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Learner autonomy and blended learning in the language classroom

Abstract

This contribution is based on a pilot study intended to examine the effect of increased learner autonomy through blended learning on student engagement, satisfaction and target language proficiency improvements in an intermediate Japanese language class. Data collected for this target study was limited largely to voluntary, anonymous student self-reporting and a comparison of statistical data gathered from anonymous, standardised course evaluation surveys.

As a pilot study, the goal is not to reach definitive conclusions but rather to constitute a first step in identifying the 'low hanging fruit' that might be harvested by encouraging student autonomy within the confines of the various fiscal and institutional limitations inherent to the university environment. We seek to identify how, in a cost-effective and sustainable manner, elements of blended learning can be integrated into a course to facilitate greater learner autonomy and to provide learners with a more student-centred and communicative language learning environment.

1. Learner autonomy and the language classroom

1.1 What is learner autonomy?

The first explicit formulation of learner autonomy appears in Henri Holec's 1980 book, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, in which he writes: "...to say of a learner that he is autonomous is to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning" (cited in Schmenk 2005: 108). While learner autonomy has attracted considerable scholarly attention, some twenty years later the most prominent scholar of learner autonomy outlines the concept in largely the same manner:

...autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. (Little 2003)

Benson and Voller (1997) further break down the notion of autonomy into three basic types: the 'technical', the 'psychological' and the 'political'. 'Technical' learner autonomy is defined as, "an act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher." 'Psychological' autonomy refers to, "a capacity... which allows learners to take more responsibility

for their own learning.” ‘Political’ autonomy focuses on the question of control and is primarily concerned with the question of, “how to achieve the structural conditions that will allow learners to both control their individual learning and the institutional context” (Benson and Voller 1997, cited in Schmenk 2005: 110). Taken a step further, it is a means of “allowing and encouraging learners... to begin to express who they are, what they think and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves” (Kenny 1993, cited in Champagne et al. 2002: 48).

The concept of learner autonomy ranges from the strictly pragmatic to the philosophical and ideological, bringing to the fore the question of learner agency and hierarchical power relationships. This study will be focused primarily on the ‘technical’ components of learner autonomy—creating a course structure that permits and encourages autonomy. However, we believe that it is impossible to isolate any one aspect of learner autonomy from the others and in attempting to create a class structure and environment conducive to fostering learner autonomy, we necessarily engage with psychological and political components.

1.2 Learner autonomy and language acquisition

In addition to being, at least potentially, a mechanism by which to provide a more student-centred approach in terms of the content, form and pacing of instruction in a diverse classroom, autonomous learning holds a number of important benefits for the learner and for the language learner in particular. Little identifies three ‘principles’ integral to successful language learning:

The principle of *learner involvement* entails that learners are brought to engage with their learning and take responsibility for key decisions; the principle of *learner reflection* entails that they are taught to think critically about the process and content of their learning; and the principle of *appropriate target language use* entails that the target language is the chief medium of teaching and learning... (Little 1999, cited in Barfield and Brown 2007: 7)

By giving learners control over key decisions—what to learn, how to learn it—they are given greater scope to integrate language study with topics of interest to them, thus stimulating intrinsic motivation. Encouraging, or requiring students to critically reflect upon the content and process of learning forces them to reconsider why it is, precisely, that they are studying a foreign language and, more to the point, why they are studying it the way that they are studying it. This approach may have the potential to reduce overreliance on short term memory and study techniques designed solely to enable students to extract the greatest number of points on a test for the least amount of time invested. Finally, the benefits of emphasizing appropriate target language use—that is, one uses the target language not simply as something to be practiced in class but as the primary medium in which all communication about the class occurs—ought to be obvious where the goal of a class is to foster communicative proficiencies.

1.3 Learner autonomy and blended learning

Blended learning has the potential to facilitate learner autonomy in several ways. Online lecture recordings have a positive impact on students learning outcomes as they can be repeated in whole or in part as the student requires (Huang and Hwang 2013). Moreover, the ability to control the speed of a recording has been shown to contribute to stronger listening comprehension (McBride 2011) and can be used to create a listening environment consistent with Krashen's (1985) $i+1$ input hypothesis. Students can get immediate feedback from automated self-study activities, giving them the opportunity to reflect upon mistakes while they are fresh in their mind. In addition to allowing students to spend more time on what they do not understand, they are also able to skip over what they do understand. Greater flexibility and greater student control in web-enhanced learning environments has been shown to promote positive learner perceptions and better learning outcomes (Romeo and Hubbard 2010; Strambi 2003).

In addition to allowing students to study in a manner that suits their individual circumstances, blended and online learning has the potential to reduce student anxiety and stress. Learner anxiety has been widely researched as a problem particularly prevalent in language classrooms (Ganschow and Sparks 1996; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986; Young 1991) and high anxiety has similarly been demonstrated to have a significant negative correlations with student achievement in the foreign language classroom (Ganschow and Sparks 1996; MacIntyre 1995; Young 1991) What is more, studies have demonstrated that Japanese, as one of the lesser taught and more challenging foreign languages for native English speaking students to master, typically generates greater anxiety among students than European languages (Fukai 2000). Not surprisingly, high anxiety, having been shown to correlate with lower student achievement, has also been shown to contribute to higher rates of attrition among language learners (Ferguson and Grainger 2005).

E-learning has been shown to reduce anxiety and positively impact learner performance by creating more opportunities to use the language outside of class (Samimy and Tabuse 1992) and by cultivating a non-threatening environment that encourages experimentation (Huang and Hwang 2013; Nishitani and Matsuda 2005). Naturally, the integration of blended learning into a class must be carefully undertaken so as to not simply replace the anxiety of using a foreign language with the anxiety of using complex, unfamiliar or time-consuming technology (Grant, Huang and Pasfield-Neofitou 2013).

2. Creating a blended learning intermediate Japanese course

The two main problems we confronted in previous, teacher-centred, lecture based iterations of the course were: the inability of the rigid format to address the diverse needs and interests of our students; and the fundamental incompatibility between a lecture format and the goal of a communicative language class.

While we believe that the content of lectures are important to helping students develop proficiency in reading and writing Japanese, we also acknowledged that valuable face-to-face time was not being used effectively. The basic hypothesis around which our pilot study was developed was that greater learner autonomy, encouraged through the strategic implementation of blended learning, would allow students to develop their own study approaches, promote intrinsic motivation, reduce anxiety and, with the concomitant introduction of student-centred communicative workshops, result in improved proficiency relative to previous lecture-based iterations.

2.1 Online course component

The online component of the class consisted of three core elements:

1. Lecture videos explicating key passages of the text (lecture conducted in the target language) accompanied by a series of reading comprehension self-study questions;
2. Online grammar explanations and self-study grammar quizzes;
3. Assessed and repeatable online quizzes (reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar).

All online components of the class were asynchronous and self-paced, with the exception of quizzes. Quizzes could only be taken during two invigilated 1-hour computer lab sessions per week. However, the order, pace and frequency students took quizzes was self-determined: only the time and location were fixed. All online components were delivered through the university's Learning Management System, in this case a modified version of Moodle 2.2.

2.1.1 Lecture videos

Seventy percent of lecture contact hours in previous versions of the course were dedicated to the review and explication of key passages in the text. With such a diverse student composition, the one size fits all approach tended to leave most students dissatisfied with the pace and content of the course. It did not allow students to move at their own pace, resulting in complaints that the course was proceeding both too quickly and too slowly. Furthermore, as lectures were conducted entirely in Japanese, the extent to which students benefitted varied greatly in relation to their listening comprehension skills with the result that more proficient students gained more while less proficient students fell further behind as was made clear both through teacher observation and student comments on course evaluations. Students requested both more and less grammar revision, more and less textbook review, more and fewer cultural activities. The two points upon which student opinions tended to merge were that: 1. the large number of heavily weighted in-class assessments was a source of considerable stress and anxiety; 2. they wanted more opportunities to use the target language in class.

In the blended learning version of the class all lecture content was divided into 6 to 15 minute long video clips and uploaded to the course Moodle page. Each video lecture was accompanied by a set of reading comprehension questions. These questions also formed the basis for the assessed reading comprehension quizzes. Students were free to watch videos whenever they wanted, in whatever order they wanted, or not to watch the videos at all if they did not find them useful. While students were not required to use the videos, survey responses indicate that over 80% of students used them to some extent.

2.1.2 Grammar revision

In the blended learning version of the class all grammar explication and revision was moved online, allowing us to recuperate approximately 50% of tutorial time. Using the 'book' module in Moodle, detailed explanations accompanied by a large number of real-world usage examples were provided for each grammar point. Explanations went into greater detail and included more usage examples than would have been possible to cover during contact hours. These explanations were accompanied by automatically marked self-study quizzes. Quiz feedback explained why the specific response was correct or incorrect, along with references to the relevant sections of the grammar explanations. These quiz questions also formed the basis for the assessed online grammar quizzes for each unit.

2.1.3 Online quizzes

Assessments in previous iterations of the course centred on in class tests, quizzes and a large final exam. Together these components of the course counted for 75% of the total course mark. These assessments were designed to test student understanding of the readings, grammar and vocabulary presented in lectures and tutorials. The frequency, rigidity and heavy weighting of in-class assessments were a common cause of complaint on student course evaluations. Weaknesses with this approach include the inability cope easily with diverse student schedules or student illnesses (students are allowed to schedule classes with conflicting meeting times at our university); the high degree of stress and anxiety that in-class assessments and particularly the final exam (40% of course mark) created in certain students; the enormous amount of time spent designing and marking resources; and the lack of incentive for students to review their work after a test or quiz had been completed, with approximately half of the student not even picking up marked versions of their tests/quizzes if marks were posted on the class Moodle page.

In the blended learning version of the class five major changes were implemented in relation to assessment. All quizzes were moved online and taken during invigilated computer laboratory hours (two hours per week with four to six hours of additional sessions at the end of the semester). All grammar and reading comprehension quiz questions were made available to students in advance, with assessed quiz questions being identical or very similar to the questions on self-study grammar tests and reading comprehension check questions. Quiz questions were drawn randomly from

a large bank of questions, meaning that not all students got the same questions. Students were allowed to repeat quizzes, without penalty, as frequently as every five days, with the most recent (not necessarily highest) mark counting. Finally, the final exam was abolished and replaced with more student-centred modes of assessment that will be described in more detail below.

2.2 Face-to-face course component

Moving to a blended learning format enabled us to recover 70% of lecture contact hours, 50% of tutorial contact hours, and over one hundred assessment design and marking hours. However, the purpose of this redesign of the course was not to save costs and one of the hopes of restructuring the course in this manner was that it would allow us to redeploy this recovered time in a more pedagogically effective manner. We do not believe that blended learning should be seen as a way to reduce expenditures but rather as a way to provide a superior experience for students with the same resources.

When building the online component of the course we sought to move everything that was not communicative and student-centred online. In short, everything that did not require face-to-face contact was put online. When designing the face-to-face component of the course, we did the reverse, reserving contact hours for activities that could only be done in person and reserving marking time for assessments that could only be marked by a qualified and experienced marker.

The face-to-face component of the course consisted of four core elements: reading workshops, culture-based tutorials, individual consultation sessions, and two major assessment projects.

2.2.1 Reading workshops

In previous iterations of the course students attended three hours of lecture per week, the primary focus of which was the explication of passages of the textbook and relevant grammar explication. As briefly discussed above, these classes were not conducive to a communicative, student-centred approach and the class consisted largely of passive learning, with only occasional opportunities to integrate task-based group activities. In the blended learning class, students were divided into two workshop groups of thirty to thirty-five students each. Each group attended two workshop sessions per week. As a result the total number of student contact hours was reduced by one hour per week (from three lecture hours to two workshop hours). Instructor contact hours increased from three hours to four, but two of these hours were repeat sessions and required no additional preparation.

Workshops introduced students to a broad range of contemporary, real-world materials, with an emphasis on topics likely to appeal to students' interests. Topics introduced include advice columns from a popular Japanese magazine, a Japanese short-short story by a renowned Japanese author, creative writing techniques, an article on environmentalism, and an essay on Japanese onomatopoeias. Students

formed groups of four or five and were given readings, accompanied by vocabulary lists (either bilingual or with Japanese explanations) and reading comprehension questions. The role of the instructor was, for the most part, limited to that of facilitator. The instructor ensured that students remained on task, answered questions and elicited responses and answers to the comprehension questions. The medium of instruction and discussion, both between instructor and students and between students themselves, was intended to be Japanese, though this was not always enforced as strictly as it ought to have been.

As the online component of the course alone covered almost the entire content of previous iterations of the course, it was essential that workload for the workshops be carefully managed so as not to overwhelm students. Students were not required to prepare for workshops (though many did) and workshop assessments were lightly weighted (15% of the course mark). Whereas course attendance was previously compulsory, this requirement was lifted for the workshops. Instead of compelling students to attend we focused on attracting them with more relevant readings, a casual and low-pressure environment, and the premise that a student showing up to workshops and making an honest effort should be able to achieve at least a mark of 'credit' on workshop assessments without significant outside preparation. While attendance levels did sink markedly during particularly busy periods of the semester, workshops averaged 70-80% attendance on the whole. By way of contrast, when attendance requirements were experimentally lifted in a previous iteration of the class, attendance rates sank to 40-50%.

2.2.2 Culture-based tutorials

No longer required to focus on grammar explication, tutorials were reconfigured to emphasise task centred student production. Specifically, a range of culturally based topics, drawn from situations that students were likely to encounter should they study or work in Japan, formed the basis for tutorials. While these topics did echo themes covered in the online component of the course, they did not explicitly refer to or draw from the textbook. Topics covered include housing (housing advertisements, filling in rental applications) and employment (reading job advertisements, filling out a Japanese CV, writing supporting statements, and job interview role play).

Tutorial time was also set aside to promote student autonomy by allowing students to develop their own assessment criteria for the group newspaper project (see below). To promote greater student autonomy and critical reflection, students read newspaper articles, identified the core elements of a successful newspaper article and developed, in conjunction with the tutor and other students, the assessment criteria that would be applied to their project. Self- and peer-assessment exercises were also conducted at key stages in the project.

2.2.3 Individual consultation sessions

The recovery of marking hours enabled us to institute three one-on-one fifteen-minute consultation sessions for each student throughout the semester. Students

were able to select times convenient to them for the sessions, which typically fell immediately before the submission of a major component of their individual project or after they had received feedback on one of those components. While the sessions were designed to allow students to get individualised feedback on the components of their individual project (see below), they also provided students with the opportunity to discuss a broader range of issues with instructors, including their overall progress or concerns with their Japanese language studies and their future study or career plans.

2.2.4 Student-centred assessment tasks

In lieu of the final exam and other in-class assessments, we developed two student-centred projects that together accounted for 50% of the total course mark: the individual project (IP) and a group newspaper project (NP).

The IP was a semester long project in which students wrote a short (2500 char.) academic essay in Japanese on a topic of their choice, drawing on research in primary and secondary Japanese sources. The project was divided into five assessed stages (title and proposal, outline, rough draft, final copy, class presentation) over the course of the semester. As mentioned above, individual consultation sessions were scheduled at key stages of the project.

Drawing on Dam's (1995) affirmation of the importance of collaborative work in learner autonomy, the NP was designed as both a group and a whole-class project. Each group, in accordance with the criteria developed by the individual groups (see above) and the class as a whole, researched and wrote a newspaper article in Japanese on a topic selected by the group. At the end of the semester these articles were collated into a class newspaper that was distributed to class members, members of the Japanese faculty and among the local Japanese community. As with the IP, the NP was divided into a number of assessed stages providing learners with a constant stream of feedback.

3. Results

Data was collected through anonymous and voluntary questionnaires conducted via the class Moodle page. There were a total of 32 respondents for the lecture format survey (25% response rate) and a total of 28 respondents for the blended format survey (23% response rate). The data should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive and, being a pilot study, is intended primarily to identify areas of greatest potential for future research.

As Table 1 indicates there was a substantial improvement in how students rated the usefulness of the online recordings versus face-to-face delivery. While 14% of students chose not to use the video recordings, this outcome is a natural consequence of giving learners greater control over the timing and means of their study. For most students, however, being able to choose freely when, how quickly

and how often to review lecture videos made the lecture component of the class significantly more valuable than in previous iterations of the class.

Table 1: Student evaluation responses: usefulness of lecture delivery for proficiency and assessments¹

<i>How helpful was (online) lecture content and delivery in enabling you to: 1. Improve your proficiency in reading/writing Japanese, 2. Improve your performance on assessments. (Lecture format vs. Blended)</i>				
	Proficiency (Lecture) n=32	Proficiency (Blend) n=28	Assessments (Lecture) n=32	Assessments (Blend) n=28
Not helpful at all	9%	0%	13%	0%
Somewhat helpful	47%	18%	44%	25%
Helpful	25%	54%	31%	39%
Very helpful	19%	14%	13%	21%
N/A (did not use)	0%	14%		14%

Students rated the self-paced online component as ‘good’ (four on a five-point scale)² and, asked about the impact of the blended learning component on their level of interest in studying Japanese, 73% of respondents replied that it made them more interested, 27% replied it had no impact.³ No student responded that it lessened his or her interest. Overall satisfaction with the blended learning course scored a four on a five-point scale (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied).⁴

These changes, while based on a relatively small sample of the class, are echoed when comparing the standardised student course evaluations of lecture and blended formats. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Student evaluation responses, lecture vs. blended format (scores out of a maximum of 5)⁵

	Lecture based	Autonomous- Blended	Change
Experience of learning	3.6	4.25	+17%
Clear expectations	3.7	4.1	+11%
Teaching activities support learning	3.3	4.3	+30%
Ready access to materials	3.9	4.3	+10%
Appropriate assessment	3.6	4.2	+17%
Feedback	3.5	4.2	+20%
Overall satisfaction	3.4	4.1	+21%

In Table 2, the greatest increase by far is seen in the 30% jump in ‘teaching activities support learning’. This result appears to confirm that the strategic implementation of blended learning to allow greater student autonomy while reserving contact hours for communicative and student-centred activities has significant potential to improve the learner experience. At the same time, it is important to note that no respondent expressed the opinion that they were disadvantaged by the online format of certain components of the course.

4. Conclusions

The results of our initial research are not discouraging. The combination of a student-centred, communicative in-class environment with the flexibility and autonomy of the online segment of the course does seem to have resonated with learners. The anticipated improvement in learner perceptions (Romeo and Hubbard 2010; Strambi 2003) and the comparison of online vs. in-class lecture delivery does appear to indicate that the greater flexibility and autonomy may, as hypothesised, be contributing to lower levels of stress and greater proficiency gains (McBride 2011; Samimy and Tabuse 1992; Strambi 2003).

Obviously, our very limited data pool and low response rate make our conclusions tentative at best. While regrettable, this was unavoidable as our pool was limited by class enrolment and, in accord with research ethics policies, responses were wholly voluntary. Limited space, furthermore, made it all but impossible to discuss student comments provided in addition to numerical data. While this study has helped us to map, in very broad strokes, some of the forces and issues at work when blended learning is employed in this manner, going forward it may prove to be more productive to examine each of the various elements in isolation and in greater depth. This may allow for survey instruments which may draw on historical research and be applicable across classes. Specifically, we believe that, as online and blended learning becomes ever more prevalent, the questions of how less autonomous learners respond to blended/online language classes and how autonomous learning behaviour can be cultivated among language learners will be of central importance and we intend to examine these questions much more closely going forward.

Notes

1. The exact question text was: “Do you feel that the lecture content and delivery was helpful in enabling you to succeed on course assessments?” (Lecture-based class); “Do you feel that the lecture content and delivery was helpful in enabling you to improve your proficiency in reading/writing Japanese?” (Lecture-based class); “Do you feel that the online lecture content and delivery were helpful in enabling you to succeed on course assessments?” (Blended class); “Do you feel that the online lecture content and delivery was helpful in enabling you to improve your proficiency in reading/writing Japanese?” In each case respondents were given the response options of ‘Not helpful at all’, ‘Somewhat

helpful', 'Helpful', 'Very Helpful' and 'Other'. Respondents to the blended class survey were also given the option of answering 'Not applicable – did not use'.

2. The exact question text was: "How do you feel about the 'self-paced' nature of the online components of the class (videos, grammar explanations, online quizzes)?" Response options were: 'Very bad', 'Bad', 'Neutral—neither good nor bad', 'Good', 'Excellent'.
3. The exact question text was: "Do you feel that the use of online/blended learning:" followed by response options "made you more interested in studying Japanese". "had no real impact on your interest in studying Japanese", "made you less interested in studying Japanese".
4. The exact question text was: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience in [course name] so far?" Response options were: 'Very dissatisfied', 'Dissatisfied', 'Neutral (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied)', 'Satisfied', 'Very Satisfied', 'Other' (no respondent selected 'Other').
5. All data drawn from standardised ANU Course evaluation surveys. For the lecture class there was a total of 70 respondents (51% response rate) and for the blended learning class there was a total of 46 respondents (36% response rate). Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree/disagree to statements on a five- point scale, where 'Strongly Disagree'=1 and 'Strongly Agree'=5. Specifically, students were asked to respond to the following statements: "I had a clear idea of what was expected of me in this course" (Expectations); "The teaching and learning activities (e.g. lectures, tutorials, field trips) supported my learning" (Teaching activities support learning); "I had ready access to the learning opportunities provided in this course (e.g. course notes, online materials, library resources, field trips)" (Ready access to materials); "The assessment seemed appropriate given the goals of the course" (Appropriate assessment); "The feedback I received during the course supported my learning" (Feedback); "Overall, I was satisfied with my learning experience in this course" (Overall satisfaction). The 'Experience of learning' result is the average of all individual question results.

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