

# Perception of Malaysian Learners on the Use of Written Communication Strategies in Mandarin, French and Japanese

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the perception of Malaysian learners on the use of written communication strategies in French, Mandarin and Japanese language learning. The subjects consisted of 2nd and 3rd year Malaysian students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. A total of 173 subjects participated in this study. The main instrument used was a 2-section questionnaire on the demographic and the perception on the use of written communication strategies. The items for the questionnaires on the perception of learners on communication strategies were adapted from Dörnyei (1995) Taxonomy of Communication Strategies. The overall findings indicated that the learners perceived to be using the written communication strategies moderately. The results across the three languages further indicated that 'appeal for help' and 'topic avoidance' were perceived to be frequently used by French, Mandarin and Japanese learners. It was suggested that further intensive research should be conducted to look into the commonly used communication strategies to develop a comprehensive framework for the incorporation of communication strategy in French, Mandarin and Japanese language learning instruction, materials and tasks for Malaysian learners.

**Keywords:** French, Japanese and Mandarin language learning, perception, written communication strategies, Malaysian learners

## 1. Introduction

One of the obvious targets of learning a foreign language is for the learners to be capable to transfer their thoughts by communicating in that particular language. The enhancement of the communication abilities in foreign languages has become particularly important within the framework of an increasingly competitive and global labour market, multilingualism being the latest challenge a graduate should answer to (Ciobanu & Bujor, 2011). Yet, learning a new language is no easy task. Since the amount of information to be absorbed by language learners is high, they will resort to use different strategies in performing the tasks and processing the new input they face (Hismanoglu, 2000). Therefore, learning a foreign language effectively means using adequate learning strategies (Meschyan & Hernandez, 2002).

Research findings agree that learners' motivation is one of the key factors affecting student performance and learning success (Cole, Field, & Harris, 2004). Amongst the most significant factors that encourage learners' motivation are their interests in the content and perceived relevance of the course (Burke & Moore, 2003). If learners perceive some benefit to their learning, they will likely be more motivated to perform well.

Ellis (1997) mentioned that learners of a second or foreign language will admit they frequently faced difficulties to communicate in the targeted language. Ellis (1997) further mentioned that the difficulties of conveying their thoughts were due to their incomplete knowledge. Therefore, they will resort to various technics and ways to get their message across, and in the context of this research, these ways or technics were referred to as strategies.

There is a considerable body of literature on the awareness of the communication strategies used by the learners. In view of past researches on the perception of strategies used in language learning, scholars such as Goh (1998) & Victori (1999) examined learners' knowledge and the use of strategies in acquiring a new language. In his study, Goh (1998) compared the awareness of the strategies and actual use among 40 ESL tertiary-level Chinese learners, and found that all the strategies used during listening were also reported to be similarly useful for facilitating comprehension. Nonetheless, the number of students who identified specific tactics as useful was

considerably less than the number who actually used them. Victori (1999), on the other hand collected the data from two good and two poor Spanish writers in advanced EFL classes at the University of Barcelona. Her findings indicated that the two poor writers' reported strategy knowledge did not always coincide with what they actually did, whereas the reported behavior of the good pair aligned more with their practice.

Another research was conducted by Lin (2007), who studied the perception of Taiwanese EFL students of learning the communication strategies. The result indicated that though the learner admitted that "topic avoidance" was relevant; they nevertheless disagreed about "keeping silence" because of their concern about politeness. Her findings also indicated that students had mixed views about "message abandonment" that ranged from a neutral position to appropriate and inappropriate usages. For message replacement strategy, most of the students believed that it was convenient to have access to getting to know their interlocutor's intended meaning, while for the inter-language strategy, most of the students perceived that it offered a function of enhancing their comprehensibility in English communication.

In Malaysia, any language which is learned and used besides Malay language is considered as a foreign language (Wan Zarina et al., 2007). Some of the foreign languages which are commonly introduced and offered as compulsory elective or free elective foreign language courses in Malaysia's Public Higher Educational Institutions are English, Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese and French languages. In fact, these foreign languages were introduced in the national secondary schools as part of the 1996 Education Act (Yin & Ho, 2013).

The French language, though are linguistically different from the local languages, namely Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil, are among the most popular foreign languages learnt (Halim et al., 2009a). The striking differences in the grammar, syntax and pronunciation, though present the difficulties to Malaysians learning French do not stop them from learning the language, both for personal and professional development. In order to help these learners acquire the competence in these two languages, various strategies are used, which are learning and communicative strategies (Halim et al., 2009a).

As for Mandarin language, Yin & Ho (2013) discovered that the majority of the learners think that learning Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation is the easiest part, while learning the Chinese characters is the hardest part in learning Mandarin language. However, although for them, learning Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation as easy, it is only easy in term of identifying the pronunciation but not in term of uttering the pronunciation. Therefore, it can also be said that they assume that speaking test is hard. Therefore, to be able to pronounce well, the students need to pay more attention and do more practice.

The Japanese language, on the other hand, is perceived to be a handful language for nonnatives for many reasons. One of the aspects of difficulties of the Japanese language is its complex writing system. Unless one is familiar with Chinese characters (kanji), many years of study are necessary to achieve complete literacy. Another aspect of difficulty of any language including Japanese lies in the fact that a person's speech can vary depending on the situation and on the person, one is talking to. A student of the Japanese language has to get familiar with Japanese society and customs in order to understand the detailed rules of the different levels of speech (Hossain & Uddin, 2008).

The problems faced by the learners to overcome these difficulties lead to the utilization of various strategies, e.g. learning and communication strategy. But then, one has to use the strategy wisely for it to be of any use. Hence, this need to better understand how to implement and use the communication strategies leads to the research question of this study:

- 1) Which of the strategies were perceived extensively used and the least used by the students?
- 2) Which were the strategies students perceived to be using the most and the least in learning French, Mandarin and Japanese?
- 3) Did the strategies differ according to the foreign language learnt?
- 4) Which were the strategies students perceived to be using the most and the least across gender?
- 5) Did the use of the strategies differ according to the gender?

Therefore, the objectives of this research were to list down the types of strategies perceived by learners of French, Mandarin and Japanese as a foreign language and to investigate the strategies they used the most and the least.

## 2. Methodology

This exploratory study utilized quantitative method of data collection. The subjects consisted of 2nd and 3rd year French (n=56), Mandarin (n=59) and Japanese (n=58) language students from different fields of humanities, social and sciences at Universiti Putra Malaysia, with the age range of 20 to 24. A total of 173 subjects

participated in this study, 34 males and 139 females. The instrument used in the study was a 2-part questionnaire consisted of 34 items, 5 items were for the subjects' demography and 29 items were for the perception on the use of communication strategies. The items for the perception of the use of communication strategies were using a five-point Likert scale (Scale 1 denoting never to be used and 5 for the most frequently used).

The mean value for the Likert scale used were then grouped using The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 17.0 as per the items in Table 2.1 below to obtain the results of respondents' perceptions for low, medium and high usage of the strategies listed (Scale 1 denoting low frequency and 3 for high frequency). For the use of communication strategies by the learners, the study applied the items in the Taxonomy of Communication Strategies by Dörnyei & Scott (1997) as an instrument to investigate the frequency used by Malay learners. As Dörnyei & Scott's (1997) strategies were catered to oral communication, the researcher eliminated those inapplicable to the writing.

In order to analyze the written communication strategies French, Mandarin and Japanese learners perceived to use, the researcher divided the questions into categories below:

Table 1. List of strategies according the items of the questionnaires

| Strategy                           | Item of the questionnaire |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Code-switching (CS)                | Item 1, 2, 3, 25, 26 & 27 |
| Literal translation (LT)           | Item 4, 5, 6, 10 & 11     |
| Approximation (APP)                | Item 18 & 20              |
| Word Coinage (WC)                  | Item 8 & 9                |
| Message abandonment (MAB)          | Item 13                   |
| Circumlocution (CIRC)              | Item 14, 16 & 17          |
| Message avoidance (MAV)            | Item 12 & 15              |
| The use of all-purpose words (APW) | Item 7, 19 & 21           |
| Foreignizing (FRG)                 | Item 8, 9, 22 & 23        |
| Expressing uncertainties (UNC)     | Item 28                   |
| Use of learning aids (AID)         | Item 29                   |
| Use of nonlinguistic signs (NLC)   | Item 24                   |

### 3. Results and Discussion

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 17.0 was used to complete the analysis of the collected data, which arises from the participants' respondents of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, standard deviations and percentages, were implemented in order to investigate the demographic data and the perception on the use of communication strategies. The demographic data is as follows:

Table 2. Background of the respondents

|                        | Frequency  | Percentage |
|------------------------|------------|------------|
| <i>Gender</i>          |            |            |
| Male                   | 34         | 19.7       |
| Female                 | 139        | 80.3       |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>173</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <i>Race</i>            |            |            |
| Malay                  | 84         | 48.6       |
| Chinese                | 74         | 42.8       |
| Indian                 | 2          | 1.2        |
| Others                 | 13         | 7.5        |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>173</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <i>Language learnt</i> |            |            |
| French                 | 56         | 32.4       |
| Mandarin               | 59         | 34.1       |
| Japanese               | 58         | 33.5       |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>173</b> | <b>100</b> |

The majority of the respondents were of female students (80.3%). From Table 2 above, most of the respondents were from Malay and Chinese background, and their repartition across foreign languages was almost equal. Looking at the overall perception on the communication strategies used by the respondents, the overall result is as followed:

Table 3. Overall means and standard deviation of the perception of respondents on the CSs used

| Types of CSs                   | N   | Minimum | Maximum | Mean   | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Code-switching                 | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.3006 | .49632         |
| Literal translation            | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.3699 | .51896         |
| Use of all-purpose words       | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.5723 | .51909         |
| Word coinage                   | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.1792 | .64450         |
| Topic avoidance                | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.7225 | .44904         |
| Message abandonment            | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.1734 | .53264         |
| Circumlocution                 | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.4682 | .53415         |
| Approximation / Generalization | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.6474 | .52546         |
| Foreignizing                   | 173 | 1       | 3       | 1.8439 | .69377         |
| Use of non-linguistic sign     | 173 | 1       | 3       | 1.9422 | .68803         |
| Expression of incomprehension  | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.4046 | .65448         |
| Using aid (dictionaries, etc.) | 173 | 1       | 3       | 2.8902 | .31358         |

Table 3 presents the overall means and standard deviation for written communication strategy used by French, Mandarin and Japanese students respectively. A mean score of 2.3 and above rated as high use, a mean between 1.6 and 2.3 rated as moderate use and mean less than 1.66 rated as low use. From the output shown in the table, the highest mean score (M=2.8902, SD=0.31358) was for “using aid” strategy while foreignizing strategy obtained the lowest mean score (M=1.8439, SD=0.69377) among other strategies. The further cross-check across the three languages gives the following result:

Table 4. Means of the perception of respondents on the CSs used across languages

| Types of CSs                   | N   | French<br>N=56 | Mandarin<br>N=59 | Japanese<br>N=58 | Total<br>N=173 |
|--------------------------------|-----|----------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Code-switching                 | 173 | 2.1250         | 2.5085           | 2.2586           | 2.3006         |
| Literal translation            | 173 | 2.3214         | 2.6271           | 2.2152           | 2.3699         |
| Use of all-purpose words       | 173 | 2.4464         | 2.5254           | 2.7414           | 2.5723         |
| Word coinage                   | 173 | 1.8036         | 2.3729           | 2.3448           | 2.1792         |
| Topic avoidance                | 173 | 2.7500         | 2.7119           | 2.7069           | 2.7225         |
| Message abandonment            | 173 | 1.8214         | 2.2881           | 2.3966           | 2.1734         |
| Circumlocution                 | 173 | 2.4107         | 2.5932           | 2.3966           | 2.4682         |
| Approximation / Generalization | 173 | 2.3929         | 2.7966           | 2.7414           | 2.6474         |
| Foreignizing                   | 173 | 1.7679         | 1.5593           | 2.2069           | 1.8439         |
| Use of non-linguistic sign     | 173 | 2.0536         | 1.7119           | 2.0690           | 1.9422         |
| Expression of incomprehension  | 173 | 2.0536         | 1.7119           | 2.0690           | 1.9422         |
| Using aid (dictionaries, etc.) | 173 | 2.9464         | 2.8644           | 2.8621           | 2.8902         |

From Table 4 above, it is found that for “using aid” strategy perceived to be highly used by the three languages (M=2.8902). Code-switching appears to be highly used by Mandarin learners (M=2.5085) as opposed to French and Japanese learners (M<2.3) who perceived to use the strategy moderately. Japanese learners perceived to be using literal translation moderately (M=2.2152) compared to the other two language learners. On the other hand, for word coinage strategy, it was found that French learners perceived not to use the strategy as frequently as Mandarin and Japanese learners (M=1.8036). Looking at the foreignizing strategy, the data showed that Mandarin learners perceived to be rarely use the strategy (M=1.5593). Nevertheless, for approximation strategy, Japanese and Mandarin learners perceived to highly use the strategy as opposed to French learners (M=2.3929).

To find out whether these differences were significant, ANOVA test was conducted, the results are as per Table 5 below:

Table 5. ANOVA test for perceived communication strategies by language learnt

|                            |                | SS     | df  | MS    | F      | Sig. |
|----------------------------|----------------|--------|-----|-------|--------|------|
| Literal translation        | Between Groups | 6.709  | 2   | 3.355 | 14.396 | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 39.614 | 170 | .233  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 46.324 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Code-switching             | Between Groups | 4.378  | 2   | 2.189 | 9.796  | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 37.991 | 170 | .223  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 42.370 | 172 |       |        |      |
| All-purpose word           | Between Groups | 2.675  | 2   | 1.337 | 5.206  | .006 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 43.672 | 170 | .257  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 46.347 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Word Coinage               | Between Groups | 11.706 | 2   | 5.853 | 16.655 | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 59.739 | 170 | .351  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 71.445 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Topic avoidance            | Between Groups | .063   | 2   | .032  | .155   | .857 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 34.619 | 170 | .204  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 34.682 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Message abandonment        | Between Groups | 10.602 | 2   | 5.301 | 23.595 | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 38.195 | 170 | .225  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 48.798 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Circumlocution             | Between Groups | 1.405  | 2   | .702  | 2.505  | .085 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 47.670 | 170 | .280  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 49.075 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Approximation              | Between Groups | 5.454  | 2   | 2.727 | 11.028 | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 42.037 | 170 | .247  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 47.491 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Foreignizing               | Between Groups | 12.744 | 2   | 6.372 | 15.466 | .000 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 70.042 | 170 | .412  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 82.786 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Non-linguistic signs       | Between Groups | 4.757  | 2   | 2.378 | 5.274  | .006 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 76.665 | 170 | .451  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 81.422 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Displaying incomprehension | Between Groups | 4.757  | 2   | 2.378 | 5.274  | .006 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 76.665 | 170 | .451  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 81.422 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Seeking aid                | Between Groups | .262   | 2   | .131  | 1.338  | .265 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 16.651 | 170 | .098  |        |      |
|                            | Total          | 16.913 | 172 |       |        |      |

Note: \* Significant at  $p < .05$ .

As the findings appearing in Table 5 show, there is no significant difference between groups for seeking aid strategy, circumlocution and topic avoidance strategy, with ( $p > .05$ ), as opposed to the other strategies. Looking at the perception on the communication strategies used across gender, the result is as Table 6 below:

Table 6. Means of the perception of respondents on the CSs used across gender

| Types of CSs                   | N   | Male<br>N=34 | Female<br>N=139 | Total<br>N=173 |
|--------------------------------|-----|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Code-switching                 | 173 | 2.1765       | 2.3309          | 2.3006         |
| Literal translation            | 173 | 2.2353       | 2.4029          | 2.3699         |
| Use of all-purpose words       | 173 | 2.3529       | 2.6259          | 2.5723         |
| Word coinage                   | 173 | 2.0882       | 2.2014          | 2.1792         |
| Topic avoidance                | 173 | 2.7353       | 2.7194          | 2.7225         |
| Message abandonment            | 173 | 2.1765       | 2.1727          | 2.1734         |
| Circumlocution                 | 173 | 2.2647       | 2.5180          | 2.4682         |
| Approximation / Generalization | 173 | 2.3235       | 2.7266          | 2.6474         |
| Foreignizing                   | 173 | 2.0588       | 1.7914          | 1.8439         |
| Use of non-linguistic sign     | 173 | 2.0294       | 1.9209          | 1.9422         |
| Expression of incomprehension  | 173 | 2.0294       | 1.9209          | 1.9422         |
| Using aid (dictionaries, etc.) | 173 | 2.8235       | 2.9065          | 2.8902         |

From Table 6, it is found that for “using aid” strategy (M=2.8902) and topic avoidance strategy (M=2.7255) perceived to be highly used by both genders. Code-switching, using all-purpose words, circumlocution and approximation appears to be highly used by female learners, as opposed to male learners. On the other hand, for foreignizing strategy, it was found that male learners (M=2.0588) perceived to use the strategy more frequently than female learners (M=1.7914). To find out whether these differences were significant, ANOVA test was again conducted, the results are as per Table 7 below:

Table 7. ANOVA test for perceived communication strategies by gender

|                     |                | SS     | df  | MS    | F      | Sig. |
|---------------------|----------------|--------|-----|-------|--------|------|
| Literal translation | Between Groups | .767   | 1   | .767  | 2.880  | .092 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 45.556 | 171 | .266  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 46.324 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Code-switching      | Between Groups | .652   | 1   | .652  | 2.672  | .104 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 41.718 | 171 | .244  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 42.370 | 172 |       |        |      |
| All-purpose word    | Between Groups | 2.035  | 1   | 2.035 | 7.855  | .006 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 44.311 | 171 | .259  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 46.347 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Word Coinage        | Between Groups | .350   | 1   | .350  | .842   | .360 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 71.095 | 171 | .416  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 71.445 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Topic avoidance     | Between Groups | .007   | 1   | .007  | .034   | .854 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 34.675 | 171 | .203  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 34.682 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Message abandonment | Between Groups | .000   | 1   | .000  | .001   | .970 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 48.797 | 171 | .285  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 48.798 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Circumlocution      | Between Groups | 1.752  | 1   | 1.752 | 6.333  | .013 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 47.323 | 171 | .277  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 49.075 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Approximation       | Between Groups | 4.439  | 1   | 4.439 | 17.630 | .000 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 43.053 | 171 | .252  |        |      |
|                     | Total          | 47.491 | 172 |       |        |      |
| Foreignizing        | Between Groups | 1.954  | 1   | 1.954 | 4.134  | .044 |
|                     | Within Groups  | 80.832 | 171 | .473  |        |      |

|                            |                | SS     | df  | MS   | F     | Sig. |
|----------------------------|----------------|--------|-----|------|-------|------|
| Non-linguistic signs       | Total          | 82.786 | 172 |      |       |      |
|                            | Between Groups | .322   | 1   | .322 | .679  | .411 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 81.100 | 171 | .474 |       |      |
| Displaying incomprehension | Total          | 81.422 | 172 |      |       |      |
|                            | Between Groups | .322   | 1   | .322 | .679  | .411 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 81.100 | 171 | .474 |       |      |
| Seeking aid                | Total          | 81.422 | 172 |      |       |      |
|                            | Between Groups | .188   | 1   | .188 | 1.922 | .167 |
|                            | Within Groups  | 16.725 | 171 | .098 |       |      |
|                            | Total          | 16.913 | 172 |      |       |      |

Note: \* Significant at  $p < .05$ .

From Table 7, it is found that there was a significant difference between groups for foreignizing strategy ( $F=4.134$ ,  $p=0.044$ ), using all-purpose words strategy ( $F=7.855$ ,  $p=0.06$ ), circumlocution strategy ( $F=6.333$ ,  $p=0.013$ ) and approximation strategy ( $F=17.630$ ,  $p=0.000$ ).

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, this exploratory study aims to find the types of strategies perceived used by Malaysian learners of French, Mandarin and Japanese. As the findings of this study indicated, the awareness of the communication strategies used by the students can be a valuable resource or means which can pave the way for the development of the teaching pedagogy in French writing skill. As Horwitz (1988) reported, learners' beliefs regarding language learning are founded on limited knowledge and experience, and these beliefs are likely to influence students' effectiveness of their learning. Teachers need to be attentive to, and conscious of, students' beliefs.

This exploratory study about the writing strategies is useful for learners of French, Mandarin and Japanese as a second or foreign language, as to identify in a later study, which strategies are most useful for them, and which are not. Knowing, understanding, and using the types of good strategies can help the learners' learning process go smoothly and clearly. For the teachers, the findings of this study and other similar studies in this vein can provide them with insight in their curriculum development as where they should emphasis when using their teaching techniques. It would also be prudent to raise their level of conscious awareness about the pros and cons of using the communication strategies, and to encourage them to view CS as an effective strategy, but to use it cautiously and judiciously.

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