

Beyond the Classroom: SILK for Promoting Autonomous Kanji Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents a study which demonstrates that explicit strategy instruction, teacher guidance and the opportunity to reflect on the learning process in the early stages of kanji learning can facilitate the development of autonomous kanji learners. A strategy instruction component incorporating the use of the Strategy Inventory for Learning Kanji (SILK) (Bourke, 1997; Bourke & Anderson, 1998) was implemented in a beginner Japanese reading comprehension classroom at university level in Australia. SILK was used in three different ways: as a comprehensive list of kanji learning strategies; as a reflection tool; and as a means of measuring strategy use. The results which are discussed in this paper indicate that the curriculum and method of implementation helped students to develop an increased awareness of and facility with a range of appropriate learner strategies prompting them to take greater control of their own learning - an important step towards becoming autonomous learners.

Introduction

Research in language learning indicates that learning strategies can help students learn more efficiently, develop positive attitudes and become self-directed, autonomous learners (Benson, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005; McDonough, 1999; Oxford, 1990). This is particularly important in kanji learning because in the typical JFL¹ classroom time is limited and kanji learning is often left for the most part to students in their own time. Furthermore, kanji are so numerous that for the serious learner kanji study is likely to be an ongoing task, even after formal tuition has ceased.

When students from a non-character background are first exposed to kanji, they have difficulty relating them to their experience and associating them with prior learning. Through modelling kanji learning strategies in the classroom and providing some basic knowledge about the kanji system, teachers can assist learners to begin to develop their own cognitive network of kanji related knowledge - a schema where they will learn to store new characters in association with previously stored knowledge (Cohen, Kiss & Le Voi, 1993). The strategies used to process kanji in the initial stages will be stored with the characters and then act as memory cues when they need to be retrieved (Bourke, 1997).

Schwienhorst (2007) lists reflection, interaction and experimentation as three principles of learner autonomy and claims that teachers can facilitate the development of autonomous learners by providing opportunities and tools which support these principles. While diaries and portfolios are commonly used for reflecting on language learning (Bailey, 1990; Stephenson, 2006), the Strategy Inventory for Learning Kanji (SILK) (Bourke, 1997; Bourke & Anderson, 1998) provides an effective and efficient reflection tool for the kanji learning process. Mori, Sato & Shimizu (2007) found a

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significant correlation between metacognitive awareness and morphological awareness in the learning of logographic scripts and recommend the allocation of time in class to the discussion of strategies to help students become strategic kanji learners.

In this paper, we describe a study carried out in a Japanese language class at beginners' level in a university setting. It incorporated the use of explicit strategy instruction and the SILK instruments to facilitate the development of autonomy in one aspect of language learning. We draw conclusions about the effectiveness of strategy instruction in this setting based on SILK scores, students' final results and student evaluations and make observations about the use of SILK as a reflection tool, as a means of interaction and as a resource for experimentation.

Strategy Inventory for Learning Kanji (SILK)

SILK was developed to support learners of Japanese from a non-character background who, due to the total 'foreignness' of a logographic script, are at a distinct disadvantage in kanji learning compared to their character background peers. It provides a list of 56 possible ways of processing kanji and managing kanji learning, thereby reducing the time students need to identify appropriate strategies for themselves. The SILK documents consist of: 1) the SILK Test, which lists the 56 strategies grouped into 15 categories; 2) the SILK Descriptions Document, which provides descriptions and examples of the strategies in the SILK Test; 3) an Answer Sheet; and 4) a Scoresheet. These documents can be viewed and downloaded from the SILK website at <http://www.silk.gut.edu.au/>. The website also provides various background information on the kanji system such as radicals, compound formation, *on* and *kun* readings and stroke order rules which all help in the establishment of networks of kanji knowledge.

The SILK materials are currently being used by learners, teachers and researchers in many parts of the world and have been translated into other languages such as Thai, Korean and Mandarin. The main uses are as an awareness raising tool for learners and teachers, as a reflective tool for learners and teachers, and as an information gathering tool for teachers and researchers. However, the SILK also provides a comprehensive list of strategies teachers can draw on as a teaching resource and learners can experiment with to make choices about which ones suit their preferred learning style. As argued by Tseng, Dörnyei & Schmitt (2006, p. 79), 'if learners can develop, personalise and use a repertoire of learning strategies, they will be able to achieve language proficiency in a much facilitated manner'. SILK also provides learners with a metalanguage that they can use to reflect on and discuss the learning process with their teachers and other students.

Context of Study

A strategy component incorporating explicit strategy instruction, learner discussions about strategy use and SILK was developed and implemented in a beginner JFL reading comprehension classroom at university level in Australia. The aim of the 13-week course was to introduce students to situations in which they might read Japanese in social and professional contexts both in Japan and Australia and to give learners with no Japan in-country experience an understanding of the Japanese culture and way of life. There were 30 students in the class, 21 of whom were from non-character backgrounds. Ten of the non-character background students volunteered for the intensive data collection stage of the study. Of these, six had some previous experience learning Japanese and kanji and four were total beginners with no prior kanji knowledge.

Curriculum and Classroom Implementation

The course consisted of eight topic-based units including activities deemed relevant, interesting and useful for students' personal goals such as employment, study

abroad, travel and friendships (Everson, 1994; Saitoh, 1996) and through these units 233 kanji were introduced. To enhance course cohesion and relevance for students, the materials featured a fictional character, a student who goes on exchange to Japan mid-way through his degree. The materials provided opportunities for students to read for different purposes requiring varying strategies depending on the task and the course structure allowed time for reflection to enable learners to come to their own conclusions about the best way to learn (Sinclair, 2006). Collaborative learning groups enhanced learner-to-learner interaction about content and method (Thomson, 1995).

Each of the eight units had pre-reading activities such as videos, authentic texts and brainstorming of lexical items or kanji characters related to the topic to stimulate recall of prior knowledge. This was followed by a reading comprehension activity carried out in groups with questions in English about a Japanese text. Students were encouraged to discuss and use various strategies to try to decipher the meaning. After this initial exposure, tutors explained new vocabulary relating it to its contextual use and introduced kanji characters with explicit reference to radicals, stroke order, derivation and mnemonics. The text was then revisited, new grammar was explained and the passage was read for total understanding and translation. Finally, authentic activities requiring comprehension and production were used to reinforce the learning of new linguistic items. This process was repeated for each of the eight units. At the end of each session, learners were encouraged to reflect on how they completed the tasks and report back to the whole class in a tutor-led session that finished with explicit instruction on three or four pertinent strategies.

A study guide containing information on strategies, collaborative learning and hints for successful group work was made available at the beginning of the course and seven strategy-specific information sheets were distributed at designated stages of the program to coincide with particular learning activities. Vanderdonk (1998, p. 15) found that providing appropriate information at the relevant time minimised the use of inappropriate strategies. The strategy sheets incorporated three separate sections: the first aimed to stimulate general discussion in small groups about how learners might approach the task in question; the second aimed to elicit more specific responses; and the third provided information about the strategy such as its name and how to use it. In addition, tutors supported learners throughout the program by modelling appropriate strategy use for the different tasks and explicitly referring to the strategies used. This methodology fitted in with the three essential elements of explicit strategy instruction as set out by Chamot and O'Malley (1994): describing, modelling and eliciting strategy discussions.

Research Method

The six volunteers who had some previous kanji learning experience completed the SILK Test twice: once before the course began and then again after the strategy instruction sessions were completed to ascertain whether any change in strategy use was indicated. The four volunteers with no prior kanji learning experience completed it once only at the end of the sessions.

All ten students were interviewed before and after the implementation to gauge their perceptions of strategy use and whether these perceptions changed during the semester. Eisner (1998, p. 183) believes the data obtained from interviews is 'second in importance to direct observation' in that it is important to listen to the participants and what they have to say about their activities, their perceptions of their own learning and their perceptions of the teaching and learning context.

During these pre and post interviews, the learners were also asked to think aloud while reading a passage containing kanji to allow the researcher to observe strategy use patterns. This study used concurrent rather than retrospective verbal reports to minimise the time interval between processing and reporting and to collect data on what learners were doing and thinking without them theorising about these behaviours (Block, 1986). The results are discussed below.

Findings

While the primary aim of this study was to determine whether explicit strategy instruction, teacher guidance and the opportunity to reflect on the learning process in the early stages of kanji learning can facilitate the development of autonomous kanji learners, Little (2007:14) argued that the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency should be 'mutually supporting and fully integrated'. For this reason, Table 1 provides students' overall result for the course, results in the final kanji and reading comprehension tests and scores in the pre and post SILK Tests. In addition, the number of strategies recorded in the high usage range has also been included. As there are 15 categories of strategies in SILK, the number in the last column of Table 1 is out of a possible total of 15.

Table 1: Semester Results and SILK Scores for Ten Volunteers

Learner No.	Semester result in course	Kanji Test %	Compreh. Test %	Av. Silk Score* (July)	Av. Silk Score* (Oct.)	High Av. Strats (/15)
L1	High Dist.	86.25 (2)	90.00 (2)	3.42 Mod	3.18 Mod	4
L2	Distinction	93.13 (1)	92.22 (1)	2.47 Mod	3.76 High	11
L3	Distinction	65.00 (6)	85.56 (3)	3.32 Mod	3.56 High	12
L4	Credit	68.13 (4)	78.33 (4)	-	3.11 Mod	6
L5	Credit	76.88 (3)	76.67 (5)	3.25 Mod	3.4 Mod	7
L6	Credit	63.13 (7)	71.67 (6)	2.76 Mod	2.89 Mod	2
L7	Credit	55.63 (9)	71.11 (7)	2.33 Low	3.13 Mod	6
L8	Credit	61.25 (8)	69.44 (8)	-	2.6 Mod	1
L9	Credit	68.13 (4)	61.67 (10)	-	3.18 Mod	5
L10	Pass	24.38 (10)	65.56 (9)	-	2.83 Mod	5

*The SILK Test is answered using a 5-point likert scale. For this study, the following system has been adopted to classify scores: Low use 0-2.4 (Low), Moderate use 2.5-3.4 (Mod), High use 3.5-5.0 (High).

Learners 4, 8, 9 and 10 were the absolute beginners with no prior kanji knowledge and so were not required to take the SILK Test at the beginning of the course. Five of the other six learners (L2, L3, L5, L6 and L7) showed an increase in their average SILK score between the July and October administration of the test. However, Learner 1, who obtained the highest result in the course and the second highest scores in the kanji and reading comprehension tests, showed a decrease in average strategy use. This may be explained by the fact that SILK provides a resource for experimentation and through this process learners, especially more experienced ones, may discard some strategies and concentrate on the ones that suit them best. Low reported strategy use is not necessarily a sign of ineffective learning, just as high reported strategy use does not guarantee learning is successful (see kanji test for L3). 'The more the better is not always the case in strategy use' (Yamamori et al. 2003, p. 384) and there is not necessarily any linear relationship between language proficiency and strategy test scores (Dörnyei, 2005; Sheory & Mohktari, 2001). A learner can be a successful, strategic learner by using a few selected strategies well as was shown in the case of Learner 1. The real value of the SILK Test is its capacity to raise

awareness of strategy use and to propose possible alternate strategies for future use, that is, to facilitate the development of strategic learners.

Although changes appear to be modest from viewing the results as set out in Table 1, it is through the student interviews that we gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of explicit strategy instruction and the use of SILK in this reading comprehension class. Students indicated that the SILK increased their awareness of strategies available for use and helped them reflect personally on how they study kanji. Most learners reported having improved their attitude towards kanji learning and heightened their motivation for wanting to learn more. Furthermore, most of the volunteers were able to discuss their own strategy use more easily in the second interview, indicating that in addition to awareness and understanding, the curriculum gave them the confidence and the language to discuss these strategies with their teachers and their peers. Some sample comments are:

I lacked awareness of strategies and SILK made a difference. I didn't know there were so many choices.

It has made me realise there is no right or wrong, best or worst way to learn. It is about experimenting and exploring various techniques to find what is most effective and appropriate for me personally.

What I found most beneficial about the project was having the opportunity to evaluate the way I personally learned kanji, it gave me a means of seeing areas in which I could improve. It also introduced me to new methods of learning which were more suitable to me than the ones which I had used previously.

Some learners reported proficiency development and credited the training with the improvement (judged not by a standardised test but through learners' own sense of achievement). They also claimed to have developed confidence that this new knowledge will be beneficial to their learning in the future and will offer them alternatives for learning which they can individually control. They developed the confidence to take greater control of their learning - an important step towards becoming autonomous learners.

Discussion and Conclusions

In summary, SILK supports Schwienhorst's (2007) three principles of learner autonomy in relation to the kanji learning task by providing students with: 1) a tool to reflect on and evaluate the way they are learning kanji, thereby raising awareness of learning patterns and choices; 2) a broad spectrum of possible strategies that can be used for experimentation making the process for the development of a personal repertoire of preferred learning strategies much more efficient; and 3) the language to communicate with their teachers and fellow students enabling them to share strategies and thereby further enhance and refine their strategy repertoire.

The curriculum described in this study and its implementation incorporating explicit strategy instruction and the use of SILK assisted learners to develop an increased awareness of and ability to use and talk about a range of learner strategies appropriate for the Japanese reading classroom. This was especially valuable for learners from a non-character background with little or no prior experience in learning kanji. The SILK Test was perceived to be of great benefit in helping learners reflect on how they personally learn kanji and suggesting new strategies they might adopt for more effective learning in the future. This process facilitated the development of autonomy in students learning to read Japanese.

This is a preliminary study in a specific learning context limited to the processes involved in the learning of kanji and the comprehension of Japanese text. However, the overall findings that the explicit teaching of language learning strategies combined with

the provision of the opportunity and means to reflect on one's own learning process can assist in the effective development of autonomous learners have implications for the teaching of other foreign languages including English.

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