 (using new words) $F(17.787) = 20.371, p < .000$ there is a significant difference but for strategy 6 (inventing new words) $F(1.596) = 1.720, p < .212$ there is no significance in variance. Strategy 10 (not allowing mistakes to prevent communication) $F(13.183) = 12.054, p < .001$ can also be associated with risk taking and was shown to be significant. Based on the results of these three categories it appears that the upper-level class engaged in risk taking more frequently.

Nunan's third factor, the use of English outside the classroom, proved to be not significant. While characteristic 4 (making one's own opportunities to use English) was statistically significant $F(8.972) = 20.720, p < .004$, upon viewing the two strategies that comprise this characteristic separately one sees that strategy 7 (classroom participation)

$F(7.403) = 6.095$, $p < .009$ carries significance while strategy 8 (using English outside of class) carries no significance and has a very low score for both classes. This is not to say, however, that adopting such strategies would not help students to become better language learners, as Nunan's study and countless anecdotal cases can attest to.

For both classes, characteristic 13 (learning production strategies to fill in gaps in one's competence) ranked as the top characteristic but was also shown to be statistically significant in its variance between the classes $F(11.002) = 22.149$, $p < .002$. When the strategies that comprise characteristic 13 are looked at separately a key difference between the two groups of students emerges. For strategy 25 (using different words) $F(8.806) = 5.906$, $p < .004$ both classes reported this strategy with a high frequency of use. However, for strategy 26 (using gestures) $F(4.384) = 5.180$, $p < .041$ the upper-level class's frequency was the same as strategy 25 but the lower-level class had a low average use. One interpretation is that the lower-level students are finding the alternative words they need and therefore need not use gestures as much. Another possibility is that when an alternative word is available to the students they will use it, but failing such availability students may simply give up without exploring other strategic options like gestures.

While analysing the differences between the two classes can be informative, so too can analysing the similarities. One of the strategies with the highest reported frequency of use and one of the most statistically insignificant in variance is strategy 9 (listening for the main idea). So long as too many important details do not go unnoticed

this could be seen as a strategy that both classes are using to their benefit. At the other end of the scale, both classes report a low frequency for using strategy 3 (using flashcards, lists, and tables to improve grammar and vocabulary). With the sheer amount of information involved in learning a language, finding a way to organize and review effectively in this way could benefit both classes.

6. Conclusion

Since the original 'good' language learner studies of the late 1970's and early 1980's the concept of the 'good' language learner has changed significantly. Given the complex cognitive, affective, and social influences on strategy use, identifying an ideal strategic profile becomes problematic. Rather than adhering to a static list of 14 characteristics, it may be helpful instead to imagine a multiplicity of profiles of good language learners. In this way Rubin's list should not be viewed as right or wrong but as one possibility. Though the fact that 85% of the characteristics were shown to be significant should give people pause before dismissing the list outright. Nevertheless each characteristic is open to interpretation and thus contains room for individuals to discover their own place within it. Therefore Rubin's list can be seen as a helpful guide by which to orient oneself but given the openness of the categories it would be difficult and unhelpful to follow it as a narrow or exclusive prescription.

Overall, the data indicate that 56 students in two classes occupy 56 different strategy profiles. Some of these students are successful and some are not. The data from

this study provide clues as to the direction in which students may wish turn. The data also appear to support a combination of a high frequency of strategy use with metacognitive awareness to match correct strategies to tasks. As individuals develop, and the affective and socio-cultural factors that influence them change, the 'good' language learner can be viewed as a process, and not a destination, that each learner has the ability to undertake.

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Appendix 1 : Rubin's (1983) list of 14 characteristics of the 'good' language learner and associated 28 strategies used on the questionnaire.

Good learners :

1. find their own way. Take charge of their learning.
 1. I have a goal for studying English.
 2. I have a regular study routine for English.
2. organize information.
 3. I use flashcards, lists, and tables to improve my grammar and vocabulary.
 4. I look for patterns in English.
3. are creative and experiment.
 5. I try to use new words or grammar that I have learned in class or heard from others.
 6. Based on what I know, I sometimes invent new words that I think will communicate my ideas.
4. make their own opportunities for practice inside and outside the classroom.
 7. I participate fully in all classroom activities.
 8. I use English in ways not related to my class work: with friends, watching movies, listening to music, reading for pleasure, using the internet.
5. learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
 9. When listening, I try to understand the main idea even if I don't understand every word.
 10. I don't let the potential of making mistakes prevent me from communicating in English.
6. use mnemonics and other memory strategies to recall what has been learned.
 11. I make a mental image of what I learn.
 12. I try to group words as I learn them.
7. make errors work for them and not against them.
 13. I see mistakes as an opportunity to learn.
 14. I take action so as not to repeat my mistakes.
8. use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
 15. I look for words in English that are similar in sound and meaning to words in my first language.
 16. I look for similarities and differences between English and my first language such as grammar, word order, and word usage.
9. let the context help them in comprehension.
 17. When I read or hear a difficult word I try to understand it based on what came before and after it.
 18. I use my knowledge of social interaction and culture to help me understand English.
10. make intelligent guesses.
 19. I use logic to help me understand English.

20. I use my knowledge of the world to help me understand English.
11. learn chunks of language and formalized routines.
 21. I learn expressions from textbooks dialogues, movies, books, or other speakers to use in specific situations.
 22. If I learn an expression and understand the meaning and when to use it then I don't have understand every word of it.
12. learn certain tricks that help keep a conversation going.
 23. I learn how to take turn in English in conversations.
 24. I seek clarification when I don't understand what is said.
13. learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
 25. I use different words when I cannot produce the word I want to say.
 26. I use gestures when I cannot produce the word I want to say.
14. learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.
 27. I pay attention to different levels of politeness
 28. I can adjust my writing style based on the genre

Appendix 2 : English Version of the Questionnaire.

You will find statements about learning English. Please read each statement and write the response (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) that tells HOW TRUE THE STATEMENT IS OF YOU.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Neither true nor untrue
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. This questionnaire will have no impact on your grade in this class. Individual responses will not be made public. This questionnaire usually takes about 10–15 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, let the teacher know immediately.

1. I have a goal for studying English.
2. I use flashcards, lists, and tables to improve my grammar and vocabulary.
3. I try to use new words or grammar that I have learned in class or heard from others.
4. I participate fully in all classroom activities.
5. When listening, I try to understand the main idea even if I don't understand every word.
6. I make associations for new words that I learn.
7. I see mistakes as an opportunity to learn.
8. I look for words in English that are similar in sound and meaning to words in my first language.
9. When I read a difficult word I try to understand it based on context of the sentence or story.
10. I use logical guesses to help me understand English.
11. I learn expressions from textbooks dialogues, movies, books, or other speakers to use in specific situations.
12. I try to use techniques for taking turns in English in conversations.
13. I use different words when I cannot produce the word I want to say.
14. I pay attention to different levels of politeness.
15. I can adjust my writing style based on the genre.
16. I use gestures when I cannot produce the word I want to say.
17. I seek clarification when I don't understand what is said.
18. If I learn an expression and understand the meaning and when to use it then I don't have to understand every word of it.
19. I use my knowledge of the world to help me understand English.
20. I use my knowledge of social interaction and culture to help me understand English.
21. I look for similarities and differences between English and my first language such as word order, and word usage.
22. I take action so as not to repeat my mistakes.
23. I try to group words as I learn them.
24. I don't let the potential of making mistakes prevent me from communicating in English.
25. I use English in ways not related to my class work : with friends, watching movies, listening to music, reading for pleasure, using the internet.
26. Based on what I know, I sometimes invent new words that I think will communicate my ideas.
27. I look for patterns in English.
28. I have a regular study routine for English.