

A Thematic Analysis of Spontaneous Learning Resource Utilization in Japanese Language Learners with Different Levels of Noticing

Research Overview

This study examined differences in perceptions of spontaneous learning resource utilization and learning behaviors among language learners with different levels of noticing language-related information. Thematic analysis of interviews with ten Japanese language learners revealed group differences in motivation, resource selection and self-regulated learning process, highlighting implications for fostering autonomous learning.

Purpose

In today's information-oriented society, autonomous learners need the ability to sustain learning by independently utilizing learning opportunities and resources embedded in their environment.

In foreign language learning, learners can acquire insights into language acquisition not only from teachers' explicit instruction but also through observing others' use of target language. Such ability to autonomously notice language learning-related information from the environment is fundamental to speaking skill development. However, the information-processing model (Ichikawa et al., 2009) and affordance theory (Van Lier, 2000) suggest that learners differ in whether they perceive objectively existing people or objects as learning resources, and how they extract and process information from the same resource.

Previous studies have paid limited attention to learners' spontaneous use of surrounding resources. Although intervention studies have introduced diverse resources through instruction, effects on learning proficiency have been inconsistent (Hamilton et al., 2024), suggesting that external support alone is insufficient to develop learner autonomy. To address this issue, Li (2025) developed a questionnaire measuring learners' spontaneous noticing of language learning-related components from surrounding resources, showing that some learners noticed a wider range of information more frequently than others. However, the questionnaire could not capture how such individual differences in noticing were reflected in everyday learning behaviors, such as how they perceive and utilize resources in surroundings. To better understand the cognitive processes underlying autonomous learning and foster such learners, a closer qualitative examination of resource-use processes is needed.

Therefore, the present study examined differences in perceptions of spontaneous resource use and everyday learning behaviors among learners with different levels of noticing.

Methods

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Chinese university students majoring in Japanese between July and September 2023. Prior to the interviews, a questionnaire survey (Li, 2025) was administered to 201 university students to assess the frequency of noticing components related to communicative competence. Based on the scores, learners were classified into high-, middle-, and low-noticing groups. The present study included 5 participants each from the high- and low-noticing groups.

The interviews focused on speaking skill development, drawing on the view that speaking proficiency relies heavily on learners' own noticing (Walker, 2011). Participants were asked about their use of language learning resources beyond explicit teacher instruction to improve speaking skill. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis to examine differences in the spontaneous resource use between high- and low- noticing learners.

Results and Discussion

Based on thematic analysis and studies of learning strategies and self-regulated learning (e.g., Murayama, 2007; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011), five categories of autonomous resource use (Table 1) were identified: motivation, resource selection, forethought, performance, and reflection. The main differences between high- and low- noticing groups are summarized below.

Regarding motivation, both groups used resources for both learning and entertainment purposes. However, learners with clear prior learning intentions accounted for 80% of high-noticing group, whereas none were observed in low-noticing group. In contrast, 60% learners in low-noticing group lacked motivation to continue using resources due to limited interest and perceived usefulness of resources.

Regarding resource selection, the cumulative numbers of resources used were 16 and 8 in high- and low-noticing groups respectively. Learners who utilized language learning videos or interactions with native speakers accounted for 80% of high-noticing group but only 20% of low-noticing group. Moreover, teachers introduced non-textbook resources such as anime more often in high-noticing group (60% vs. 20%), suggesting that instructional practices may influence learners' resource use.

The process of resource use was examined across the phases of forethought, performance, and reflection. First, regarding goals for resource use, low-noticing group used resources for reasons related to habitual language exposure and task completion. Second, all learners in high-noticing group engaged in learning behavior, whereas 60% of low-noticing group remained at the level of passive exposure, with consistently lower use of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and output practice. Third, regarding reflection on resource use, both groups reported positive effects on motivation and knowledge or skill development. Furthermore, high-noticing group more often reflected on relation use in relation to classroom-learning limitations, whereas low-noticing group emphasized intuitive experiences with the target language and culture.

Overall, high-noticing group used resources more intentionally and strategically to improve speaking, while low-noticing group showed more passive and habitual use. The two groups also differed in their perceptions of difficulties in speaking acquisition and future strategies for improvement, suggesting a possible relationship with resource utilization.

Table 1 Comparison of spontaneous resource use classifications between the two groups

Categories	High-noticing group	Low-noticing group
Subcategories	(Participant ID)	
Labels	(H1-5)	(L1-5)
Motivation for learning resource utilization		
Lack of intention to continue use		L1, L4, L5
Exposure to resources without learning intention	H1, H4, H5	L1, L3, L5

Incidental learning through resource use	H2, H3	L1, L3
Exposure to resources with learning intention	H2, H3, H4, H5	
Resource selection		
Textbooks and school materials	H2	L3
Teacher-provided non-textbook resources	H3, H4, H5	L4
Learner-oriented videos	H2, H4, H5	L5
Authentic media content (non-instructional content)	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5	L1, L3, L5
Interaction with native speakers	H1, H2, H4, H5	L5
Forethought phase of utilizing resource		
Comprehension-oriented	H2, H3	L3
Knowledge and skill improvement-oriented	H2, H3	L3, L4, L5
Habitual language exposure-oriented		L3, L4
Task completion-oriented		L4
Performance phase of utilizing resource		
Passive exposure		L1, L3, L5
Cognitive strategy use	H1, H2, H4, H5	L4
Metacognitive strategy use	H3	
Output practice	H2, H3, H5	L1
Reflection phase of utilizing resource		
Positive effects on motivation	H1, H4, H5	L1, L5
Negative effects on motivation		L5
Learning benefits for knowledge and skill development	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5	L1, L3, L4, L5
Perceived difficulties in acquiring speaking skills		
Lack of learning environment and practicing opportunities	H1, H3	L5
Insufficient language knowledge	H2, H3, H4	L1, L3
Limited communicative ability	H2, H3, H4	L2, L4
Low perceived difficulty in speaking		L1, L3
Future strategies for improving speaking skills		
Cognitive strategies	H2, H5	L1, L5

External resource strategies	H1, H3, H4, H5	L3, L4, L5
Metacognitive strategies	H1, H5	

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