Classroom-based Speaking and Listening Learning Strategies: Japanese Learner Preferences

日本人学習者の声に基づくスピーキング・リスニングスキル改善のための授業内ストラテジー

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ABSTRACT

Learner perceptions and experiences can aid in the conceptualization of how and why learners use and prefer particular language learning strategies and language use when developing language skills. This pilot study explored the opinions and experiences of twenty-five Japanese university students on factors that improved their speaking and listening skills through their reflections on three years of study in an English language program. The learners indicated that opportunities to speak English in class, a variety of activities and the socializing effect of speaking to others in class were significant factors that helped to improve their speaking skills. Listening skill improvements were perceived by the learners to result mainly from listening to Teacher Talk studying for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in class and listening to other learners speak English in class. Findings from this research indicate that learner perceptions on language skill development can be a valuable resource that teachers can utilize when they are designing and implementing speaking and listening activities.

KEYWORDS: Learner perceptions, Listening, Self-reflection, Speaking, Teacher talk

1. INTRODUCTION

This pilot study explored learner self-perceptions on classroom-based teaching and learning strategies that helped to improve their speaking and listening skills. A review of the literature focuses on language learning strategies and language use strategies for speaking and listening skills development. Next, the methodology describes the participants and the instrument used to elicit participants' perceptions. Findings are then considered in the light of the participants' voices about the strategies they

identified and how these facilitated their learning. Finally, a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review follows, limitations of the research are identified and conclusions are presented

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher facilitation of the learning of English second language (L2) users has been influenced by research into language learning strategies. The inception of the *strategy* concept in language learning research brought about the optimistic expectation that by finding out what good language learners do, teachers could teach these strategies to other learners in order to help them meet with equal success (Rubin, 1975). However, Griffiths (2013) noted that learning can be influenced by important variables including the importance of learner identity. Various factors contribute to individual identity such as age, gender, motivation, style, beliefs (Griffiths, 2008) and issues of learner identity which influence the extent to which learners are willing to invest time, effort or money into the pursuit of learning a new language (Norton Peirce, 1995). Learner identity is shaped by the context in which the learner is situated. Norton and Toohey claimed that "learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to learn English" (2001, p. 310). Littlewood (2000) posited that teachers may have preconceptions of Asian learners viewing the teacher as an authority figure not to be questioned and learners as wanting to sit in class passively receiving knowledge. Holliday (2003) warned about Western cultural bias and encouraged teachers to learn from learners' socially-based learning strategies while sharing learning strategies with learners. That is to say, a move away from a native speakerist approach to classroom teaching and learning including teacher controlled oral interaction and towards the preexisting social autonomy of learners and the social worlds of learners that they bring from their lives outside of the classroom.

For the purpose of conducting the current research a practical definition of strategies as they relate to language learning was essential. Griffiths provided a working definition of a *strategy*, i.e., "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" (2008, p. 87). The language learning strategies a learner uses and the effectiveness of those strategies greatly depends on learners themselves, the learning task at hand and the learning environment (Gu, 2012). Cohen & Weaver (2006) noted that a distinction can be made between language learning strategies (i.e., for learning material for the first time); and language use strategies (i.e., for using materials that have already been learned, at least to some degree). Both language learning strategies and learning use strategies are imperative to develop second language proficiency (Saville-Troike, 2006) and facilitate the language development process. In the current study, the researcher attempted to explore learner preferences on language learning strategies based on the strategies that the learners identified themselves.

Kawai and Kawaiʼs (2005) study of 1758 Japanese undergraduate learners of English found that the building of a language use environment can help learners to use a language and develop language use strategies. They did so by implementing the frequent use of short group presentations, peer evaluations and in-class and online discussions. Kawai and Kawai concluded that learner confidence in using English was increased considerably when learners were involved in group and pair work and their interactions increased the use of social strategies which helped to break down social barriers and reduce competitiveness in the classroom.

There are some studies on Japanese learner perceptions of the cultural factors that can influence their English language development. Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) found that classroom interactional patterns between Japanese learners of English and their teachers depend on some contextual, cultural and local factors. Firstly, learnersʼ attitudes towards the role of English in their society often does not make them feel any immediate needs for English and authentic real-world communication. Secondly, anxiety about tests such as university entrance examinations has produced an effect of focusing on grammar, vocabulary and comprehension components of English to the detriment of communicative interaction. Thirdly, communication in Japanese culture is characterized by valuing indirect speech, face saving, group conformity, reticence, competition avoidance, individual shyness and the preference for teacher dominated classrooms. In relation to these factors, Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) argued that Japanese language learners should be made aware of the important role that English plays in helping them achieve intercultural competence rather than being merely proficient language users.

Mori et al., (2010) study explored the role that culture may play in English language learning by surveying 355 Thai and 350 Japanese university students and asking them to share self-perceptions on their successes and failures on actual language learning tasks. Results from this study showed that Thai learners were interested in grades, teacher influence, classroom atmosphere and effort; whereas Japanese learners were concerned with teacher influence, class level, classroom atmosphere and interest. The current research found agreement with Tsuiʼs (2001) contention that the researcher needs to have a sound view of the cultural phenomena from the perspective of the participants in order to gain a fuller understanding of the context of classroom interactions.

While there was an absence in the literature of research into Japanese learner perceptions of language learning strategies that aided in their speaking skills development, some research was found in relation to the development of English language listening skills. Of the four main language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing), many learners maintain that listening is the most difficult (see Field, 2008; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). For the purpose of the current study and in relation to listening skills development, *a listening strategy* can be understood as including "conscious plans to manage incoming speech, particularly when the listener knows that he or she must compensate for incomplete input or partial

understanding" (Rost, 2002, p. 236). Siegel (2013) studied learner perceptions of class-based listening strategies and how those strategies could be useful to learners in their futures. This study of 54 Japanese university students enrolled in English classes, who were surveyed and interviewed, found that a majority of them believed listening strategies would benefit them in a variety of contexts, including academic, business and travel. In reference to the literature reviewed, the current research explored the perceptions of Japanese learners about language learning strategies and language use strategies used in the classroom that helped to improve their English speaking and listening skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

The experiences of twenty-five third and fourth year undergraduate students enrolled in an English language program formed the foundation of the current research. The participants were members of a single class group at the time the data were collected. They were requested by their class teacher (the researcher) to write a 100 to 150 word individual blog in English and post their written work anonymously to a class group blog in the second last week of their course. They were given one week to answer the question:

> *Is this English program helping you to speak English and listen to English better? Why? How?*

Participants were aware that the blog activity was part of their coursework participation and served as an activity of self-reflection. Completion of the blog was considered as meeting the requirement of that component of their coursework participation Upon completion of their blogs in a subsequent class period participants engaged in small group discussions (as part of the research) where they could share thoughts on their answers to the above question. At the time the research was conducted participants were enrolled in their sixth semester of study in the program, had been taught by several teachers and studied with a variety of other students over that time period. Hence, they generally shared both some similar and different experiences during their three years of study and the breadth of their engagement in the program offered a source of discovery for the current research. The researcher requested that participants draw upon any of their three years of experience in the English program when constructing their written reflections. Data used in the following section were derived from non-random sampling so that the researcher could select the deepest detailing offered in the participants' responses in relation to the specific categories elicited from the data collected.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section has been divided into two parts: firstly, the perceptions of learners on how their speaking skills have improved in the English program; and secondly, the perceptions of learners on how their listening skills have improved in this program.

4.1 Perceptions on Speaking Skills Development

Among the twenty-five participants, there were thirty-nine references made to the program's influence on the learners' speaking skills development. The researcher grouped these references into six categories.

Table 1

Speaking items helping English skill development

Speaking-related item	No. of times selected by learners
Opportunity to speak English in class	15
Socializing effect	6
Varieties of activities	6
Overcoming shyness / apprehension	5
Teacher influence on speaking English, not Japanese	4
Development of a sense of international use of English	3

The most commonly discussed theme was the opportunity to speak English in class which fifteen participants selected. Seven of them talked about the program being their main avenue to talk in English because they could not find those opportunities easily in their lives in Japan: *Because I didn't have some chance to speak English in my life before I attended English classes. I always used to speak Japanese only with my friends and teachers. But in English classes, we have to speak English as possible (sic) as we can (P14).* The regularity of attending two class lessons per week and its influence on their English language skills development was mentioned by eleven learners and one of them found that this program helped to improve her English when considered in combination with other English courses she was attending: *Before I entered this university I was not good at speaking and listening English…I did not have such a chance…now I take four English classes a week, including this program. and the teachers give us many chances which we speak English. (P19).*

The English program was noted by approximately one-in-four learners as providing socializing experiences that they believed helped in the development of their speaking skills. For example, being situated in an environment in which *everybody speaks a lot of English (P3)* and learners can speak English with friends and their teacher (P7, P12, and P24). One learner referred to his immersion in the

program and how mixing with people in the classroom changed him over time: *I was not good at talking with a person at first, when I entered university. However, English speaking activities changed me, so they improve my speaking skill and I am good at talking with a person now. (P13)*. Interactions with others in the classroom brought one learner to reflect upon his learning and how talking with others helped him to gain and share knowledge in English with others: *All knowledge has no sense unless it (is) communicated to others…thanks to the program I have opportunities to speak with my friends, I got communication skills (P10)*.

The variety of activities that learners engaged in during class lessons was emphasized by six participants as a primary reason for their speaking skills development. One learner talked about his experience of participating in many types of activities with his peers in the program: *There are many opportunities for me to speak English in this program, for example, book report, blog, presentation, pair work. While I talk with partner about book report, blog, presentation, pair work, I always use speaking ability (P6)*. Other learners talked about doing activities for the first time in their life in English: *I gave a presentation in English for the first time. When I heard that we gave presentation in English, I thought it was impossible for me. However, I was able to show presentation magnificently because I practiced with friends (P21)*. Another learner discussed class activities and how teachers' tips helped to improve her speaking skills: *I experienced some book reports, speaking test and important talking activity time in English class. All study helped my English skills. Teachers taught me how to improve to speak English, for example, watching CNN news, YouTube and listen radio. These are effective for me (P16)*.

Overcoming shyness and/or apprehension were recorded as being an important outcome for five learners in the development of their speaking skills. Several learners noted that they were able to overcome their nervousness with talking to others in the classroom in English: *I was very shy when I enter university. But, speaking activities help me improvement my character…As a result, I can speak English actively (P1)*. One learner implied that the program helped to shift her focus from grammar when talking and use her existing and developing oral skills: *I worried about grammar very much until I received English classes…However, I came to think that it is important because teachers made me to speak English these classes (P5)*.

The influence of classroom teachers in guiding learners to speak in English rather in Japanese was referred to by four learners. One learner noted: *If a teacher doesn't care whether I speak in Japanese or not, it`ll be easy to discuss friends and maybe it`ll be fun, but it`ll not be my practice. That`s why the teacher makes mood that we have to speak in English (P4)*. Another learner remarked on the importance of the teacher speaking English, rather than in Japanese and English: *I like teachers speak only English, so I have to listen carefully what they say. If I don't listen carefully…I would fall behind (P20)*.

Three learners noted that their participation in the program gave them a sense of ownership of English as one of their languages of use. One learner thought that her

immersion in the program and constant use of English seemed to help her see herself as a speaker of English, to some degree, when travelling abroad: *I came to think that it is important that I was told to speak English this program. When I went for a trip abroad, I did not abnormally feel uneasiness either...I became able to go for a trip positively (P5)*. Two of the other learners noted their goal of becoming an intelligible speaker of English rather than aiming for native speaker competence and one of them referred to her study in the program as helping her to do that: *this program helps me to speak… In my future, I would like to use English for job. I want to be (a) good English speaker, but I don't aim perfect pronunciation. I think most important thing is that I try to message for other people. (P16)*.

4.2 Perceptions on Listening Skills Development

Among the twenty-five participants, eighteen references were made to the program's influence on the learners' speaking skills development. The researcher grouped these references into three categories.

Table 2
Listening items helping English skill development

Listening-related items	No. of times selected by learners
Teacher Talk	8
TOEIC study	5
Listening to other students	5

Eight learners referred to Teacher Talk in English as a factor that helped them to improve their listening skills. A common sentiment expressed among them is exemplified by one learner's view: *the teachers are foreigner and I heard their English well. So, my ears had ability to hear English naturally. I can listen to English well (P13)*.

Six learners considered the studying of TOEIC in the classroom as being important for their listening skills development. Due to the influence of one of his teachers, one learner commented on a particular listening skill that he had learned in class: *From TOEIC practice and my teacher I was able to change my skill of catching main points from listening activities (P1)*. Another learner talked about how her listening ability improved from studying TOEIC in class: *TOEIC listening training helps to listen English. Because we listen to English and we think about an answer to hear English…I think that I become able to hear it little by little (P15)*. One learner mentioned the importance of studying TOEIC in class for improving her TOEIC score: *If there is no English class time, we cannot more easily get high score for TOEIC test. (P11)*.

Being situated and interacting with other learners in the classroom who were

speaking English was highlighted by five learners as helping to improve their listening skills. One of those learners felt that by listening to others speaking English in class he was able to learn how to use the language more when he wanted to communicate: *I can learn how to use English when I want to talk with and listen other students (P22)*. Another learner realized the value of observing and listening to other learners when they were doing presentations in English: *My teacher said, "Please listen carefully to the presentations of other people." I became able to understand what a presenter wanted to say through the grace of that teacher (P21)*.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Teachers may need to consider preconceptions of Asian learners (Littlewood, 2000) as preferring to be passive learners. The most commonly referenced reason reported by the learners for their speaking skills improvement while studying in the English program was the opportunity to speak English in class. Participants also referenced the socializing effect that they experienced in their classes and the value of engaging in a variety of activities during classroom learning which in some cases helped learners to overcome shyness and apprehension about speaking in English. This finding is supported by Kawai and Kawai's (2005) conclusion that the building of a language use environment can help learners to use a language and develop language use strategies. Yet, initial self-perceptions of shyness, grammar and test focused attitudes in relation to the spoken production of English were noted by several learners as being problematic at times for them; an issue raised by Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) which was discussed in the literature review.

The teacher's influence on speaking English in class, not Japanese was referred to by approximately a fifth of the learners as being important to their speaking skills development. This finding concurs with Mori et al. (2010) results showing that Japanese learners considered teacher influence and classroom atmosphere to be important in language use and language learning strategies. Listening to Teacher Talk in English and listening to other learners in class were identified as important strategies used by learners for language use and language learning.

Practice in various ways to talk in English influenced learners' speaking and listening skills development positively. This finding contrasted with Siegel's (2013) argument that Japanese learners prefer to focus on using listening strategies instruction for bettering their test scores. However, it should be noted that one-fifth of the learners referenced the importance of TOEIC test study in their classroom learning and listening skills development.

As noted by Mori et al. (2010), it cannot be assumed that all students have the same perceptions and preferences regarding learning styles, teachers and classroom environments, and classroom activities. Thus, a wider range of participants should be included in future research on this issue and the inclusion of more than one researcher could benefit the breadth of learner perceptions that could be explored.

The current research was not intended to evaluate the English program. The focus was on learner perceptions of their speaking and listening skills improvement as they understood from their experiences with various class groups of learners and teachers during their three-year period of study in the program. Insights offered by the learners show the depth of reflection that they were capable of presenting in their individual blogs. Teachers may find that class-based discussions or their own field research observations might help them to identify their learners' preferred strategies for negotiating what is to be learned in a particular context (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2012) and help learners to develop a greater awareness of strategies that can be used to support a closer alignment between learners' knowledge of strategies and their knowledgeable usage of them. Teachers should give consideration to both cultural bias (Holliday, 2003) that can potentially influence their research and learners' experienced-based perceptions when analysing future research findings. Future research may also benefit from consideration of gender differences in reported strategy use, how they may vary, and why particular strategies appear to be more favorable to some learners in particular learning contexts.

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