

Self-directed learning and the teacher's role: insights from two different teaching contexts

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Abstract. There has been interest in learner autonomy in the field of language education for many years but the role of the teacher remains uncertain. In Japan, where this research was conducted, it is not commonplace for comprehensive programs that foster autonomous learning to be integrated into formal English education, but some institutions and educators have taken steps in this direction. This study gives an overview of two different contexts in which teacher support for autonomous learning was woven into English education at Japanese universities; firstly, in a course that was dedicated to self-directed learning and secondly, in a speaking course that included a self-directed learning strand. Survey data that were collected from 50 students in these two contexts suggest that the support given in both course types was largely beneficial to learners, with similar outcomes in many areas but a noteworthy difference in the amount of time spent studying outside of class.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-directed learning, language learning, digital technology.

1. Introduction

To become fully proficient in a language, students generally need to look beyond their course-based studies and seek opportunities for autonomous, out-of-class learning. The path to efficient and sustained self-directed learning is not without its challenges, but educators can play an integral role in enhancing students' opportunities to gain the skills and motivation required (Blidi, 2017; Lai, 2017). In Japan, there is not a comprehensive system in place for fostering autonomous

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learning at the tertiary level. However, there is support available, with some universities offering credit-bearing self-directed learning courses (Curry, Mynard, Noguchi, & Watkins, 2017) and others providing self-access learning centers (Mynard, 2016). This study contributes to the existing body of work in this field by examining different ways in which English learners were offered support for self-directed learning at two private universities in Tokyo, Japan. While the two contexts are compared, the main aim of this study was not to assess which was more beneficial to learners, but rather to draw on the researcher's own teaching settings to provide examples of ways that educators can successfully support out-of-class learning in different contexts.

2. Method

This study presents ways self-directed learning was integrated into two first-year university subjects that students were required to take for two 14-week semesters. Students in one university took a self-directed learning course (hereafter SDL course/students) for 90 minutes once per week and students in the other university took an English speaking skills course (hereafter Regular Course or RC students) for 100 minutes twice per week. In the latter course, approximately 20 minutes of class time each week was spent on self-directed learning tasks, with longer sessions held several times throughout the course.

Both groups followed the same basic pattern with different degrees of detail and extension work. Support commenced by guiding students to reflect on their language learning history and share it with their teacher and classmates. After that, both groups learnt about tools and methods for English study, with the teacher and students introducing a range of education-driven CALL/MALL² tools and other digital tools that could be exploited for language learning purposes as well as some paper-based tools such as graded readers and proficiency test textbooks. Another key component of each course was planning-action-reflection cycles, which had the following components:

- outline long-term and short-term goals,
- identify tasks that will build towards goals,
- list the tasks in a SMART³ way,

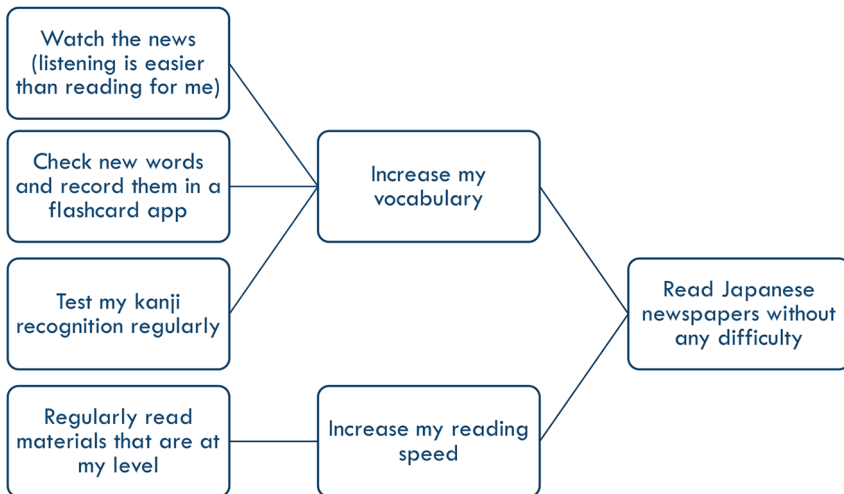
2. Computer Assisted Language Learning/Mobile Assisted Language Learning

3. SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-related; alternate versions of this acronym exist.

- discuss the plans in class,
- take action outside of class,
- discuss the action (or inaction) in class,
- reflect on the experience,
- modify plans if necessary, and
- continue the cycle.

The first step was done as a writing task for homework then discussed in class. Students were told about the teacher’s long-term goals and **Figure 1** was used to show how one of the major goals could be broken down into smaller goals, with facilitative tasks identified. For steps two and three, students made a similar chart for their own goals then learned about SMART plans and applied this principle to create learning plans. Steps four to nine became a cycle during term-time and all steps except the discussions were encouraged during university breaks.

Figure 1. Model for connecting tasks with goals



The major difference between the two courses related to the amount of support that was provided for each step. For example, SDL students did extra preparation

for their learner histories by watching and reading models online and significantly more time was spent on learning about useful tools and study methods, with a lot of support through Moodle, which was used for course management. Moreover, while RC students made short learning plans in note form, SDL students wrote detailed plans based on models from the teacher. Furthermore, student interaction about planning, action, and reflection was limited to brief, in-class discussions for RC students, but SDL students had time for lengthier group discussions and also did three presentations about their planning-action-reflection cycles, including face-to-face and pre-recorded ones that they shared online.

At the end of the academic year, anonymous survey data were collected from 50 students, with 38⁴ SDL participants and 12 RC participants. Key findings are discussed below.

3. Results and discussion

To gain insight into the value of steps taken to support self-directed learning, students were asked to rate the usefulness of various aspects of their course on a four-point Likert scale. [Figure 2](#) shows that the vast majority in both contexts found it *useful* (combined figures for *very useful* and *somewhat useful*) to make and review plans, share plans and actions with their teacher and classmates and learn about their classmates' out-of-class study/use of English.

In terms of learning about resources, [Figure 3](#) indicates that a marginally higher proportion of students found it useful to learn about ways to improve their English outside of class with digital technology than with non-digital tools, and more students found it beneficial learning about tools from the teacher than other students. However, in all cases, most students found value in these aspects, which suggests building these features into the courses was worthwhile.

The greatest discrepancy between the groups was found in the amount of time spent studying outside of class. Students were asked to estimate the average amount of time they spent on self-study each week, choosing from categories that rose in 30-minute increments (e.g. about 30 minutes, about 60 minutes). In Japan, the typical length of a university lesson is 90 minutes so responses have been amalgamated in [Figure 4](#) to show those who did at least one extra lesson's worth of study and those who did less. The results show that SDL students were more likely

4. This figure is an amalgamation of two separate classes.

to study for approximately 90 minutes or longer, with an 18 percentage point gap during the term and a 24 percentage point gap during university breaks. Without further investigation, it cannot be claimed that the additional support students received in the SDL course is responsible for these gaps, but the discrepancy warrants further research.

Figure 2. Perceptions of the usefulness of making, reviewing, and sharing learning plans/actions

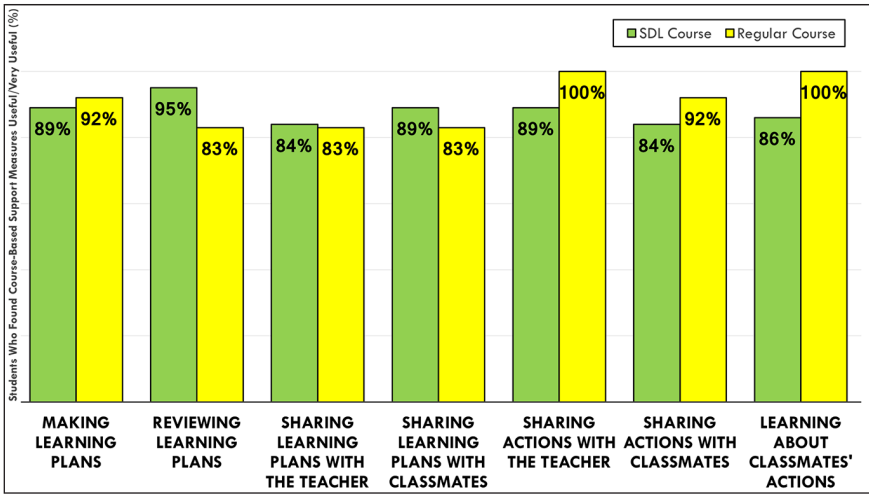


Figure 3. Perceptions of the usefulness of learning about study tools from others

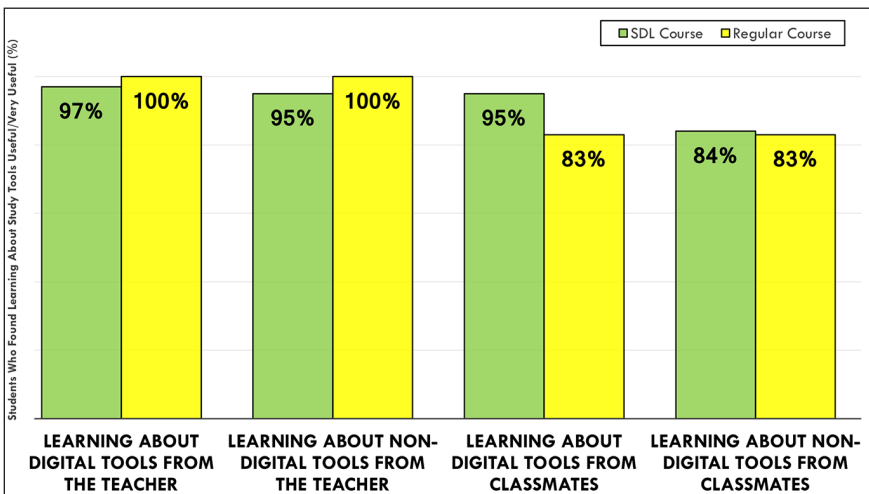
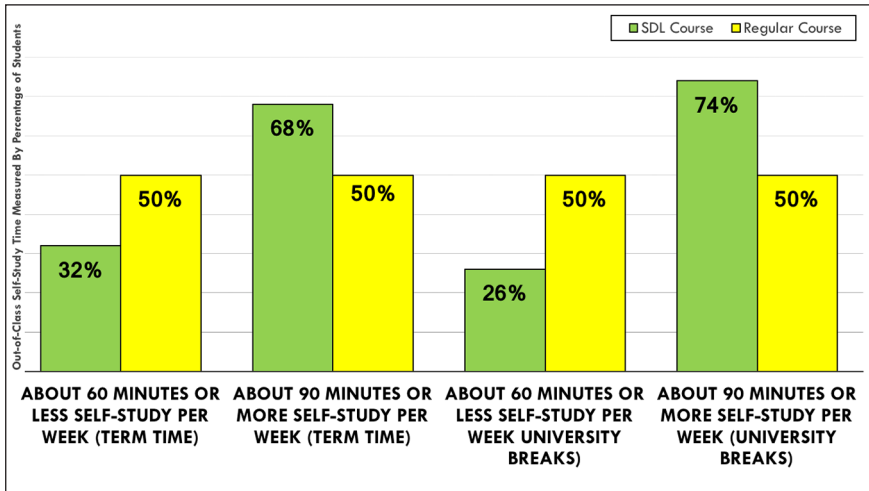


Figure 4. A comparison of out-of-class study time by course



Open responses from students also highlighted numerous benefits to students, including the following:

- **Identifying future goals:** “[The course] helped me think about my future plans, and what I want to do in the future became a bit more clear”.
- **Developing planning skills:** “I learned the importance of setting a short and REACHABLE goal because I had almost never achieved big and long-term goals”.
- **Learning new study skills:** “Thanks to [the] 5-week feedback presentations, I learned and found [a] variety of ways of learning English. I could find new studying methods so I will do it from now and am motivated now”.
- **Planning as a motivator:** “By making a study plan, it motivated me to actually study English and reach goals”.
- **Gaining motivation from others:** “I was so motivated to study English. Especially, when my friend told me how much he studied English and its outcome, I was so encouraged to study English”.

However, some students did not like certain activities, with one noting, “I was not really motivated because when I do something I planned, I feel that I have the duty to do that”. Furthermore, a student from the SDL course wrote, “I was a little not motivate[d] because sharing the information can be done in [a] short time and also we did similar things through the first semester which made me less motivated”. For this learner, the repetition of the cycle had become unproductive and the time allocated was excessive. Further investigation into how widespread this sentiment is in similar settings would be worthwhile.

4. Conclusions

This study has outlined ways in which teachers can support autonomous learning and shows the potential they have to influence students’ out-of-class actions through in-class guidance. It was beyond the scope of the study to thoroughly evaluate whether the support given to SDL or RC students was more beneficial to learners, but the results suggest the SDL students were generally willing to spend more time developing their language skills outside of class. In future research, it would be valuable to extend this work by collecting qualitative data to investigate further how and why the types of teacher support outlined in this study can influence learners.

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