Student Opinions Towards Autonomous Learning Strategies

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University educators should encourage their students to take control of their own learning using various autonomous learning strategies. This paper details students’ opinions towards various strategies in order for educators to plan more effective language courses. The topics of autonomous learning, comprehensive input, student-centered learning, and gamification are discussed in relation to four activities. These activities are English Central, elllo.org, extensive reading, and news reports. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected via an online questionnaire. Results indicated that students generally like learning English using these techniques as they could study topics they were interested in. As students were able to choose materials which suited their English ability, this was seen as a good reason to make these activities a part of an English course. This report will likely be of interest to anyone wanting information about autonomous learning, comprehensive input, gamification, and the implementation of CALL-related technologies into a language course.

University students need to learn how to learn. University educators need to teach how to learn. This can be done by motivating and encouraging students to take control of their own learning. If done correctly, students will go on to become life-long learners who do not rely on teachers to improve their language ability. Currently some language educators at the university level do not teach as much as they facilitate and guide their students. A good avenue through which students could be guided to improve their language skills is the Internet. The Internet has provided students with various opportunities to improve their English ability without the need for a teacher. Student-centered autonomous learning (AL) strategies using the Internet are still relatively new, but are becoming very popular amongst university educators. Therefore, it is important to know how students feel about these activities and this approach to learning in order to plan effective language courses.

At Kwansei Gakuin University, students participated in this research project to enable teachers to find out student opinions about various AL strategies. This report will firstly look at what AL is in an online environment. Then the importance of enjoyable, comprehensive input will be discussed. The concept of a student-centered environment will then be explored. Next, the process of gamification will be discussed as each activity has a level of competitiveness. Following this, four activities used to support and foster AL will be examined: English Central (EC), elllo.org (ELLLO), extensive
reading (ER) using Moodle Reader (MR), and news reports. Finally, the conclusion will clearly explain, based on the data collected, how the students feel towards these learning strategies. It is important to note that these AL activities were not used as a substitute but as an addition to normal classroom activities. Students still did standard in-class activities (textbook, interviews, pair work, presentations, etc.) as a part of this Intermediate English course.

**Autonomous Learning**

University level students should take responsibility for their own learning. With AL the learner will have the power to make decisions about the tools and contents they want to use to accomplish a goal (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Dickinson, 1995). Autonomous learning is best suited to an environment where students have a positive attitude towards learning (Little, 1991). However, effective autonomous learning activities should raise students’ motivation while improving their language skills. The concept of learner autonomy is that students should take responsibility for their own learning rather than be dependent on the teacher (Holec, 1981).

The four supplementary activities mentioned above were chosen by the instructor for students to complete over the first semester of a two semester course. They have been specifically chosen, as the combination of them all will likely improve students’ reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. All activities could be done autonomously, with minimal guidance by the teacher. Students had the power to decide what, where, and when they wanted to study.

**The Importance of Input**

The importance of comprehensive input for language acquisition cannot be overstated. Krashen’s (1989) Input Hypothesis assumes that we acquire language by understanding messages. Krashen (1982) also suggests that for students to acquire a language quickly they should be exposed to massive amounts of ‘comprehensible input’ through listening and reading in the target language as much as possible. Therefore, if students are going to be spending a lot of time ‘inputting’ language, it is important that the content is enjoyable. The materials students use should be relevant to their lives, understandable, interesting, challenging (in some way), and easy to access. Szynalski (n.d.) wrote “…when you find enjoyable English-language books, movies, TV shows, websites, etc., learning English will become a way to have fun every day.” If students do not enjoy the input or some tasks associated with the input then this will be demotivating, as shown in Philpott’s (2011) study into student opinions about having to write book reports as part of an extensive reading program. The activities in this paper have been assigned by the instructor as they appear to be interesting and motivating forms of input which strongly promote autonomous learning.

**Extensive Reading**

It is crucial for university students to develop their target-language reading skills to achieve academic success. All major proficiency tests have important reading sections which require the student to read and infer meaning quickly. Extensive reading (ER) programs have proven successful in developing various skills (reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing, and speed) as noted by Iwahori (2008). Cho and Krashen (1994) also found that ER improves listening and speaking skills.
showed that motivation and attitude towards books improve because of ER. ER is a great tool for AL.

ER is an “approach to the teaching and learning of reading in which learners read large quantities of material that is within their linguistic competence” (Grabe & Stroller, 2002, p. 259). This corresponds to Krashen’s (1982) input hypothesis which states that students acquire language when the language a student hears or reads is one step above their current level (i + 1).

**Student-centered Environment**

The activities used in this study occurred in a student-centered environment. Several case studies were examined by Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003) with the overall results showing that effective language learning can be fostered in a student-centered environment. Brandes and Ginnis (1986) presented the main principles of student-centered learning as:

- The learner has full responsibility for their learning.
- Involvement and participation are necessary.
- The relationship between learners is more equal which promotes growth and development.
- The teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person.
- The learner sees themself differently as a result of the learning experience.

The focus of this research paper is what activities the students do, how often they do them, and what do they think about them. The teacher provides support and guidance where necessary.

**Gamification**

Gamification is “defined as the use of game mechanics, dynamics, and frameworks to promote desired behaviors” (Lee & Hammer, 2011, p.1). The desired behaviour in this situation is for students to do a certain activity as much or as well as possible. As stated above in the *Importance of Input* section, the more a student does an English activity, the better their language ability will become. Kolodny (2012) asserts that gamification can provide an incentive which makes people care and behave in a positive or desired manner. The incentive for the student typically is getting a better grade, but the underlying purpose from a teaching perspective is for students to improve their English.

All the activities used in this study employ some type of gamification where students are graded in competition against each other. The marks for each activity are divided into five possible categories with the top students receiving full marks (20), the middle students receiving average marks (15 or 10), and the bottom students receiving low marks (5 or 0). This could be considered a ‘soft’ style of gamification as many of the concepts of ‘full’ gamification are not employed (see Lee & Hammer, 2011; Kolodny, 2012, for further explanation).

**METHODS**

Various methods were used to record student performance and gamify the four activities included in this study. English Central (EC) and Moodle Reader (MR) use computer-generated progress bars for students to view their progress in comparison to other students. The more students do the activities (e.g. watching videos, speaking
videos, reading books, etc.), the better their final ranking/mark will be. Kelly (2012) ascertained that when students see a progress bar, it encourages them to continue to do the activity. ELLLO is tracked manually by the teacher who once a week checks the students’ ELLLO worksheets to see how many conversations they have studied. The teacher calls out how many conversations each student has studied, so that all of the students know how well they are doing relative to other class members. The news reports are graded not by number but by quality. Each week, students have the opportunity to see other students’ news report notebooks to see how well they are reporting the news compared to the other people in their group. Groups change each week giving students an opportunity to speak to all students in the class. At the end of the semester the teacher grades the ELLLO worksheets and the news reports using a similar marking scheme to EC and MR, as described above.

**English Central**

English Central (EC) is a website designed to help students learn English. The premise is that students learn English whilst watching English videos (movie clips, commercials, news reports, political debates, speeches, home-made movies, etc.) they are interested in on the site. The site has extensive graded activities to improve students’ vocabulary and pronunciation. The site can be used for various English language learning purposes such as TOEIC/TOEFL practice, business English, travel English, plus many more.

Students were encouraged to use the site as much as possible by watching and ‘speaking’ (i.e., shadowing) the videos, and doing the vocabulary and pronunciation exercises. As the site requires a microphone to practice speaking, some time was allocated in class once a week so students could access the site and use the university’s microphone headsets. However, like all the other activities, students were encouraged to do most of the work in their own time. The students’ progress, in terms of how often they did each of the activities, was automatically tracked by the website. Once a week a leaderboard showing the students’ performance was shown to the class.

**ELLLO**

ELLLO is a free-to-use website with approximately 1,200 different native level conversations in English. Students can listen to the conversations whilst reading the script if they require. Conversations come packaged with supplementary materials, including videos, pictures, vocabulary quizzes, and comprehension activities. There is a vast array of different conversation topics. It is a considerable resource for students wanting to improve their speaking, listening, and reading skills.

During the class, students were encouraged to listen to and study at least five conversations a week. Students kept a log of what conversations they studied (conversation number, topic, brief description of conversation, and any new vocabulary they learned). Once a week, in small groups (three to five students), they would be encouraged to share what they had learnt with their group members. They could teach the other students any new vocabulary they had learnt and give their opinion about the conversations they listened to. Their logbooks were checked once a week to make sure they had been doing the activity. Student rankings from EC and ELLLO were averaged and then they were given a mark which was worth a maximum 20% of their final grade for the semester.
Moodle Reader (MR)

ER was seen as an important component in developing students’ language proficiency, as discussed above. However, data collected by Philpott (2011) shows that students enjoyed reading books in English, however they did not like writing book reports. This was seen as a demotivating factor in an ER program. So how can teachers accurately track their students’ reading progress?

MR is a website used to track students’ extensive reading progress. After a student has finished reading a book they log in to MR and do the corresponding quiz for that book. The purpose of the quiz is not to check full comprehension, but to check whether they have actually read the book or not. The quizzes are designed to be easy enough so that if a student has actually read the book, they should be able to pass the quiz. Once they have passed the quiz the total amount of words in that book are tallied under their name. The more words they tally, the higher their marks or scores for the class competition. Typically, in ER, a teacher would give their students a minimum goal to reach (e.g. 60,000 words per semester). However, to gamify the ER component (20%) of this course, students’ marks were assigned depending on their word count ranking.

News Reports

Kwansei Gakuin University promotes the concept that students should become world citizens. For students to become world citizens it would be useful if they could read and understand English news and then form an opinion based on what they know or feel. This is a worthy challenge for language learners. Understanding authentic, native-speaker-level news stories can be difficult for low-level students, but it can be a good challenge for more advanced students. Low-level students can be directed towards news sources that use simplified or graded English.

The news report section for this course was worth 10% of the students’ final grade. Every week students had to find a news story they were interested in and then rewrite the story in their own words. Every Friday, in small groups (three to five students), students would present the news story they rewrote, teach the group any new vocabulary they had learnt, and then have a discussion. Students kept all the news reports in a notebook for the teacher to check. During discussion time, the teacher would take note of who was participating and who was not. Half of the grade (5%) was based on how well they rewrote and presented the news report in their notebook; the remainder (5%) of the grade was based on how much they contributed to the group discussion. As with the other activities, this activity was competitive as students’ marks were based on how well they worked compared to others in the class.

Participants

Survey data was collected in order to better understand students’ opinions in relation to the activities described above. Data was collected from 47 students from two classes in an intermediate level intensive English course comprised of 23 Lower-Intermediate Business students and 24 Upper-Intermediate Economics students. There was approximately an even mix of males and females. Classes met three times a week and the majority of students were motivated to improve their English skills. Students were encouraged to do most of the AL activities in their own time for homework, but
some time was allocated once a week in a computer room to do some online work, get help, and discuss with other students what they had been doing.

**Data Collection**

The data was collected at the end of the semester using Google Docs. Data was collected in a quantitative and qualitative manner. Some of the quantitative data was collected using a five-point Likert scale. This data has been converted to a number which represents the average result on the question. Number five represents *strongly agree*, while number one represents *strongly disagree*. Some of the quantitative data results will also be presented as a percentage of respondents. General statements based on frequency and insightfulness will be used to discuss the quantitative data.

**RESULTS**

The results for the survey are listed below.

The first group of results display responses to questions 1-4 as the average score given by respondents on the five-point Likert scale.

**Q1. I often did this activity:**
News report = 4, Reading = 3.5, English Central = 3.5, ELLLO = 3.1

**Q2. I liked learning English using this technique:**
English Central = 4.1, Reading = 3.8, News report = 3.4, ELLLO = 3.1

**Q3. My English improved because of it:**
English Central = 3.7, Reading = 3.6, News report = 3.2, ELLLO = 3.0

**Q4. My English improved because of this course:**
Average score = 4.0

The following results display the responses of students to questions 5-7 as percentage of responses.

**FIGURE 1**
Results for Question 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Central</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Report</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLLO</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 2
Results for Question 6

Q6. Which activity did you dislike most?

- English Central, 12%
- Reading, 21%
- News Report, 29%
- ELLLO, 38%

FIGURE 3
Results for Question 7

Q7. I will continue to use this in the future to improve my English

- English Central
- ELLLO
- News Report
- Reading

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

[Bar chart showing responses for each activity]
The data above shows that:
English Central and reading are the most popular and most effective ways to improve their English.
- ELLLO is the least popular activity.
- None of the activities had overall negative responses.
- Even though it was most often done, news reports weren’t seen as effective as English Central or extensive reading.

In the next section, students were asked which skill do you think each activity improved. Students were able to select more than one option. The left axis represents the percentage of how many students chose that option.
FIGURE 6
Student Self-assessment of Skills Improvement: ELLLO

FIGURE 7
Student Self-assessment of Skills Improvement: News Reports

FIGURE 8
Student Self-assessment of Skills Improvement: Extensive Reading
The graphs show the following student beliefs about the skills reinforced by each activity:

- English Central improves listening, speaking, and to a lesser extent, vocabulary.
- ELLLO improves listening, and to a lesser extent vocabulary and reading.
- News reports improve vocabulary, writing, speaking and reading skills.
- Extensive reading improves their reading skills and to a lesser extent, their vocabulary.

The next question was in relation to gamification.

**FIGURE 9**

**Student Responses to Question 13**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Central</th>
<th>ELLLO</th>
<th>News Report</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q13: Did you try and do this activity more than other people in order to get a better mark?</strong></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bar Chart" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bar Chart" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bar Chart" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bar Chart" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data above suggests:

- Employing an element of gamification into the course was effective as it encouraged the students to do the activities more often.
- Even though the competitiveness did not cause *all* the students to try to do more work, it did result in the majority of them attempting to do more work.
- Fewer students felt motivated by competition using ELLLO.
In the case of English Central, News Reports and Extensive Reading, a majority of students felt more motivated to try to do more in comparison to their classmates.

Students had the option to write comments about each activity. Their responses have been summarized below.

**Comments about English Central**
The 19 comments about English Central were overwhelmingly positive, with the most common comments (listed in order of frequency) being:
- It is a great way to practice listening and speaking.
- Happy to have a way to practice pronunciation.
- Interesting and fun.
- Enjoy watching various movies.
- It is complicated to use a computer.
- Improved my vocabulary.

**Comments about ELLLO**
There were 12 students who wrote comments about ELLLO. The comments are listed below in order of frequency:
- Can listen to native pronunciation.
- Many conversations so we can choose topics we are interested in.
- I prefer English Central.
- It is boring.
- Good to watch with videos.
- Poor sound quality.
- I did not use it often.

**Comments about News Reports**
There were 13 students who wrote comments about news reports. The comments are listed below in order of frequency:
- Could learn news from all over the world.
- Can study difficult words.
- Good.
- We need to know how to summarise articles in a simple way. When the reports are discussed in a group it is difficult to understand other student’s reports.
- Difficult and boring.
Comments about reading and Moodle Reader

There were 16 students who wrote comments about extensive reading and Moodle Reader. The comments are listed below in order of frequency:

- I enjoy reading this way.
- I was annoyed because I read some books, but I could not pass the quiz.
- My reading skill is improving.
- Moodle Reader is good.
- I could not find the book I read on Moodle Reader.
- I want to be able to see my ranking anytime.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Students are generally happy with the structure of the AL part of this English course. They enjoyed the challenge of learning in this environment and appreciated these new approaches to learning. However, it is difficult to please all the students.

Students learn in different ways so it is good to have a mixture of activities where students have some control over what they study. Different activities improve different skills, therefore it is important for the teacher to provide students with a variety of ways in which they can improve their English ability. Even though the classes were an intermediate level, students still varied in level from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate. These activities allowed students to choose materials which were suitable for their own level.

According to the students surveyed, English Central is good for improving speaking, listening, and vocabulary. ELLLO is good for listening and vocabulary, while ER and news reports are good for reading and vocabulary skills. One of the most insightful comments, which will have an effect on future classes, was in relation to the news reports. A student noted, “We need to know how to summarise articles in a simple way. When the reports are discussed in a group it is difficult to understand other student’s reports.”

In future classes, there should be more explicit instruction on how to write a news summary. All of the activities where students are working by themselves should be done out of class as much as possible. The face time students have with teachers and classmates should be utilised for more meaningful face-to-face interactions.

One of the lower level students wrote on her Facebook wall that she was feeling a bit overwhelmed with all the things she needed to do for her English class. Teachers, especially in this situation, need to take the time to explain all the activities and give the students time to understand what is expected of them. Students know what activities they like, but they do not necessarily know what is good for them. As teachers, we need to apply what we have studied and
researched in order to deliver an effective course. For example, even though ELLLO was not as popular as the other activities it is still a great resource for students. On the site, they can listen to various opinions and accents from around the world, then discuss what they listened to with other students. This is surely a great activity to improve their English ability.

Gamification was used in order to encourage students to do as much work as possible under the premise that the more they did each activity, the better their English would become. Two of the activities, English Central and Moodle Reader (ER), included a leaderboard which displayed their rank against other students. ELLLO did not use an electronic leaderboard to display rankings, and was ranked the lowest of the activities. This could have affected students’ attitudes towards doing the activity in a competitive manner. However, News Reports, which had the highest level, also did not have an electronic leaderboard but students would often compare notebooks with each other when discussing their news reports. Having other students look at their work may have encouraged them to do the activity more thoroughly, contributing to a spirit of competition.

In conclusion, it is clear from the results of this study that gamification definitely had a positive effect on the students. However a few questions remain for future research. Further research could be done into actually how effective each activity is, not just student opinions. What type of students did gamification not have an effect on? Variables to consider could include student linguistic ability, level of motivation, gender, intrinsic interest in the activity, and computer proficiency.
References


