

Independent Learning for Language Students

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Abstract

Students in Japanese schools are trained to follow instructions from their teachers. In the absence of such instructions, students will quietly sit in their seats and wait. They will continue to wait until they receive further instructions. Evidence of curiosity is rare and the students show little sign of doing any work that is not required of them. The author wanted to find out if his English language students only completed work assigned to them by their teachers or if they did extra study on their own. The results of the study showed that the students actually did studies that were independent of their assigned work. The study also showed that the learners relied on teachers to help them become better autonomous language learners.

1. Background

In Japan, when a teacher asks the class for the explanation of a new word, if the students do not understand the meaning, very few students, if any, will proceed to look for the meaning in their dictionaries on their own accord. More often than not, students will wait for the teacher's explicit instruction to do the simplest of tasks. They will only take notes if they are told that the material will be included in an exam. Becker (1990) explained that in Japan, "the teacher is authority, and students are simply expected to follow." So, more than twenty years after Becker's comment, is there evidence of student motivation manifested by their actions of doing independent study, i.e., doing studies that are not assigned by their teachers? As the Language Center at Kwansei Gakuin University promotes independent learning as a course goal in its language program, I wanted to find out the nature of

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independent learning with students taking classes at the Language Center.

The terms *independence* and *autonomy* are often used in the same context to mean the same thing. Finch (2002) stated that autonomy meant different things to different people, and provided definitions that referred to the situation where learners are on their own, and skills used for self-directed learning. Lee (1998) said that autonomy involves learners taking responsibility for their learning, including monitoring, and assessing their own work. Moore (1972) put forward that a truly autonomous learner is self-aware, understands that there is a variety of options to achieve his language goals, and knows where to seek help to reach his goals.

Furthermore, the scope of learner autonomy extends to English proficiency (Deng (2007) saw a positive relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency), as well as motivation (Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) concluded that motivation is a major factor that influences learner becoming autonomous). For the purpose of this study, independent learning means any work which students do to improve their English ability, where the work is done outside of class time and is not assigned by a teacher.

2. Context

The subjects of this research were 45 students who were taking elective classes offered by the Language Center at Kwansai Gakuin University in western Japan in the spring semester of 2012. They were aged between 19 and 23 years old, 34 of them were female and 11 were male, and they belonged to different schools of the university (Schools of Humanities, Sociology, Law and Politics, Education, Human Welfare Studies, and Business Administration). The classes taken by these students at the Language Center were Intermediate English (22 students for three lessons a week), Pre-Advanced Business (six students for two lessons a week), Pre-Advanced Communication (nine students for two lessons a week), and Multidisciplinary Seminar in Culture and Society (eight students for one lesson a week). All the classes were taught in English only and were learner-centred. Homework for a typical week amounted to about three hours of work outside of class.

3. Research Questions

This research was based on the following questions:

1. *Apart from homework and assignments, do students do other things outside of class time to improve their English? If so, what do they do?*
2. *What could be used to assist students to expand their English learning*

beyond doing only class-assigned work?

4. Methods

At the end of the spring semester in 2012, the students were asked to fill out a survey titled 'Independent Study Questionnaire'. It was an anonymous survey, asking basic information (age, gender, school of study at the university) and the following questions:

1. *How many hours a week do you spend studying English outside of class?*
2. *What kinds of techniques/activities (not including homework and assignment) do you use when you study English? (If more than one kind, how much time do you spend on each one?)*
3. *Where/how did you learn about these techniques/activities?*
4. *Why do you use these techniques/activities?*
5. *What techniques/activities have you learned from this English class that you will continue to use after the semester is over? Why?*
6. *In what other areas of your English learning would you like to learn self-study techniques/activities?*

5. Results

For Question 1, to clarify the nature of the question, students were reminded that their response should not include time spent doing work assigned by teachers. From the survey, there were two main clusters of responses (see Figure 1). More than half of the students (24 students) spent between one to three hours per week studying outside of class. The next group (15 students) spent between four to seven hours. Of the remaining students, the longest time spent studying outside of class

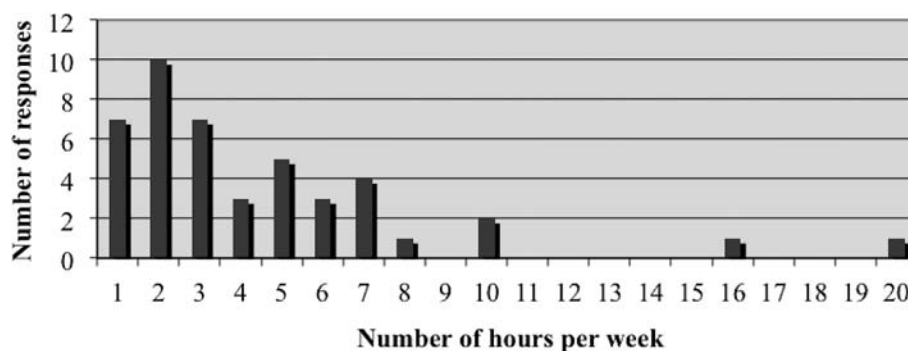


Figure 1 Time spent studying English outside of class (excluding class-assigned work)

was 20 hours per week.

There were a variety of responses to Question 2 and some students wrote multiple answers. The results have been categorised into the skills involved with the activity (see Table 1). Most of the responses (43 answers) involved listening, with watching movies and listening to music accounting for over half these responses (25 answers). Reading activities, including reading newspaper, novels, books, and comics made up for 15 responses. Other activities included vocabulary (six answers), chatting with foreigners (four answers), and studying for tests (four answers).

Table 1 Activities used by students to study English outside of class

Skills	Activity	Frequency
Listening	Music	14
	Movies	11
	TV drama	6
	CD	5
	Radio	4
	Internet video	1
	Podcast	1
	Pronunciation CD	1
Reading	English newspaper	7
	Novel/book	4
	Read long sentences	2
	Comics	1
	Reading	1
Vocabulary	Vocabulary	6
Speaking/listening	Chatting with foreigners	4
Testing	TOEFL/TOEIC study	4
Reading/listening	Music with lyrics	2
	Internet news	1
Writing/reading	Messenger with foreigners	2
Speaking	Speaking	1
Unspecified	Textbook	2
	Internet	2

A third of the students said that they learned about the activities for the answers to Question 2 from their teachers. Five students attributed it to their friends or other students, while another five students learned it from the internet. Other responses included themselves (three answers), family (two answers), foreigners (two answers), and from books (two answers). Three students did not answer this question. After the collection of the questionnaire it was discovered that the wording of the question was ambiguous. Eight students took the question to mean the location where they did the learning activity. They gave answers such as 'home', and 'train'.

The main reason why students did the activities described in the answers to Question 2 is because they wanted to improve their English skills. This was expressed by twenty-one of the students. Ten students (about a quarter of the students) described the activity as enjoyable or fun, while the remaining students answered passing tests (six students), ease of the activity (six students), the content of the material (five students), and communication with others (three students) as reasons for their answers to Question 2. One student did not answer this question and some students wrote more than one answer for this question.

The responses to Question 5 corresponded mostly to activities that the students did throughout the semester in their respective classes. Twenty-five students (from the Intermediate, Pre-Advanced Business, and Pre-Advanced Communication classes) answered that they will continue reading English newspaper after the semester is over. Five students, also from the same classes, said they would continue with vocabulary-related exercises. Of the six students who took the Pre-Advanced Business class, four students will use business writing in the future, while students in the Multidisciplinary Seminar in Culture and Society class will continue thinking about culture (four students) and watching English movies (three students). Two students expressed in general terms that they want to try harder in studying English in the future.

For Question 6, twelve students stated that they would like to learn self-study techniques for speaking (see Table 2). The remainder of the responses had four answers each for listening, testing, vocabulary, grammar, and overseas experience, three answers each for writing and business, and two each for presentation and strategies. Nine students wrote 'don't know' or did not answer the question. As with previous questions, some students wrote multiple answers.

Table 2 Areas in which students want to learn self-study techniques

Skills	Frequency
Speaking	12
Listening	4
Testing	4
Vocabulary	4
Grammar	4
Overseas experience	4
Writing	3
Business	3
Presentation	2
Strategies	2
Don't know/Blank	9

6. Discussion

In analysing the results, it can be easily seen that all the students who participated in the survey do take time outside of class to improve their English abilities. As all courses offered by the Language Center are elective courses and students must meet certain standardised test score requirements to enroll in the courses, it was expected that the students would have some self-motivation to take these non-compulsory classes. It was no surprise that almost all the students had some motivation to study English beyond what is required of them by their teachers, with the average amount of time spent doing so being half an hour per day. For half of these students (those who answered between one to three hours), it averaged 26 minutes per day. Whether this was sufficient or beneficial could depend on many factors, such as the language goals of the student, the method of study, and the student's motivation. For the purpose of this research, the results have answered the question whether students spend time outside of class to study English beyond what is required of them from their classes. Future studies could be developed to explore the factors for ideal independent language study.

It was surprising to see that most of the students chose activities that involved primarily listening. Students often remark that they want to improve their speaking and to be able to speak better with native English speakers. As such, it was expected that students would choose activities that included more of a speaking component. Less than ten percent of the students actually used activities that required speaking. One reason for this could be that English in Japan is a foreign language, rather than a second language, so the opportunities to be able to speak English outside of the classroom environment are rather limited. Although there are international and exchange students on campus, most of their classes are conducted separately from the rest of the university student body.

Another point of interest was the influence of teachers on the students. One third of the students noted that they learned the study technique they were using from their teachers. Also students seemed to get their information primarily from other people (teachers, friends, family, foreigners) rather than from non-human sources. In fact, four times as many of the students learned from other people than from books and the internet. This suggests that students place more trust in what they hear from people than from what they read in text sources. This is especially important for teachers to ensure that they provide proper language learning strategies to the students. To do otherwise would be betraying the trust the students have in the teachers as their guides.

Consistent with a previous study on the motivation of students taking classes at the Language Center (Wang & Luk, 2012), this study also found that the main

reason that these students were doing extra study was to maintain and improve their English skills. In fact, if the responses of *passing test* were combined with those of *improving skills* in Question 4 of the survey, that would mean 60% of the students did extra work outside of class for academic reasons, highlighting the goal-oriented nature behind the students' motivation for their independent studies. In contrast, the components of *fun* and *ease of activity* made up for only a third of the responses.

Current activities

As a teacher, one of my goals is to give students tools that they could continue to use after the course has finished. Students have expressed that they have found certain aspects of the classes useful for their learning. These were reading newspaper in English, studying vocabulary, business English, thinking about culture, and watching movies in English.

The newspaper activity was conducted once a week and required the students to bring to class a recent news article to be used in discussion during class. The topic was based on the students' own preferences as to give them a sense of control over their learning, as well as providing them with authentic texts. (For the Pre-Advanced Business class, the article had to be connected with anything related to business or economy in some way.) Students were asked to choose articles of which they understood about 80% of the article. This was to give the students a way of learning new vocabulary every week and to use those new words during discussion. Also, the students were taught how to search for articles on the internet, and had to find articles from a different source every week. One reason that this activity was successful was that the students were involved in the decision-making process of their learning. Another reason is that they were dealing with topics that were of personal interests to themselves. Student comments showed that by continuing with this activity after the course is finished, they are able to continue learning English, acquire new vocabulary, and it is something they can do easily.

Students were required to keep a log of all the new vocabulary in their notebooks. Walters and Bozkurt (2009) had noted that vocabulary notebooks could be useful in an EFL setting. At the beginning of the semester, students were told to write the meaning of new words in English only, and to include information such as part of speech, synonyms, antonyms, and example sentences. Once a week, students were put in pairs and had to quiz each other on the meaning of words, using the information in their notebooks. The use of Japanese was not allowed. In the beginning, students found this exercise to be challenging but by the end of the semester, many of them realised the advantage of the exercise. One student noted, "I learned to use English-English dictionary. Before this class, I always used English-Japanese dictionary, but the English-English dictionary is more useful than English-

Japanese to understand the meaning of English words.” Another student said they would continue to “look up words in English because I can know the subtle distinction.”

In the Multidisciplinary Seminar in Culture and Society class, students were asked to think about the cultural and social aspects of normal everyday occurrences and phenomena. Discussions included advertisements and the motivations behind them, and movies and their underlying themes. Students were encouraged to think critically about these topics. One student noted that after the semester she wanted to “ponder about each social problem deeply,” while another said, “I will consider the cultural aspect underlying media as this can keep my motivation.”

After the course

It was stated above that the main response (*listening*) to Question 2 (what activities/techniques do students employ) was surprising, considering students often said they wanted to improve their speaking. It seems that students do in fact want to improve their speaking but they do not know how to do so. There were three times as many students wanting to improve their speaking as those who gave another response. It would be useful to provide students with ways or opportunities to improve their speaking. Existing options on campus include Coffee Hour (social gathering with international and exchange students), and use of the Fujita Global Lounge (resource space with international news, popular with the international and exchange students).

Other considerations would include teaching students language learning strategies. Wallis (2005) stated that students need support to become more independent in their learning. I will continue with the newspaper and vocabulary activities, and as is done currently, students will be asked to write down their language learning goals for the semester. After that, students will be guided in how to reach those goals and they will learn to monitor their progress on their own. They will also be asked to evaluate their own performance at the end of the semester. It is hoped that students will grow as independent learners. Also, the current survey should be modified to avoid confusion and then submitted to future classes to see if student responses are consistent.

7. Conclusion

Whether it is enrolling in elective courses at the Language Center or studying on their own, the students’ main goal for such actions is to improve their English language skills. And, even without being prompted to do so, students do in fact spend time outside of class in a variety of ways to achieve that goal. However, they

often lack the knowledge to be able to do so successfully. They need and want guidance on how to improve and they are willing to take instructions from others, especially from their teachers. It is therefore important for teachers to honour that trust and to be ready and equipped to teach sound and useful learning strategies to the students. And as Finch (2002) put it, “it is the responsibility of every teacher to promote autonomous, critically thinking, responsible members of society.”

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