

Classroom-Based Independent Study and Learner Identity

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This paper describes a one-semester project aimed at developing first-year university students' capacity to study English autonomously. Students participated in five independent study workshops in which they chose, tried and reflected on learning activities suggested by the teacher. Research aimed to establish what effect the intervention had on student motivation, agency, and ability to study outside the classroom. Questionnaire data showed little change in motivation to learn English, which was consistently high. Measures of student agency rose significantly, but student confidence in their ability to study without a teacher showed no change. The paper argues that the ability to study alone should not be the aim or measure of learner autonomy development, and concludes by suggesting that students with limited experience of making choices in the classroom may benefit from teacher- and peer-supported in-class experimentation and reflection as a way to build their metacognitive awareness.

本稿は大学1年生の自律的学習能力を向上させるための一学期のプロジェクトについて説明したものである。学生が5つの自己学習ワークショップにおいて、先生に推薦されたアクティビティの中から一つを選択し、その活動の省察を行った。本研究は、この教育方法が英語学習意欲、自主性と学外の学習能力に対してどのような影響を及ぼしたかを目的とする。アンケート調査によれば、学習意欲が一貫して高かった。自主性の測定が顕著に上昇したが、一方、学外の学習能力に対して変化が見られなかった。学外の学習自体は自律性の発達に対して不適切な目的または尺度と考察する。そして結論として、教育における選択の自由を行使する経験が浅い学生に関して、教師と学生同士を助け合いながら経験的学習と省察がメタ認知能力を高める方法として効果があるとする。

Keywords

learner identity, reflection, autonomy, independent study, agency, motivation

キーワード

学習者のアイデンティティ、省察、自律性、独立した学習、エージェンシー、学習に対する意欲

If we define identity as “the way we view ourselves in relation to specific contexts and groups” (Williams, Mercer & Ryan, 2015, p. 49), it seems likely that transitions in those contexts and social groups can occasion profound changes in our identity, and a loss, hopefully temporary, of confidence in our sense of who we are. Entering university is one such transition, with its new balance of freedom and responsibility. Students are often aware that a great deal is expected of them, but unsure as to what the expectations are and how best to fulfil them.

In order that students can hit the ground running, institutions and instructors have a great deal to gain from easing this transition by making expectations clear and helping learners develop their identities as competent university language students. Part of this involves cognitive aspects, helping students develop familiarity with the new learning context and strengthen skills needed to do well in it. Another aspect is social: how can instructors facilitate the develop of social groups which support students in their learning and adaptation to their new context?

The present study arose due to my participation in a curriculum project group at Kanda University of International Studies. The group was updating the materials for the initial “Orientation Unit” of the first-year Basic English Proficiency Program (BEPP) curriculum, around 20 class periods. We decided to focus explicitly on the transition from high school to univer-

sity, taking it as a topic for discussion and using the unit as a chance for students to experience the kinds of learning activities and processes that they would be expected to carry out during their degree program.

I revised the Independent Study lessons, aiming to introduce students to a range of English study activities in class, allowing them to choose activities individually or in groups and then to reflect on their value to them. I hoped that by enabling students to experiment with learning activities in a sheltered context, their confidence, knowledge, and metacognitive awareness of the learning process would grow, and they could create new identities as competent, agentic, reflective learners while building a supportive group dynamic.

This paper will describe a semester-long project carried out with one class of 19 students, of which I was the classroom teacher. Students followed a cycle of choosing study activities from a range suggested by the teacher, trying them out and reflecting on what they had learned. A thorough description of the activities suggested is beyond the scope of this paper, but all are standard practice within communicative language teaching (see the Methods section for further details).

Through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures, the research aimed to understand what the process meant to students, and what impact it had on their skills, motivation, and self-beliefs. As an instructor, I experienced transitions of my own regarding my beliefs about the learning process and how it appears to students, and became much more aware of the importance of the social dimension of learning.

Literature Review

The committee began with a broad definition of what might constitute the identity of a competent learner at our university and beyond. Classes within the English Language Institute are learner-centred, and successful learning is felt to depend on the “activity, initiative and engagement of the learner” (van Lier, 2008, p. 163). Kanda also has a Self-Access Learning Centre allowing students to access learning resources and a community of other language learners. This speaks to a belief in the value of learner autonomy, or students’ “ability to take charge of [their] own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Autonomous students may be better able to learn in the language classroom as they develop the capacity to relate new information to their existing knowledge and experience (Little, 1991), and in a broader sense are empowered to think and act as free individuals.

Our learners would also need to believe themselves to be capable of functioning effectively at our university (perceived competence; see Elliot & Dweck, 2007), developing confidence in their ability to tackle learning actively, to plan and direct their own learning. Part of this might involve their metacognitive awareness of the process of learning: their ability to understand and reflect on language systems and skills, and their knowledge of strategies, defined by Cohen as “thoughts and actions consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance” (2012, p. 136). It would also involve understanding how to succeed within their new context.

In order to thrive within Kanda’s communicative English-only classrooms, students are expected to develop and express their identities in the target language (Ushioda, 2011). This includes not only their classroom-based identities, but also what Richards (2006, p. 60) calls their “transportable identities”, as rounded individuals with interests beyond the classroom. Engaging these identities seems to have a motivating effect, and to contribute to a positive group dynamic. Kanda students are also expected, and explicitly trained, to work well in groups and support the efforts of others to contribute.

While many of these behavioural competencies are considered fairly standard goals of higher education, our research group felt that few of our learners come to the classroom fully equipped to learn autonomously; more commonly, we encounter “learners who are not yet autonomous but are involved in the process of acquiring the ability to assume responsibility for their learning” (Holec, 1981, pp. 25–26). As Brophy (2009) argues, socializers, such as teachers and other students, play an important role in steering students towards adaptive identities and demonstrating the affordances given by a particular context or activity.

We also felt that it was important for students to experience actively making autonomous decisions in the classroom. Ushioda (2011, p. 223) argues that there are two main senses in which the word “autonomy” has been used:

- Autonomy in the sense of taking responsibility for, managing and regulating one’s learning.
- Autonomy in the sense of a psychological need to experience behaviour as self-determined.

Ushioda argues that the former sense of autonomy is indeed dependent on a learner’s level of motivation, because learners are unlikely to exercise meta-cognition without the willingness to do so. On the other hand, classroom experience and research such as that of Dam (1995) suggests that promoting autonomy in the latter sense—empowering students to make decisions in the classroom—can be a powerful motivating factor.

Further, Ushioda suggests that encouraging students to make autonomous decisions in the classroom can help them to take ownership of their learning, and to engage more fully with the demands of the learning context, promoting their “willingness to take responsibility for regulating their motivation and learning behaviour in line with inevitable constraints and demands” (2011, p. 224). Perhaps this experience of autonomy is a necessary precursor to the motivation required to become a capable autonomous learner?

Also important to understanding student decision-making and identity formation is the context in which it takes place. Students are not “autonomous actors processing language-related information and skills”, but rather “social beings that have... a dynamic, reflexive and constantly changing relationship with the social context of learning” (Gao, 2010, p. 18). Social relationships can either help or hinder the development of collective agency, the sense that individuals are empowered and willing to work together to achieve collective goals (Bandura, 2000). Through engaging in a shared learning process, learners and teachers can create shared ways of communicating and learning, known as “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), and a shared identity which has a powerful impact on each individual in the group.

The Curriculum Context

This paper describes research into a semester-long independent study project undertaken with low-tier first-year university English major students (CEFR A1 or A2). It was undertaken at Kanda University of International Studies, a medium-sized specialist languages university in Japan known for its self-access learning centre.

Acting as a member of the Basic English Proficiency Program curriculum research group, a group of six teachers responsible for maintaining and updating materials for the first-year “Freshman English” course, I had expanded the “Independent Study” section of our introductory “Orientation Unit” from a one-off series of lessons to a course component that ran throughout the academic year. This component required students to set goals, identify relevant learning activities (with the help of teachers and learning advisors), try the activities and

write a reflection on them (Hutchinson, 2014). The aim of the course component was to foster the skills needed for more autonomous learning, by giving students experience of selecting, trying out and reflecting on a range of study activities, and also to give students a greater sense of ownership over their learning.

The research described here is a follow-up study; feedback on the previous year had found that many students were struggling to identify relevant activities, especially at lower levels of English proficiency. Teachers had also identified the workload associated with supporting each student individually as an issue. The curriculum group decided that before setting goals, many students needed experience in choosing and trying out learning activities. As a result, a “sheltered” model was introduced, in which teachers pre-selected activities for students to choose and try in class, before completing a reflection (Hutchinson, 2014). This also encouraged students to try a range of activities, where previously some had made conservative choices which precluded them from comparing the advantages and disadvantages of multiple activities.

Throughout the semester under consideration here, five independent study workshops were held, in which students chose activities from a range suggested by the teacher and worked on those activities individually or in groups depending on the activity type and their own preferences. Activities included group discussions, grammar and vocabulary games, shadowing, dictation, and pronunciation software, and were based on activities recommended by the university’s self-access centre, and ones that previous students had felt to be beneficial.

Once students had chosen an activity and negotiated groups, they worked together to understand how to do the activity using instructions in English, their L2. The teacher was on hand as a consultant where needed, but otherwise students worked without teacher supervision. Learners then reflected on what they felt to be each activity’s benefits and drawbacks and identified a goal for the next session.

The committee believed reflection to be an essential part of the learning process for students. For one, it provided teachers with a way of understanding what students had done, and what meaning they had drawn from their study. More importantly, however, reflection was seen as a way of students developing their metacognitive awareness of what they were doing and why, “a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualisation” (Kohonen, 2007, p. 1).

Reflection questions aimed to provoke thought on the following aspects of the decision-making process, and were drawn from Nunan’s (1997) framework proposing levels of encouraging learner autonomy through classroom materials:

- **Awareness:** were students aware of the skills they practised in the activity they selected?
- **Involvement:** were students aware of the positive and negative aspects of the activity, with relation to their own goals?
- **Intervention:** were students able to modify their choice of activities, or the details of those activities?

Students were given teacher feedback on their written reflections, which formed the basis of discussion at two individual consultations held during the semester.

Research Methods

While the materials described above were made available to teachers of the entire first-year cohort, the present research was conducted in one class, taught by the author. There were 19 students in the class, of whom three were male. Unfortunately, it has not thus far been possi-

ble to repeat the study on a larger scale, but I hope that the qualitative data collected provides insights into how the process appeared to students, how they made their decisions, and at what points they encountered challenges in the selection, study and reflection process.

Research Questions Were as Follows:

- RQ1: Does experience of choosing and conducting language learning activities in class, and reflecting on those activities, affect student motivation?
- RQ2: Does experience of choosing and conducting language learning activities in class, and reflecting on those activities, affect student awareness of metacognitive aspects of learning?
- RQ3: Does experience of choosing and conducting language learning activities in class, and reflecting on those activities, make students more able to study outside the class-room?

A questionnaire on attitude and agency (based on Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002) was administered before and after the project. The questionnaire, included in Appendix 1, was entitled “English Language Learning Questionnaire”, and consisted of 32 questions drawn from the 16 areas identified by Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) in their research into student perceptions about learning foreign languages. All items and instructions were provided bi-lingually. This questionnaire was chosen to capture a wide range of possible factors affecting student motivations and beliefs, in particular:

- Students’ attitudes toward English
- Students’ perceptions of their own ability in English
- Students’ perceived control over the learning process (sense of agency)
- Students’ perceptions of the role of external influences on their learning

Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) further subdivide these categories into subcategories, as set out below.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items and Focus Categories

Category	Factor	Sample questionnaire item
Aspects of Attitude	Liking, enjoyment, interest	I enjoy English lessons
	Desire	I want to learn to speak English well
	Need, importance	It will be important for me to know English in the future.
	Integrative orientation	I’d like to meet English-speaking people
	Intrinsic motivation	I’d want to learn English even if I didn’t have to
Aspects of Identity	Perceived success, Competence	I am confident I can achieve my English learning goals
	Perceived ability	I think I’m good at English

Category	Factor	Sample questionnaire item
Feelings of Agency	Effort	I work hard at English
	Result of effort, Learned helplessness	I believe that anything can be achieved, if I work hard enough
	Internal locus (responsibility)	Doing well in English is up to me
	Awareness of strategies	I know which things I need to study to improve my English
	Metacognitive awareness	When I get good marks in English I usually know why
	Metacognitive strategies	I try to set myself goals when I study English
External factors	Teacher	My teacher is helpful to me in learning English
	Parents	My parents encourage me to study English
	The group	The students in our English class work together as a group

Students were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, with “5” signifying that the statement was “very true for me”, and “1” signifying “not at all true for me”

At the end of the project, selected students were invited for recorded interviews about the independent study project as a whole, focussing on the process of selecting activities, understanding how to do them, reflecting, and their perceived ability to study without a teacher.

There were limitations with the research methods used, beginning with the small number of participants. Questionnaires were administered only twice, and therefore could not capture the daily fluctuations that can accompany student motivation. The numbers derived from the questionnaires are self-reported, and each student may have a different understanding of how the concepts relate to them. Further, and perhaps most crucially for a qualitative study, student interviews were reliant on students’ ability to express themselves in their L2, although this was not part of the research design.

I am a proficient speaker of Japanese as L2, and provided all items relating to research bilingually. I also explained the project in Japanese in class, and encouraged students to use Japanese where they were unable to express themselves in English. Nevertheless, students’ recourse to their L1, Japanese, was vanishingly rare, and usually concerned individual words. On the one occasion where a student made a sustained utterance in Japanese during the project, it did suggest a level of metacognition beyond what the student could express in English.

Having worked in other contexts where Japanese students are more willing to communicate in their L1 than in English, I can only speculate that this stemmed from the university’s strict “English-only policy”, which I regularly reminded students of during class time. Students clearly saw the independent study project as part of the ethos of “learning English by using it” rather than as a time to consider the process of learning from a metacognitive perspective, using L1 as one tool to do so. When questioned about this in interviews, students defended their use of English, citing as reasons that English use provoked thought, engendered teamwork, improved their skills, and that it was the target language of our classroom and, in regular classroom interactions, verbally encouraged by the teacher.

This is one way in which my dual role as teacher and researcher may have impacted the research process. I am also aware that as the students' class teacher, there were times where I became frustrated with students whose conceptions—of effective study habits, desired behaviours and interpretations of skills studied—did not always match my own. On the positive side, however, this dual role forced me to reflect on my own beliefs about effective language learning, and in many cases to revise them.

Results

Questionnaire

A mean score was calculated for all students for each item (5 indicates strong agreement, 1 indicates strong disagreement). Items were combined into the four motivational strands discussed earlier, and negatively coded items converted into positive items, giving the following results:

Table 2. Four Motivational Strands at the Beginning and End of the Semester

	Beginning of semester	End of semester
Attitude	4.63	4.65
Identity	2.87	2.79
Agency	2.93	3.43
External	3.86	3.97

Student attitude towards English was consistently positive with little change on any item, perhaps to be expected of students selecting English as their major at a foreign languages university. Nonetheless, this was an interesting finding, as students did not always appear to be especially motivated. The slight rise in score can mostly be accounted for by a rise in item 17, "I enjoy English lessons", and in item 6, "It will be important for me to know English in the future". Returning to our research questions, the intervention appears to have had no discernible effect on student motivation (RQ1).

Student identity, or belief in their own competence or ability, was substantially lower, and again showed little change. In terms of perceived competence, students had greater belief in their ability to succeed in class (item 28: a score of 3.8 once positively coded) than confidence that they could succeed in their learning goals, and their belief in their ability to achieve those goals actually fell over the course of the study (item 3: from 3.1 to 2.8). In terms of perceived ability, the lowest scores were due to strong agreement with item 15, "My English is not as good as I want it to be". As this item also contains a future desire to be better at English, it may be this aspect that students are responding to.

All items targeting the role of *external factors* rose, whether positively or negatively scored, resulting in a slightly increased overall total. This may indicate that student beliefs regarding the role of others in their learning became more strongly held.

The most significant change in student beliefs was in their sense of *agency*, where the following results were observed. These are the mean scores, with negative items unadjusted; a high score indicates agreement with the statement. Positively coded items are marked +, negatively coded items are marked "-".

Table 3. Items Relating to Agency

Sub-sections relating to agency		Pre-semester	Post-semester
Agency: Effort			
7+	I work hard at English	3.94	3.89
29-	I could study harder if I wanted to	4.5	4.67
Agency: Result of Effort			
8+	I believe that anything can be achieved, if I work hard enough	4.17	4.28
14-	However hard I try, I'll never do well in English	1.72	1.39
Agency: Responsibility			
2+	Doing well in English is up to me	4.72	4.67
20-	I cannot study effectively on my own	3.5	3.5
Agency: Awareness of Strategies			
30+	I know which things I need to study to improve my English	2.72	3.06
25+	If I do badly at English, I usually know how to do better next time	2.72	3.28
Agency: Metacognitive awareness			
12+	When I get good marks in English I usually know why	2.83	3.06
10-	I don't know which ways to study English work best for me	3.83	3.72
Agency: Metacognitive strategies			
18+	I try to set myself goals when I study English	4.06	3.83
23-	I don't often measure my English study progress	1.61	1.5

The largest changes can be seen in student awareness of learning strategies and the learning process, suggesting that the intervention may have had a positive effect on student awareness of metacognitive aspects of learning, our second research question (RQ2). However, it is worth revisiting Cohen's definition of learning strategies as "thoughts and actions consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks..." (2012, p. 136), as students gave little self-reported evidence that they were *consciously* using strategies, either in their reflections or their interviews.

This may be a function of the difficulty of self-reporting in students' second language, or it may suggest that, rather than becoming aware of strategies, students had become more familiar with the nature and expectations of their new learning context. The questionnaire items could perhaps be better worded to precisely target strategy use, although this would be hard to do unless students were familiar with relevant metalanguage. A greater confidence

in how to do well is reflected in the rise in item 12, and the fall in item 14, but as discussed above, items relating to students' identity as competent learners did not rise.

The third research question focussed on whether students would be more able to study outside the classroom as a result of the intervention (RQ3). In spite of the overall rise in measures of agency, item 20 ("I cannot study effectively on my own") showed no change, remaining relatively high with a 3.5 agreement rate. Another item that was expected to rise was 18, "I set myself goals when I study English", but this in fact fell from 4.06 to 3.83. Before conducting interviews, I had speculated the intervention might have made students more attuned to the wide range of possibilities, and hence potential difficulties, involved in setting goals. However, interviews offered a different perspective, namely that students valued the freedom to choose without the narrow focus of a goal.

Student Interviews

Five students were interviewed, for 20 to 30 minutes each. Interviewees were chosen at random from those who had completed the majority of independent study sessions and reflections and had sufficient communicative ability to carry out the interviews in their L2, English, since students had proved unwilling to use Japanese in consultations.

The aim of the interviews was to shed light on how students experienced the process of selecting, trying and reflecting on activities, with a view to understanding the value of the independent study course component and revising the materials for future implementation. I also hoped to shed further light on the rise in student agency (RQ2), and students' feelings about their ability to study independently (RQ3).

Awareness: Selecting Activities

Question 1: How did you feel about choosing the activities? Why did you choose each activity?

Four of the five students interviewed said that choosing activities was difficult (the fifth failed to understand the question). This difficulty was borne out by teacher observation: students frequently took upwards of 20 minutes to choose an activity, and initially needed encouragement to actually make a choice, rather than simply starting work on the first activity listed. All four students explained this by saying that they wanted to try a number of activities, with the sense that choosing one meant missing out on others. Student B went further and said

First I want to do... all kinds of activity so I don't think which activity is important for me... I don't know what activity is doing, maybe all of these is very important but I want to brush up my skill, all, so I'm difficult to choose...

Three students of the five identified specific skills they had wanted to improve, and activities that they had chosen to practice these skills. Students sometimes demonstrated a different understanding of skills practiced to that of the teacher (student E: "I choosed shadowing because I want to improve listening skills"). Although I initially interpreted this as a failure in student capacity to effectively manage their own learning, over time I came to see that students were actively engaged in making sense of the affordances available to them.

Three students chose activities because they were "fun", while student A identified the following criteria:

Which is easy to me. And many other students want to do activity.

This bears out classroom observation that students tended to negotiate choices with their existing friendship groups, rather than gathering a group of students who wanted to choose a given activity.

Awareness: Understanding and Describing Study Activities

Question 2: Was it easy to understand the instructions? Was it easy to explain what you did in your reflection?

Of five students interviewed, two said that understanding instructions was difficult, and two that the difficulty depended on the activity. The fifth student did not directly answer the question. Student C stated that group members had helped her to understand the activity.

Once the instructions had been understood, however, four of five students felt that it was easy to explain. Student A stated that it was “easy. I wrote only verbs that I did.”

Indeed, many students essentially copied down the instructions in their reflections, which perhaps could be rectified by introducing activities in a different form, such as whole class demonstration. However, one student stated that explaining was difficult, because “any activity had very detail 1234, so I... it’s difficult to write in detail” (Student D).

These findings suggest that students find approaching learning activities through L2 instructions alone to be quite challenging, and benefit from the presence of a teacher or peers who can explain the activity to them. This clearly has implications for our third research question, suggesting that many students would struggle to understand and carry out new study activities unsupported outside the classroom, but that they may benefit from teacher and peer support when trying out activities for the first time.

Intervention: Modifying Activities

Question 3: Did you change any of the activities at all? If yes, how? If no, did you want to change them?

This question proved extremely difficult for students to answer, which was expected based on student reflections. Initially, four students misunderstood the question to mean “Did you try different activities from week to week?”, rather than “Did you modify the instructions of the activities themselves?” Once clarified, all five students asserted that they had not changed the activities that they did in any way. In fact, they seemed upset that their teacher would ask them such a question, perhaps suggesting that they saw activities as fixed entities between which they could choose, or that they did not want to change something suggested by an authority figure, their teacher. This came despite repeated assurances, in both spoken and written feedback, that modification was both appropriate and desirable.

When pushed, all five were able to identify some negative points with the activities that they did—primarily that they were boring, too long, or too short. Student D ventured

...when I did Word Map, I’m confused choose word so if there are box, in the box, for example ten words, we can choose from this box

Rather than modifying the activity, she was suggesting a way in which the teacher could improve the activity by providing suggested words. In fact, she was suggesting that the teacher reduce an element of learner autonomy in the classroom by providing more scaffolding.

Student C gave one interesting criticism:

Taboo... it is too fun to study in English. We say only word... only word. We couldn’t say sentence.

In fact, “too fun” had been a theme in student reflections, with other students using phrases like “we enjoyed too much” to think about grammar, and also “it’s too fun to look around us”, which turned out to mean that students in the group had been too noisy while playing and had not realized that they were disturbing others.

Before writing reflections, students were encouraged to share their feelings about activities with their group. In this process, certain interpretations of what constituted positive and negative study behaviour seemed to become fixed, creating a kind of informal class code of conduct. While I initially found such comments to be contrary to the spirit of communicative learning activities, it became clear that students wanted to use the time given to communicate deeply and accurately, while respecting the learning of others.

Question 4: How did you feel about reflecting?

This was intended as a more general question to elicit student comment on the process of reflecting on what they had studied. In terms of the usefulness of reflections, one student felt that they constituted a useful record of what he had studied:

if we didn’t reflecting, I also forgot activities, what activities I decide or I doing. (B)

Three students said that they had found reflection difficult, focussing especially on the difficulty of identifying negative points of the activities that they tried, and on identifying what they wanted to study next time. Teacher observation bore out the fact that answers to the final two reflection questions, on negative aspects of the activities and what to study next time, were harder for students to complete, and answers were often short or vague. If students had enjoyed an activity, they frequently answered that it had no downsides.

The curriculum committee had hoped that reflections would have a future-oriented effect, with students using the positive and negative points of the activities to identify their next focus for study. In reality, however, most students answered the final question either with “I want to do this activity again” or “I want to do something different”, depending on how positive their assessment of the activity had been. One student did mention that “By writing this portfolio I could... next I want to do. Is good point.” (C)

However, this assessment seemed to have little impact on what students actually chose to do in subsequent sessions, including student C. This may have been partly because students tended to choose from the new activities introduced each session, or to choose what their friends were choosing. There were instances, especially towards the end of the semester, where students chose to revisit an activity from a previous session, but it was less common for students to identify a different *skill* that they wanted to study. There was no evidence that students used the perceived negative aspects of an activity to decide their next study target.

Since these two questions target things that students have not yet actually done, they are somewhat more abstract than the foregoing questions. If reflection is “a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualisation” (Kohonen, 2007, p. 1), we can speculate that most students in this project had yet to conceptualise of language study as a system of possibilities and needs beyond the activity they were reflecting on. They were aware of what they had done and what they had learned but were less able or willing to relate this to a defined target or goal.

One student articulated a degree of resistance to any goal-setting structure being imposed on the task, which was particularly interesting as the previous year’s project had explicitly involved setting goals and identifying activities which would target the chosen skill. When discussing the connection between the final reflection question and the subsequent choice of activity, student B stated that . . .

Reflecting, I want to choose same, but next time I change my mind. I think we have... if I have a correctly goal I have to choose the activity to lead to the goal but if I haven't goal I choose everything I think.

When I asked “is having a goal important for you?” student B clarified his position:

I don't. I think we are doing a lot of activities and find own goal is better.

This position, taken in combination with students' desires to experience all possible activities articulated in response to question 1, may go some way to explaining the decrease in students reporting that they set themselves goals in the post-study questionnaire (item 18—see Table 3). This was somewhat of an outlier within items measuring agency, and was initially interpreted as disappointing given that the course materials arose with the aim of supporting students to set study goals. However, for students who may have little experience of decision-making in their learning, it is valid to want to build experience before developing metacognitive strategies such as goal-setting and self-evaluation, which are the only metacognitive strategies considered in the questionnaire.

Question 5: Do you feel able to study effectively without a teacher (for example over the summer vacation)?

This question was initially conceived as a measure of the success of the project, and a direct response to the third research question. If students said yes, it was felt, the project had succeeded in creating independent learners. Seen in this light, the results are less than positive. Three of five students felt that it was difficult to study at home, citing reasons such as the lack of a teacher to motivate them, and the fact that they do not speak English at home.

Having teacher we should study I think, we have to study, but without teacher if I doing other thing there is no teacher so I can do anything (B)

No! In summer vacation I... maybe I don't speak English in home. Family home. (C)

Other students felt that the different context afforded different types of study:

Case by case. I can't study same things in class, but I can study easy things, for example listening to music, Western music, and I can learn grammar” (D)

One student was confident that she could study without a teacher, although that did include completing homework assigned by a teacher:

I will do Next Stage textbook homework and I'm able to learn grammar and vocabulary alone, so I feel able to study effectively without a teacher (A)

Interestingly, while student B felt that there were things he was able to do without a teacher, these did not really qualify as “study”:

B: I think... I want to study but real is I think I go to SALC [Self Access Learning Centre] and watching movie or reading books or comics, and don't study English.

Teacher: Isn't that study?

B: Read books in English... if I know the book's or tale's story, I think I don't have to read all through the difficult words, so it is not study. I would just read, not check words. I want to enjoy.

As with the issue of “too much fun”, this was a conception of “study” that differed from my own as a teacher, and my instinct was to challenge it. Nevertheless, students were correct

in identifying that their home environment did not offer the same affordances as the classroom, especially considering the social nature of the independent study workshops.

Conclusions

Considered in terms of the three research questions, the results of the study were mixed. Student motivation did not change, although this may have been due to the fact that it began relatively high. Measures of student agency rose, suggesting that students felt more empowered to take control of their learning, but both questionnaire data and students' interviews suggest that this did not translate directly into student confidence in their ability to study alone. Perhaps, however, this reflects a misconception that learner autonomy necessarily entails articulating goals and following solo study plans, and that it can be measured by the extent to which students engage in such behaviours.

In terms of socialising students to the skills and expectations accompanying study at Kanda University, I believe that the intervention was effective. Students' belief in their own agency—especially in terms of their awareness of how to learn, and the learning process—had risen significantly, and this was mirrored by the increasing depth of student reflections. While it is impossible to isolate the five cycles of the project from the other things happening around students in their first semester at university, most students had developed significantly in their ability to select, negotiate, carry out and reflect on learning activities in English. These abilities continued to develop in the second semester of the year, when activities expanded to include those available to students outside the classroom, which were usually completed in pairs or groups.

By bringing study activities into the classroom and allowing students to choose activities without first specifying goals, the “independent study” sessions became more social than in the previous year's goal-focussed project, which most students completed individually due to the difficulty of finding time to study together outside class. Not all activities on offer were group ones, but group activities were much more popular, and individual activities were overwhelmingly completed collaboratively. Students tended to choose activities with class friends, but would also share information about activities and negotiate participation in them. Over time a set of rules emerged that defined effective participation and could be termed a nascent “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998).

Removing the strict focus of setting goals allowed students to experiment more widely. First-year university students in Japan have typically had little exposure to independent or self-directed learning activities, and little opportunity to make their own meaning of those activities. Student interviews supported classroom observation that selecting and understanding how to do the activities on offer represented a significant challenge to students. Likewise, students were better able to express what they had done and what they had learned—concrete aspects arising from experience—than abstract aspects such as what they had not done, how they could improve an activity, and what, ideally, they would like to do in the future.

Working from example activity through reflection to understanding is likely to be more accessible to these students than travelling the other way. Exercising the autonomy to make choices in learning may, as Ushioda (2011) suggests, be an important first step in increasing motivation, engagement and responsibility, and therefore in developing the capacity for self-directed learning. This may assist students in developing an identity as competent university students who are responsible for their own learning, forming the basis of their further development as learners, and in time enabling them to set meaningful future targets on the basis of experience and reflection.

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Review Process

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Author Bio

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Appendix

English Learning Motivation Questionnaire

英語学習に対するモチベーションについてのアンケート

The following questions ask about your motivation for and attitudes about learning English. Remember there are no right or wrong answers, so please just answer as accurately as possible.

これはあなたの英語学習に対する姿勢やモチベーションを問うアンケートです。これには正解も不正解もありません。あなたの率直な気持ちを答えてください。

Use the scale below to answer the questions. If you think the statement is very true of you, circle 5; if a statement is not at all true of you, circle 1. If the statement is more or less true of you, find the number between 1 and 5 that best describes you.

各質問事項に5段階で回答してください。各問があなたに当てはまっていれば「5」に丸を、全く当てはまらなければ「1」に丸をつけてください。どちらでもなければ、「1」から「5」の中で1番自分に当てはまる数字を選んでください。

1. Most language learning can be done without a teacher 語学学習に教師は不要だ。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
2. Doing well in English is up to me 自分次第で英語は上達する。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
3. I don't usually do well in English lessons 英語の授業は苦手だ。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
4. I think I'm good at English 英語は得意だと思う。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
5. I prefer to study English on my own, rather than in groups グループワークより自分一人で英語を学ぶ方が好きだ。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
6. It will be important for me to know English in the future 英語の知識は将来自分にとって重要になる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
7. I work hard at English 真面目に英語学習に取り組んでいる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
8. I believe that anything can be achieved, if I work hard enough 一生懸命頑張ればどんなことでも達成できる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
9. I don't mind if I'm not a fluent English speaker at the end of my degree 卒業時までには英語を流暢に話せるようにならなくても別に気にならない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
10. I don't know which ways to study English work best for me どの英語学習法が自分に一番合っているかわからない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
11. I don't learn English for my own enjoyment 楽しんで英語を学んでいない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
12. When I get good marks in English I usually know why 英語の成績がいいと、おおよそなぜか理由がわかる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
13. I want to learn to speak English well 英語をうまく話せるように学びたい。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5

14. However hard I try, I'll never do well in English どんなに頑張っても英語をうまく話せるようにはならない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
15. My English is not as good as I want it to be 自分が望むほど英語は上手くない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
16. I'd want to learn English even if I didn't have to 必須科目でなくても英語は学びたい。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
17. I enjoy English lessons 英語の授業は楽しい。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
18. I try to set myself goals when I study English 目的意識を持って英語を学習している。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
19. I'd like to meet English-speaking people 英語を話す人と知り合いたい。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
20. I cannot study effectively on my own 独学では効率よく勉強できない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
21. My parents encourage me to study English 両親が英語学習を勧める。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
22. English will not be an important factor in getting a job 就職に英語は重要項目ではない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
23. I don't often measure my English study progress 自分の英語レベルの上達の有無にはあまりこだわらない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
24. English lessons are not interesting for me 英語の授業には興味がない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
25. If I do badly at English, I usually know how to do better next time 英語の成績が悪い時、次はどうすればよくなるかわかる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
26. My family are not interested in my English study 家族は私の英語学習に無関心だ。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
27. I have no interest in getting to know English native speakers ネイティブスピーカーと知り合うことに興味がない。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
28. I am confident I can achieve my English learning goals 英語学習における自己目標を達成する自信がある。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
29. I could study harder if I wanted to やる気さえあれば、一生懸命勉強できる。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
30. I know which things I need to study to improve my English 何を勉強すれば自分の英語を上達させることができるのか知っている。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
31. My teacher is helpful to me in learning English 教員は私の英語学習に協力的だ。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5
32. The students in our English class work together as a group このクラスの生徒はグループワークにおいて協調性がある。	Not at all true 1 2 3	Very true 4 5