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Listening learning strategies and outcomes: Taking Japanese news as an example

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Abstract

Taiwanese universities offer students majoring in the Japanese language the opportunity to take news and media courses in their middle and high school years. This study examines how to improve students' learning effectiveness within a limited time. Students taking the Media Language course were surveyed and interviewed to identify which listening strategies were most effective for developing their listening skills. The findings showed that good learners spent more time studying and had more effective learning strategies.

Keywords: Listening Practice, Learning Strategies, Japanese News, News Listening

Introduction

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four basic skills in language learning. When speaking and writing, learners can use the grammar and vocabulary they have learned to express themselves, and when reading, they can determine what they do not understand. However, in listening, learners may encounter sentence patterns or vocabulary that they have not yet mastered. At such times, it is important for learners to make appropriate and reasonable decisions using their existing language knowledge. Most Taiwanese universities allow students majoring in the Japanese language to take news and media courses during their middle and high school years. News listening is a challenging subject for most students who have just begun learning 50 Japanese sounds and basic Japanese grammar and are still adjusting to a second foreign language.

Teachers often allow students to watch online news to practice their listening skills. However, students may be unable to absorb a large number of proper nouns in the news and the special usage of written language if they are not provided with effective guidance strategies. As a result, if teachers wish to find more effective teaching methods for the limited teaching time available, they must develop effective learning strategies to guide students and apply them to listening lessons.

Literature Review

Learning Strategies

Regarding the discussion of learning strategies, Mendelsohn (1995) claimed that language teachers should not only provide learners with opportunities to listen but also guide students “how to listen.” According to O’Malley et al. (1989), excellent learners usually employ three strategies: self-monitoring, elaboration, and inferencing. Oxford (1989) pointed out that as students change their learning strategies in response to the teacher’s teaching methods, curriculum design is extremely important. He divided strategies into direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social). A simplified description of these six strategies is as follows:

A Memory strategies: Support the processing of stored information

B Cognitive strategies: Help to understand and learn the target language

C Compensation strategies: Use guessing to compensate for a lack of knowledge in the target language

D Metacognitive strategies: Monitor language learning progress and effectiveness

E Affective strategies: Help to manage learning emotions, attitudes, and motivations

F Social strategies: Learn through interaction with others

Japanese researchers Mizuta (1996) and Yokoyama (2004) used specific listening teaching materials to analyze listening learning strategies. Yokoyama (2004) highlighted the importance of clarifying the “process” of how learners listen. Taiwanese researcher Wu (2009) conducted a survey and found that good language learners mostly have good habits of active learning and acquire effective learning strategies. She claimed that allowing “students to acquire appropriate learning strategies for listening practice and improve bad learning behavior patterns through classroom training is one of the important topics for language teachers” (p.156). Wu (2009) created a 38-item learning strategy table based on the six abovementioned categories of Oxford (1989), offering teachers and students the opportunity to select appropriate strategies for teaching and learning objectives. This study referred to Wu’s (2009) 38 listening learning strategies and produced a 20-item news listening learning strategy table for the four types of “memory, cognitive, compensation, and metacognitive” to examine students’ strategies.

Course Design

We conducted this study with students in the first semester of their third year of Media Language Listening in the Department of Applied Japanese at I-Shou University in Taiwan. Presented in two

teaching hours per week, this course focuses on listening to Japanese news. The first paragraph of a news report is the introduction, which serves as a guide to the the main body of the article that follows. The most important facts appear first in the main body, followed by the unimportant ones, and details. The introduction usually clearly lists the six elements of news, namely 5W1H (when, where, who, what, why, and how). Therefore, the Media Language course uses the listening teaching material *The News from the Beginner's Level*, which is mainly about the introduction and has only sound, and the course is supplemented by the online teaching material *NHK News Web Easy* with images for listening exercises for the full text of the news.

(1) Without visuals: Using the textbook *The News from the Beginner's Level*, we focused on listening to Japan's NHK news for beginners, which is listening practice of the introduction. In this textbook, the introduction is divided into several short sentences. Each sentence is read three times, beginning slowly and becoming faster each time to enable students to adapt to the speed of the news presentation. The news content is divided into several categories, such as "earthquake, traffic, fire, employment, and weather forecast." The classes begin with the meanings and sentence patterns of commonly used words in each unit to reduce students' burden of listening to the news. The teachers guide the students to practice the short sentences and then the longer sentences, and to repeat the entire introduction to complete the listening practice without visuals.

(2) With visuals: After practicing the above introduction, we used "NHK News Web Easy," which is a Japanese news website designed for Japanese primary and secondary school students and foreigners living in Japan. Through easy-to-understand text and videos, children and foreigners can easily listen to the news. During class, proper nouns and background knowledge are first explained, and the news twice is shown. During the lesson, students watch the video, practice listening, repeat sentences, and use dictation to confirm their understanding. Once the students have completed the sentence-by-sentence exercises, they are asked to recall the general content of the news and identify the key points of each news item.

Research Design

Research Subjects

We employed students in the first semester of their third year of the Media Language Listening course in the Department of Applied Japanese at I-Shou University in Taiwan. The teaching hours are two hours per week. To understand students' learning strategies, this survey divides students into two groups: Group A is composed of students who have passed the Japanese test N2, and Group B is

composed of students who have not passed N2 (N3 or below). The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) was implemented in 1984 and is a Japanese language proficiency test that targets Japanese language learners. It is the most prominent Japanese test in the world and assesses Japanese communication ability on three levels: verbal knowledge, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. According to the introduction on the JLPT website, the N2 hearing certification standard is an ability to “understand conversations and news reports at near normal speed and coherently in most situations, except for daily life situations, and ... understand the topic trend, content, and character relationships, as well as grasp the main idea(Accessed 2024)”. Therefore, we speculate that students who have obtained the N2 certification certificate can understand news reports, while students below N3 are generally capable of understanding daily Japanese but are not required to understand news reports in Japanese.

Research Method

This study sought the cooperation of 15 students who had obtained the N2 certificate and 15 students who had not obtained the N2 certificate (totaling 30 students), in conducting an interview survey on news listening. Following an interview lasting 5 minutes per person, students were given another 10 minutes to complete a five-point Likert scale regarding their listening learning strategies and satisfaction with class.

The interviews asked the following five questions to determine how long students spent studying Japanese each day, what methods they used in their daily listening practice, and the difficulties they experienced while listening to Japanese news:

1. In addition to attending school classes, how much time do you spend practicing Japanese listening a week?
2. What are your daily methods of acquiring Japanese?
3. Do you find Japanese news difficult?
4. How do you usually train your news listening skills?
5. What items do you find difficult to understand when listening to Japanese news?
 - ① Kanji vocabulary
 - ② Terminologies
 - ③ Very long modified sentences
 - ④ Background knowledge
 - ⑤ Fast Speed
 - ⑥ Grammar

Results and Discussion

Interview Results

According to the interview results, five students in Group A spent more than 5 hours a week on Japanese listening, compared to only one student in Group B. Additionally, nine students in Group B

just spent 1–2 hours a week on Japanese listening . Most students in both Groups A and B found Japanese news very difficult (13 students in Group A; 14 students in Group B), and most of them rarely read Japanese news and at most read online news on the internet. Watching Japanese television programs, watching online videos, and listening to Japanese music are the most common ways to practice listening.

Difficulties listening to the Japanese news

In the interviews, the students were asked to name two of six items they found the most difficult when listening to Japanese news: Kanji, terminologies, long modified sentences, background knowledge, fast speed, and grammar. Most students in both groups considered the terminologies (A = 33%, B = 43%) and fast speed (A = 27%, B = 30%) to be a major challenge. Group A students also struggled with grammar (13%), while Group B students had most difficulties with modified sentences (10%). In addition to strengthening the common terminologies of news, this course enables students to adapt to the speed of news broadcasts as quickly as possible in the short term.

Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first part, the students scored the learning strategies on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”). Higher scores indicate that students are more likely to use the strategy for news listening exercises. There are 20 learning strategies in total, categorized into four types: memory (items 1–4), cognitive (items 5–12), compensation (items 13–16), and metacognitive (items 17–20).

In the second part of the survey, the students were asked to rate the difficulty and results of the course on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The higher the score, the more the students agree with the item. Items 21–23 represent the level of difficulty of the course, while items 24–28 represent the level of learning results.

Table 1: Questionnaire Survey Results

Category	Item	Learning Strategy	Average	
			A	B
Memory	1	Watch the news, write down the words, and remember after checking them	3.00	3.20
	2	Look up the news vocabulary and write it down in a vocabulary book to memorize them	2.87	2.93
	3	Combine sounds and images to memorize the	3.00	2.93

		words		
	4	Use situations and patterns to help remember the news content	3.40	3.27
Cognitive	5	Repeatedly watch Japanese news programs	2.67	2.53
	6	Focus on listening with the ears while watching the news	3.93	3.40
	7	Watching the subtitles while listening to the news	3.86	3.67
	8	Translate the content of the listening exercises into written form	2.33	2.33
	9	Utilize keywords to understand the general content of the news	4.20	3.86
	10	Listen to the news content briefly first, then more carefully	3.27	3.80
	11	Remember the key points while listening to the news	2.47	2.60
	12	Use dictionaries (including online dictionaries) when watching the news	3.33	3.20
Compensation	13	Identify unknown keywords based on the context	4.20	3.27
	14	Try to find clues to infer the content if unsure	4.26	3.53
	15	Infer the following content from the previous sentence	4.20	3.67
	16	Understand the general ideas without obsessing over translating them	4.33	3.40
Metacognitive	17	Self-monitor understanding of listening content	2.93	2.80
	18	Develop a listening practice plan	1.73	2.53
	19	Pay attention to whether your listening skills have improved	2.87	3.33
	20	Be aware of your listening problems	3.40	3.27
	Item	News Difficulty and Course Opinions	Average	
			A	B
Difficulty	21	I adapt to the speed of the Japanese news	4.20	2.93

		broadcasting.		
	22	I quickly grasp the general content of Japanese news.	4.33	3.00
	23	It is not difficult for me to listen to news without subtitles.	3.27	1.87
Learning results	24	News courses are highly appropriate for students in their junior year.	4.00	3.47
	25	The news course is moderately difficult for me.	3.80	3.20
	26	It's important to learn common Japanese phrases and vocabulary to ease the burden of listening to Japanese news.	3.80	4.00
	27	I need recordings that start slowly and then speed up to help me adjust to the speed of news broadcasts.	3.47	4.00
	28	Dividing news content into major categories helps me learn the news.	4.20	4.33

Application of listening learning strategies

As shown in Table 2, based on the average scores of each type, the memory category scores of the two groups were similar (3.07: 3.08), while the cognitive category scores of Group A were slightly higher than those of Group B (3.26: 3.17). Overall, the biggest difference between the two groups was in the compensation category (4.25: 3.47), which shows that students made up for the lack of target language knowledge through guessing. The scores of Group A in this item were significantly higher than those of Group B. Moreover, for every item in the compensation strategies, Group A's score was greater than 4. Although the compensation strategies of Group B were slightly higher than those of other types, they were all less than 4. In the category of metacognitive, which is part of monitoring language learning progress and results, the average of the two groups of students is 2.73 for Group A and 2.98 for Group B, both less than 3. Metacognitive strategies require learners to actively think about how to improve their listening and comprehension abilities. However, the students in this study have not yet learned to take the initiative to come up with clear plans.

Table 2: Average Values of the Four Categories

Strategy category

A

B

Memory strategies	3.07	3.08
Cognitive strategies	3.26	3.17
Compensation strategies	4.25	3.47
Metacognitive strategies	2.73	2.98

We examined the top five learning strategies in both groups. In Group A, the top five items were 16, 14, 15, 9, and 6, which showed that Group A students used learning strategies that focused on the overall general concept and listening with their ears. All scores in the speculation category exceeded 4. The top five projects in Group B were 9, 7, 15, 14, and 16, indicating that students in Group B also made inferences based on keywords; however, “Watching the subtitles while listening to the news” (3.67) was the second highest, which means they still relied more on subtitles when listening to the news rather than practicing with their ears. In addition, except for item 6 in Group A, all scores were higher than 4 points, while the top five scores in Group B were all lower than 4 points, indicating that Group B used these strategies less.

Items to improve

The items scoring lower than 3 in both groups (items 2, 5, 8, 11, 17, and 18) need to be strengthened in class. Both groups of students lacked adequate independent learning and self-monitoring skills. The scores in items 8, “Translate the content of the listening exercises into written form,” and 18, “Develop a listening practice plan,” were both low, suggesting that the students’ learning willingness and self-discipline skills need to be improved. Items 8, “Translate the content of the listening exercises into written form,” and 11, “Remember the key points while listening to the news,” are easier for teachers to guide in class and can be integrated into curriculum design in the future.

Learning difficulties

For the three items on the difficulty of news learning (items 21–23), Group A scored an average of 3.93, while Group B scored an average of 2.53. These results suggest that students in Group A are less dependent on subtitles and are more able to adapt to the speed of the news playback. By comparison, students in Group B felt that the speed of Japanese news broadcast was too fast and found it difficult to adapt. However, the students suggested that if subtitles were not provided, it would be difficult to understand the news. Overall, listening to Japanese news is still a challenge for junior students.

Course results

Regarding the learning results of the news listening course (items 24–28), the average scores of students in Groups A and B were 3.85 and 3.80, respectively, which means that the majority of

students agreed that news courses should be studied in their junior year. In particular, the students in Group B believed that the commonly used sentences and vocabulary they learned in class were very helpful to them. Furthermore, the teaching materials that were initially slow and became faster made it easier to adapt to the speed of news broadcasts. Overall, both groups of students were positive about the course results.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings of this study show that junior students have difficulty understanding terminologies and adapting to the fast speed of Japanese news. In the interviews, most students believed that the biggest gains from the course were “learning different types of news articles,” “understanding common sentence patterns and proper nouns,” “being able to quickly grasp the content of the news,” and “increasing the understanding of long sentences.” However, the students also wished for “a slower speed” and for “the materials to be played a few more times.” Therefore, while this course provided news and common vocabulary to accelerate students’ understanding of the news, the students were still unable to keep up with the playing speed of the Japanese news.

The results of this study show that students with better listening performance are good at using compensatory strategies, such as guessing, to make up for their deficiencies in listening, while students who have not obtained N2 have lower scores in this area. In the future, students struggling with their listening abilities can be introduced to learning strategies related to speculation in class. In addition, among the four major categories of listening learning strategies in this study, the research subject students were least good at the metacognitive strategy. Metacognitive strategies require learners to think actively about how to improve their listening and comprehension abilities. Future teaching should therefore help students actively think about their own learning results. The majority of students who participated in this study agreed that the course was useful for developing their news listening skills. In the future, learners will be trained to use various strategies effectively to improve their listening and learning results.

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