



Investigating Japanese Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Indonesian Vocational Business Students

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Abstract

Mastering Japanese vocabulary is a critical yet challenging component for vocational students aiming for professional proficiency in business contexts. This study investigates the specific language learning strategies (LLS) utilized by vocational higher education students to acquire Japanese lexis. Using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) framework, data were collected from 71 sixth-semester Business Administration students and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results reveal a dominant preference for affective (85%) and social strategies (81%), indicating that learners rely heavily on emotional regulation and peer interaction, whereas metacognitive (63%) and memory strategies (60%) were the least employed. These findings highlight a diverse learning approach as signified by the high employment of socio-affective strategy, but a critical deficiency in self-regulated learning and systematic retention. Consequently, the study implies that vocational curricula must integrate explicit strategy instruction to help students transition from social dependence to greater learner autonomy and achieve more effective vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: Japanese vocabulary; language learning strategies; SILL; vocational higher education; Business Administration

INTRODUCTION

In educational discourse, the concept of learning strategy occupies a central position in understanding how learners achieve academic goals. In general terms, a strategy refers to a carefully designed plan or method employed to accomplish specific objectives. When associated with learning, it denotes a deliberate and systematic effort undertaken by individuals to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and facilitate behavioral change through experience. Thus, learning strategies can be broadly understood as planned and purposeful actions that make the learning process more effective, efficient, and goal-directed.

The term *strategy* itself derives from the Latin *strategia*, meaning the art of using plans to achieve particular ends (Anitah, 2013). In the context of education, learning strategies encompass both observable behaviors and cognitive processes that influence how learners process, store, and retrieve information (Fatimah & Kartikasari, 2018). They are closely linked to the learning process, as they represent the means by which learners approach tasks, solve problems, and ultimately achieve intended outcomes.

Within the field of language education, language learning strategies (LLS) have been widely recognized as one of the key factors determining how successfully learners acquire a second or foreign language. In the view of Oxford and Ehrman (as cited in Brown, 2008), language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques used by learners to enhance their own learning. Similarly, Cohen (as cited in Shi, 2017) defines them as consciously selected processes that

lead to actions aimed at improving second or foreign language learning and use, including the storage, retention, retrieval, and application of linguistic information. Oxford (as cited in Shi, 2017) further emphasizes that these strategies are often consciously employed to facilitate acquisition, memory, and use of new language input. In this sense, language learning strategies are intentional efforts undertaken by learners to make language learning easier, more effective, more enjoyable, and self-directed. Understanding the types of strategies learners employ is therefore crucial for improving instructional practices and learning outcomes. Oxford (1990) has classified the learning strategy into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

For Japanese as a foreign language, vocabulary learning is often perceived as demanding due to its unfamiliar orthography and the need to retain a large number of lexical items. On the other hand, vocabulary knowledge is a core component of foreign language proficiency. Some studies evidence a significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and language performance (Biseko, 2025). Learning a language improves more by acquiring sufficient vocabulary and expression (Zhang and Liang, 2024). However, students' vocabulary mastery is connected to their vocabulary learning strategies (Zuhairi and Mistar, 2023). In other words, the successful vocabulary acquisition, to some extent, relies heavily on the way they learn. Thus, learners must be more mindful of their learning strategy implementation.

Empirical research within the Indonesian settings has reported that learners tend to combine multiple strategies when learning a foreign language, depending on learning goals and context (e.g., Saragih & Kumara, 2009; Setiawati & Septiyaningtyas, 2023). Studies in Japanese vocabulary learning also indicate that learners may rely on compensation and social strategies to maintain communication and support understanding when vocabulary is limited (Afdhol et al., 2022). The earlier studies rely heavily on foreign language learning in the university context. However, evidence focusing specifically on Japanese vocabulary learning among vocational higher education students remains limited. The latter group experiences a curriculum that emphasizes practical communication skills and workplace-relevant competence. Thus, this study provides a novel contribution by addressing the learning strategy employment in a specialized vocational business context.

This study aims to investigate the language learning strategies used by vocational students in learning Japanese vocabulary in the Business Administration Department of Politeknik Negeri Malang. The findings are expected to provide insights regarding some alternative language learning strategies that students have not yet explored, but that may improve their vocabulary acquisition. The analysis of students' strategies in this study is based on Oxford's classification of language learning strategies.

More particularly, this study contributes to the limited body of research on Japanese vocabulary learning strategies in vocational higher education. It also provides pedagogical implications for enhancing students' strategic competence and learner autonomy.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design supported by qualitative interpretation. The sixth-semester vocational students of the Business Administration Department, State Polytechnic of Malang, Indonesia, in the 2023/2024 academic year were surveyed. The participants consisted of 71 students. All members of the population were included as research participants. The data were gathered using a questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) based on Oxford's strategy categories (as adapted in Setiawati & Septiyaningtyas, 2023). The instrument covered six strategy categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale: 4=always, 3=often, 2=sometimes, and 1=never. The questionnaire was administered to students during the semester. The data were tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics. Strategy use was summarized using mean scores and an index percentage formula (total score divided by the maximum possible score, multiplied by 100). Qualitative interpretation followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to support the presentation of findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Overall Language Learning Strategy

Strategy category	Mean score (1-4)	Index (%)
Memory strategies	2.41	60%
Cognitive strategies	2.76	69%
Compensation strategies	3.01	75%
Metacognitive strategies	2.54	63%
Affective strategies	3.41	85%
Social strategies	3.42	81%

Table 1 summarizes the overall level of strategy use by category (n=71). Affective strategies (M = 3,41; 85%) emerged as the most dominant category selected by participants and closely followed by social strategies (M = 3,42; 81%). This pattern suggests that learners in this context rely heavily on emotion regulation, motivation control, and interpersonal interaction to support their learning processes. The high preference for affective strategies indicates that students actively manage anxiety, encourage themselves, and maintain positive attitudes toward learning tasks. Similarly, the strong use of social strategies underscores the importance of peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, and cooperative learning.

Compensation strategies (M = 3,01; 75%) appeared as the third practical tool preferred by students. Their relatively high use suggests that learners are good at overcoming their problem in vocabulary by employing techniques such as guessing meaning from context, making use of context clues, or using alternative expressions. This strategic flexibility is indicative of communicative competence and aligns with the needs of learners who must function effectively despite linguistic limitations.

Cognitive strategy (M = 2,76; 69) was still chosen by nearly 70% of participants. Cognitive strategies (e.g., practicing, analyzing, reasoning, and creating structure), as a matter of fact, are central to language learning. However, this strategy was moderately used and did not dominate participants' strategy. It is, perhaps, students were not consciously recognizing the use of such a strategy.

Metacognitive (M = 2,54; 63%) and memory strategies (M = 2,41; 60%) showed the lowest average use. Metacognitive strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning, are often associated with higher levels of learner autonomy and academic success. Their limited use in this study suggests a potential condition in students' self-regulated learning skills. This may indicate that learners are less accustomed to reflecting on their learning processes or lack sufficient training in strategic planning and evaluation. Similarly, the lower reliance on memory strategies could reflect a shift away from rote learning toward more communicative and meaning-focused approaches, which are increasingly emphasized in today's pedagogy.

All of these findings point out that students' learning profile are characterized by strong socio-affective engagement but relatively underdeveloped metacognitive control. It highlights the need for instructional interventions that foster greater strategic awareness and self-regulation. Teachers should consider integrating explicit strategy training, particularly in the cognitive and metacognitive domains, to help learners become more autonomous and efficient. At the same time, the evident strength in affective and social strategies should be leveraged through collaborative tasks, supportive classroom environments, and activities that promote emotional engagement.

Table 2. Memory Strategy Use

No.	Substrategi	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Creating Mental Linkages</i>	Students write every new vocabulary (for example, in the form of tables) to easily understand and memorize it.	13	19	29	10	71
2	<i>Applying Images and Sounds</i>	Students independently study new vocabulary outside class using learning videos as in YouTube	3	7	41	20	71
3	<i>Reviewing Well</i>	Students review the given learning materials after class	13	24	32	2	71
4	<i>Employing Action</i>	Students learn new vocabulary by making notes and sentences	10	23	36	2	71

The memory strategies use indicates an inconsistent use of memory-related vocabulary learning sub-strategies. Most responses cluster around “*sometimes*,” suggesting that learners are aware of these strategies but have not yet applied them consistently. Creating mental linkages and employing action show moderate engagement, yet both are used only as alternatives by most students, limiting deeper processing. Reviewing well is relatively more frequent, indicating recognition of its importance, though not fully done as a habit. In contrast, applying images and sounds is the least utilized, reflecting limited integration of multimedia resources into independent learning. Overall, learners demonstrate partial strategy adoption rather than consistent practice. This highlights the need for explicit instruction to help students internalize and regularly apply effective vocabulary learning strategies.

Table 3. Cognitive Strategy Use

No.	Substrategi	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Practicing (berlatih)</i>	Students practice uttering or writing new vocabulary they are learning frequently	30	28	12	1	71
2	<i>Receiving and Sending message</i>	Students use greetings (for example: <i>ohayou gozaimasu, konnichiwa, and konbanwa</i>) when messaging via online media, like Whatsapp, Instagram, etc.	15	22	26	8	71
3	<i>Analyzing and Reasoning</i>	Students make vocabulary comparison between Japanese and Indonesian	3	16	32	20	71
4	<i>Creating Structure for Input and Output.</i>	Students mark important information in their book, like sign of star, color highlight, underline, etc.	31	23	16	1	71

The data reveal a clear preference for practice-oriented and structure-focused cognitive strategies, but weaker engagement in analytical processing. Practicing emerges as the most dominant strategy, with the majority of students reporting *always* or *frequently* rehearsing vocabulary through speaking or writing. This indicates a strong reliance on repetition as a primary mechanism for vocabulary consolidation. Similarly, creating structure for input and output is widely adopted, suggesting that learners actively organize and highlight information to support comprehension and recall. Meanwhile, receiving and sending messages shows moderate use, with responses distributed across frequency levels. This suggests that while learners occasionally apply vocabulary in their social media communication, such practice is not yet systematic. The least utilized strategy is analyzing and reasoning, where most students report only occasional or no use. This limited engagement implies that learners rarely engage in deeper cognitive comparison between languages, potentially restricting their ability to develop more flexible and transferable lexical knowledge. Overall, the findings indicate a learning pattern is centred on repetition and organization rather than higher-order processing. Even though it is seen as effective for short-term retention, this fact suggests the need to foster more analytical engagement to support deeper and more durable vocabulary acquisition.

Table 4. Compensation Strategy Use

No.	Substrategi	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Guessing Intelligently</i>	Students translate new vocabulary through context or any clues in sentences.	36	26	9	0	71
2	<i>Overcoming Limitations in Speaking and Writing.</i>	Students use gestures, any physical movement, when they forget new vocabulary to deliver their message	14	24	26	7	71

The findings show a strong tendency toward meaning-focused compensation strategies, particularly in comprehension. Guessing intelligently is the most consistently applied strategy, with nearly all students reporting frequent or constant use. This indicates that learners are inclined to exploit contextual clues to infer meaning, reflecting a relatively high level of strategic flexibility in dealing with unknown vocabulary during comprehension. On the other hand, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing demonstrates more varied and less stable use. While some learners frequently rely on gestures to compensate for lexical gaps, a substantial proportion report only occasional or no use. This suggests that compensatory strategies in production are less internalized, possibly due to limited confidence or lack of practice in spontaneous communication. Overall, the pattern highlights an asymmetry: learners are more strategic when interpreting input than when managing output constraints. This imbalance suggests the need for pedagogical support that encourages more active and confident use of compensation strategies in productive skills.

Table 5. Metacognitive Strategy Use

No.	Substrategi	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Centering your Learning</i>	Students set up their own learning targets every week	5	16	34	16	71
2	<i>Arranging and planning your learning</i>	Students practice speaking (<i>kaiwa</i>), do exercises independently every-day	4	19	42	6	71

3	<i>Evaluating your learning</i>	Students do learning exercises and make peer evaluations of each other	29	27	14	1	71
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The data signify irregular development of metacognitive strategy use, with clear differences across the three different sub-strategies. Evaluating learning is the most established practice, as most students report frequent or consistent engagement in exercises and peer evaluation. This suggests that reflective activities are relatively well embedded, enabling learners to monitor progress and receive feedback. In the meantime, centering learning and arranging and planning learning show predominantly occasional use. The majority of students only sometimes set weekly targets or engage in structured independent practice, indicating that goal-setting and planning are not yet habitual. Overall, learners appear more accustomed to evaluating outcomes than regulating the learning process itself. This fact suggests that metacognitive development is half-done, with a need to strengthen forward-planning and self-regulation to support more autonomous and sustained learning.

Table 6. Affective Strategy Use

No.	Substrategy	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Lowering your anxiety</i>	Students try to stay relaxed (by taking a deep breath) every time they feel nervous when speaking or writing in Japanese	28	33	7	3	71
2	<i>Encouraging yourself</i>	Students motivate themselves to speak and write Japanese even in situation when they are afraid	34	29	7	1	71
3	<i>Taking your emotional temperature</i>	Students discuss with fellow friends when facing difficulties in learning Japanese.	52	16	2	1	71

The results indicate a strong and consistent use of affective strategies among learners, particularly in managing emotions and sustaining motivation. **Taking emotional temperature** is the most dominant practice, with a majority of students regularly discussing difficulties with peers. This suggests that social-emotional support plays a central role in regulating learning challenges. Similarly, **encouraging oneself** is highly practiced, indicating that learners actively maintain motivation even under conditions of uncertainty or fear. **Lowering anxiety** also shows high engagement, with

most students frequently employing relaxation techniques to manage nervousness. In general, the employment of affective strategy seems to be promising, with learners demonstrating awareness and control over emotional factors in language learning. This strong affective foundation may positively support persistence and engagement, although its effectiveness would be further enhanced when aligned with cognitive and metacognitive strategy use.

Table 7. Social Strategy Use

No.	Substrategi	Activities	Criteria				Total
			Always (4)	Frequently (3)	Sometimes (2)	Never (1)	
1	<i>Asking questions</i>	Students undoubtedly ask teachers or friends to slow down or repeat their utterances to correct their speaking or writing	39	24	7	1	71
2	<i>Cooperating with others</i>	Students discuss learning materials with friends after class	26	23	22	0	71
3	<i>Empathizing with others</i>	Students watch YouTube to learn Japanese culture	29	30	12	0	71

The findings demonstrate a strong orientation toward social strategies, with learners actively engaging in interaction to support language development. Asking questions is highly practiced, indicating that students confidently seek clarification and feedback to improve accuracy. This reflects a proactive attitude toward resolving comprehension and production difficulties. Cooperating with others shows moderate-to-high use, though with greater variability, suggesting that peer collaboration is common but not consistently sustained across all learners. Empathizing with others, reflected in engagement with cultural content, is also widely practiced, highlighting learners' interest in contextualizing language within its sociocultural framework. Basically, social strategies are well integrated into learners' practices, supporting both linguistic development and cultural awareness. However, the variation in collaborative engagement suggests room for strengthening more consistent peer interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Japanese vocabulary learning strategies among sixth-semester Business Administration students using an adapted SILL questionnaire. Students reported the highest use of affective, social, and compensation strategies, while cognitive strategies were used at a moderate level and metacognitive and memory strategies were used least. The dominance of affective and social strategies reflects a shift toward more interactive and emotionally grounded learning practices, while the lower use of metacognitive and memory strategies signals areas for further development. These findings signify the implications that instructors should move beyond traditional vocabulary lists to provide explicit training in memory recollection and self-monitoring skills. Meanwhile, it is also vital to simultaneously encourage students to utilize social strengths through collaborative business role-plays. Moving forward, future research should employ qualitative methods like interviews to explore the underlying reasons for the infrequent use of

metacognitive strategies and utilize extensive designs to track how these strategy preferences evolve as students transition from academic study into professional business environments.

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