

Investigating Learner Autonomy through Self-Directed Study Programs

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Abstract

This essay is a description of a small scale action research project designed to investigate and encourage learner autonomy and increase student motivation amongst a class of second year English students at a college in Japan. The key research questions are:

- 1. What examples of autonomous learning behaviour do students believe they practice?*
- 2. What kind of out of class activities are popular with students and do they see these activities as being useful ways of studying English?*
- 3. Can students be encouraged to become more autonomous by participating in study activities that promote autonomous learning?*

The research took the form of students making their own specific study goal, working on them independently throughout the semester, maintaining a journal of their progress and giving a small presentation about their independent study to the rest of the class at the end of the semester. Data was collected through observation of the projects as well as student answers to a questionnaire regarding their own autonomous learning habits, given twice, at the onset and end of the study. A separate questionnaire designed to collect more feedback about the project was also given.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has long been a vibrant area of research in the field of second language acquisition. The inception of the concept is usually attributed to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project which sought to modernise and democratise second language learning in Europe beginning 1971 (Trim 2007). Although the field has many branches, and debates over definitions, redefinitions, and types of learner autonomy are still in progress, the purpose of the small scale research project is simple. It is a teacher seeking an answer to the broad question, "How can I help my students to learn?"

With this question as a starting point and influenced by the researcher's interest and previous study of learner autonomy, the vague question was morphed into the slightly less abstract, "How can I help my students to be more self-sufficient in their language learning?" As the new semester approached this was further refined into the three questions which are listed above in the abstract.

As mentioned above, learner autonomy is a broad field and there is considerable overlap into other theories, constructs and areas of study such as motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) and learner strategies (Wenden, 1991), among others.

Holec, a pioneer in the field of learner autonomy offers this often quoted definition, "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (cited in Benson, 2011, p.59). Little (2007) provides a concise list of qualities necessary for becoming autonomous. Learners must, "develop a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p.4).

2. Literature Review

In recent years many teachers and researchers in the field of second language education have attempted to promote learner autonomy through various methods. Interest in learner autonomy has grown alongside the increasing prevalence of the concept of a learner-centered classroom, a key component of which is for, "learners to identify their own learning styles and strategies" (Nunan, 2003, p.200) as both a construct and an explicit goal in language classrooms around the world.

In discussing the links to the humanistic perspective of "learner-centeredness" Tudor (1996) writes, "Language teaching should therefore exploit students' affective and intellectual resources as fully as possible, and be linked into their continuing experience of life" (p.23). According to this viewpoint learning is most effective if it is relevant to the students, is done in a way which suits them and takes them towards their individual goals.

This is obviously easier said than done however. Although, the terms are not completely synonymous, there is some relationship between autonomy and individuality. Integrating autonomy into formalised language education at an institution, where students taking a course will be assessed, ideally by the same criteria, given a final grade and divided into those "passing" and those "failing,"

provides a challenge. As learner autonomy in second language education is “essentially concerned with the organization of formal education” (Benson 2011, p. 9), it is clear that teachers also have a key role to play in its promotion. In an article outlining 9 steps for integrating notions of learner autonomy into curriculum, Nunan (2003) acknowledges that few students enter a course of study with the aptitude of becoming autonomous.

Teachers who are committed to the concepts of learner-centeredness and autonomy must therefore help their learners to develop this knowledge and skills. They can do this by incorporating into their teaching a set of learning process goals to sit alongside language content goals. (p. 94)

As language teachers we may see ourselves as teaching not only language but also teaching the learning of language a goal of producing competent language users and competent language learners.

Much has been written about the particular learning context of students in countries such as Japan and whether learner autonomy is a relevant goal in a society where teacher and student roles are seen as clearly defined, and influenced by the parameters of society and a traditionally collectivist culture. In addition to this, the reality in many classrooms in Japan is that teachers are under a lot of pressure to follow a set curriculum closely, and feel a strong responsibility to prepare students for entrance exams to high schools and universities (Nishino & Watanabe 2008).

At the tertiary level, interest in learner development and autonomy continues to grow and numerous studies into developing learner autonomy at Japanese universities continue to be conducted and published. While many of these studies report that students some reluctance to take control of their own learning and a persistent attachment to passive learning habits, the results have largely been positive.

Morrison writing of the promotion of learner autonomy at Kanda University suggests that the study methods of students who have achieved highly in entrance exams etc. cannot be directly applied to the university context, “(T)he strategies that worked so well at high school are no longer fit for the purpose. In recognition of this, the university promotes out-of-class learning with a purpose” (Morrison 2012). To this end, the fostering of learner autonomy has become a major goal at the university with a centre created to help accomplish this.

The study of Iimuro and Berger (2010) attempted to introduce learner autonomy to first year English students. While the course was highly structured, with specific criteria that had to be met, it necessitated students to take a degree of control over their learning. In the program, students were expected to:

1. *Develop their own English study goals and plans;*
2. *Work towards their own goals and plans;*
3. *Use time outside of class;*
4. *Be responsible for their own study;*
5. *Find study materials suited to their needs;*
6. *Go to the SALC;*
7. *Consult the teacher or English Advisor (in the SALC) on their study when help is needed. (p.129)*

The authors note that, “a few students seemed to lack the ability and the understanding of this project in finding the right material for themselves.” These students continued to use materials selected by the teacher and seemed unable or unwilling to shed the, “tendency of the student being teacher reliant” (Iimuro & Berger, 2010, p.130). However, this was not true of the majority of students who participated in the program

Over the three years of this study, over 80% of the students involved chose to “agree” or “somewhat agree” that the self-study program was helpful in learning English. The authors noted that common positive responses to the program included “improvement in language skills, gaining a study habit, and increase in motivation” (Iimuro & Berger, 2010, p.132).

Another recent study conducted in Japan explores the blending of online content with classroom discussion. Through use of a site called Edmodo, and drawing on the students’ experience of using social networking sites, students were given assignments to select material and topics, post resources such as articles and videos and post discussion questions which students would then engage with in the classroom setting. The authors lists one of the goals of the study as to, “promote student autonomy in using online tools to explore topics that they themselves found relevant and interesting” (Hourdequin, 2013, p.36).

While the researcher acknowledged some discomfort or reluctance to take such an active role in selection of class content, it was noted that overall, “students seemed to enjoy this freedom to introduce new content to their

classmates, and the broad variety of topics presented suggests that learners were in fact using this opportunity to pursue their own interests in English” (Hourdequin, 2013, p.39). Certainly, technology and the endless resources of the online world provide vast potential for allowing students to take a degree of control over their learning both inside and outside the classroom.

In particular, the inspiration for and design of this study owes a great deal to Stephenson and Kohyama (2003), who found a degree of success in developing learner autonomy through student project work. This study provided students with freedom to choose their own study materials, to set goals and to work independently, while giving some structure through classroom support.

With the caveats that some students are uncomfortable with the shift of responsibility and that guidance, a degree of structure and ongoing support are all necessary, the consensus seems to be that learner autonomy is a relevant construct and a worthwhile goal from both the perspective of teachers and students at universities in Japan.

Littlewood, a researcher who has published extensively regarding learner autonomy in the East Asian context writes that, “(T)he demands of a changing world will impose on learners of all cultures the need to learn without the help of teachers” (1999, p.74).

3. Participants and Background

The participants in the study were sixteen second year university students in an English for oral communication class. All were English or International Culture majors and had been streamed by their placement test results into the advanced class. At the beginning of the first year the students were motivated and enthusiastic. Over the year though, their enthusiasm and effort levels seemed to wane. For example, the textbook used for the course, like many these days, provided “Self Study” listening activities in each unit. While the first couple were done in class as a demonstration, students were instructed to do these in their own time and to have the teacher check them. Initially, many students completed these by themselves, however as the year went on this became rarer and rarer. This study was designed to increase their motivation levels and independence as English learners.

For the purpose of this research paper, I constructed a list of ideal qualities,

adapted from a variety of sources, primarily Nunan (2003) and Reiner (2010), that I would like the students to have or to begin developing.

- Be motivated to learn
- Be able to set goals and work towards them
- Be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses
- Be aware of their own learning styles and preferences
- Be able to find and select appropriate learning materials
- Be able to self-evaluate

The research was designed with these qualities and abilities in mind. Furthermore, the research attempts to answer the following research questions.

1. What examples of autonomous learning behaviour do students believe they practice?
2. Can students be encouraged to become more autonomous by participating in study activities that promote autonomous learning?
3. What kind of out of class activities are popular with students and do they see them as being useful ways of studying English?

4. Process

The study took place over the first semester of 2013, at a private university in Japan. At the beginning of the semester, students were given a brief explanation of the program, in both English and Japanese. They were then instructed to fill in a form (Appendix 1) designating an aspect of their English that they would like to improve, to set a specific study goal and to write which materials they would need. Students were also instructed to think about when and where they would do this study.

Next, they were instructed to complete a questionnaire (Appendix 2) adapted from (Dafei 2007) to gauge their individual study habits and what autonomous activities they already believed themselves to be practising. Students were also given a notebook to record their progress.

During the first few weeks of the program, about thirty minutes per week was allocated for students to bring their materials and work on their self-directed study programs in class time. This gave students the opportunity to observe what other students were doing and for the teacher to observe and give feedback on the students' course of study. Students who were using electronic

resources and were unable to bring their materials to class were instructed to observe other students' programs and to discuss their own with the teacher.

In the following weeks, students were no longer given class time to work on their projects, however were instructed to bring their notebooks to show their progress. During this time the teacher could continue to give feedback and to monitor progress.

At the end of the semester each student gave a five minute presentation about their self-directed study program.

Finally, the students were given the initial questionnaire about study habits again and another questionnaire (Appendix 3) which could be completed anonymously in either English or Japanese to collect detailed feedback and impressions about the program.

5. Discussion of Results

For simplicity, the discussion of the results will be divided into three sections according to which of the three research questions they pertain.

5.1 What examples of autonomous learning behaviour do students believe they practice?

Part 1 of the questionnaire contained twelve statements regarding autonomous learning practices. Employing a Likert Scale, participants were provided with five answer choices, never, rarely, sometimes, often and always. For the purpose of analysis, each response was calculated with a point value. "Never" was assigned the value of zero and "always" was assigned a value of 4. According to this questionnaire, a participant choosing the response "always" to each statement would be seen as a completely autonomous learner and receive a score of 48 points.

At the first instance the questionnaire was given, the 16 respondents had a mean of 23.8125 out of the possible 48 points. The highest score was 33 and the lowest was 18.

The statements that students were most likely to select the answers of "often" or "always" to were:

9. *During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc.*
10. *I know my own strengths and weaknesses in English.*

12. *I try to expose myself to English out of the classroom through books, music, movies internet etc.*

The items for which “never” or “rarely” were most reported as a response were:

3. *I preview before the class.*

5. *I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc.*

6. *I make self-exams with the exam papers chosen by myself.*

Part 2 of the questionnaire was more difficult to analyse statistically. While completing this part, some students expressed the desire to select more than one answer for each part and this was allowed.

Item 13 examined the students’ reasons for studying English. The majority chose interest in culture and usefulness for getting a job as their primary reason for studying.

In response to item 14, three quarters of the participants are of the opinion that their success or failure in learning English depended on themselves.

Responses to item 16 indicated that students have some experience in selecting their own study materials but that self-selected materials did not comprise the majority of materials used.

Looking at the results as a whole and with the slight risk of over generalisation, it seemed that overall the students were enthusiastic about using English as purported by the responses to items 9 and 12 in particular. They also had a strong sense of their own responsibility regarding their acquisition of English as a second language. They claimed to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English but according to the results of the questionnaire and conversations, they seemed reluctant or unable to address these issues on their own in a structured manner.

5.2 What kind of out of class activities are popular with students and do they see these activities as being useful ways of studying English?

When designing their own self-directed study programs, students were advised to be as specific as possible about their goals and activities. Where possible they were also encouraged to set quantifiable goals, such as how much

time they would study, or how many books they would read or how many new vocabulary items they would attempt to memorise per week.

Students were encouraged to talk to other members of the class and to consult with the teacher. They were recommended to choose a program that matched their goals, interests and available resources.

To gather data to answer the research question, the students' response to Appendix1, were gathered. The responses were divided into two categories, *Skills* and *Activities and Materials*. Instances of key words such as “reading,” “TOEIC,” and “music” were recorded and compiled into two graphs.

At the college at which this research took place, students who achieve a certain TOEIC score can access scholarships and reductions in tuition fees. Therefore, TOEIC is often mentioned by the students in designing their study programs. Although TOEIC does not fit neatly into either category, it was decided to place it in the *Skills* category as students had designated it as an area of English they would like to improve rather than as a study activity.

For example, a student who reported that they wanted to improve their listening skills through watching Hollywood movies, would be recorded as one instance each for *Listening* in the *Skills* category and *Movies* in the category of *Activities and Materials*. A student who wanted to improve their TOEIC listening score through using TOIEC practice tests would be recorded as one instance each of *TOEIC* and *Listening* and one each of English Textbook and Textbook CDs. A student who responded that they would read books in English, write down and attempt to memorise new words would be recorded as one instance each of *Reading* and *Vocabulary* in the *Skills* category and one of *Books* in *Activities and Materials*.

Translation was included in the *Activities and Materials* as it was chosen as an activity by a student who specified, “writing” as the part of their English they would most like to improve.

The data has been compiled into tables and graphs displayed below.

Skills

TOEIC	4
Reading	3
Vocabulary	6
Listening	4
Speaking	1
Writing	2

Activities

Music	2
Movies/television	2
Newspaper/news websites	1
Books (graded readers, novels etc)	3
English Textbook	8
English Textbook CDs	3
Diary or Blog	1
Translation	1

In this particular group, vocabulary was the area that most participants wanted to improve. From speaking to students about why they chose this particular aspect of their English to focus on, the most common answer was that they felt that their vocabulary was limited, and it would be the most useful improvement as it was applicable to both productive and receptive language skills. Secondly, students also thought that vocabulary items would be easy to count and keep track of their progress.

Receptive activities were more popular than productive activities. Only one student chose to improve speaking skill, through watching movies and repeating sections to improve fluency and intonation. Lack of speaking opportunities outside of class certainly influenced this.

Of study materials, English textbooks such as TOEIC textbooks were the most commonly used. Some students used graded readers. Of the class, only two students made use of online resources, one accessing television shows and movies through streaming sites such as Youtube and one writing an online blog.

5.3 Can students be encouraged to become more autonomous by participating in study activities that promote autonomous learning?

To answer this question, two measures were used. First, the results from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire when given at the beginning of the semester and those from the end of the semester were compared.

After participating in the self-directed study program for one semester, the overall rating of purported autonomous learning habits was largely unchanged.

There was a negligible increase from a mean of 23.1825 to 24.1825 out of a total possible score of 48. Seven students' self-ratings actually decreased slightly while eight increased. One was unchanged.

As expected, positive responses to item 5. *I keep a record of my study such as keeping a diary, writing reviews etc.* increased. Surprisingly though, nine students claimed that they did this rarely or never despite completing a journal of their study to present to the teacher every week. Overall, no dramatic changes in autonomous learning habits were indicated by the responses to the first part of the questionnaire. Responses to Part 2 of the questionnaire also remained largely unchanged except for a slight shift towards more use of self-selected study materials in item 16.

In reference to the results of the two questionnaires, participation in this self-directed study program did not increase students' perception of themselves as autonomous learners.

However, answers given to a more open questionnaire (Appendix 3) to collect data qualitatively provides a different perspective. To allow for as detailed and honest answers as possible, this section was completed anonymously and students were allowed to answer in either English or Japanese.

Approximately half of the students thought that their study habits had changed during the program. While all of the students reported that their time of studying English had increased.

Out of the sixteen students, fifteen students were of the opinion that their English had improved through participation in the program.

The responses indicated eagerness to continue their programs (all participants), while thirteen indicated that they would like to begin another program.

Students gave various responses to the question, *What did you like about this program?* Two students wrote that they enjoyed being able to study at their own pace while numerous students reported enjoying being able to choose their own goals and adapt study to suit their own interests. Students also seemed to appreciate the structured nature of the course, adding that knowing their progress would be checked helped them to maintain motivation. This is in line with findings of Imuro and Berger (2010) and Stephenson and Kohyama (2003) who reported that while students enjoyed the freedom of choosing their own activities they also appreciated a degree of structure and support.

In response to the question *What didn't you like about this program?* the majority of students who chose to answer were dissatisfied with either their

goals or their own time management. Nine participants reported that they could only meet their study goal half of the time. Five reported that they could meet their study goal most of the time while one reported that they met their study goal every week. One student admitted that they could rarely meet their study goal.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study could not claim to have caused a quantifiable increase in autonomous learning habits through having students participate in a self-directed study program. However, students seemed to enjoy having the freedom to choose their own goals and materials and saw the value in participating in the program. Admittedly, this study was conducted over a short time and with a small group of participants but it is the opinion of the researcher that allowing students the opportunity to set their own goals and to select their own study methods and materials is a good supplement to structured English courses.

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Appendix 1

Introduction to the Self-Directed Study Program

Students at Keiwa and other colleges often ask me, "How can I improve my English?"

I think it is a difficult question to answer because for everyone the answer is different. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. People enjoy doing different things. A good way of studying for one person might not be good for everyone. Therefore, this semester, I hope that you can find your own way of learning and improving your English.

Recently, I have studied a lot about learner autonomy. In Japanese, learner autonomy is 学習者の自律 or 自主学習. From my research and experience, learners who are successful and become fluent in English are usually autonomous learners.

This semester, I want to help you to become more autonomous and independent learners. I hope that you can improve your study habits and your English by participating in a self-directed study program. Also, I will use data from this program for my own research.

In this program, you will decide your own English learning goals and make a suitable study plan to achieve that goal. Throughout this semester, you will continue working on your own study project outside of class time. Every week, Adrian will check your progress. At the end of the semester, you will give a 5 minute presentation about your study project.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

この学習プログラムでは、皆さんはそれぞれ自分にあった英語の学習目標を設定し、その目標を達成できるように学習計画を自分で立てます。皆さんは今学期を通し、授業外の時間もこの学習プログラムを継続します。毎週、エイドリアンが皆さんの学習の進み具合を確認します。学期末には、自分の学習計画とその結果について、それぞれ5分間のプレゼンテーションを行います。

本件に関する協力を感謝します。

Appendix 1

Designing Your Own Self-Directed Study Program

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	
My Study Activity	
My Specific Goal	
The Materials I Will Need	

Examples of Activities

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	Reading
My Study Activity	Read news in English
My Specific Goal	I will read and write a summary of one news article per week
The Materials I will Need	Internet, printer, notebook

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	Fluency and pronunciation
My Study Activity	Practice ondoku or shadowing with an English CD
My Specific Goal	I will practise for at least 20 minutes, 3 times per week.
The Materials I will Need	CD player, textbook

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	Listening
My Study Activity	Watch TV shows in English
My Specific Goal	I will watch one episode of my favourite drama per week and write down 5 new words or phrases
The Materials I Will Need	CD player, textbook

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	Grammar
My Study Activity	Write example sentences with new grammar learned in Unit B class.
My Specific Goal	I will write ten example sentences per week.
The Materials I Will Need	Textbook, notebook

The Part of My English That I Want to Improve	Writing
My Study Activity	Write a blog/facebook posts in English.
My Specific Goal	I will update a blog or facebook 3 times per week in English.
The Materials I Will Need	Computer

Other Activities

- ◇ Read Japanese folk tales in English
- ◇ Search for recipes in English and try to cook them
- ◇ Listen to English podcasts while on the train or bus
- ◇ Listen to English songs and try to understand the lyrics
- ◇ Translate Japanese songs to English
- ◇ Try to memorise a number of new words per week using flash cards
- ◇ Read English websites and leave comments
- ◇ Keep a diary in English
- ◇ Practice saying English tongue-twisters(早口言葉)

✓ **Any other activity that you are interested in**

Appendix 3

Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

Questionnaire	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.					
2. I make use of my free time to study English.					
3. I preview before the class.					
4. I review after the class.					
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing review etc.					
6. I make self-exams with the exam papers chosen by myself.					
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I progress.					
8. I attend out of class activities to practice and learn English.					
9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role-play, etc.					
10. I know my own strengths and weaknesses in English.					
11. I choose books and exercises which suit me, neither too difficult nor too easy.					
12. I try to expose myself to English out of the classroom through books, music, movies internet etc.					

Part II

13. I study English here due to:

- a) my parents' demand
- b) curiosity
- c) English being useful for getting a good job
- d) interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music, etc.
- e) c and d

14. I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:

- a) luck or fate
- b) English studying environment
- c) studying facilities (aids)
- d) teachers
- e) myself

15. When I meet a word I don't know, I usually:

- a) ignore it, do nothing
- b) ask others
- c) guess the meaning
- d) b and e
- e) look it up in a dictionary

16. I usually use materials selected:

- a) only by teachers
- b) mostly by teachers
- c) by teachers and by myself
- d) mostly by myself
- e) only by myself

Now, you have been working on your self-directed study projects for one semester. I would like to receive some feedback about the program.

Please answer honestly and openly. This is not an exam. The information you give will NOT be used to calculate your grades.

さて今学期中、皆さんには自主学習プログラムに取り組んでもらいまし

た。その成果についてのアンケートに回答をお願いします。
アンケートの結果は成績には反映されませんので、率直に、また正直に回答をしてください。

You may answer in either English or Japanese

回答は英語でも日本語でも、どちらでも構いません。

1. What part of your English did you try to improve in this program?

1. この自主学習プログラムで、英語のどの部分を上達しようと思いましたか？

2. What was your specific study goal?

2. どのような学習目標を立てましたか？（具体的に）

3. How often could you follow your plan and achieve this goal?

3. どのくらいの頻度で、計画どおりに進め、学習目標を達成できましたか？

Every week/ Most weeks/ About half the time/ Rarely/ Never/

毎週できた／ほぼ毎週できた／半分位できた／ほぼできなかった／全然できなかった

When you couldn't achieve your goal, what was the reason?

学習目標が達成できなかった時についてお聞きます。その理由は何だったと思いますか？

4. Did your study methods change during this program? If yes, how did they change?

4. この自主学習プログラムを実施中に、学習の方法が変わりましたか？
「はい」と答えた人は、どのように変わったかも回答をお願いします。

5. As a result of this program, did the time you spend studying English increase?

5. この自主学習プログラムを実施したことにより、英語の学習に取り組む時間が増えましたか？

6. Do you feel that this program helped you to improve your English?

6. この自主学習プログラムは、英語の上達に役立ったと思いますか？

7. Do you think that you will continue your self-directed study program after this semester is finished?

7. 今学期後も、この自主学習プログラムを続けてみようと思いますか？

8. Do you think you will start another study program by yourself?

8. 自分自身で別の学習プログラムを立てて実施してみようと思いますか？

9. What did you like about this program?

9. この自主学習プログラムで良かった点（好きな点）は何ですか？

10. What didn't you like about this program?

10. この自主学習プログラムで悪かった点（嫌いな点）は何ですか？

11. Write any other comments here.

11. その他コメントがあれば、こちらをお願いします。

12. May I use this data in a research paper for publication? (No names of students will be used.)

12. このアンケートの結果を、研究論文に使用してもいいですか？（皆さんの氏名は掲載されません）