

# An investigation into language learning strategies used by a group of Japanese learners of English.

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This paper describes an investigation into language learning strategies, conducted by means of a grid-questionnaire presented to 70 first-year students of English, residing in St. Mary's Hall on this campus. The grid-questionnaire listed a selection of 19 "ways" available to these students, and they were asked to check their own frequency of use for each strategy. A series of pie charts display the data. The findings suggest that some students utilize some learning strategies more than others, but further study is recommended to determine why students use a particular strategy for a task; how they use it; and whether it is a successful learning strategy for them.

**Key words:** [learning strategies]

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## INTRODUCTION:

This study sets out to investigate some of the ways in which a group of learners of English use in their learning and whether the findings of this research have implications for the introduction of further strategies that could increase their learning capacity.

There has been a substantial amount of literature published solely for developing studying skills in a foreign language. In 1975, Heaton produced a practical study-skills book comprising of suggestions on improving listening comprehension, note-taking, reading, attending lectures, using a dictionary, writing reports and articles, techniques for learning and remembering, and how to study towards examinations.

"Many teachers and educationalists see learning how to learn as the most basic and important educational objective, no matter what teaching or learning mode is adopted" (Dickinson, 1987), and Rubin and Thompson (1994), say that to be a successful language learner, at first, a learner has to be in control of the way he/she learns. Rubin and Thompson list several ways that learners can increase their own awareness of learning. They recommend keeping a diary, talking to peers and teachers and assessing themselves, working through questionnaires about learner goals, monitoring, evaluating and revising, strategies for grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills, provided in their book "How to be a more

successful language learner".

Ellis (1993), identifies two main types of learning strategy: behavioral (the ones we can actually observe learners doing), and mental (the ones that work quietly inside the minds of each individual). The biggest problem, he continues, is that it is more likely that the mental learning strategies are the most interesting - but, because they are hidden, how do we actually find out that they are even there or being used? One method of investigation here has been introspection - to have learners perform tasks and try to think their thoughts out loud as they are doing them. Whilst this is happening, the learners can be told which strategy it is likely they are using for that task. There have been numerous attempts to define and classify "learning" and what characteristics constitute a "good" learner. "There is no stereotype of "the good Language learner." There are instead, many individual traits that contribute to success, and there are also many individual ways of learning a foreign language." Rubin and Thompson (1994:3). Oxford (1990: 317-330) lists strategy applications, with examples, according to the four language skill areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

There have been several attempts at arriving at a definition for a strategy, ranging from mental or behavioural perspectives, or a combination of both:-

<b>Source:</b>	<b>Definition:</b>
Stern (1983)	"In our view strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behaviour."
Weinstein & Mayer (1986)	"Learning strategies are the behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process."
Chamot (1987)	"Learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions the students take in order to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area of information."
Rubin (1987)	"Learning strategies are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly."
Oxford (1989)	"Learning language strategies are behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable."

**Table 1: Definitions of learning strategies (cited in Ellis, 1996:553).**

Learning strategies used by individuals have also been defined as "steps taken by the learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage and retrieval or use of information" (Oxford and Crookall, 1989:404). Strategies are employed by teachers and learners alike in the course of

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learning. Abbott et al (1987) suggest that there does not need to be a teacher present for learning to take place. "Learning is something people do all through their lives". However, there may be some learners who need guidance in finding out the strategies that really work for them. Nunan (1989), found the following from a study of "good learners": Motivation, prepared to take risks, determined to apply developing language skills outside the classroom and McLaughlin (in Harley, et al, 1990), says that expert language learners are often not aware of how they are going about learning a new language!

Then, by investigating which learning strategies our learners use, outside of the classroom, how regularly they use them and whether the student finds them useful or successful, this kind of research can tell the teacher how the learner's time is being spent outside the classroom, with regard to language learning.

## LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS AND STUDY SETTING:

The students involved in this research reside in the college's dormitory for their first year during their two year English course, along with three native-speaker (NS) teachers of English. The two Japanese Catholic Sisters, who also live in the dormitory are responsible for the coordination of the students' daily routines. The general idea behind living in this dormitory is to give the students an pseudo-English-speaking environment. In fact, living in the dormitory for the two semesters in their first year, fulfills a course module called "English in Life", for which, the three NS teachers in the dormitory are responsible for grading all of the first year students. We can assume that the students in the dormitory have chosen this college in which to pursue their study of English because they are particularly motivated to do so. Gardner and MacIntyre ( 1992:219), suggest that motivated learners develop their own strategies to advance in their second language learning.

Each day, students eat their lunches and dinners and talk in English with the NS teachers and Sisters. "Marathon Days" are on Wednesdays, and other college staff visit at lunch time during these days which are set aside to really encourage students to put in an increased effort and output of English mid-week by talking with as many teachers and other students in English as possible. In addition to the "Marathon Day", the students and the three dormitory teachers have organised a student "English committee", which monitor several bi-weekly tasks that see the students work together in pairs or small groups to complete. These tasks may take the form of talking in "Buddy pairs" about their family, their hometown, their hobbies etc, or something typically Japanese in preparation for their Australian homestay at the end of their first year; or participating in small competitions between areas of the dormitory in vocabulary-expansion activities (semantic maps: "mind-maps" or "word-spiders" on large sheets of colored paper to put on the notice boards in the dormitory). The students keep an English journal each day over the weeks in each semester. All teachers in the English

department assist with the marking and helping with these written diaries at the end of each week. The dormitory also has Internet and word processing facilities, a television/video lounge, an English book and audio library and on each day of the week at 9:20pm, the teachers, Sisters and small groups of students take turns to play some music and announce messages in English, for up to 10 minutes, over the public address system in the dormitory. Once a month a guest speaker visits and gives a talk to the students in English. These guests are usually native speakers of English who live locally in Japan, but sometimes we have some visitors who graduated from this college and come to talk in English to the students about their lives after college. There is also an opportunity for students to ask questions afterwards about the talk. The committee leaders report back to the teachers those students who are seen to have tried their hardest to do as many of the English tasks as possible, irrespective of the number of mistakes the students may have made. These recognized students receive a small certificate at one of the bi-weekly English meetings held on Wednesday evenings in the dormitory. Finally, at the end of each semester, the students have their pair or small group "Buddy-pair" conversation test with one of the NS teachers. The "English-in-life" module tries to provide numerous opportunities for students to practice and learn English in the dormitory.

Therefore, for the purposes of this report, this study sets out to investigate the frequency a group of 70 learners of English utilise a selection of strategies that relate to their "English-in-life" module in their first year in the dormitory at this college.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS:

The subjects for this study are 70 Japanese first year junior college students of English who reside in the dormitory on this campus, as described above.

The strategy criteria were based on what tasks are currently available to the students, that are learner-centered or made available for them in the dormitory. Oxford (1990), identifies six main categories of learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies, which our listed learning strategies fall into.

A grid-questionnaire (Appendix I), was given to the dormitory students, who were asked to check the frequency of use for each of the 19 "ways" chosen for this investigation. The frequency options were "often", "sometimes", "not often", "rarely" and "never". The data was collected and simple pie-charts were constructed to clearly show the regularity of the 19 learner strategies that were chosen for this study (in Results). In this investigation, pie-charts are ideal graphics for clearly describing the frequencies of use for particular strategies by the students.

## RESULTS:

Some general ideas concerning the regularity of use of strategies in the survey are best seen in the pie-charts that follow:

(The pie-chart labels - the numbers outside each pie-chart "wedge", show the actual number of students out of the total 70 surveyed, who gave that particular choice of answer).

Figure 1. Repeating words to yourself (out loud):-

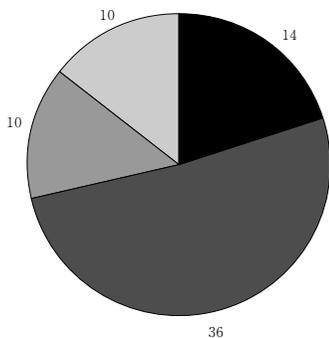


Figure 2. Silent practice (Thinking in your head)

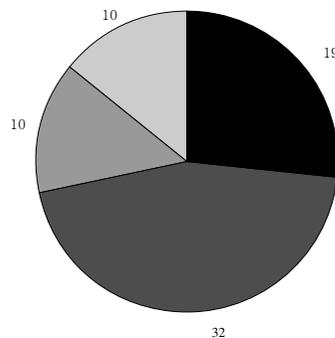


Figure 3. Practice with a friend

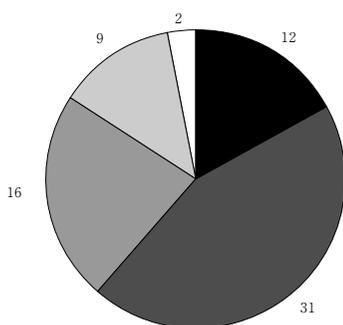


Figure 4. Reading your notes

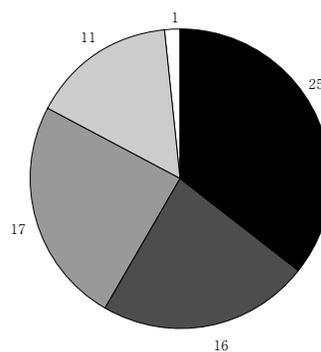
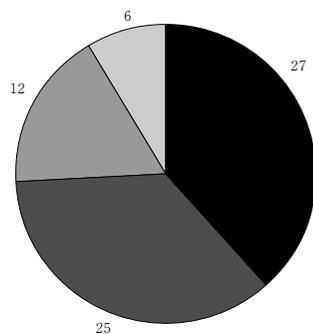


Figure 5. Reading your textbook



### Key:

- often
- sometimes
- not often
- rarely
- never

**Results:-** Some "Learning strategies" and their regularity of use by a group of Japanese Junior college students

Figure 6. Memorizing words

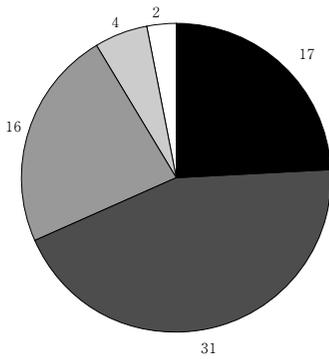


Figure 7. Testing yourself on words

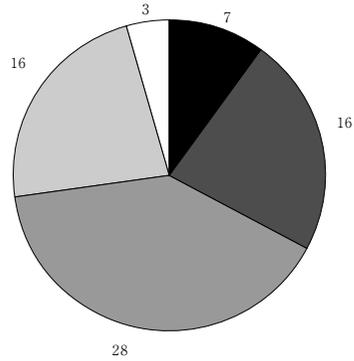


Figure 8. Trying to use English whenever possible

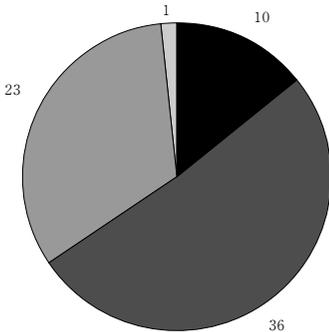


Figure 9. Revising what you have done in class

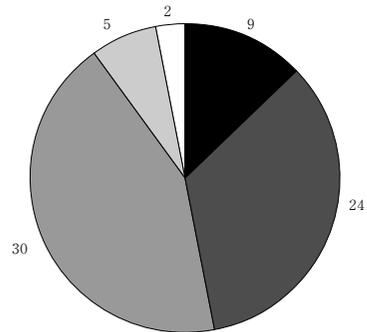
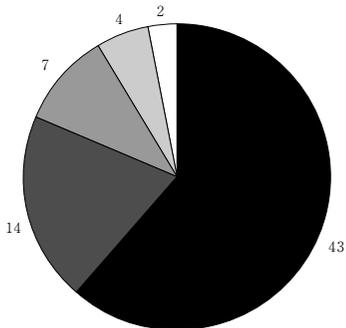


Figure 10. Listening to English songs



**Key:**

- often
- sometimes
- not often
- rarely
- never

**Results (continued):- Some "Learning strategies" and their regularity of use by a group of Japanese Junior college students**

Figure 11. Listening to English on the radio

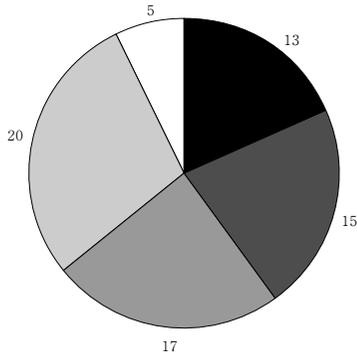


Figure 12. Listening to English cassettes

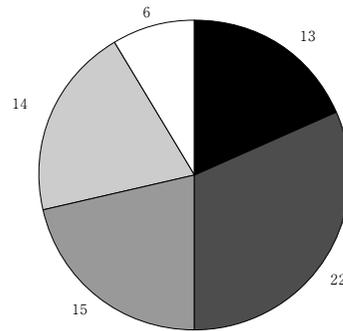


Figure 13. Watching videos in English

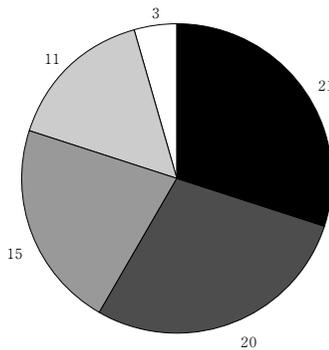


Figure 14. Discussing language learning with a friend

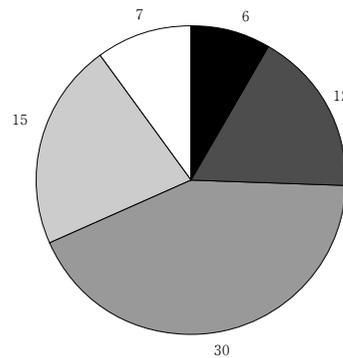
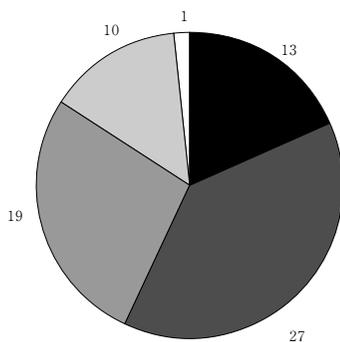


Figure 15. Discussing language learning with a teacher



**Key:**

- often
- sometimes
- not often
- rarely
- never

**Results (continued):- Some "Learning strategies" and their regularity of use by a group of Japanese Junior college students**

Figure 16. Reading English books at home

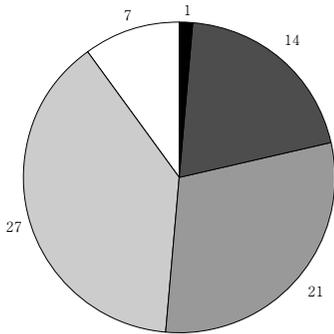


Figure 17. Reading English books from the library in the dormitory

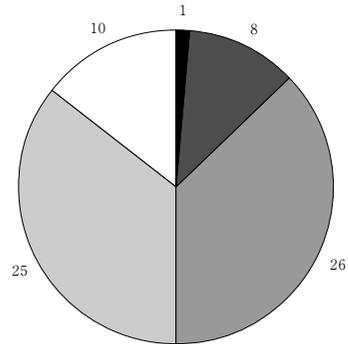


Figure 18. Listening to the announcements made in English

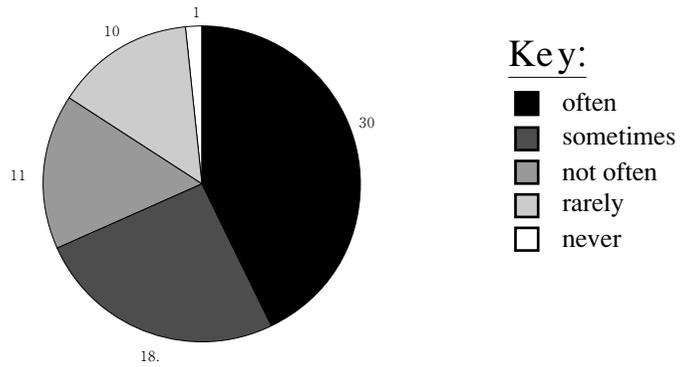
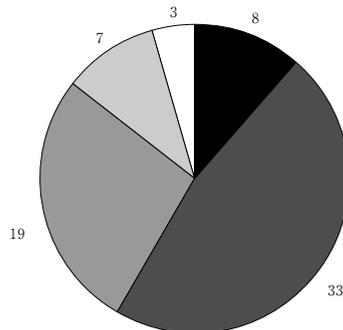


Figure 19. Reviewing and evaluating what you have learned



**Results (continued):- Some "Learning strategies" and their regularity of use by a group of Japanese Junior college students**

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A first glance at these results, shows that some students appear to be using some strategies more than others, and there is a clear proportion (given by the degree of lighter/no shading in the pie charts), of up to around 30% of students who either *do not often, rarely* or *never* use any of these strategies clearly available to them. Figures 1 and 2, and closely, to some extent, figures 3 and 6, show that students repeating words out-loud, or in the head, memorizing words and practicing English with a friend are strategies that these students use at about the same frequency. Figure 8 shows that almost a third of the students *do not* often try to use English whenever possible, compared to a small 14% who often seek out opportunities. 52% of the students do not revise materials that they have done in class (figure 9). This lack of revising throughout a course displays ill-preparation by students for subsequent classes. Figures 9 and 19, are similar types of strategies but in figure 19, 11% more students are reviewing and evaluating at least *sometimes*, whereas this same (?) 11% do not appear to review what they do in class. The English radio and English cassettes listening strategies in figures 11 and 12 are almost mirror images of each other, and the use of English through video in figure 13 is also similar. It is possible that the same students have checked these frequencies, but assumptions are best avoided. Figures 14 and 15 display little frequency in discussion of language learning with a friend or even less, with a teacher. Figures 16 and 17 show that the reading of English materials (other than the students' notes from class, figure 4, and their textbooks, figure 5), to be generally a strategy least exploited by the students in the dormitory.

These results are not without their limitations. For example:-

- i) the frequency options may mean something different to each learner. A more thorough description of *how often* "often" actually means, say in terms of hours per week or hours per night, may give more accuracy or clarity to these findings;
- ii) these results could depend upon how the students interpret the whole questionnaire format. It is difficult to monitor 70 students completing a questionnaire all at the same time, and time-consuming to spend time with each individual student, to ensure they understand. Students may interpret the list of "ways" in terms of purely liking to do something: In Figure 10, 61% of the students, for instance, "*often* listen to English songs" - but they may just listen to songs for relaxation - not to actually "learn" English. Oxford (1990:320) lists the strategy of using music as an affective strategy which lowers the learners anxiety. The playing of baroque music to relax students' moods and mental states forms part of the teaching method called Suggestopedia;
- iii) the problem with such a large sample of data means that only a general overall view is given. True, it may show which strategies are possibly the most preferred, but where such data is needed for class analysis of learning strategies, perhaps a smaller sample of students would be better to survey, since with such a huge amount of information here, the *individual*

student's strategy use gets hidden, and if we teachers are trying to encourage learner autonomy, then sweeping percentages does not support the individual learner. Another point concerning the individual learner is, we cannot tell from this data a single individual learner's favor for strategies involving more visual input than aural. There may be patterns that emerge with learners - a student who often listens to the radio may also listen to English cassettes, but assumptions

should be avoided;

iv) students may feel less hesitant in asking a friend rather than a teacher about some aspect of language learning, or may be the teacher is unavailable to ask when the student wants to ask a question;

v) to raise an issue of *honesty* in answering questionnaires, we cannot be totally certain that our people report exactly what they really do. Does the question pop up in the student's mind "I wonder if the teacher wants me to write *this* answer or *that*?" and

vi) These results do not tell us whether the students find the strategies they use the most often to be successful for them.

## CONCLUSION:

The learning strategies that were investigated in this study are by no means exhaustive. Whilst conducting this survey, other strategies came to mind such as making guesses at meanings, using pictures to help recognition (from our bi-weekly semantic mapping tasks), organising work, managing time, looking for patterns and facts, etc. Also, this study did not feed-back the results of the findings, which in retrospect was an inadequate part of this survey. The pie-charts should have been displayed on the notice boards in the dormitory, where the students would be able to see their peers' frequencies of strategy use, perhaps stimulating a little discussion, and some may even have been encouraged to try a different strategy for a particular task. Strategies from Oxford's list of applications of strategy use in the four language skills (1990:317-330), could be explained and incorporated in the dormitory activities, leaving the choices of strategy use up to the students. "Many teachers and educationalists see learning how to learn as the most basic and important educational objective, no matter what teaching or learning mode is adopted" (Dickinson, 1987), and by making the students aware of the vast amount of strategies available to them, our students will learn how to learn.

Ellis (1996), says that research which assumes that there are 'good' learning strategies is questionable, since different strategies will be employed in different tasks. He suggests that effective strategy use may mean using appropriate strategies in the right task, but there is currently little evidence to support this. Wenden (1991), says that learner strategies are the

key to learner autonomy, and one of the goals of language training should be helping that autonomy develop. Getting learners to think about the ways and beliefs about language learning is called *Metacognition*. Wenden (1986), suggests that by discovering how learners complete language learning tasks, we see some learners use well-developed metacognitive skills, whereas others may not have them and so will need guiding for their own discovery. Just how the students perform the various language tasks in the dormitory, could be the focus for further research which could help the teachers help those learners who show less-developed metacognitive skills. What this investigation does tell us about some of the tasks and ideas that the NS teachers have organised for trying to encourage the students to develop their English, is that the library of English books and the reading of English outside the classroom, aside from the textbook, is not a strategy used by about a third of the dormitory students.

This study provides ample possibilities into further investigations for information concerning students' learning strategy use. For example, so that teachers can reach a fuller understanding of their students' learning strategies, it is recommended that the teachers talk with those students who are found to often utilize a particular strategy, *why* they use it, and this may help explain *how* the English activities and tasks work for them in the "English-in-Life" module, towards their language development.

We could suggest to learners to try different strategies for completing different tasks during their stay in the dormitory, in order to find which strategy suits their style best. After all, in the words of Oxford (in Berko-Gleason, 1988): "...the greatest benefit language teachers can bestow on their learners is to help them to learn how to learn."

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## APPENDIX:

### Questionnaire as provided for the students to describe ways ("strategies") they find useful to learn.-

Name.....

How often do you use the following ways to help you learn ?

	often	sometimes	not often	rarely	never
1 . Repeating words to yourself (out aloud)					
2 . Silent practice (thinking in your head)					
3 . Practice with a friend					
4 . Reading your notes					
5 . Reading your textbook					
6 . Memorizing words					
7 . Teating yourself on words					
8 . Trying to use English whenever possible					
9 . Revising what you have done in class					
10. Listening to English songe					
11. Listening to English on the radio					
12. Listening to English cassettes					
13. Watching videos in English					
14. Discussing language leaning with a friend					
15. Discussing language leaning with a teacher					
16. Reading English books at home					
17. Reading English books from the library in the dormitory					
18. Listening to the announcements made in English					
19. Reviewing and evaluating what you have learned					

## 要 旨

本稿では本学キャンパス内にあるセント・メアリー寮に住む英語科一年生70名に対して行ったアンケートに基づき、言語学習のストラテジー（戦略）について調査・研究したものである。アンケートの表に学生たちがとる19の「方法」を示した。更に学生たちにそれぞれのストラテジーについて使用頻度を尋ねた。データは一連の円グラフが示す通りである。明らかになったことはいくつかの決まったストラテジーをよく活用する学生がいるということである。しかし、なぜ学生がある課題に対して特定のストラテジーをとるのか、それをどのように活用しているのか、そしてそれが学生たちにとって好結果をもたらしたかを見定める更なる研究が求められる。