

Language Learning Experience and Language Teaching Implication

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Abstract

This report examines the author's language learning experience through an online Japanese course, aligning it with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and deriving implications for language teaching. As a native Chinese speaker and an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher, the author undertook the course to gain insights into the challenges faced by language learners and to reflect on teaching practices. The study identifies four key themes: (1) the demand for appropriate teaching methodologies, (2) strengths and weaknesses in language learning, (3) natural and preferred learning styles, and (4) sensitivity to contrastive analysis (CA). The Grammar-Translation Method used in the course provided limited opportunities for practice, highlighting the benefits of the Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) for skill development. The author's strong analytical ability contrasted with average memory skills, emphasising the need for balanced teaching approaches that cater to different learner aptitudes. The report concludes that effective language instruction should integrate form-based and meaning-based activities, fostering both grammatical accuracy and communicative competence. The findings underscore the importance of aligning teaching methodologies with learners' cognitive and motivational profiles to enhance language acquisition.

Keywords

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Teaching Methodology, Language Learning Motivation, Contrastive Analysis (CA).

1. Introduction

This report explores my language learning experiences through an online course, aligns these experiences with relevant literature in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and applies the findings to teaching practice. The study focuses on learning Japanese as a foreign language while maintaining a language learning log. Concurrently, I was working as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher and a teacher trainer in a Chinese context.

I undertook the course of another foreign language (other than English) to gain firsthand insight into the challenges my students might face and to reflect on their language learning processes and/or my teaching strategies (Richards, 1998). I chose Japanese because of its linguistic and social similarities to Chinese. As a native Chinese speaker, I acquired my first language subconsciously during childhood rather than through a conscious learning process. Consequently, I lack explicit linguistic knowledge of Chinese, making it difficult to compare and contrast it with my students' target language, English, or to identify the influence of the first language on the target language. However, learning Japanese, which is relatively similar to Chinese, allowed me to make these comparisons as a beginner.

Upon analysing my language learning log after the Japanese course, I identified four key themes: (1) my demand for appropriate teaching methodology; (2) my strengths and weaknesses in

language learning; (3) my natural and preferred way of language learning; and (4) my sensitivity to contrastive analysis (CA). Each theme will be discussed in detail in the main body of the report, supported by relevant SLA literature to illustrate whether my experiences align with or contradict existing theories.

To gather data for this report, I enrolled in an online course titled *Easy Japanese* at the elementary level. The course consisted of four sessions, each lasting 1.5 hours, totalling six hours. Each session included a 20-minute preparation period, a 50-minute recorded online course, and a 20-minute follow-up drilling activity. The course primarily employed the Grammar-Translation Method, though I supplemented it with the Audiolingual Method for drilling after each session. Throughout the course, I documented my feelings, attitudes, opinions, and notable learning incidents.

The online course, offered by Japan's public broadcaster, *NHK World Japan*, is available in 17 languages. However, I chose to take the course in English (my foreign language) rather than Chinese (my native language). This decision was influenced by my limited grammatical knowledge of Chinese, which made English a more effective medium for comparing and contrasting the target language. Additionally, the Grammar-Translation Method underlying the course likely influenced this choice. In contrast, in case of meaning-based approaches, I might have opted for my native language as the medium, especially as a beginner.

2. Theme 1: My Demand for Appropriate Teaching Methodology

My experience learning Japanese highlighted the importance of teaching methodology. The online course was primarily based on the Grammar-Translation Method, which helped me understand the meaning and form of certain words and patterns. As an adult beginner, this method was beneficial to some extent. However, it provided an overwhelming amount of grammatical rules rather than opportunities to practice language skills. Without sufficient listening and imitation, I struggled to memorise key phrases. For example, several entries from my learning log read:

The rules are overwhelming. There are variations of numbers when counting objects like cakes! I can't even remember the numbers from one to ten, and now there are variations for cakes! I had to ask my Japanese friends about counting eggs!

The rules are too numerous. In addition to infinitives, there are TE- and DE-form verbs in the middle of sentences. The explanations don't make sense because I can't remember or apply them. Beyond the basic TE-form verbs, there are variations! Different verb syllables lead to different variations! I'm giving up on them.

The rules are overwhelming. There are TA- or DA-form verbs for the past or perfect aspect of verbs.

These challenges led me to appreciate the positive aspects of the Audiolingual Method and the significance of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. The Audiolingual Method emphasises input and repetition, fostering a sense of achievement, while CLT focuses on interaction and output, enhancing learning motivation. To incorporate these methods, I used sentence-listening software for drilling key expressions after each session and sought opportunities to practice through communication with Japanese friends. A log entry reflects this:

As a beginner, I strongly felt the importance of drills and practice in learning new items. I was eager for more opportunities to repeat new sounds, words, and expressions, and to engage in

communicative activities. However, the Grammar-Translation Method provided far fewer chances for such practice.

My experiences align with the literature on input in language acquisition. The Audiolingual Method emphasises input, exposure, imitation, and habit formation, reflecting a Behaviourist view that focuses on the external linguistic environment (Ellis, 1985; Ellis, 1997; Gass and Selinker, 2001). In contrast, the Grammar-Translation Method provides limited exposure, resembling a Mentalist theory that views input as a trigger rather than a driving force (Ellis, 1985; Ellis, 1997; Gass and Selinker, 2001). Despite this, the input I received was effectively processed and integrated into my interlanguage system (Corder, 1967 in Gass and Selinker, 2001; Ellis, 1985). CLT, on the other hand, reflects an Interactionist theory, where language acquisition results from the interaction between mental abilities and the linguistic environment (Ellis, 1985).

Furthermore, my experience supports the theory that the route and rate of SLA are influenced by factors such as modelling grammatical forms, comprehensible input, and intake (Ellis, 1985). The quantity and quality of input can significantly impact the speed of development (Fillmore, 1982 in Ellis, 1985). For instance, rapid development is facilitated by high-quality input, the need to communicate, and opportunities for learners to listen to and produce language (Ellis, 1985: 159). My slow progress may have been due to the lack of these features. Overall, my experiences helped me understand the computational model of SLA, which includes observable input and output and the internal processes within the "black box" of interlanguage (Ellis, 1997: 35). The Grammar-Translation Method focuses on the "black box," while the Audiolingual Method emphasises observable input. The absence of either component can hinder successful language learning.

3. Theme 2: My Strengths and Weaknesses in Language Learning

Based on my experiences learning Japanese and the theory of language aptitude components, I evaluate myself as having strong language analytic ability but average language memory (Ellis, 1997; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). I possess a strong inductive learning ability, enabling me to understand the function of specific items in sentences and discover grammatical rules from language samples (ibid). For example, a log entry reads:

Japanese, like Chinese, is a "topic-comment" language rather than a "subject-predicate" language (Kirkpatrick, 2007: 171). In Japanese, a modifying topic word precedes a subject noun with the linker "NO" (of/from/on/in): SORE (It) WA (is) TAI (Thailand) NO (possessive 's) OMIYAGE (souvenir) DESU.

However, my capacity to remember new sounds is limited (Ellis, 1997; Lightbown and Spada, 1999), though I am conscious of and sensitive to identifying them. As a Chinese speaker, I faced fewer phonological challenges in learning Japanese due to the similarities in their phonological systems, such as the scarcity of closed syllables and consonant clusters. Nevertheless, I struggled with rote memorisation of new words. To address this, I attempted to memorise words as collocations. For example, after some sessions, I wrote:

By the end of the first session, I could... However, I was unable to apply any key expressions in everyday conversation.

Before the second session, I set learning objectives: to memorise key expressions, read the conversational text fluently, and... Yet, I found the new sounds and words difficult to learn by rote, and the increasing number of grammatical rules was overwhelming.

However, I gradually became familiar with key expressions from previous sessions through revision and decided to recycle the target language more regularly. By the end of the third session, I could remember and use stock phrases from previous sessions, repeat the conversational text fluently, and...

It was easier to handle "... WA DOKO DESU KA" (Where is ...?) as a phrase rather than as separate words: WA (is), DOKO (where), DESU (a polite sentence-ending word), and KA (a particle that forms a question).

In terms of motivation, I evaluated myself as having high instrumental and integrative motivation but low intrinsic and resultative motivation (Ellis, 1997; Gardner and Lambert, 1972 in Lightbown and Spada, 1999). My instrumental motivation stemmed from the functional goal of writing this report, while my integrative motivation was driven by my interest in Japanese culture. For example, several log entries read:

Japanese is rich in onomatopoeia, which are prevalent in manga and cartoons, which I enjoyed during my teens. I really miss my favourite manga and cartoons...

Japanese traditions and customs are fascinating. People bow when greeting, rarely hug or shake hands. During my visit to Japan last year, I found everyone polite and well-mannered, as are my Japanese friends.

Politeness is a hallmark of Japanese. There are specific verb forms for polite speech and many polite words, such as DESU (a polite sentence-ending word) and -SAN (a polite title). Now, when addressing my Japanese friends, I use "name-SAN," which they appreciate.

However, the lack of intrinsic motivation and resultative motivation hindered my progress. Intrinsic motivation requires learners to feel involved in learning tasks, which was lacking in the online course. A log entry reflects this:

As a beginner, I strongly felt the importance of drills and practice. I was eager for more opportunities to repeat new sounds, words, and expressions and to engage in communicative activities. However, the Grammar-Translation Method provided far fewer chances for such practice.

The lack of resultative motivation further impacted my learning. The result of learning can be the cause of learning (ibid). The more successful, the more motivated (ibid), but the reverse is also true. A log entry illustrates this:

I admire my friend's performance of a Japanese tongue twister. He's also a beginner, but his performance earned praise from our Japanese friends. While a good performance doesn't equate to learning success, the sense of achievement it brings can keep learners motivated. For beginners, staying motivated is a form of success.

4. Theme 3: My Natural and Preferred Way of Language Learning

In addition to my strengths and weaknesses, I also reflected on my learning style preferences and strategies. I identify as a field-independent (FI), left-brain-dominant, reflective, and auditory learner, with some variability depending on context (Brown, 2007; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). As an FI learner, I tend to perceive specific items within a "field," such as identifying the function of a word in a sentence (Brown, 2007). This preference is evident in my ability to recognise Japanese and Chinese as "topic-comment" languages. FI learners often perform better in formal, tutored classroom settings than in communicative, natural settings (ibid), as seen in my reluctance to attempt my friend's Japanese tongue twister.

However, my experiences contradict the literature suggesting the superiority of FI styles for language learning success (Alptekin and Atakan, 1990; Chapelle and Abraham, 1990 in Brown, 2007; Chapelle and Green, 1992). While adults and males tend to be FI learners, children and females, who are often more successful in SLA, tend to be field-dependent (FD) (Brown, 2007). In early language learning stages, perceiving whole meaning may be more critical than analysing specific parts.

As a left-brain-dominant learner, I rely on logical, analytical thinking, verbal instructions, and language for memory and thought (Brown, 2007). This preference is evident in my log entries. While the left and right hemispheres should work together in language learning, past methods like the Grammar-Translation Method overly emphasised left-brain processes, neglecting right-brain processes (Danesi, 1998 in Brown, 2007: 126).

As a reflective learner, I tend to understand and produce language more accurately (Doron, 1973; Kagan, Pearson & Welch, 1966 in Brown, 2007: 128; Kagan, 1965 in Brown, 2007: 127) but may progress more slowly (Brown, 2007: 127). For example, a log entry reads:

I felt frustrated when I couldn't tell my Japanese friends in Japanese that we would have a party on Friday. I knew the word order norm in Japanese (time followed by action) but couldn't remember how to say "Friday." At that point, I couldn't recall the days of the week in Japanese.

Lastly, as an auditory learner, I respond better to audio input than text (Brown, 2007). However, to enhance my learning, I combined visual and auditory input, engaged both hemispheres, and experimented with various strategies. After the last session, I wrote:

I adopted several useful strategies: (1) repetition—imitating the recording repeatedly; (2) imagery—relating new information to visuals while listening; (3) contextualisation—placing new language items in meaningful contexts while reading; and (4) prefabricated patterns—memorising chunks of language and using stock phrases in communication, such as "DENWABANGO WA NANBAN DESU KA" (What is your telephone number?) and "TOIRE WA DOKO DESU KA" (Where is the restroom?).

5. Theme 4: My Sensitivity to Contrastive Analysis (CA)

My experiences comparing Japanese and English align with the literature on Universal Grammar (UG). According to Chomsky (2000: 8 in Mitchell and Myles, 2013: 69), language consists of a fixed network of principles and adjustable parameters. Language acquisition involves resetting these parameters (Chomsky, 2000 in Mitchell and Myles, 2013; Ellis, 1997). For example, Japanese sentences are organised into phrases, such as Noun-Phrases (NP) and Verb-Phrases (VP) (Mitchell & Myles, 2013). Lexical categories (open classes like content words)

and functional categories (closed classes like grammatical words) vary across languages. A log entry highlights the open nature of lexical categories:

Japanese borrows many content words from other languages, such as KEKI (cake) from English, SHUKURIMU (cream puffs) from French, and DENWA (telephone) and TOSHOKAN (library) from Chinese. It also uses three scripts, including Kanji (Chinese characters) and Katakana (for foreign words).

Functional categories, such as word order, differ between Japanese and English. Several log entries reveal these distinctions:

Japanese is a head-last language, with complements following the head, while English is head-first. For example, in Japanese, a modifying word precedes a noun: "SORE WA TAI (Thailand) NO (possessive 's) OMIYAGE (souvenir) DESU" (It's a souvenir from Thailand).

Japanese is left-branching, while English is right-branching. For example, "KOKO (this place) NI HACHIJI HAN (8:30) NI ATSUMATTE (gather) KUDASAI (please)" (Please gather here at 8:30).

Japanese questions are formed by adding the particle KA with a rising intonation, without changing word order: "DENWABANGO WA NANBAN DESU KA" (What is your telephone number?); "ANATA MO RYUGAKUSEI DESU KA" (Are you an international student, too?).

6. Conclusion

The teaching methodology of the online course significantly impacted my learning. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between my language analytic ability and rote learning ability, influenced by the course's methodology. The graph reflects qualitative impressions of "high," "medium," and "low" levels rather than quantitative data. My intake level remained stable due to the Grammar-Translation Method, while the input level (requiring the Audiolingual Method) started low and remained constant. My strong analytic ability improved with the form-based approach, while my average memory ability declined due to insufficient exposure. Different aptitude components are involved in different processing phases: grammatical sensitivity and inductive learning ability in interlanguage construction, and phonemic coding and rote learning ability in input processing (Ellis, 1997). Overall, the teaching approach profoundly affected my language aptitude, enhancing my analytic ability but limiting my rote learning ability.

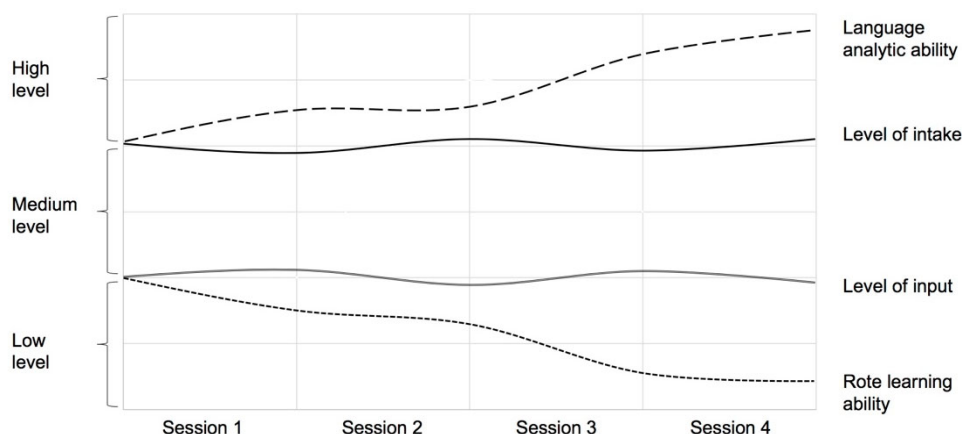


Figure 1. The Impact of Teaching Methodology on My Language Aptitude: Analytic Ability vs. Rote Learning Ability

For teaching implications, it is suggested that instruction should focus on grammatical structures for learners with strong analytic ability and average memory, while emphasising functional use for those with good memory but average analytic skills (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). However, a balance between meaning-based and form-based activities is crucial, as an exclusive focus on either can lead to incomplete learning (*ibid*). Learners should focus on both "what they say" and "how to say it" (*ibid*). The Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual Methods have left many learners frustrated and unable to engage in conversation, highlighting the importance of an interactionist approach that combines mental abilities and linguistic environment (Ellis, 1997).

Under the Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual Methods, aptitude components are closely tied to language learning. However, in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), motivation plays a more significant role than aptitude (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between my motivation and communicative opportunities. My motivation started high due to my interest in Japanese culture (integrative motivation) and the goal of completing the language log (instrumental motivation). It declined after the first session due to a lack of communication opportunities but increased after the second session when I interacted with Japanese friends. However, motivation dropped again during the last two sessions due to overwhelming grammar rules and insufficient communicative activities. This highlights the importance of incorporating communicative activities, tasks, and materials to maintain learner motivation.

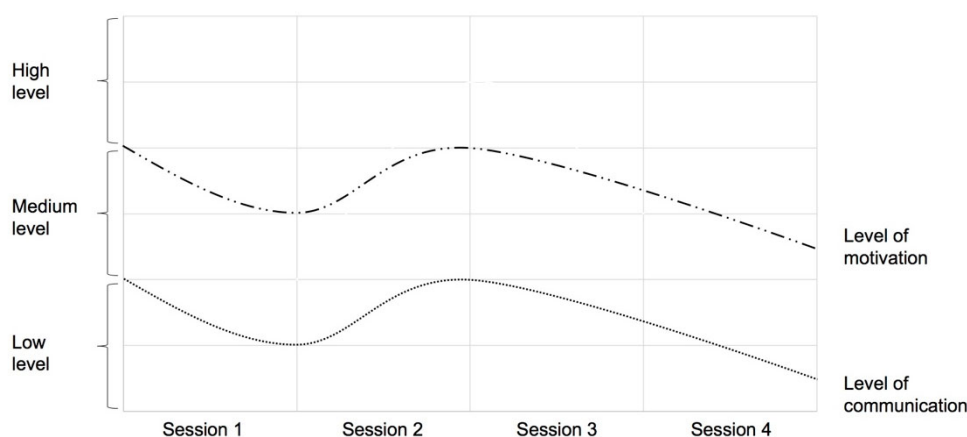


Figure 2. The Interplay Between Motivation and Communicative Opportunities in Language Learning

A limitation of this research is the exclusion of sociocultural factors due to the isolated nature of the online course. However, second culture is an essential context for SLA, not merely a by-product of language learning. Future research should incorporate the social aspects of SLA and place greater emphasis on language learning logs as critical evidence for findings.

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