Becoming an Autonomous Learner

Successes and Failures

by

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Abstract

In this research project, several classes of second-year Sojo university students were asked to complete an independent study project of their own choosing for one semester. Over the course of the semester, they were asked to track their total English usage and study habits. The study also examined students' beliefs about their own language abilities and the amount of time they actually studied outside the classroom, as well as whether they used the SALC to aid them in their independent study project.

Key Words：　independent study, student beliefs, language learner, autonomy

1. Introduction

The Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) was established at Sojo University in 2010. According to Rowberry (2010: 60), the hope was that a communicative language program, with a focus on independent learning, would allow students to become more active learners in and out of the classroom. Trim (1997: v-vi), has argued that it is important that schools "equip learners with attitudes or skills which will enable them to continue to plan, carry out and monitor their own learning once all the supporting and disciplinary structures of institutionalised learning are withdrawn."

To further this aim, the SILC has a Self-Access Language Center (SALC) on the second floor of the building that is dedicated to independent use by students. It contains a variety of resources for the students to use, including graded readers, music CDs, DVD movies without Japanese subtitles, grammar and vocabulary books, listening stations, and more. Rowberry (2012) has more recently stated that a gradual introduction to the SALC through orientations and activities would aid the students in overcoming their reluctance to use such a center, as most would not have had the opportunity to learn English on their own prior to enrolling at Sojo University. As an instructor within this program, I have been impressed by both the SALC and the combined effort of the staff and teachers in encouraging the students to use the SALC.

However, I wanted to discover if additional intervention from the teacher would encourage the students to become more autonomous learners. The project would include them tracking their English language study, and would follow up with pre- and post-project surveys to determine the success of the initiative.

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2. The Project

In discussing autonomy, Benson (2010: 79) argues that "autonomous language learners are...learners who are in some sense "in control" of important dimensions of their learning, which might otherwise be controlled by others or by nobody at all." Similarly, Leni Dam (2009: 109) defines the autonomous classroom "as a teaching/learning environment in which the teacher is expected to provide learners with possibilities to be *consciously involved* in their own learning — to be autonomous learners. It is also a setting in which the learners are expected to be *actively engaged* in their own learning."

Therefore I designed a project that would encourage the students to take more control over their own learning, but at the same time retain some measure of autonomy within. First, the concept of learner autonomy was introduced to the students, which was followed by a discussion on the number of years and hours they have studied English. This was followed by a talk on the amount of further study it takes to get to the next level, in this case the CEFR levels, and what students can do themselves to improve their English. This premise rests on the assumption that many teachers have, that students have a desire to improve their English. In this particular case, the students had a high level of motivation to study English — they included Aerospace Engineering students, Pharmacy students, and Life Science students. In total there were 88 students from the three classes that took part in this initial trial.

After the initial class discussion, I conducted a survey about the students' ideas of language learning. Due to absences, only 64 students took part in this pre-project survey. The gender split between the three classes was 60% male and 40% female. 91% of students indicated that they had studied English for seven years or more. When asked if they thought their level of English was appropriate to the number of years they had studied it, the majority (68.1%) said no. The students were also asked to self-assess their own level across the four skills, and the majority of students indicated that they were probably at the A2 CEFR level in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. There were also a number of questions that sought to ascertain student perceptions of learning English, and those results are in the table below.

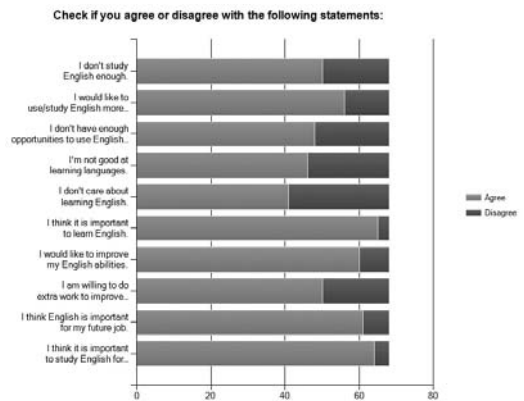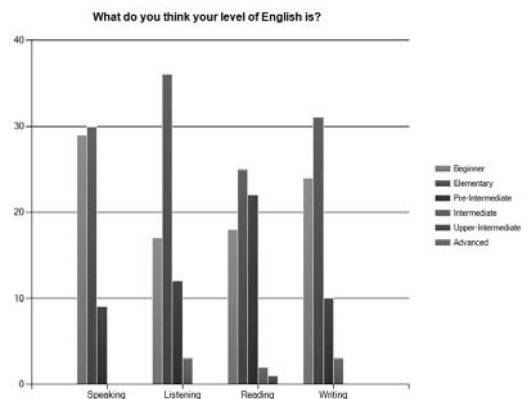Table 1.1: Student Statements about English Study

Table 1.2: Student Perceptions about Level of English

Finally, the students were asked to rank their motivation to study English, and nearly 90% said that they had normal to very high motivation to study English, with 51% indicating high to very high motivation.

After analyzing the results of the survey and giving consideration to the discussions we had in class, I proposed that the students choose one area of study that they would like to work on, such as listening, reading, writing, TOEIC, speaking, vocabulary, or grammar. They could do what they liked, but they had to track their English usage throughout the semester by keeping a portfolio/logbook. The students were asked to explain the rationale for their choices, but the majority of students wrote things like, "I want to improve my listening because I want to listen better." However, some students did put more thought into their reasoning, as written below (students' writing is kept in its original form):

My goal for this project will be:

- to get 600 score by graduation but I don't have enough it ability. So I must reinforce my most weak point. In short, I must learn hard the vocabulary. (LS) (TOEIC/vocabulary)
- writing any kind at any time. I want to increase your vocabulary. (P) (writing)
- I use many English words properly. Because I don't know many words. I want to extend my vocabulary. (P) (vocabulary)
- learning to catch the words that people utter. Because it's important for conversation. (P) (listening)
- getting to the B2 level. Because I want to get 700 point in TOEIC test. (P) (listening)
- that I become to be able to communicate with foreign people (A) (speaking, listening, grammar)
- to improve my pronunciations and to accustom communicating in English. (A) (speaking)
  (P: Pharmacy, LS: Life Sciences, A: Aerospace)

The final breakdown of projects chosen was as follows: Listening (25 students, 34.2%), TOEIC (17 students, 23.3%), Reading (13 students, 17.8%), Vocabulary (11 students, 15.1%), Writing/Grammar (6 students, 8.2%), Speaking (1 student, 1.4%). The students were also given the choice to come up with their own alternative project, but none chose this option.

The students were given their own logbooks, and the logbooks were kept in the classroom during the week. Students were given appropriate handouts every week to track their work, which they would then add to the logbook at the start of every week. Dam (2009) did a similar project with schoolchildren, however, unlike her study, the students in my classes were not required to write reflections on an ongoing basis, nor was there any written teacher feedback, although some feedback did occur orally in the classroom with the students. This was done for two reasons. First, as this was the first time I was doing such a project, I wanted to see what they would do on their own with as little teacher involvement as possible, even though there is a lot of research that calls for a more proactive approach in giving feedback, as argued by Cotterall (2000), Dam (2009), Kemp (2010), and Suh (1999). Second, the reality for the working teacher with a full courseload is such that there is often little time for grading and other administrative duties, and I wanted to see if this was a realistic project for teachers to achieve in the classroom without adding excessively to their duties.

At the end of the semester I collected all of the logbooks. Students were graded on effort, but not on their work in general. In analyzing their books, I discovered that the average amount of time spent on work every week was approximately 35 minutes a week, which correlates with the post-survey results. However, it was also clear that as the semester wore on, the students became less motivated to complete any independent study, and

the amount of time spent on the project decreased as we approached the end of the course. Most did indicate that they were too busy with their other classes to keep up with the work.

I conducted a final survey at the end of the course to get the students' impressions about the project. Although students were encouraged to dedicate at least an hour a week to independent study, most students said they did either 10-30 minutes a week (42.1%) or 30-60 minutes a week (35.5%). 71% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their English improved as a result of the project, and 75% of students thought it was a useful project in helping them to improve their English. With regards to their motivation to study English, 65.8% felt that their motivation had increased as a result of the project. Finally, when asked if they would continue to study English independently once the course was finished, 59.2% indicated that they would likely do so.

This independent learning project was conducted during the first semester of the university year. However, as English was an optional course in the second semester, many of the students, most notably Pharmacy, did not continue with English. In the end, I was left with one class of 18 Aero students, all male, who chose to do the English Communication class in the second semester. They were not required or reminded of doing any independent study during this time. However, at the end of the semester I did a final survey to see if any of the students had continued to study English independently. Despite the results of the post-project survey, 72% (12) of the students said that they did not study English outside of the classroom during the second semester. The other 28% of students (4) did do some independent study, and they indicated that it was because they thought English was useful/important, that they enjoyed studying English, and that they like to choose what they study. The majority of students who did not

study autonomously said that it was because they did not have the time to do so, although two students indicated that they would have studied more if they had more feedback from their teacher. In addition, some questions that had been overlooked in the first semester were also given at this time. The key question for me was where they had done their independent study, and the majority (77.8%) said that they had done it at home, with only 11% of students (in this case, 2) using the SALC. In addition, two-thirds of the students had indicated that they would have like more teacher feedback during the project.

Conclusion

While the students saw some improvement of their English abilities and motivation to study English as a result of this project, there is still a lot of room for improvement. In short, more time needs to be spent in the beginning of the project to ensure that the students know what they are doing, and why. Ideally this would be done with one-on-one conversations between the teacher and each student. As well, it is clear to me that the students need to reflect on the activities that they are doing, and what benefit (if any) it may have on their language learning. In addition, having the students complete the statements below would ideally help keep them focused on their goals throughout the year:

➢ I have decided to become better at:
➢ I have become better at:
➢ I know it because:
➢ My objectives for next time:

It is also important that the teacher give more regular feedback throughout the semester, not only written, but possibly with a second session with each student to keep them on track. Finally, regular group discussions amongst the students about their independent study projects would have the benefit

of peer encouragement, and possibly new strategies to try.

The next stage of this project will take place over the entire university school year, rather than just one semester. During the first semester there will be the introduction of mini-projects, both in and out of the SALC (without overlapping with the SALC Activities project that is part of the curriculum) which will be included as part of their homework. In the second semester, committed students who want to do the projects (for extra credit, possibly) will be able to do so with more teacher involvement, but it will not be required by all students. Ideally, with the second round of this project, there will be less teacher coercion and more autonomous language learning, regardless of where it takes place.

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