

学習の学習

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Wow, it's July. The semester is almost over. As I talk to colleagues and students I hear various plans for the summer: travel abroad, study Japanese or English, write a paper, attend a conference, rest. As you prepare for your summer, please take a look at this issue of *Learning Learning*. In addition to an LD committee member update and our 1998 financial report, we are featuring two articles by members: Padraic Frehan's, Study Plans in independent learning environments and Anthony Rausch's, A "Menu approach" to Language Learning Strategies Instruction and Use. There is also an announcement about an NLP workshop that will be held in Nagoya and Tokyo later this summer. After 3 years serving as co-editors, Sumiko Taniguchi and I will be stepping down after the JALT conference in October. If you are interested in helping publish *Learning Learning*, please get in touch with either of us. Have a nice summer!

Steve Cornwell and Sumiko Taniguchi

もう7月です。前期もそろそろ終わろうとしています。同僚や学生と夏休みについて話していると、海外旅行、日本語や英語の勉強、論文の執筆、学会への参加、そして休養など、みんないろいろな計画を持っているようです。夏の準備をしながら、どうぞ本号をご覧ください。学習者ディベロプメントSIGからのお知らせの他に、メンバーからの投稿論文を2本掲載しました。ポーレック・フリーハンの「自律学習におけるスタディ・プラン」とアンソニー・ラウシュの「学習ストラテジー指導と使用のためのメニュー・アプローチ」です。また、この夏に名古屋と東京で開かれるNLPワークショップのお知らせもあります。

今まで3年間、私たちはニューズレターの編集者を務めてきましたが、10月のJALT大会をもって引退する予定です。ニューズレターの編集に興味がおありの方は、是非ご連絡ください。

それでは、皆さん、良い夏をお過ごしください。

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Study Plans in independent learning environments: investigating degrees of autonomy in Japanese learners

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Introduction

The concept of autonomy is not a new concept; it has been with us for centuries. The notion of learner autonomy as a goal of academic learning is attributed to ancient Greece where it was applied in a political context (Pierson 1996:50). Now, in the latter part of this century, the issue of autonomy has come to the forefront again as many respected scholars and researchers in the field of language learning (e.g. Knowles, Riley, Holec, Esch, Little) attempt to raise the teaching and learning communities' awareness to the importance of autonomy, a concept which Holec has succinctly defined as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec H. 1981:3).

The study described in this paper arose out of research conducted by Frehan (1998) on The British Council Tokyo Self-Access Centre and its users. One finding revealed that over 51% of the learners did not plan their self-study activities while only 20.5% responded they did plan in some form prior to studying.

This study was conducted to see if learners could plan an individual learning programme, to see what type of Study Plans, if any, were actually made, to see how these Study Plans might influence the learners' attitudes towards themselves as learners and their learning environment and lastly, to see if any conclusions could be drawn from the evidence found regarding the possible autonomous learning characteristics of the learners involved.

Planning for learning, described by O'Malley & Chamot as a metacognitive strategy (1990:127), is a necessity in an autonomous learning environment and Study Plans in particular play a vital role in an individual learner's learning programme as they can help a learner focus clearly on her current learning goals.

The Learners

Seven learners volunteered to participate in the project. All were female learners attending a Study Skills class at The British Council Tokyo and all but one were preparing to take up postgraduate studies at British tertiary institutions. Furthermore, they were all at a lower to mid-advanced level of English proficiency.

Only the first initials of the participants names will be used throughout this paper.

The Learning Environment

The teaching methodology at The British Council English School Tokyo is a 'communicative' one in which high involvement on the part of the learners is one of the desired processes of learning. Almost all learners joining the courses are perceived to have "come from an educational background of rote learning" (Frehan 1997:1) and perhaps find it hard to "shake off the shackles of teacher dependency" (Ibid.). As the study unfolded, however, it became clear that these participants had already begun to shake off these shackles and had started to break "out of the cocoon of dependence on the teacher" (Bloor & Bloor 1988:73).

Defining Study Plans

Little writes that the essence of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning which entails establishing an agenda for the learning that is to take place (Little 1996: 203-4). This agenda encompasses, for example, the setting of objectives, the allocation of time and the selection of resources necessary to help achieve these objectives and can be described as the metacognitive strategy of self-management (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 198). Wenden identifies three self-management strategies: planning, monitoring and evaluation (Wenden 1991:29). The planning level, which Dickinson (1988) sub-divides into three sections: a) approach to learning, b) learning plans, and c) learning techniques (p.51), is an absolute necessity in the learning process as it is here that the decisions for the next steps are made, decisions without which learning could not proceed in a fluid, organized and coherent fashion.

Study Plans then are the written realizations of this planning procedure which have been decided upon by the learner in order to achieve a particular objective and can be either short-term, long-term Plans or a combination of both. The Study Plan plays the role of guide for the learner, helps her to stay on the right track, helps confirm what she is doing at a particular stage in the learning process and can help to improve the allocation and use of time when studying.

Furthermore, a Study Plan can play an instrumental role in assisting the learner's motivation because it enables her to see where she has been, where she is now and where she is going and can thus highlight the progressive nature of learning.

Setting up the Study

The study consisted of inviting a group of learners to develop Study Plans for a duration of ten weeks while simultaneously keeping a Journal in order to record their learning experiences. Furthermore, a series of individual interviews was arranged, one at the beginning of the project period, one mid-way through and the last one at the end of the study. These interviews were, respectively, to elicit expectations of the project and criteria for developing the Study Plans, discuss progress and any difficulties being experienced during the project and to find out the learners' reactions to the project as a whole. In addition, two group discussions were held, one at the beginning of the project to give the participants the opportunity to clarify their roles and the other on the final day to elicit the learners' opinions on the experience as a whole. Finally, the participants were asked to write a retrospective essay on their experiences when the project ended.

As all the participants, including the writer, had access to electronic mail (e-mail) it was agreed that this would be another avenue of communication between the learners and the writer throughout the project period. This was an added bonus as our class met only once a week.

A Definition of Learner Autonomy

Breen & Mann (1997:134-136) distinguish eight qualities for being autonomous. These are:

1. **Learner's stance.** This refers to her relationship to *what* is to be learnt and *how* it is to be learnt. It is "a position from which to engage with the world" (Breen & Mann 1997: 134) and when so doing the learner is 'an active agent' (Benson & Voller 1997: 7).

2. **Desire to learn.** This is her motivation to learn, which can be either intrinsic (Brown 1994: 155), or instrumental (Ibid.: 153), and is where the learner shows a 'willingness' to learn (Wenden 1991: 53).

3. **A sense of self.** This refers to being confident and capable of making just assessments on the learning taking place without it having any negative effects on the learning process. The assessment can be a "rich source of feedback or can be discarded" (Breen &

Mann 1997: 135) and in making such a decision the learner is being 'self-confident' (Wenden 1991: 59).

4. **Metacognitive capacity.** This capacity allows the learner to make decisions about what, when, how and with what materials to learn; incorporated within Nunan's expanded definition on autonomy of making 'all the decisions' (Nunan 1996: 15).

5. **Management of change** refers to being "alert to change and being able to change in an adaptable, resourceful and opportunistic way" (Breen & Mann 1997: 135). In other words, being 'resourceful' (van Lier 1996: 92).

6. **Independence.** This can be interpreted as having the capacity to learn independently of the educational process taking place. To achieve this the learner needs to be 'self-conscious' (Pennycook 1997: 39).

7. **A strategic engagement with learning.** When the learner constructs and evolves her own learning programme, i.e. chooses "the right thing at the right time for the right reasons against her own criteria" (Breen & Mann 1997: 136), this is evidence of strategic engagement with learning and also of incorporating all the decisions necessary for successful learning.

8. **A capacity to negotiate.** Interacting with her social environment, e.g. her fellow learners and her teacher(s), highlights the learner's capacity to negotiate with others, as learners never work in "a social vacuum" (Breen & Mann 1997: 136). This illustrates her awareness of some of the 'responsibilities' (van Lier 1996: 12, Dickinson 1988: 48) for the learning at hand.

Evidence of Learner Autonomy

Awareness of One's Present Situation

The learners expressed clear reasons for participating in the project when outlining their expectations during the first interview and in their first e-mail correspondence. For example, many of the learners were intent on improving their skill of managing time: "(I want to) manage study time effectively and efficiently" commented one of the learners. Secondly, some felt they needed to set clear aims before studying: "(I want to) make a clear purpose to study" remarked another learner.

This evidence implies the learners were aware of weaknesses in those areas and that a particular learning strategy needed attention or improvement

which illustrates they were thinking about the learning process, a core metacognitive strategy. They were, in other words, being 'active' learners.

Ability to Plan

The Study Plans produced by the participants varied in structure and content but simultaneously contained evidence that the learners were preparing Study Plans to suit their own learning environments, displaying a "sequence of activities with a conscious purpose" (Dickinson 1987: 51).

During the first interview all learners expressed very clear criteria on how they were organizing their Plans while four of the learners had no questions to ask concerning the setting up of their Study Plans. This displays a high degree of self-confidence in their own ability plus a willingness to take personalised action to further their English skills.

Highlighting the level of awareness displayed is A.'s statement:

"Studying along with step-by-step schedule makes goals be realistic and also avoid a burn-out.", which supports Dickinson's claim that the autonomous learner "must provide the necessary (work) structure for himself." (Dickinson 1987: 98). To reiterate a statement made earlier, the establishing of a personal agenda is "the essence of learner autonomy" (Little 1996: 203).

Ability to Evaluate

Types of evaluation in evidence during the study came under the following categories:

a) Time allocation in Study Plan

A. reported a difference in her self-study because she had never thought of the times for her tasks before. K. stated that "the time is added so it's more clear". M. wrote in her Journal that because she felt restricting her study to an hourly basis so stressful she changed to a daily schedule instead; "*This type of Plan enables me to study efficiently*" she reported in her e-mail feedback.

b) Suitability of contents of Study Plan

During the study period K. became aware that she was including too many items in her Plan which resulted in her not being able to cover them all. This prompted her to make a more simple schedule to enable her to concentrate on one subject at a time. A. expressed a desire to alter her Plan because she felt the one she had too rigid in structure.

c) Suitability of objectives in Study Plan

An example of the ability to evaluate can be found in Yu.'s actions. As the contents Yu. listed in her first Study Plan were devoid of aims or objectives she altered her Plan to include more focus and more time efficiency after self-reflection and discussion with the writer.

d) Learning progress

C. stressed that making a Plan was very beneficial for her as she could see the overall picture of her study and M. stated she could confirm what she was doing with her Plan. A. believed that the Plan was having a positive effect on her study as she was able to keep a record of her learning.

The process of evaluation then can help the learners identify specific areas of strengths and weaknesses, can motivate them to continue working and can help them focus on how successful their learning processes are (Hammond & Collins 1991). Y. illustrates strong evaluative skills when she writes: "*Now, I am convinced effective planning needs 'try and error'. I know I need some more tries and errors. I want to make a long-term schedule and a short-term schedule and combine them effectively in the next stage.*"

Evaluation is thus, as Little (1996) remarks, "central to the development of learner autonomy." (p.211).

Confidence in One's Ability as a Learner

Confidence was displayed by the learners in the following areas:

a) Willingness to participate in the project, knowing they would be working on their own without direction. Yu wrote "*I am very glad to join your project. I decided to get myself involved ... because I think it will be helpful for me to make myself accustomed to studying for a certain period of time everyday.*" (Yu.: E-mail).

b) Ability to self assess

Confidence was displayed especially by the ability to self-assess their own progress and learning techniques. This in turn helped them to attribute their level of achievement to their own efforts and thus further helped to increase their motivation and confidence.

In addition, the choice of appropriate learning materials and activities to promote their learning and their ability to produce coherent Study Plans also illustrated a high degree of self confidence.

Awareness of One's Weaknesses

There were reports from a number of the learners concerning their weaknesses and how they were addressing them. For example, Y. reported she continually gave top priority to her main subject, Economics, with the result that she always neglected to study English. She wrote: "*I realized that I would never study it if I continue my way of planning. Therefore, I changed my plan and started to study English from 7 am to 8 am every day*". K. realised that she was being over-ambitious regarding the contents of her Plans and set about changing them to better suit her learning style .

Other areas where weaknesses were discussed by the learners were:

- T. realised that her weakness was not being able to set clear and achievable learning goals.
- M. noted how she was becoming too easy-going in her approach but admitted that that was not such a bad thing as it helped her avoid unnecessary pressure and stress.
- Yu. reported "*the definite difference is that the Study Plan gave me the chance to think about the weakness that I have to overcome, which I had overlooked.*"

In addition, during the project some learners also requested advice on their learning approaches thus illustrating an awareness that this area of their learning needed improvement.

Willingness to take on responsibility

The learners displayed responsibility by volunteering to participate in the project and by producing Study Plans containing a series of organized and coherent activities without assistance or direction from the teacher. In addition, responsibility was illustrated by the decision making involved in the learners' choice of learning materials. Furthermore, responsibility was evident in the learners' attention to upcoming important academic events and focussing on them in their Study Plans.

Willingness to seek advice

Five participants sought advice during the project period from the teacher. Whether the learners sought advice from one another is not known as it was not documented. Advice was sought under three categories: the project, language development and future study in Britain. The learners were thus taking advantage of "a diverse learning opportunity" (O'Malley & Chamot 1990:205), one application of self-management and a key element of a learner's

metacognitive learning strategies.

Awareness of when to Change or Adapt Study Plan
M. adapted her Study Plan from an hourly basis to a daily basis in order to relieve the stress she felt from trying to adhere to an hourly Plan and A. stressed a desire to adapt her Plan as she felt it was too rigid in structure. K. simplified her schedule to enable her to focus on a particular subject in preparation for a deadline and an examination thus responding to the situation at that time and focusing on what was relevant to her. In addition, K. also added an extra dimension to her Plans by dividing them into two sections, 1. 'My Ideal Plan' and 2. 'What Really Happened' so as to help her plan in a more appropriate way at the next stage.

The above information points to learners who were highly aware of their learning situation and were able to take appropriate steps to focus on what was important to them at a particular time. This was similar to what O'Malley & Chamot (1990:149) found in their research.

Showing Resourcefulness

Voller (1997) writes that the ability of the self-directed learner to use resources efficiently, skillfully and with initiative should be one of the main proofs of autonomous language learning. During this project the learners resourcefulness was clearly visible in:

a) Activities

The learners displayed ability to choose activities to help attain their learning goals. For example, K. chose to listen to the BBC news for authentic listening exposure and compare her understanding to the Japanese news.

b) Appropriate materials

The learners ability to choose appropriate materials to assist in the learning process was obvious. For example, Yu. chose to expand her vocabulary by using magazines and newspapers; she wrote: "*I believe choosing the right material is the first step for carrying out the plan successfully.*" (Yu.: E-mail).

c) Adapt and change

The participants' ability to adapt and change their Study Plans when and where appropriate to suit their objectives illustrated another aspect of their resourcefulness.

d) Seek advice

Their willingness to seek advice from another party when they felt they needed it further illustrated the learners' resourcefulness.

A Definition of Learner Autonomy Revisited

All the evidence cited above gives a picture of a group of learners developing active control over their own learning. Referring back to the eight qualities of autonomy (Breen & Mann 1997) above it is reasonable to conclude that the learners who participated in this project all possessed autonomous learning qualities, albeit some more than others. These learners were 'active agents', they exhibited a 'willingness' to learn, they possessed a 'self-confidence' which enabled them to assess their learning, they illustrated 'resourceful' qualities that allowed them to adapt and change their learning approach, they were in possession of the 'self-consciousness' to act independently, they had the 'responsibilities' to interact with the environment around them, and finally, they made the important 'decisions' necessary to engage successfully with the learning process.

Where to go from here?

The following are suggestions to help promote and further develop the autonomous learning characteristics already present in this learning environment.

Orientation and Provision of Models

On introducing the idea of a Study Plan it would be of great value to provide the learners with samples of what previous learners produced. This would give them an indication of the range of styles possible and also help clarify its role in the learning process. This suggestion is corroborated by T. who writes: "*I had no sound plan ... If a kind of plot type of plan had been shown in advance ... it might have been smooth.*"

It is thus imperative that the teacher builds a file of learners' previous Study Plans so as to be able to make them available to the learners when appropriate. Having such samples would enable the learners consider suitable format and content for their Study Plans. The most important consideration initially would be simplicity in order to provide the learners with a platform from which to develop their own style.

Secondly, assistance in the setting of objectives is essential. This would help avoid the "octopus syndrome" (Dam 1995: 77), the feeling of "being everywhere and nowhere at the same time" (ibid.). Negotiating with the learners the setting of short-term achievable goals would have the added bonus of building learners confidence in their own learning capacity and hopefully motivate them to more

challenging learning activities as their experience grew. Simmons (1996) found that all her learners expressed a willingness to work independently but were unable to negotiate the learning foci without some assistance from the teacher.

Trust

A power relationship exists within the classroom. The generic relationship is the teacher holds the power and the learner follows instructions. Some teachers 'like' this power and especially in situations where the profession is held in high esteem (e.g. Confucian societies like Japan, China and Hong Kong) this power relationship can have negative consequences. For example, learners can become totally reliant on their teacher for knowledge and neglect their own capacity to acquire knowledge. Thomson (1996) claims people are all born "self-directed learners" (p.77) but by the time they reach university many "have unlearned most of their skills as self-directed learners" (p.77) due mainly to the educational experiences they have been channeled through growing up.

To help overcome this inequality the teacher needs to transmit to the learners the belief he holds in their capacity to learn (Breen & Mann 1997: 146). He needs to develop his relationship with the learners so that they begin to become, in a sense, equals who respect each others positions, knowledge and responsibilities. Both parties need to begin to build a trust in one another's capacity, the learners ability to assert their own autonomy and the teacher's ability to be a resource, to participate in the learning decisions and to be viewed by the learners as a person they can turn to when advice, support or feedback on the autonomous learning process is required and so creating a more positive learning environment.

Guidance

"*Of course I don't want to be made to do something but in my case there was no guidance for Study Plan*" (M: Final Group Discussion).

This quote reflects the necessity of providing learners with the option of having guidance if they feel they need it. Guidance can be in the form of models or samples as mentioned above. It can take the form of providing learners with checklists or self-evaluation forms to evaluate their progress or it can be a comparison through discussion of the learner's and the teacher's evaluations on a particular piece of work. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) report that learners were successful in learning to use self-evaluation criteria and enjoyed it! (p. 167).

Certainly many learners are not in a position to effectively evaluate their own learning - they will most probably not have had previous practice doing so. Thomson (1996) reports that such was the case in her study, "The students lacked confidence in all areas of assessment, especially in assessing their performance without the assistance of their instructor" (p.84). It is therefore sensible that teachers provide such an option to help develop and improve the learner's ability to assess their own learning.

Don't dictate ~ cooperate

It is necessary for the teacher to become more involved in the learner's learning programme. The learner, for example, may have far more important learning goals or wishes than just taking on board the uses of the Present Perfect. For instance, she may be compiling a portfolio of work to submit to a British University or she may be hoping to sit an English language proficiency examination in the near future. Teachers need to become more involved with their learners' objectives and at the same time help to involve the learners more in their own learning, e.g. guiding them to having clearer goals, as "interaction and negotiation are of vital importance to the development of autonomy." (Pemberton 1996: 6). Teachers need to cooperate with the learner as an *overall* learner and not just with what is part of the teaching syllabus at any particular time. The positive consequence is that by becoming more involved the teacher can help channel better learning habits the learner's way and in effect help them become more the "authors of their own worlds" (Pennycook A. 1997: 39).

Promote more reflection

a) Informal discussions

The incorporation of on-going informal discussions on experiences of keeping a Study Plan and the autonomous learning process can lead to "greater sensitivity in the learning process over time" (Nunan 1996: 20). This could be conducted regularly as a class activity and can serve not just as a reflection exercise but also help to promote cooperative work between learners themselves and also learners and the teacher because, basically, self-direction should not mean learning in isolation.

b) Counselling sessions

Another way to incorporate reflection is through offering individual counselling sessions to learners when they desire it. Not alone is counselling important initially where it can provide guidance in goal setting for example, but it can also be indispensable during the

learning process because "learners frequently lose sight of their original goals, and may become confused ... they may lose motivation and need encouragement." (Kelly 1996: 104).

Learner Contracts

A learner contract is one way of providing structure in autonomous learning environments as it gives a learner "a framework for his planning" (Dickinson 1987: 99) thus paving the way for the use of more complete Study Plans later. There can be many levels of learner contract but a minimal one should show the learner what work she has decided to do over what period of time. This contract can be an agreement between the learner and the teacher initially and later develop into one the learner has with herself.

It would therefore be extremely beneficial for the learners if they were given assistance when compiling the contract initially e.g. in an individual counselling session. This assistance should then be on-going and the contract should initially contain short, achievable tasks to promote confidence, motivation and proficiency in conceiving them. Research has found that the rationale for learning agreements be openly discussed with learners (Hammond & Collins 1991: 145).

Summary

This study uncovered three important aspects relevant to the learning approach of the group who participated in the study. Firstly, when given the opportunity, these learners were capable of setting up, carrying out and evaluating their own learning programme through the incorporation of a Study Plan. In other words, they displayed the ability to work independently of their teacher and organized classes. This is contrary to the prevalent opinion within the field of language teaching, especially in Japan, that Japanese learners are predominantly teacher-dependent learners and it illustrates that they have the capacity to act in an autonomous learning mode when provided with suitable conditions. This finding has major consequences which deserve further attention and research.

Secondly, this study has demonstrated that although the learners in question displayed a certain degree of autonomy some of the group experienced difficulties during the project as they felt they lacked the direction which could have propelled them further in their autonomous learning environment. This finding has major consequences as it highlights the necessity for:

a) providing learners with the opportunity and trust to

enable them to work more autonomously and
b) when preparing to enter and when in this
autonomous learning mode careful steps need to be
taken to provide the learners with clear orientation,
support to help them along the road to greater
independence and to ensure guidance and advice is
readily available should they so desire it.

A third important outcome of this study was that the
learners were given the opportunity to 'be themselves'
which enabled them to discover elements of their own
learning characters and resulted in a positive attitude
towards the learning taking place. They could see
themselves as the ones who were in control of the
learning process; they had "the locus of control"
(Pierson 1996: 50), a fundamental principle of learner
autonomy. As M. stated: "... you left us free ... so I
think that's the very good point of this project " .

Conclusion

By assisting our learners along the road to greater
autonomy we are giving them one way of "maximizing
their life choices" (Knowles 1975: 219). Evidence
suggests that "individualism is central to modern
consciousness" (Meyer 1986: 216) and in this rapidly
changing society of today independence in learning is
one of the vital requirements for effective functioning
in our society and also in the society of the future
which our learners will inhabit.

This study has based its findings on seven learners.
Due to the small size of the group and the relatively
short time covered in the investigation, the writer is
hesitant to offer conclusions on Japanese learners in
general. However, from the evidence presented and
the conclusions drawn, it would seem reasonable to
conclude that an area has opened up which deserves,
nay demands, further research as it can only have
positive results for the learners and all the other
parties involved in the field of language teaching in
Japan.

Note

This paper represents a summary of research carried
out for my MSc in Teaching English at Aston University
England in 1998. I have omitted from the paper due to
space restrictions samples of the Study Plans
produced and other elements of the research which
were elaborated on in the dissertation. Should any
reader wish to see samples of the Study Plans
produced or wish to comment or elaborate on this topic
I can be contacted via e-mail at paric@gol.com

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