Self-Access Learning Program: Promoting Self-Directed Learning in College Language Courses

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1. Self-Direction in Language Learning

Self-direction is defined as "an attitude to the learning task, where the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson, 1987). Self-directing learners would be aware of their language learning needs and preferences and exercise their judgment over the appropriateness or effectiveness of the learning activities that they are involved in. Unlike completely autonomous learners who control every aspect of their learning and attempt to learn themselves, self-directing learners may decide to seek help and advice from experts, such as teachers, whenever necessary. Therefore, it is entirely possible for a learner to be self-directing and to resolve to follow a course that is taught. Self-directed learning in the present article is in an educational context where learners are disposed to be involved in their learning process and are capable of making decisions with regard to it, such as when to seek help or how to make the best use of language courses and facilities that are available to them.

It is often reported that self-direction is one of the most prominent features observed among successful language learners (e.g., McCombs, 1984) and is claimed to be a key to effective learning. The arguments in favor of self-direction can be summarized into the following four points. The first two concern classroom realities of college language courses, whereas the remaining two focus on the psychology of language learning.

(1) There is a wide variety of learners in a college classroom. Students who enroll into college language courses vary in terms of their age, English language levels, past learning experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Some students enroll into college immediately after high school, where they have spent several hours a week learning English as a school subject, whereas other students graduated from high school several years ago and have not used a word of English ever since. Some students may lack basic knowledge and require more explanations and practice with regard to basic language components, whereas others may be ready to shift to more challenging tasks. In addition, teachers are usually required to decide on course contents (i.e., course goals and teaching items) several months prior to the initiation of a course. Even if teachers...
try their best to design their courses to accommodate the requirements of different learners, there is always a limit to what teachers can achieve. In order to achieve effective learning in a college classroom, learners should actively assess their language needs and control the focus of attention accordingly, while participating in classroom activities and completing assignments. In other words, learners should "replace the belief that they are "consumers" of language courses, of textbooks and exercises, of teacher hours with the belief that they can be "producers" of their own learning program" (Holec, 1987: 152).

(2) Learners sometimes persist with their learning even on completion of formal education at college. For several people in Japan who learn English, the end of a college education does not imply the same for the learning of the language. Learners sometimes persist or resume their learning after graduation, when they realize firsthand that English is an important tool for communication in business transaction in Japan. Promoting self-direction in college courses prepares students to make necessary judgments and take decisions with regard to their learning when there is no teacher to assist them in their study of English.

(3) Self-direction makes language learning a goal-oriented process. Self-directed learning enables learners to become aware of their learning goals that are set either by themselves or by others. This provides them with the focus of attention while attempting learning both inside and outside the classroom (Lee, 1998; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 2000; Dörnyei, 2001). It also provides a sense of direction and purpose in their learning, which will guide their choice of learning activities and the amount of effort they allocate to them. Dörnyei (2001) points out that goal-setting affects learning performance, in that it promotes persistence and strategic thinking on the learner’s part and regulates the efforts on goal-relevant activities. The focusing on goals by learners not only initiates and maintains an active search for effective means to achieve them, but also promotes the assessment of the effectiveness of learning attempts. In other words, promoting self-direction in language learning will help learners organize separate pieces of learning experiences into a goal-oriented process.

(4) Self-directed learning promotes motivation for language learning. Dickinson (1995) argues that self-directed learning helps develop intrinsic motivations and link learning success to higher motivation through enhanced self-efficacy. It should be noted that learning success alone may not guarantee an increase in motivation. It is through the perceived self-efficacy that a successful learning experience affects motivation. Following Bandura, Schunk (1984) advocates that people form self-efficacy judgments by integrating information with regard to the learning context, task nature, and the level of their involvement in the completion of the task. When learners experience success and decide that they are primarily responsible for producing the desirable result, it is probable that they develop a strong sense of self-efficacy. In other words, self-directed learning provides the type of educational context where successful performance promotes a learners' self-efficacy, which in turn boosts their motivation for additional efforts.

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2. Premises of the Program

Self-direction requires learners to regulate their learning by actively planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning attempts (Ellis, 1994). In the area of learning strategy research, the abovementioned management skills are referred to as metacognitive strategies. Although it is often pointed out that metacognitive strategies are essential to any kind of effective learning, they are one of the least frequently employed learning strategies (Ellis, 1994; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989).

The Self-Access Learning Program aims to promote use of metacognitive strategies by learners in language learning by providing a learning environment or context where they are carefully guided to become aware of the learning process and develop strategies to regulate it. When the learner is not familiar with self-directed learning, as is the case with many Japanese college students, we believe that it is best introduced and coordinated by the course teacher within the framework of a regular language course. Nunan (1997) postulates that classroom teachers are best suited to encourage learners to initiate self-directed learning. Gardner and Miller (1999) also argue for the effectiveness of introducing self-direction in a classroom where learners might "feel most secure." In our program, the course teacher plays a vital role in educating learners on metacognitive strategies and its functions in language learning. The teacher also leads learners through different phases of the learning process and encourages them to use the strategy effectively. It is hypothesized that with systematic guidance and support by classroom teachers, learners will be able to make the necessary leap from the other-directed learning that most of them are familiar with.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) point out that learning outcomes, both linguistic and non-linguistic, will affect the strategy that a learner employs either directly or indirectly. They argue that the outcomes of the previous learning experience form the cognitive and psychological basis for the next round of learning. In other words, the learning experience and outcome are important variables of the strategy that a learner employs; therefore, they should be included as a part of a strategy training program. Metacognitive strategy training imparted in isolation from learning experiences might overlook the important effects of learning outcomes on a learners' cognitive and psychological process.

It is also noteworthy that some aspects of metacognitive strategy use may take longer to develop than others. Holec (1987) observed that learners at the initial stages of the management skill development are able to choose materials, but pay no attention to goal-setting and the evaluation of progress. He reports that even when they begin to consider goals, those goals are often unclear and are confused with needs, and remain unrelated to their material choice. Gardner and Miller (1999) also point out that a learners' development of management skills in reading may vary from one skill area to another; their ability to analyze requirements develop rapidly, whereas their self-assessment ability remains underdeveloped until a later stage. Although planning is a crucial step in self-direction, initiating a strategy training program with heavy emphasis on the planning stage may not be the most effective method. It appears that
this developmental nature of metacognition has not attracted sufficient attention with regard to training in self-direction in language learning.

The above review of research on metacognition leads us to develop the following three premises of a self-directed program.

(1) Self-directed learning should be introduced by classroom teachers. They can provide learners not only with a sense of security, but also with ample support and encouragement for the development of metacognitive strategy.

(2) Learners should be provided with opportunities where they can practice directing their own learning and can witness the consequences of their action in a supportive environment. It would also allow them to learn what is actually required for successful coordination of language learning.

(3) Learners should be given clear explanations concerning metacognitive strategies and ample support in their usage. Some forms of teacher intervention should be carried out, which takes into consideration the developmental nature of metacognition.

These premises are built into the Self-Access Learning Program (SALP), which consists of two components: the Self-Access Work and the Focused Strategy Training. These two components play distinct and complementary roles in the gradual development of self-direction. In the following chapter, the purpose and details of each component and the manner in which they are implemented in a college course will be illustrated.

3. Self-Access Learning Program
3.1 An Overview

The Self-Access Learning Program (SALP) is a one-year program which incorporates the Self-Access Work and the Focused Strategy Training.

Self-Access Work: The primary purpose of this component is to allow learners to perform learning activities and practice decision making through planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning both at the learning management level and at the task management level. The course teacher provides assistance in goal-setting and material selection, such that the burden on learners in the planning stage is greatly reduced.

Focused Strategy Training: It aims to provide guidance and encouragement in the learner's use of metacognitive strategy. The focus of teacher intervention shifts from "monitor" at the initial stages, to "evaluate" in the intermediary stages, and then "plan" towards the end of the program. It is hypothesized that the continuous assistance and encouragement provided by the teacher over a period of time helps learners to foster or activate their metacognitive strategy use.

These two components operate together to promote learners' metacognition: one is based on the learners' actual experience and the other is a supportive training provided by teachers. (See figure 1.)

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There are three circular steps in Self-Access Work: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. In the step that deals with planning, the learners first develop their plans based on their class objectives. They then begin their self-access learning activities by following their plans. The next step is monitoring. The learners monitor the process of their work and their own study, while performing their self-access work. After they complete their activities, they reflect on the working process and make notes. The teachers also help them to raise their awareness towards their learning by providing feedback on their reflection notes for each activity. Finally, the learners evaluate their own learning. Self-evaluation is organized twice both at the middle of and at the end of a semester.

Meanwhile, the teachers provide the strategy training sessions that introduce metacognition to learners and help them to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. The training sessions are provided thrice a semester—at the initial stage, at the middle stage, and at the end of the semester.

Concerning the self-access materials, the course teachers first select them based on the course goals and the skill levels of the learners. Then the course teachers place the materials in the Learning Center where the learners actually practice their self-access work. After the materials are prepared, the course teachers list the names of textbooks, the instruction for the self-access work, and the points for each workload.
The list is made available to the learner at the Self-Access Learning Program orientation.

3.2 Self-Access Work

The self-access work is an extension of regular class work and worth 20% of credit in terms of course work. The learners first have a 60-minute orientation of the program during the first class of the course. Self-Access file, a guidebook for the program, is distributed to the learners to help them get a better understanding of the program. This file contains five main elements: 1) an explanation of the steps for the self-access learning activities, 2) guidelines for an effective learner, 3) a list of materials, 4) a guide regarding the levels of the material, and 5) instructions regarding self-access work. In the orientation, the course teachers explain to the learners the manner in which they need to conduct their work and complete the program with guidance from the file. In addition, the learners also use this file as a manual to conduct their self-access work.

As mentioned 3.1, there are three primary steps involving self-access work, and the first step is planning.

3.2.1 Planning

The learners are first asked to set a realistic goal within the aims of the course work, for example, the improvement of their ability to understand large numbers by the end of the semester or the ability to pronounce consonants. On the basis of their goals, they formulate their own self-access work plans such as time schedules and the materials they employ in their work. The learners choose the materials from the material list included in their file by considering their levels and the topics they wish to learn. Subsequently, they submit a planning sheet to the course teachers.

The deadlines are set twice in a semester and the learners formulate their study plans twice. If it does not assist the learners in achieving their goals or if it is impossible to follow, the plan can be reformulated.

3.2.2 Monitoring

Monitoring is concerned with the practice of activities and recording reflections regarding their work. Planning and evaluation will be performed twice each semester; however, monitoring is repeated several times till the evaluation is conducted. After formulating a plan, the learners begin their self-access work and follow their own schedule.

(1) Practicing activities

Based on their plan, the learners perform their work at their own level and at their own speed, independent of supervision by teachers. They first access the materials they use in the Learning Center and then practice there. On completion of their work, they check their answers using answer keys and scripts. The learners
observe their own learning process while performing the self-access activities.

(2) Recording reflections

After the learners complete their activities, they record reflections on their learning process and the results of their work. While monitoring their work, they might ascertain several aspects such as the progress of their work, the appropriateness of materials they use, the reasons that led to them committing mistakes, or the strategies they employ. During this step, the teachers intervene by providing feedback, usually by writing comments on the learners' reflection notes.

3.2.3 Evaluating

The final step before moving to the next cycle of the SALP is that of evaluation. The learners evaluate their own learning at the mid-term and the end of the course with regard to the increase in motivation for language learning, the improvement of their English skills, and the improvement in their learning abilities.

The teachers organize the 30-minute sessions at the middle and at the end of the course during class timings. The course teacher distributes an assessment sheet that will help the learners to clarify their learning process. Subsequently, out of class, the learners evaluate themselves by answering questions on the sheet. Self-evaluation will enable the learners to learn what they should do in the next cycle of their learning. This evaluating process may play an important role in maintaining the motivation of the learners to enable them to continue their learning.

3.3 Focused Strategy Training

In order to raise and promote student awareness of metacognitive strategy use, the teachers offer them a three-step training opportunity for semester I: introduction to the SALP, training in self-monitoring, and self-evaluating.

The first training session occurs at the very beginning of the course. In this training session, the teachers introduce the SALP and advise the learners on making plans for the self-access work. They also explain the importance of making plans that match their goals and objectives. In addition to this, the course teachers discuss the learning styles, materials, and the time and place where the learners conduct their work. On completion of this session, the learners formulate their own plan for the self-access that they themselves perform out of class.

The second training session is held for self-monitoring and assessing in the middle of the course. In this session, the teachers first explain the reason for recording reflection notes and the manner in which they are recorded. Since the learners have just started the program, they are not familiar with the monitoring of their learning. Therefore, the teachers advise them on the reflections by providing them with ten key words. They are goal, plan, effectiveness, causes of problems, solutions to those problems, learning items, appropriateness of material, progress, knowledge, and usage of that knowledge. The aim of providing these words to the learners is to make them
aware of their learning process and then build their monitoring ability. They are also requested to analyze and to assess their self-access work until that time, and adjust their plans for their self-access work in the rest of the course.

The third training session occurs at the end of the course. In this training session, the learners are requested to evaluate their own work. The teachers advise them to objectively observe their learning and to evaluate it by considering three aspects—improvement of their English, metacognitive abilities for learning, and motivation for studying English. Revisiting all the work they have done, they evaluate their self-access work from these three points. In the following semester, the learners repeat the process again with more emphasis on evaluation and planning in semester II.

4. Implementation of the Program

The SALP has been implemented from April 2004 as a part of a compulsory English course in a Japanese women's college. Based on the observations so far, we will discuss some of the important issues regarding the management of the program and its possible effects on the learners.

In order to successfully implement a new program, it is vital to ensure that the learner clearly understands the manner in which the program works. In this regard, the Self-Access file proved to be extremely helpful, and the learners appeared to have understood and followed the program procedures without major difficulties. Reading reflection notes of individual learners also enabled the teachers to discover misunderstandings of the learners at an early stage, and thus, they could be clarified immediately. Since there is no full-time staff in the Learning Center who can check and maintain self-access materials, we emphasized to the learners the benefits of sharing materials with other learners and the importance of storing them safely in the Learning Center. We developed a simple sign-out system in order to keep a record of the learners' use of the materials and, on the whole, our learners have been fairly cooperative.

Another major issue concerning the implementation of the program is the increase in teachers' workload. Since the selection and preparation of self-access materials require a considerable amount of work, we first created a small collection and gradually expanded it over a period of two years prior to the initiation of the program. Commenting on each learner's reflection also involves extra work: three teachers were involved in the program, and each spent an hour or two on a weekly basis providing feedback. Although the amount of time consumed was less than what was initially anticipated, we require to develop more efficient ways of dealing with the learners' reflections.

Seventy three learners originally enrolled into the course, out of which five opted out of the course by the middle of the first semester. Among the remaining 68 learners, 57 completed the required amount of self-access work and filled in a questionnaire at the end of the semester. The questionnaire was designed to measure the learners' motivation levels and because of the defects of the questionnaire responses, the sample size was reduced from 57 to 44. A significant increase was observed among the
motivation levels of our learners at the beginning and at the end of the first semester (p < .01). Twenty nine learners reported that their motivation levels increased during the course, and four claimed they were highly motivated to learn from the beginning, and their levels of motivation remained the same throughout the course.

The questionnaire also examines the learners' use of different types of metacognitive strategies. The highest score was 4.2 on a scale of five for "choosing appropriate materials," and the lowest was 2.8 for "adjusting study plans." It is indicated that the learners frequently "check levels and contents when choosing self-access materials," whereas they do not pay much attention to "checking their study plans and revising them when necessary." They are also "aware of the goals and progress while carrying out self-access activities," but they spend less time in "thinking about the ways to improve their language abilities." It is also worth mentioning that the correlation between the learners' motivation levels and their metacognitive strategy use was significantly high.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to introduce the Self-Access Learning Program that was designed to promote self-directed learning in college English language courses in Japan. In this program, learners are carefully and systematically guided the gradual development of their knowledge and abilities in order to direct their own language learning (i.e., metacognition). Since the program has not been fully implemented, the final results are yet to be known. However, there is a good indication that the program has positive effects on learners' motivation and their use of metacognition. It has also become clear to us that creating a self-directed learning environment requires a great deal of preparation and careful thinking by the teacher. The roles of the teacher and the language courses appear to gain importance in such a context although they may be considerably different from the traditional roles.

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