Learning how to learn pragmatics: Application of self-directed strategies to pragmatics learning in L2 Chinese and Japanese

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Abstract

Learning strategies are self-generated actions taken to make learning more efficient, productive, and transferable to new settings (Oxford, 1990, 2011). We can teach students how to use learning strategies efficiently, helping them gain autonomy and control of their own learning process. This study applied strategy instruction to pragmatics learning in a second language (L2). Adapting Oxford’s (2011) taxonomy, we taught L2 learners various cognitive and metacognitive strategies, including how to pay attention to select pragmatic features, and how to monitor and evaluate their learning of the features. Four L2 Chinese learners and six L2 Japanese learners in a US university received strategy instruction on targeted pragmatic features (i.e., conversation opening/closing; indirect meaning). The instruction was followed by a two-week period in which students kept a daily journal recording their experiences with the targeted features. Interviews were conducted at the end to gauge students’ reflections of the strategy applications. Results showed that students noticed targeted pragmatic features in available resources, but there was imbalance in the degree of noticing and types of strategies used.

Keywords: Second language pragmatics; learning strategies; strategy training; Chinese; Japanese

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1. Introduction

Learning pragmatics involves understanding a relationship among linguistic forms and their functional possibilities, and contextual elements that determine the form–function relationship. This is a challenging task for second language (L2) learners because linguistic means for performing a communicative act and social norms behind the act vary across cultures (Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2016). For example, when receiving a favour from someone, people may say ‘Thank you’ in English, but Japanese speakers often apologise to show indebtedness and formality (e.g. *sumimasen* ‘I’m sorry’). There are no clear-cut rules about when to use an expression of thanks or apology. Rather, the use is governed by contextual elements (e.g. degree of favour received), as well as individual characteristics (e.g. personality). Hence, L2 learners often experience difficulty in noticing the critical form–function–context relationships, let alone generalising the relationships from observation.

Complexity involved in the form–function–context relationships suggests that teaching these relationships one-by-one is not productive. A more beneficial approach is to cultivate learners’ self-directed learning strategies. Learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Strategy instruction can help learners direct their attention to a pragmatic phenomenon and learn how to interpret the phenomenon – what contextual elements surround the phenomenon, how the phenomenon impacts personal relationships, and what interactional outcomes result from it. These interpretive practices can help develop skills for learning pragmatics, which learners can transfer to different situations.

This preliminary study examined the efficacy of strategy training for learning pragmatics. Adapting Oxford’s (2011) strategic self-regulation model, we taught cognitive and metacognitive strategies to L2 Chinese and Japanese learners so they would learn to pay attention to pragmatic features, while monitoring and evaluating their learning processes. We examined whether strategy instruction can help promote learners’ pragmatic awareness and knowledge building.

2. Background

2.1 Teaching pragmatics

With the recognition that pragmatics, like grammar and vocabulary, should be taught in a language classroom, the last decades have seen a rapid growth in research in teaching pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2015; Takahashi, 2010). Existing studies roughly fall into two categories: observational
and interventional. Observational studies explore opportunities for pragmatics learning available in a classroom, while intervention studies implement specific instruction and assess learning outcomes using a pre-post design. The following section presents generalisations coming from studies in these categories. We will highlight limitations of the current practice and explain why learning strategies can be a solution to the limitations.

Previous studies analysed classroom discourse to reveal how classrooms provide opportunities for pragmatics-related language use (e.g. interrupting someone politely) and how students’ participation in classroom routines facilitates their pragmatic development (Tateyama, 2019). Other studies analysed pragmatics-focused information and practice supplied in textbooks (Tatsuki, 2019). These studies show that the classroom is not an ideal place for pragmatics learning because classroom language does not reflect a variety of communicative situations or registers. Because learners do not often interact with speakers of diverse social roles, the range of pragmatic samples that they encounter is often restricted. In addition, learners do not typically experience any real-life consequences of their pragmatic behaviours or receive feedback on their behaviours in a classroom. For example, Taguchi (2012) showed that, although ESL teachers were aware of the rudeness of students’ linguistic demeanours, they refrained from correcting them to maintain positive relationships with the students. Similarly, textbooks have been criticised for the paucity of pragmatics-focused materials (Diepenbroek & Derwing, 2013; Nguyen, 2011; Vellenga, 2004). Vellenga’s (2004) analysis of eight ESL textbooks revealed that less than 30% of the text involved pragmatics information (e.g. information about politeness and register). Studies comparing textbook dialogues and naturalistic dialogues revealed a discrepancy between the two (Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Gilmore, 2004). For example, Boxer and Pickering (1995) found that only direct complaints appear in ESL textbook dialogues, when in fact indirect complaints are common in naturalistic settings.

As illustrated above, the general consensus in the literature is that the classroom is limited in pragmatics-learning opportunities. Given that naturalistic acquisition of pragmatics is difficult to achieve in a classroom, researchers have turned to direct instruction as a way of promoting pragmatics learning. A number of studies have examined the efficacy of instruction by comparing the learning outcomes of different teaching methods. The comparison between explicit and implicit teaching in particular has dominated the field. Explicit teaching involves a direct provision of metapragmatic information (e.g. telling learners which linguistic forms can mitigate the tone of refusal). Implicit teaching holds back such information and promotes inductive learning via exposure and consciousness raising. A general consensus is that explicit teaching leads to greater learning outcomes
than implicit teaching (Takahashi, 2010; Taguchi, 2015; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019). This consensus lends support to Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis, which has served as the theoretical bedrock of the explicit–implicit comparison. The noticing hypothesis claims that learners’ attention to forms, functions, and context of use is a necessary condition for pragmatic input to become intake, leading to learning. Explicit metapragmatic information makes the form–function–context relationships salient to learners, thus facilitating noticing of the relationships.

While the benefit of instruction is incontestable, there are several shortcomings in existing practice. First, studies typically focused on only a few pragmatic features, limiting the scope of pragmatics taught in each setting. In Taguchi's (2015) review, only 5 out of 58 instructional studies taught more than one pragmatic feature (e.g. two speech acts together). The small coverage of target features raises a question about the utility of instruction. Although instruction can certainly improve learners’ pragmatic knowledge, such knowledge is restricted to a few pragmatic features, while in reality pragmatics entails a wide array of features. Since it is impossible to cover everything that falls under pragmatics in a single study, a more profitable approach would be to equip learners with learning strategies, so they can observe, analyse, and interpret pragmatics on their own, using their immediate resources.

Another limitation of instructional studies is that, with a few exceptions (Cunningham, 2016), studies are mostly conducted in a laboratory setting without any connection to real-life language use. Because most studies rarely followed learners beyond post-test, we do not know whether learners can cope with real-life pragmatics after instruction. To make instruction relevant to learners’ real-world performance, researchers should focus on facilitating the transfer of learned pragmatic knowledge to real life use by teaching self-directed learning strategies. Strategy instruction can help learners take the initiative for their learning outside of the classroom by developing their habit of attending to language around them and analysing it from the perspective of pragmatics.

In summary, observational studies have uncovered scant opportunities for pragmatics learning available in a classroom. Instructional studies have shown that, although direct instruction (especially explicit instruction) is effective for pragmatics learning, instruction has limited utility because only a few pragmatic features can be addressed in a single study. Moreover, studies do not typically address pragmatics learning in real life.

These tendencies prompt us to consider strategy instruction as an alternative approach to pragmatics teaching. Learning strategies can compensate for existing limitations because of their ‘self-directed’ nature. Self-directed learners may be willing to go outside the classroom and look for resources in real life. Self-directed learners can cultivate opportunities for pragmatics learning on their
own and consciously draw pragmatic implications from real-life language use. In the next section, we discuss strategy instruction and its application to pragmatics learning.

2.2. Learning strategies for pragmatics

Learning strategies have been the object of investigation in a large number of L2 studies. The popularity of this research domain stems from Rubin’s (1975) seminal work, in which he defined learning strategies as (semi)conscious behaviours that learners deploy to enhance their knowledge and abilities. Dozens of studies have examined types of strategies that L2 learners use for self-learning and generated taxonomies of learning strategies (i.e., cognitive, metacognitive, and affective) (Chamot, 2005; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Manchon, 2008; Oxford, 2011; Oxford & Griffiths, 2014). Paralleling this trend, strategy instruction has been implemented widely to test its potential to help students take control of their learning process (Cohen, 1998). Empirical support for strategy instruction is widely available. Plonsky’s (2011) meta-analysis revealed the medium-size effect of 61 strategy instruction studies, indicating that direct teaching of strategies can contribute to learning. He also found that teaching cognitive strategies produced greater learning outcomes than metacognitive strategies.

Although a substantial amount of work exists in strategy instruction, we find very little literature on learning strategies for pragmatics. Indeed, Plonsky’s review did not identify a single study on pragmatics, although many studies were found in other areas (e.g. grammar, vocabulary). Moreover, pragmatics was not even mentioned in the section on future directions in Plonsky’s paper, where he acknowledged the imbalance among target aspects of learning in the existing literature, which further highlights the underrepresentation of the research area.

Cohen (2005) was the first to present taxonomies of strategies for pragmatics learning. He proposed a set of speech acts learning strategies (e.g. using a memory aid to remember speech act expressions). Following this, Cohen and Shively (2007) examined the effect of strategy instruction in learning speech acts while abroad (L2 French and Spanish) and found some effects. Given the paucity of the literature, more research should explore how pragmatics learning strategies can be taught across different languages, learning contexts, and pragmatic features (e.g. conversation strategies, indirect meaning). As a step in this direction, the next section presents Oxford’s (2011) framework of strategic self-regulation as a guiding framework for pragmatics learning strategies.

2.3. Strategic self-regulation model for pragmatics learning

Oxford (2011) introduced the strategic self-regulation model as a base, in which learners actively use strategies to manage their own learning process. The model
addresses three dimensions of learning: cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive. The cognitive dimension attends to the process of constructing, transforming, and applying knowledge, while the affective dimension addresses the mental aspect of learning (e.g. creating positive emotions). The sociocultural-interactive dimension assists learners’ interaction with the target community. Each of these dimensions includes a set of metastrategies and specific strategies. Metastrategies serve the executive-control functions, managing the use of specific strategies. For example, metacognitive strategies help learners plan, obtain resources, organise, and monitor their knowledge construction process. To facilitate this process, specific cognitive strategies are called upon (e.g. using senses and visuals as memory aids).

Building on Oxford’s model, Taguchi (2018) introduced metacognitive and cognitive strategies specific to pragmatics learning. Metacognitive strategies involve paying attention to language by setting goals as to where one’s attention should be directed. Learners can be introduced to pragmatics phenomena (e.g. indirectness) so they know to pay attention to the phenomena in their everyday life. After they understand the phenomena and set the goal of attending to them, learners can be introduced to other metacognitive strategies – obtaining resources and implementing plans. Field observation, media, and online materials are useful resources. The final set of metacognitive strategies involves monitoring and evaluating strategy use by consciously reflecting on how they attend to pragmatics phenomena in resources.

While metacognitive strategies help manage learning in general, cognitive strategies help construct and transform pragmatics knowledge. Taguchi (2018) presented three types of cognitive strategies specific to pragmatics learning. The first cognitive strategy is activating knowledge of pragmatic features, which is followed by a strategy of reasoning (analysing interactions and discovering patterns). The last cognitive strategy is conceptualising – analysing and categorising units of information. For example, learners can classify linguistic forms according to their levels of directness, which can be elevated to the level of conceptualisation if learners can create a semantic map linking similar forms and their contexts of use.

Strategy instruction can help develop L2 learners’ ability to apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies to identify, analyse, and reflect on pragmatic phenomena in real-life situations. This study was set to examine this premise. Focusing on the stage of attention and detection in Schmidt’s (1993) noticing hypothesis, this study asked: To what extent does strategy instruction help direct L2 Chinese and Japanese learners’ attention to pragmatics phenomena in their everyday language use?
3. Methods

3.1 Participants
Participants were two groups of learners in a US university: four learners of Chinese (three males and one female; mean age of 21; three advanced and one intermediate level) and six learners of Japanese (six females; mean age of 21; all advanced level). They were volunteer participants recruited from language classes.

3.2 Targeted pragmatic features
The strategy instruction targeted two pragmatic features: conversation opening/closing for Chinese learners and comprehension of indirect meaning for Japanese learners. We selected these features because they are pervasive in everyday communication and constitute a critical aspect of pragmatics in their respective language. Conversation opening/closing involves interactional routines that are important to establish social and interpersonal relationships (Ferguson, 1976). Despite its importance, research has shown that Chinese textbooks represent conversation opening/closing in a monotonous manner with oversimplified exchanges such as 你好 ‘hello’ and 再见 ‘goodbye’ in this study (Christensen, 2011; Zhang, 2014). Hence, we decided to focus on conversation opening/closing. For L2 Japanese learners, we targeted indirect meaning because of the ubiquity of indirectness in Japanese communication. The literature has revealed that Japanese speakers convey intentions indirectly using a variety of linguistic forms (e.g. Maynard, 1998; Miike, 2003). Understanding those forms of indirect communication is an important part of Japanese pragmatic competence and thus merits strategy instruction.

Although both pragmatic features serve a critical function in their respective language, they differ in terms of modality and saliency. Conversation opening/closing are part of production skills; learners produce them to initiate or close their own conversation. They are also salient features because they signal discourse boundaries (i.e. beginning and end of a conversation). In contrast, comprehension of indirect meaning involves receptive skills. It is less salient because it is embedded within a conversation. By targeting different features, we intended to examine whether strategy instruction functions differently depending on the pragmatic feature.

3.3 Strategy instruction
We developed a strategy instruction session to teach metacognitive and cognitive strategies specific to learning pragmatics (Taguchi, 2018). Three metacognitive strategies were taught: (1) focus and planning, (2) obtaining resources and implementing plans, and (3) monitoring and evaluation (see Table 1). The first two
strategies were taught explicitly in a strategy instruction session (a one-hour session in a face-to-face format). Students were introduced to target pragmatic features (conversation opening/closing in Chinese, indirect meaning in Japanese), as well as resources available around them to observe those features (e.g. films). The last metacognitive strategy was addressed after the instruction session by having students keep a daily journal and jot down their observations of the focal features in their immediate environment.

Table 1: Metacognitive strategies and functions for learning pragmatics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus and plan</td>
<td>Pay attention to pragmatics concepts and set goals in attending to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain resources and implement plans</td>
<td>Obtain resources for observing pragmatic acts; obtain opportunities for participating in pragmatic acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor and evaluate</td>
<td>Monitor and evaluate the process of performing and interpreting pragmatic acts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to metacognitive strategies, we taught three cognitive strategies: (1) knowledge activation, (2) reasoning, and (3) conceptualising during the one-hour strategy instruction session (see Table 2). The next section illustrates how these strategies were materialised into activities in the strategy instruction.

Table 2: Cognitive strategies and functions for learning pragmatics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Specifics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activate knowledge</td>
<td>Brainstorm what is already known</td>
<td>Activate pragmatic knowledge in L1 or in a familiar language and reflect on the same pragmatic act in L2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Use inductive and deductive reasoning</td>
<td>Inductive reasoning: Analyse a pragmatic act by contextual factors; Explain why certain forms are used in a given context. Deductive reasoning: Think about other contexts where the same pragmatic act might occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualise</td>
<td>Compare, categorise, and synthesise information</td>
<td>Categorise expressions by function and situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategy instruction for the L2 Chinese learners involved a warm-up activity, role-play, and discussion. Students first brainstormed different ways to open/
close a conversation, as well as the social factors (e.g. speaker relationships and settings) affecting the opening/closing (activate knowledge). After the warm-up, students role-played three scenarios, which differed in participant relationships (e.g. a student and professor, classmates) and contexts (e.g. on/off campus). Role-plays were video-recorded. Students watched their performance on video and categorised their opening/closing expressions along with contextual factors (reasoning). Following this, students watched a few video clips taken from a popular Chinese TV show. They discussed how people open and close conversations in different settings (conceptualise).

After these activities, students received a list of Chinese learning resources, including direct contact with Chinese speakers (e.g. Chinese Corner, speaking assistants, office hours), media, and online resources (e.g. WeChat, YouTube). These resources were made explicit to the students so that they could implement their plans of attending to conversation opening/closing and monitoring their process.

Finally, students were asked to keep a journal during the following two weeks to jot down their observations of conversation opening/closing. The journal was created online using Google Forms. The journal asked students to describe how people open/close a conversation, along with contextual elements (e.g. speaker relationships, settings). Students were asked to write in their journals every day and report their observations.

A similar strategy instruction was developed for learners of Japanese, targeting indirect meaning. During the warm-up session, students completed a writing activity in English. In this activity, they were asked to consider several imaginary situations and supply a response (e.g. “You work as a research assistant, and the lab coordinator has asked you to come in on short notice on a Sunday night, but you want to say no. What do you say?”) (activate knowledge). Afterwards, students discussed their answers in pairs and then shared their findings with the whole group. At this point, the concept of indirect meaning was briefly introduced, along with questions about situations where one would be likely to be more or less direct (reasoning).

After the warm-up activity, the students watched video clips taken from a Japanese reality TV show which showcased different instances of indirect meaning (e.g. indirect refusal). Students wrote down what they believed to be the intention of the speaker. They also wrote down what the speaker actually said and discussed the cues used to determine the speaker’s intention (reasoning/conceptualise). Those cues involved, for example, tone of voice, gestures, specific linguistic forms such as kana ‘I wonder’, chotto (lit. ‘a little’ used as a hedging device), and incomplete utterances ending in te-form (te-form is a tenseless conjunctive form of verbs, adjectives, and nouns and can be used to combine words and sentences...
or serve as the base for other conjugation forms). At the end of the session, students brainstormed resources for Japanese learning that they were aware of. They also received a list of resources for their reference (e.g. anime/variety show websites, on-campus Japanese Language Table).

Finally, like the Chinese participants, Japanese participants kept a daily journal created with Google Form for two weeks. The journal questions asked about situations in which students had trouble understanding what someone said or meant to say. They were asked to describe the situation and what they did to resolve their confusion.

3.4 Interview
A one-to-one interview (about 30–40 minutes) was conducted with all the students after the two-week journal entry session to gauge students’ reflections of their strategy applications. Interviews were conducted by the researchers in English in a semi-structured format, following pre-determined questions while allowing some flexibility. Interview questions addressed whether the students were able to apply learned strategies to their real-life situations after instruction. Sample interview questions are listed below. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

1. In what ways were the strategy instruction, journal entry, and list of resources helpful or not helpful? What did you learn from the process? What challenges did you experience?
2. How did the process change your way of looking at conversation opening/closing or indirect meaning?

3.5 Data analysis
This study examined whether strategy instruction can facilitate L2 Chinese and Japanese learners’ noticing of pragmatics features in their everyday language use. We taught metacognitive and cognitive strategies to see if they could direct learners’ attention to the targeted pragmatic features in real-life settings. Learners’ attention to those features, along with the usefulness of the strategy instruction, were examined with journal entries and semi-structured interviews.

We analysed journal entries from two perspectives: learners’ noticing of focal pragmatic features and contextual factors surrounding the features. Each mention of the pragmatic targets was coded as one occurrence. Contextual factors were coded for two sub-categories: ‘speakers’ and ‘settings’. Each mention of the sub-category was coded as one instance. For example, if a learner wrote his observation on how speaker relationship affected conversation openings and closings in one journal entry, it was coded as one mention of ‘speakers’. 
For the analysis of interview data, we read the interview transcriptions multiple times to identify recurring themes. Two main themes emerged in the analysis: (1) noticing of focal pragmatic features and contextual factors; and (2) challenges related to noticing.

4. Results

This section presents the analysis of the journal entries and interview data separately for the Chinese and Japanese learner groups.

4.1 Strategy instruction results in L2 Chinese – Conversation opening and closing

Four participants submitted a total of 54 journal entries during the two-week period, which were evenly distributed among participants. Journal entries showed that participants noticed how Chinese speakers open and close a conversation in a variety of self-learning resources, including face-to-face conversations with Chinese speakers, online social networking (e.g. WeChat), and Chinese TV shows. Using these resources, students analysed how Chinese speakers started and ended a conversation. Table 3 displays the number of participants’ comments on opening/closing expressions, as well as contextual elements surrounding the expressions (i.e., speakers and settings).

Table 3: Reporting of focal pragmatic features and contextual elements in journal entries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects reported in journal entries</th>
<th>Frequency of report (percentage and raw count)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focal pragmatic features</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation opening</td>
<td>67.8% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation closing</td>
<td>32.2% (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100% (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual elements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speakers</td>
<td>42.9% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settings</td>
<td>57.1% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100% (35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 54 entries submitted. Some entries had more than one reporting of conversation opening/closing, thus exceeding the total count of 54.

Interestingly, reporting of conversation opening was twice as frequent as that of conversation closing. Students reported a variety of conversation-opening expressions, including  "wei 喂 'hey', haojiumeijian 好久没见 'long time no see', nichilema 你吃了吗 'did you eat yet', ni zhezhou mangbumang 你这周忙不忙 'are you busy this week' and nonverbal cues (e.g. waving). They noticed opening expressions more frequently, possibly because conversations typically have a clear starting point.
Speakers use specific verbal expressions to signal the beginning of a conversation, and those expressions are often conventionalised (e.g. *haojiubujian* 好久不见 'long time no see'; *zaoshanghao* 早上好 'good morning').

In contrast, conversation closing can be ambiguous for lack of a clear-cut boundary. Speakers might be interrupted by someone or take leave without a formal ending. Ending signals are also idiosyncratic and situation-dependent, as reported in students’ journals (e.g. *jixujiayou* 继续加油 'keep up the good work'; *haobuhao* 好不好 'all right?'). The following excerpt from a journal entry illustrates the ambiguity of conversation ending.

(1) Journal entry, Participant BT

He [a friend] greeted me with *haojiumeijian* 長时间没见 'long time not see'; (translation added by the researcher), which made sense because it had been a few weeks since I last saw him … This was also a good reminder to me that there's you don't have to literally say *haojiubujian* 好久不见 'long time no see' to express the sentiment that you haven't seen someone in a long time. It's good to add some variety to how you express the same idea when possible. We actually didn't end the conversation in Chinese because when practising our song there were some things we had to discuss that we only know in English.

Although conversation closing did not appear as often in participants’ journals, it did appear when it involved a conventional form of ending a conversation. Excerpt (2) illustrates this. BT reported how a character in a TV show ended a conversation in an elaborate manner.

(2) Journal entry, Participant BT

In one scene the main character is eating dinner with a boy and she has to leave early. I’ve been told people end conversations with *woxianzoule* 我先走了 'I need to go' when they have to leave before something is done, but that always seemed really abrupt on its own. Seeing it used in more complete context really helped. She starts with saying *wo jintian keneng gen ni chibuliao fan le* 我今天可能跟你吃不了饭了 'I probably can’t have dinner with you today' followed by *wo xianzai dei zou le* 我现在得走了 'I have to go now'. They then continue chatting for a bit longer even though she has to go and then she finally finishes off the conversation with *woxianzoule* 我先走了 'I need to go'. This gave
me a much better sense of you might say a few different things together to get across the message that you’ve got to leave without just abruptly saying goodbye.

In this excerpt, BT attended to the conventional expression of *woxianzoule* 我先走了 ‘I need to go’. Since this expression sounded abrupt, he attended to how it was prefaced by other expressions. BT used the cognitive strategy of reasoning (i.e., explaining why certain forms are used in a given context) in his analysis of a TV show conversation.

The journal data showed that students actively reflected on how contextual elements influenced speakers’ choice of opening/closing expressions. Within the contextual element of ‘speakers’ (see Table 3), students often reported on speaker relationship (11 entries) and personality (4 entries). In the following excerpt, KW analysed a conversation in a TV show and wrote about how people’s relationships affects the way the speakers start and end a conversation.

(3) Journal entry, Participant KW

The girl opened the door and said, *nimenlia ganma ne* ‘what are you guys doing?’ and ended with the two girls following the first girl to the elevator, saying *jiayou* because she was going on a big meeting. She replied to the other girls, ‘bye bye’ and smiled. Immediately, I noticed a power differential between the first girl and the other two girls, because they followed the first one around all the way up to the elevator and they wished her luck, but she didn’t say anything except bye and only smiled coyly. Also, in the start of the conversation, she didn’t address them by name or anything and only used question.

As shown in this excerpt, KW was able to identify a power difference and hierarchy among the speakers. KW observed that the first girl (who has power over other two) used a casual question (‘What are you guys doing?’) to start the conversation, instead of ‘addressing the other girls by name or anything’. KW also noticed the power difference observed in the rather uncommon conversation ending: The other two girls ‘followed the first girl all the way to the elevator’ and ‘wished her luck’; then the first girl said good-bye and smiled coyly. KW concluded that the power difference among the girls led to those unconventional conversation opening and closing patterns. Clearly, KW used the cognitive strategy of reasoning to discern the connection between opening/closing expressions and the context of their occurrence.

In addition to the speaker relationship, students also attended to the setting of a conversation. For example, one student mentioned how a graduate student started a discussion session in class with *dajiahao, woshi … women jintian yao jiangde shi …* 大家好，我是…我们今天要讲的是… ‘Hello everyone, I am … Today we will talk about …’: 
This was a very formal setting. Although we did discuss back and forth and ask questions, it was pretty clear that the grad student was leading the discussion, and it was in some ways more like a lecture.

Using the reasoning strategy, AQ was able to articulate that the way the graduate student started the discussion was influenced by the formality of the occasion. This excerpt also shows what type of real-life situations is considered as a ‘formal setting’ from a student's perspective. Namely, this student associated formality with a classroom where a discussion took place.

Similar to the journal data, interview data also revealed the usefulness of strategy instruction. Most clearly, strategy instruction helped students form a habit of paying attention to conversation opening and closing in their everyday resources, as shown in the excerpt below.

It [strategy instruction] just made me more aware of how people like start and end conversations, how they speak in general depending on, you know, what the situations are like. I never learned, you know, opening and closing strategies, um from my Chinese classes.

This excerpt shows that the instruction cultivated students' metacognitive strategies: setting goals, obtaining resources, and monitoring the process of interpreting the focal features. Specifically, students expressed that journal keeping was instrumental, pushing them to seek opportunities to observe and use Chinese outside the class (see Excerpt (6)).

It [journal keeping] really forced me to practise Chinese more, and be more open to my friends.

The students’ self-directed attention to focal pragmatic features sometimes led to the discovery of new opening/closing expressions that were not taught in class. For example, one student reported noticing an elaborated conversation ending from a TV show, which he also reported in the journal (see the previous section).

I think one place it helped with closing is in a class when you learn how to end a conversation, you sort of learn the very end of the conversation. So the last phrase you learn would be like 再见 zaijian ‘bye’, 拜拜 baibai ‘bye’, 我先走了 woxianzoule ‘I have to go’. But you don't learn the few things you say before that so watching a full conversation helps with that. So in one episode of the show it was like 我今天和你吃不了饭了 wo jintian he
Classroom instruction often focuses on fixed phrases for conversation ending (e.g. *zaijian*再见), and students learn those phrases as set formulae. However, in real-life conversations, speakers do not always close a conversation with a single phrase. Instead, a conversation ending can take the form of a sequence collaboratively constructed among speakers via turn-taking. As evident in Excerpt (7), strategy instruction helped the student notice a sequence of conversation exchanges that formed the speech event of conversation closing, which was not taught in class.

While students’ noticing and awareness of conversation opening/closing were evident in the interview, the data also revealed students’ challenges in applying learning strategies to real life. One notable challenge was the lack of resources available in their surroundings. Students reported difficulty with finding opportunities to interact with Chinese speakers. Some students had access to Chinese-speaking peers on campus, but they found direct observation difficult because they felt as though they were eavesdropping on other people’s conversations. Another challenge related to the distribution of attention — specifically, attending to form and meaning concurrently in a naturally flowing conversation. Several students expressed that it was difficult to participate in a real-time conversation while analysing language use during the conversation. These challenges might have constrained students’ use of learning strategies in real life.

To summarise, journal and interview data revealed converging findings in students’ use of learning strategies. Students used a variety of metacognitive strategies: They consciously attended to conversation opening/closing, accessed resources voluntarily in their everyday surroundings, and self-monitored the process. They also used cognitive strategies by analysing conversational sequences, extracting opening/closing forms, and inducing the connection between forms and context of use. Strategy instruction also promoted students’ self-directed learning behaviours by pushing them to seek more resources to use. However, because of the limited opportunities to interact with Chinese speakers, students mostly used media as resources, restricting strategy application to scripted conversations.

### 4.2 Strategy instruction results in L2 Japanese – comprehension of indirect meaning

After the strategy instruction, six learners of Japanese kept a daily journal in response to the question: “Did you encounter any situations where you had difficulty understanding what someone said or meant to say?” This question was intended to direct students’ attention to meaning communicated indirectly (con-
fusions induced by indirect ways of communication). However, contrary to our expectations, most journal entries (33 out of 35) concerned issues that were not related to indirect meaning. Students reported vocabulary and grammar as the primary sources of confusion, although a few entries also touched on cultural expressions. There was one instance in which a student wrote about indirect meaning.

(8) Journal entry, Participant SY

Sometimes when the question is quite challenging or place them at an embarrassing situation … they would either re-direct the question to answer something seemingly unrelated, or they would once and for all give out facts and answers that are neutral and hard to interrogate further. I don't feel very comfortable about this aspect, 私は言葉の裏を読むのが下手なので、無駄に距離感を感じてしまいます watashiwakotobano urawo yomunoga hetananode, mudani kyōrīkan no kanjite shimaimasu 'I'm not good at reading the underlying meanings behind words, and because of this I end up feeling a sense of distance.'

Interview data revealed complementary findings to journal data, generally pointing to students’ lack of attention to indirect meaning. Interview data helped us to understand why it was difficult for students to attend to this pragmatic phenomenon.

First, we should acknowledge that the strategy instruction was effective in developing students’ metacognitive strategies, i.e., bringing the focal pragmatic features to students’ consciousness so they can set goals in attending the features:

(9) Interview, Participant SY

I think the main things about this thing th, the training session is just giving you awareness and letting you really know what you’re looking for during the rest of the research.

One student was even able to explain the focal feature from a pragmatics perspective, associating it with a cultural aspect, going beyond textbook information (I’ refers to the researcher):

(10) Interview, Participant YZ

I think that most of the stuff we learned [in the strategy instruction session] is, ah, ah, how to actually communicate in Japanese, so using Japanese in a pragmatic sense? (I: What do you mean by 'pragmatics sense'? ) Oh, basically it means understanding how it's different from learning Japanese in textbooks? … so like when you are actually communicating with Japanese people there is also a lot of cultural aspects that you need to understand, like, for example, like Japanese people don't reject directly and they just reject people very indirectly …
Despite the explicit focus and orientation to indirect meaning developed during strategy instruction, students made very little report of this phenomenon in their journals. Four of the six students explicitly reported experiencing difficulty with noticing – and identifying – specific instances of confusion occurring in real-life settings. The difficulty was, in part, due to the ambiguous nature of the target feature. Students did not understand whether they understood something or not (Participant LH) or did not remember what exactly the source of confusion was (Participant SD). In addition, the moment of confusion was difficult to retain in memory because it often occurred in a short time span, as shown in the following excerpt.

(11) Interview, Participant SD

So for journal entries I felt like there are a lot of days I definitely don't have anything to write about, yeah, so that's the main part but other than that I feel like it's very reasonable to ask for like things that confuse you. But sometime I have to like LOOK for things that confuse me or THINK about it … yeah. Because sometimes it's just like one or two seconds of hesitation instead of like actually feeling really really confused for a couple of seconds …

It appears that students were largely unable to notice and reflect on their own confusion – or even if they did, they were not always able to articulate the reason behind their confusion, much less recall in detail examples in which indirect meaning was involved.

In addition to the ambiguous nature of indirect meaning, types of Japanese resources that students used seemed to have led to limited noticing of the focal pragmatic features. Students mostly used media as sources of observation (e.g. TV shows). There were only two instances in which students reported direct interactions with Japanese speakers(s). Thus, for the most part, learners’ contact with Japanese outside of the classroom depended on resources in which the learner was not an active participant, and thus had very little real-life consequence for them. One student reported that the lack of real-life consequence was exactly the reason why she was not motivated to attend to indirect communication occurring in media.

(12) Interview, Participant SY

I think that, um, when you’re really passively listening to something, versus when you’re actively talking to someone it’s different because your motivation is different. If you’re looking at someone, it’s their story … if I don’t understand what they’re saying … and I-I mean, if it's not me personally interacting I don't have the motivation to really like apply some kind of the skills and um, there's also an emotional component where you
don’t get engaged so you don’t really like, learn it. So, I mean, media and like, real-life conversations, are still kind of different, so like I-I think, the best resource is still to immerse in the culture.

Since the resources that students engaged in were mostly fictional in nature (i.e. media) and did not have a direct impact on their lives, it is likely that they did not feel the need to pay close attention to what was being communicated. Because the students did not perceive any consequences for not understanding, even when incidents of confusion did arise, they might have employed a let-it-pass strategy and did not attend to the source of confusion closely. In fact, several students expressed that the only way to understand indirect meaning was to interact with native speakers in real life. For these reasons, students were less driven to notice and try to resolve instances of indirect meaning, as observed in the journal entries.

On the other hand, the opportunity for noticing indirect meaning was apparent in situations where students were able to interact with Japanese speakers face-to-face, as presented in the previous journal entry data (Excerpt (8)). When asked to expand upon this particular journal entry in the interview, the student described her interactions with three native Japanese speakers who visited her Japanese class. She asked about their views on traditional gender roles (e.g. men working outside the home). She noted that one of the Japanese speakers spoke slowly, gave vague answers to repeated questions, and used incomplete sentences (e.g. gai ga aru shigoto nara nee がいがある仕事ならねえ ‘If it’s a job with value, I suppose …’). This is illustrated in Excerpt (13), a transcript from the interview. (‘I’ refers to the interviewer.)

(13) Interview, Participant SY

So it made me think like maybe I asked in a wrong way? Or did she not understand my question? … It stops in the middle, so like it’s really hard for me to connect the dots to see like if she really meant like, she really thinks this way or like she, if if she really thinks that women shouldn’t work … or if it’s just like she had no idea but like, just saying that to … so like I think that’s the main part I didn’t really understand her. (I: Do you feel like you would have experienced the conversation differently if you hadn’t attended the training session?) Like, so like if with the training session I could probably am understand that she’s probably having second thoughts about the issues, and um it could be also like she’s just like not willing to answer directly, it makes her feel embarrassed because that question is really kind of a little bit like private thing, so like maybe she’s just trying to indirectly let me know that this type of question I can’t give you a direct answer … Yeah, so like it’s it’s more like a feeling thing where you really understand that if if that, if like using indirect phrases are a way for them to like not hurt you but at the same time keep a proper distance I mean, that would make me feel better.
As this excerpt shows, after the strategy instruction, SY was able to arrive at alternative interpretations for particular conversational moves (e.g. incomplete sentences) made by her native speaker interlocutor. Specifically, instead of interpreting the indirect responses as a lack of understanding (i.e. communication failure), SY perceived these as a possible way of her interlocutor indirectly showing hesitation without being impolite. That SY was able to report on this instance of indirect meaning and also describe her own reaction and interpretation of it shows a high degree of noticing. This finding indicates that, in real-life interactions where there is a need to comprehend and respond to another speaker, students may be more driven to achieve successful communication and thus to pay attention to sources of trouble. Under this pressure, they are more motivated to understand what is being said, and therefore to attend to instances of indirect meaning.

It is also notable that this student went beyond what was discussed in the strategy instruction session and attributed what she noticed to specific aspects of the context. In this case, she mentioned her interlocutors' backgrounds as possible reasons for the use or non-use of indirect meaning that she noticed, which is shown in Excerpt (14).

(14) Interview, Participant SY

So like the first two speakers like the, the first one is like Hikari-san Hikari-san and she-she's like kind of young, she's like young-younger than the rest of them so like … she tries to say everything as clearly as she could, so like she didn't use many of that context thingy or like use indirect, she just talks about everything really directly … yea, very very frankly, it's it's just like, just like Americans … And then like we went to um, a male, um … Ebitani-san, he he's like a police officer, and um and also because of his social status and also like his male roles like taking on responsibilities, he's also very frank about stuff, so but-but also, but I mean it's he starts to get a little indirect like in some questions like the gender roles, where he doesn't talk about his own like feelings.

SY draws a relationship between the indirect meaning she observed earlier, the topic being discussed at hand (i.e., gender roles), and the speakers' backgrounds (i.e., gender, age, and occupation). She interpreted that the third speaker's indirectness signalled her hesitance to share her personal views on traditional gender roles, which was possibly influenced by her own background as an older woman. In effect, the learner considered possible reasons behind the speaker's use of indirect expressions, in terms of not only the immediate function of or intention behind these interactional moves (Excerpt (13): “she's just trying to indirectly let me know that this type of question I can't give you a direct answer”), but also the discourse (i.e. what was being talked about) as well as broader social categories (i.e. speaker background). One possible interpretation of this finding is that
real-life opportunities to interact with other speakers can serve as resources for using cognitive strategies. Those real-life occasions can prompt learners to not only notice indirect meaning, but also to reflect more deeply on the motivations behind such moves, as well as the immediate and wider context in which the interaction is taking place.

In summary, while learners of Japanese were conscious of the focal pragmatic feature of indirectness during the strategy training session, they experienced difficulty in noticing and reporting on instances of the feature due to the nature of indirectness and the resources they consulted. However, it appears that learners may be driven to notice, analyse, and attempt to resolve confusion arising from indirectness when there are perceived consequences involved for successful communication, as in a face-to-face interaction.

5. Discussion

Building on Schmidt’s (1993) noticing hypothesis and effects of explicit instruction established in the literature (Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019), this study investigated the efficacy of explicit strategy instruction in promoting L2 Chinese and Japanese learners’ noticing of pragmatics phenomena (conversation opening/closing and indirect meaning) in real-life language resources. We pursued strategy instruction as an alternative approach to teaching pragmatics after observing limitations of the existing literature. By equipping L2 learners with self-directed learning strategies, our intention was to develop autonomous learners who can cultivate learning opportunities on their own, to remedy for scant pragmatics resources available in the classroom. It was also our intention to arrange an opportunistic learning environment where learners could transfer their learning to real-life contexts and expand on their learning. Journal entries and interview data collected after the strategy instruction revealed both opportunities and challenges for self-directed pragmatics learning.

5.1 Opportunities

We found that metacognitive and cognitive strategies, adapted from Oxford’s (2011) strategic self-regulation model, had a positive impact on self-directed learning in that they helped learners manage and organise their own learning out of class. As a function of metacognitive strategies of attention, planning, and monitoring, learners were able to direct their attention to focal pragmatic features using the language resources provided by the researchers and brainstormed on their own. Learners were able to report on the pragmatic features they noticed in their surroundings and present an analysis of the features by interpreting the linguistic forms and contextual elements surrounding the features. Their interpretations were grounded in the cognitive strategies introduced in the instruc-
tion. Using video clips, role-plays, and group discussions, they learned how to interpret a focal pragmatic act from multiple dimensions – linguistic forms, communicative goals, and contextual elements affecting one's linguistic choice.

As Oxford (2011) claims, cognitive strategies are responsible for information processing and knowledge building. Clearly, our participants were able to draw on the metacognitive strategy of reasoning to process information at multiple levels (i.e. form, function, and context) and construct pragmatic knowledge around the levels. In some cases, learners were able to go beyond the learned pragmatic features by attending to the sequences surrounding the features (Excerpt (8)) or inferring the speaker's intention for using the features (Excerpt (13)). These findings indicate that, like grammar and vocabulary, pragmatics can be learned in a self-directed manner. Learning strategies can help learners attend to a complex relationship among form, function, and context of use, and extract it from input for analysis and reflection. Learning strategies did help “empower students by allowing them to take control of the language learning process” (Cohen, 1998, p. 70). Our study adds to the current literature of strategy instruction. As Plonsky (2011) revealed, there is imbalance among the aspects of learning targeted in strategy instruction. Pragmatics being one of the aspects, our findings revealed the potential of strategy training in cultivating self-guided, independent learning of pragmatics in a way that formal classrooms or instructional studies cannot.

5.2 Challenges

While the findings support the benefit of strategy instruction for detecting focal pragmatic features in context, the benefit was not always clear-cut. The benefit was observed differently depending on the types of learning strategies and focal pragmatic features. First, we observed learners’ unbalanced use of metacognitive strategies. Among the three metacognitive strategies taught – (1) focus and plan, (2) obtain resources and implement plans, and (3) monitor and evaluate – the second strategy was underused, as reflected in learners’ reliance on media as primary resources. Although learners were informed of a variety of resources available other than media (e.g. Chinese Corner), they were not able to seek those resources actively. Primary reasons for this tendency, as indicated in interview data, are twofold: learners did not come across occasions for face-to-face communication in a foreign language context, and it was difficult for learners to focus on pragmatics in naturally flowing communication.

Unbalanced use was also found in cognitive strategies. Journal data showed that learners actively used the strategy of reasoning (i.e. reasoning the connection between linguistic forms and context of their occurrence), but they did not make use of the strategy of conceptualising. The conceptualisation strategy involves categorising and sequencing units of information, and comparing and contrasting across units (Oxford, 2011). Through these processes, we can synthe-
sise different information units by combining similar items and distinguishing between different items. Learners practised the strategy of conceptualising when they categorised different linguistic expressions by function and situation, and compared them across scenarios. Yet, when they attended to real-life situations, they reported their observations one-by-one as isolated events; they did not compare across events nor draw similarities among them. These findings indicate that the higher-level cognitive strategies (conceptualising and synthesising) were not accessible to learners even after instruction. This could be because the instruction was relatively short (one 1-hour session), or because those higher-order strategies were not emphasised enough during the instruction. It remains for future research to develop materials specifically aimed at developing higher-order cognitive strategies.

The most notable challenge facing self-directed pragmatics learning found in the data is that not all pragmatic features were detected to the same degree. Unlike the Chinese learners, who regularly made notes of their focal pragmatic features of conversation opening/closing, the Japanese learners rarely reported their observations of indirect communication in journals. At the same time, Chinese learners reported on conversation opening far more frequently than on closing. These skewed distributions of noticing are, in part, due to the different degrees of saliency among the focal pragmatic features. Conversation opening and closing are clearly marked by discourse boundaries (beginning and end of a conversation) and thus are relatively easy to identify compared with indirect meaning. Conversation openings are even more noticeable because of the conventional expressions used to signal opening, while conversation closings can be less marked and ambiguous. Indirect meaning, on the other hand, is not as salient because it occurs in the middle of a conversation (as opposed to the beginning or end). Unless there are conventional expressions attached, it is difficult to detect the moment of indirectness in a naturally flowing conversation, particularly since such a moment occurs in a split second, making it hard to remember (Excerpt (11)). Furthermore, consequence of communication style (direct or indirect) is a personal matter, affecting the speakers who are directly involved in the conversation. When learners take the role of an observer and watch someone else’s conversation in media, they might be less likely to notice how meaning is communicated since it has no direct impact in their lives (Excerpt (12)). Hence, limited opportunities for interaction can be another reason why Japanese learners were not able to report instances of indirect communication. This point also resonates with the fact that learners underused the metacognitive strategy of ‘obtaining resources’ as discussed earlier. Primary reliance on media as resources probably restricted the opportunity to detect certain pragmatic features, particularly when the target features were not salient.
6. Conclusion

This study was a preliminary attempt to examine whether the taxonomy of pragmatics-learning strategies (Cohen, 2008; Taguchi, 2018) can be materialised in a form of strategy instruction and whether the instruction can actually help manage learners’ efforts to learn focal pragmatic features outside of class. Results were promising as evidenced in Chinese learners’ frequent attention, detection, and analysis of conversation opening/closing. Yet, challenges were also notable, as seen in the constraints that Japanese learners exhibited in their noticing of indirect meaning. Similarly, several cognitive/metacognitive strategies were under-represented in learners’ use. These findings indicate that not all pragmatic targets and strategy types benefit equally from strategy training. Future research should take into account these inconclusive findings to further explore the efficacy of strategy instruction.

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, we focused on only two pragmatic features with a small group of 10 learners of high-intermediate and advanced proficiency, which makes it difficult to generalise the results to a wider context. Further investigations are needed with a larger number of participants over different proficiency levels and pragmatic targets. Second, strategy instruction can be expanded in future studies. Given that strategy training was new to participants, it is questionable whether the one-hour session was sufficient. Since we found that some strategies were under-used by participants, several instruction sessions can prove more effective. Third, the structure and format of journal entries require some modifications. Considering that most of the Japanese journal entries dealt with non-pragmatic issues, future studies may consider using questions that guide learners to focus more specifically on indirect meaning. Finally, and as revealed for the Japanese group specifically, the limited opportunities for engaging in face-to-face interactions in L2 constituted a significant challenge for learners to apply what they learned in the strategy training session to their own L2. Future research can provide more resources to learners in which they can interact with other speakers such as in language exchange applications.

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