



# Learning Strategies Used by Japanese Native Students to Learn Spanish

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Received: 10 December 2022 ▪ Revised: 24 March 2023 ▪ Accepted: 10 July 2023

## *Abstract*

Language learning strategies are used for a better organization of information and acquisition of a language. Spanish has become one of the most spoken languages nowadays thanks to globalization. As well, the relationship between Japan and Mexico has grown over the years thanks to the development of Japanese companies located in Mexico. Therefore, it is of interest how two languages so different from each other can be learned. This research seeks to find the most used learning strategies to reduce the complications of studying Spanish as a native Japanese learner.

*Keywords:* second language acquisition, language learning strategies, language interference.

## 1. Introduction

Learning a second language can be a tough procedure. Nowadays, acquiring a new language is a necessary ability because of our interconnected world. Having the possibility to communicate with people around the world is helpful to reach different objectives; for example, better job opportunities in the business field can be achieved, having cross-cultural relationships, getting to know people from other parts of the world, visiting other countries while getting involved with the culture, having access to more information and more.

Facilities to learn a second language have been investigated for many years, coming up with new different problems and solutions. As Mendoza (2019) states, learning another language besides our L1 can come with some difficulties, especially because of linguistic and cultural differences. To overcome the barriers of the learning process, learning strategies have been introduced with the purpose of understanding and retrieving new information effortlessly in the education field. Learning strategies are how an individual plans, organizes, and executes specific skills to learn content or perform other tasks effectively and easily in academic and non-academic settings (Clark et al., as cited in Schumaker & Deshler, 1992).

These strategies have the purpose to affect positively in the learning process of the learners, allowing them to implement a procedure that is more favorable and suitable to comprehend information. Consequently, this case study will discuss the barriers between the Japanese and Spanish language and the usage of learning strategies according to Japanese native speakers learning Spanish as a second language at the University of Guanajuato.

It seeks to know which the most used strategy is to reflect on the most useful way to introduce the language to students and what can be helpful in the future. As well as to raise awareness in the use of learning strategies, since it is believed that the lack of knowledge of these, limits the student's ability to know their skills in depth and put them into practice to facilitate the acquisition of a second language.

## 2. Literature review

In this section, concepts related to the explanation of the investigation will be discussed: Second Language Acquisition, differences, and similarities between Japanese and Spanish, Language Interference, Language Learning Strategies, and the SILL questionnaire.

### 2.1 *Second language acquisition*

For several years, research on the acquisition of a second language has been carried out to provide a clear theory mentioning the paradigms involved in studying a new language. As Brown (1980) states, the discipline of second language acquisition emerged its own part in the 1980s. SLA is a process which differs from the previous experiences of learning a first language. As is stated by Klein (2001)

The ways which lead this innate language faculty to the knowledge of a particular linguistic system vary, depending on factors such as age, nature of input and whether this task is undertaken for the first time ("first language acquisition," FLA) or not ("second language acquisition," SLA) (p. 13768).

However, even if there are differences between the two procedures, learning an L1 and an L2 share that in both cases plenty of interaction is needed to start producing any language. Krashen (1981) states that acquiring a language requires natural communication and meaningful interaction.

When the target language is acquired, it is recognized as bilingualism, which is defined as "the ability of an individual or the members of a community to use two languages effectively" (Nordquist, 2020).

### 2.2 *Principal differences and similarities between Japanese and Spanish*

Spanish and Japanese have many differences, assimilating both languages can cause a bit of conflict if the person has not had contact with the opposite language before. It is known that Spanish and English have a similar grammatical structure which follows the order "subject + verb + object"; however, there is a big difference in the construction of Japanese sentences, which follow "subject + object + verb" and can become even more complex.

In addition, Japanese has 3 writing systems, one which uses Chinese characters and the other 2 that are syllabaries named hiragana and katakana, which can be defined as graphic symbols that represent a morpheme, each morpheme being represented by a specifically shaped character (Paradis et al., 1985). Spanish has only one writing system that does not manage characters that aren't part of the alphabet.

However, one of the most significant differences are the very few verbal conjugations in Japanese since the tense of the sentence is known mostly depending on the context, while Spanish has about 17 verbal tenses.

Finally, Japanese is a very neutral language, not having gender or plurals unlike Spanish can cause confusion. Since changing the number and gender it is not necessary in Japanese, a language barrier is created subsequently because of the nonexistence of some grammatical rules that differs from the target language and generates difficulties when learning it.

On the other hand, one of the most important similarities that Japanese students are believed to mention is the alike pronunciation of both languages. Phonetically, they are remarkably similar: Both Spanish and Japanese have the same consonants: A, I, U, E, O.

By identifying some of the major differences and similarities between these two languages, it can be investigated what can be done to facilitate both languages and what other characteristics can be given a little less importance since there exist a facility. This will be helpful for the respective students of either of the two languages with the usage of learning strategies.

### *2.3 Language interference*

Due to these barriers in both languages, interference from the first language can be found during the production of the target language. Language interference refers to the influence of the mother tongue over students' production and development in the second language (Hashim, 1999).

It is often believed that the interference of the native language is problematic, but this is not true in all cases. The first language can also make it easier to learn a target language, this is called positive transfer. Positive transfer refers to "the facilitation, in learning or performance, of a new task based on what has been learned during a previous one" (Druckman, 1994: 26). An example considering Spanish and Japanese, is the similar sounds in terms of vowels, as well as some words that are used in both languages. As well, both use formal language, there would be no cultural erasure of formal language in how both communities in the case of addressing their elders, as it is in the case of learning English.

On the other hand, there is the existence of the negative transfer as well, which is defined as "any decline in learning or performance of a second task due to learning a previous one" (Druckman, 1994: 26). In this case, Japanese by not having plurals, there is usually a difficulty in everyday speech to change all the words' number.

### *2.4 Language learning strategies*

As previously mentioned, to start this new process of acquisition, learning strategies are used to improve the competence and performance of the student. In the educational field, learning strategies have been sought to facilitate the development of the classroom. Learning strategies can be defined as "procedures or techniques that learners can use to facilitate a learning task" (Chamot, Barnhardt, Beard & Robbins, 1999: 12).

There is no specific time for when learning strategies began to emerge, as McCombs (2017) mentions that it is believed they began in 1960, deriving from the study on "study skills and memory strategies."

For Oxford (1990), strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. In addition, they are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8).

As Hismanoglu (2000) states, is important for language teachers to present a wide range of learning strategies for the needs of the students to be met since due to the different environment and ability of each student, they handle different learning styles that are not contemplated in a single strategy, as well as of expectations, interests, motivation, strategy preference, etc.

In the same way, the teacher must be able to explain how to use the strategy, in what context or moment it is most useful and how to transfer it to other situations (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003). It is not quite common to see this type of exercises in class since due importance is not given into teaching this type of tools.

### *2.5 Strategy inventory for language learning*

To learn more about the student's learning strategies, many tools and studies have been carried out. One of the principal tools for this subject, is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is an 80-item tool devised by Oxford created in 1990 with the function to "evaluate specific language learning tasks within the learning context" (Rusell, 2010: 1). The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning can be used to assess specific language strategies which is divided in 6 subscales: (A) Remembering more effectively, (B) Using your mental processes, (C) Compensating for missing knowledge, (D) Organizing and evaluating your learning, (E) Managing your emotions, and (F) Learning with others. With this tool, it is sought that by recognizing the strengths of the students, changes can be made in the class modality to create a better educational environment.

## 3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology for the analysis is reviewed. First, the background of the participants will be explained. Secondly, the purpose and the main questions for the investigation will be presented. Thirdly, the discussion and analysis of the results will be stated. Finally, the investigation will be concluded.

### *3.1 Context and participants*

This research was developed at the University of Guanajuato directed to Japanese native students who are Spanish learners and came to the university as part of an academic exchange. These students take classes at the University Language Center where the data was collected. The participants are two men and one woman between the ages of 24 to 27 years old. All the participants were born and raised in Japan and came to Mexico to learn the language because they look forward working and living in Mexico in the future. It is not required that exchange students have plenty of knowledge in English, so there was a language barrier in communication between the interviewer and the participants. Each participant was assigned a number to mention specific examples they mentioned.

### *3.2 Procedure*

The process of how the experiment was conducted was the same for each of the participants. Before the interview and data collection, the participant was shown the confidentiality letter and the reasons for carrying out this research were explained.

Interviews were used to have a better control on what is needed for the research and add questions if it's necessary. Also, to analyze from the different perspectives of the interviewees

their own experiences and see if there is a common factor in the difficulties when learning Spanish. It was sought that the interview could be carried out face to face to be closer to the interviewee and to achieve an interview as complete and sincere as possible. Much consideration was given to the opinion of the participant to inquire into what could be the solution of learning difficulties by recognizing the various language strategies that are used by the participants.

Finally, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was applied to each participant to compare the discussion in the interview with the results in the test. The test was sent to them electronically so that they could answer it calmly and sincerely. At the end they were sent their test results.

### *3.3 Research questions*

The main purpose of this study is to become aware of the main difficulties Japanese speakers that learn Spanish go through and which strategies they implement to surpass the language barriers. With the help of this research, teachers, and students interested in teaching Spanish to foreign learners, or learners which find the mentioned strategies useful can adapt their way of teaching or studying knowing the most used strategies. At the same time, it is a topic that awakes my curiosity since I am a Spanish native speaker which is currently learning Japanese, so I want to analyze the other point of view. The questions that guided this study are the following:

1. Which learning strategies are used by Japanese students to learn Spanish taking into consideration the absence of gender, plurals, and conjugations in their language?
2. What factors in the Japanese language are the hardest to overcome when learning Spanish?
3. Does coming to México and being involved in the language has a beneficial impact in the language learning journey?

### *4. Analysis of results*

A notable aspect among all the participants was that they shared the same reasons why they came to Mexico, which was work situation and because Spanish is a language that has become popular lately. As Green (2018) states, Spanish is the most widely spoken Romance language. There are approximately 470 million native speakers and 90 million second-language users, scattered through all continents.

The barriers that were stated before the investigation have been correct since the most mentioned problems were the conjugation of the verbs, gender, and plurals.

The participants mentioned that sometimes there was not a significant problem in the case of gender, but when changing the word to its plural or when adding a definite or indefinite article was the most complex part. The participant 3 mentioned that she still did not understand when definite or indefinite articles needed to be used since this does not exist in the Japanese language either. As well, she mentioned that in Spanish there are words that do not have a plural, she explained that the word “cilantro” was confusing, since it is not necessary to change the word to “cilantros” to mention a bigger quantity and there are more examples like this.

A broad comparison was made about the difference in their learning of English and Spanish, in which was mentioned that Spanish was easier due to the pronunciation. Participant 2 mentioned that he had no problems pronouncing Spanish words because of how similar the vocals are pronounced in both languages. At the same time, participant 3 mentioned that Spanish was

more understandable when listening and pronouncing than English since the words seemed more “clear” and easier to understand.

#### *4.1 Cooperative learning*

During the interview, the participants were asked about their preference to study the language individually (individual learning) or in groups (cooperative learning). This question was made to have a broader idea of their learning strategies. Cooperative learning can be defined as instruction that involves students who work together in teams to accomplish a common goal, under conditions that include the following elements (Johnson et al., 2002). However, in the case of individual learning, the students may follow the teacher’s instruction or their own to practice and learn the target language.

The response from all the participants was that they are used to learn in groups but if they have the opportunity they also study separately. One of the students mentioned that keeping in touch with his classmates helped him improve, since he could learn new expressions or check if what he was learning was correct.

Within cooperative learning there is a type of knowledge compensation since the participants in the group are in a constant interaction with their peers, learn from their strengths and individually continue to acquire information. “Cooperative learning leads to greater learning and superior development of communication and teamwork skills (e.g., leadership, project management, and conflict resolution skills) (Felder & Brent, 2007: 51).

#### *4.2 Language immersion*

As Bostwick and Gakuen (2004) states, Language immersion is an approach to foreign language instruction in which the usual curricular activities are conducted in a foreign language. Immersion helps the student gradually begin to internalize the language by having to make an effort to produce it properly.

Participants were asked if there was a change in their learning due to their stay in Mexico, since they had a greater opportunity to put their Spanish into practice. All the participants mentioned that it was very helpful since they were in constant contact with Spanish speakers, likewise, participant 1 was interested in the cultural field. The participants had acquired expressions typical of Mexico due to this interaction and enjoyed the immersion in the culture.

In the same way, participant 1 mentioned that something that is very helpful for him to study Spanish is to imitate the speakers. If someone tells him an interesting expression, he repeats it again to remember it continuously.

Participant 2 mentioned that people should not be embarrassed when practicing a language and that he was able to practice it with kind people and that it has been helpful to have a good teacher.

#### *4.3 Strategy inventory for language learning questionnaire*

None of the students were aware that of what was specifically a learning strategy, which confirms the lack of information on a topic that is so useful in our daily lives. By giving them examples of what a learning strategy requires, they were able to formulate their own criteria and showed a general idea of what they consider what a learning strategy is, but not as a topic that they had been taught before with specific characteristics.

After the interview, now that there was a general idea of how the students managed their learning, it was preferred to have more specific answers by carrying out a test that has previous studies on its authenticity. As already mentioned, there are 6 strategy subscales, which are arranged in the following table with the respective results of each participant.

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Remembering more effectively	3.1	4.3	3.3
Using all your mental processes	3.9	4.3	3.4
Compensating for missing knowledge	4.5	4	3.6
Organizing and evaluating your learning	3.2	3.7	3.7
Managing your emotions	2.3	3.8	2.3
Learning with others	5	4.6	3.9
Overall average	3.6	4.1	3.6

As can be seen, the three participants have their highest result on the subscale “Learning with others”. It is surprisingly true that in all three cases, the students presented the highest qualification in this aspect. Noticing all the information that had already been previously acquired, it can be noted in certain aspects that establishing conversations with people was of the utmost importance in their learning.

Section E of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Questionnaire. The statements that answered with the highest score were the following:

45. If I do not understand something in Spanish, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
46. I ask Spanish speakers to correct me when I talk.
47. I practice Spanish with other students.
48. I ask for help from Spanish speakers.
49. I ask questions in Spanish.
50. I try to learn about the culture of Spanish speakers.

It is very noticeable the usage of these strategies since to overcome the main difficulties of gender, conjugations and plurals, the participants put a lot of effort and attention in other people speech and thanks to the constant repetition of words from other people, they could integrate them into their daily vocabulary.

It is perceptible how their environment also influences their learning strategies since, as mentioned before, they practice the language daily inside and outside the classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the research, it was surprising to find that most of the interviewees did not have a common idea about what a language learning strategy was. Even though they used day to day strategies for their learning, they are not capable of noticing them.

The lack of awareness that prevails. It is worrisome as students miss more adaptable ways to learn, which can make their learning faster and more fun. As future teachers, it is especially important that we show these concepts to students to help them create their own way of studying with which they can feel more confident.

The operation of learning strategies has been studied for several years and has solid information that validates its practice, so it can help the student a big amount. If the student is aware of what helps him the most or what types of skills they have, they will know if they are on the right track.

The objective of knowing which was the most used strategy by the students was fulfilled. All the research questions were answered, and it was possible to analyze the need for these different strategies and how interaction is essential for a natural acquisition of the language.

#### Acknowledgements

I want to first thank the participants of my research since this topic was of great personal interest, they were exceedingly kind and comprehensive, their answers helped me a lot.

In the same way, I want to acknowledge the effort that I put into this article since even if I was going through a difficult and stressful moment. I loved doing this and, in the future, I would like to continue investigating topics of my interest. I also thank whoever has taken the time to read my article, I hope you enjoyed it.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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