Manufacturing Autonomy:
An L2 Reflective Writing Project

by

Rachelle Meilleur*, Craig Yamamoto* and Tracy Franz*

Abstract

Initially, this project began as a way to integrate L2 reflective writing in communicative Japanese university English-language classes. Students were given reflection tasks on various aspects of their language learning, and were asked to keep these reflections in hand-written journals. This ongoing study involved both low-level and higher-level ELLs, both of which have offered up unique challenges in planning and implementation. The ultimate goal of this project is to encourage learner autonomy and awareness beyond the classroom.

Key Words： learner autonomy, reflection, journal writing

1. Introduction

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."

We began this project as a means to engage the students to become, as Dam suggests, more "consciously involved" in their language learning through two methods. The first stage of the project was to have students continually reflect on various aspects of the activities they were involved with, both in and out of the classroom. These reflections usually required the students to think about the positive and negative aspects of particular

activities, and/or of their English skills used within those activities. The second stage was to do some learner training by introducing students to a variety of activities that they can do independently. This report is a summary of what we were able to discover during the first stage of our project.

2. Background and Rationale

The Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) opened in 2010, with the core of the program concentrating on communication language with a focus on independent learning. The inclusion of the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) Activities in all four semesters of the English Communication program is meant to introduce the students to a variety of ways they can use the center to study independently. These activities include reading a comic book, watching a movie, using a grammar program, interviewing a teacher, etc. However, the majority of students do not appear to study English

＊Lecturer, Sojo International Learning Center

independently outside of class time, whether in the SALC or not (Meilleur (2013)). Lafaye and Tsuda (2002) investigated university student attitudes towards learning English and found that the majority of students knew the importance of English and envied others who were good at speaking English. However, many students were also unhappy with their experiences in learning English in the past, and were dissatisfied about their level of proficiency in the language. These results are similar to Meilleur's (2013) study that found that while the majority of students in her classes had studied English for 7 years or more and thought it was important, many of them (68%) were displeased with their proficiency levels. Meilleur's study was based on the premise that students may be more motivated to study independently if they were given guidance and choice over what kinds of activities they could do outside of the classroom. The majority of students self-reported to have done between 30-60 minutes of independent study outside the classroom over the course of one semester. They also indicated that they thought such study helped them to improve their English skills. However, very few students did any type of reflective writing about their autonomous learning, especially in regards to how it was benefitting their language learning.

These results, along with Franz's and Yamamoto's in-class work with journal and reflective writing with their respective classes, led to this new research project. We determined that we would introduce our students to autonomous learning through three different stages. The first stage would be to introduce reflective writing to the students. The objective here was to have the students reflect on various aspects of their language learning － such as on their previous experiences, or on the activities they did in the classroom. If students became more self-aware of their own language learning processes, that they could make better, more informed choices outside of the

classroom or the teacher's influence. During this stage the teachers would provide feedback to support and encourage the students. The importance of giving feedback has been discussed by others (Cotterall (2000), Dam (2009), Kemp (2010), and Suh (1999)). The second stage would be to introduce the students to a variety of activities they could do outside the classroom, and have them reflect on those experiences as well. As Benson (2010: 79) has pointed out, "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, Fukuda and Yoshida (2013), in their investigation of Japanese university students' out-of-class study time, concluded that classes that were engaging and useful to students had a correlating effect on the amount of time students studied independently outside of class.

The third stage was to follow-up with the students in subsequent years to see if they continued to study independently outside of class time, and how much time they devoted to it every week.

3. Conditions

Initial stages

At the beginning of the project we conducted a simple survey with our students. The survey was written in English and Japanese on a 6-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree). Three hundred students in first and second-year English Communication classes completed the survey. We wanted to know if students knew what it meant to be an independent learner, and 91.4% believed that they knew. A smaller majority (68.3%) felt that they were independent learners. The vast majority of students felt that their abilities in English were not so good

(51.3%) or poor (43%). Despite that, the majority of all students (97%) were interested in improving their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. A similar percentage of students thought that English was important for their future (jobs, travel, etc.), and 87.9% felt that they did not have enough opportunities to study English outside the classroom. Finally, only 38% of students felt that they knew how to choose appropriate resources to study and improve their English. These results were consistent with our predictions and we felt that our project on reflective writing would prove useful to the students.

Students were told to buy a small B5 notebook to bring daily to keep as a journal in the classroom. Students were given a reflection question either at the beginning (Yamamoto/Meilleur) or end of the lesson (Franz/Meilleur), and were given some time (5-10 minutes) to complete the reflection. Reflections that could not be completed during class time were regulated to homework. It became apparent very quickly that some classes needed more help and time with their reflections, that it was not always possible to do reflections in class (when planned), and that the three teachers involved with this project introduced the reflections in various ways (see individual reports below). The first obstacle we faced was that the students did not answer the reflection question correctly. For example, a sample question might be:

Can you talk about your school schedule in English without looking at your notes? Please explain your answer.

An unsuccessful answer from student looked like this:

No, I can't. Became I don't know spelle.

Conversely, a more successful answer from a different student in the same class looked like this:

No I can't. I practiced very hard but. It is difficult for me to speak English. so, I try to study English hard.

After some discussion, we tried various ways to get the students to reflect more thoughtfully, such as:

• Having the students answer one clearly-worded question with a singular meaning
(*Can you remember all the classroom objects in English?* As opposed to: *Can you remember all the classroom objects in English, and can you spell them correctly?*)

• Having the students answer a series of simply-worded questions
(*Do you think you can talk about your family well? Why or why not? What did you enjoy about this lesson? Was there anything you found difficult?*)

• Giving the students a sample answer/with fill-in-the-blanks options
(*Yes, I can talk about my family well because _____. No, I can't talk about my family well because ___. I enjoyed _____ because_____. I thought _____ was difficult.*)

We found that adapting the prompts in the forms shown above, in addition to providing more help in the L1 (see Tracy's variation below) led to more successful responses in the students' reflective writing abilities, regardless of level.

4. Teacher Variations

Although we planned the initial project to be as consistent as possible between our various classes, it became quickly obvious that the realities of students' levels and teachers' teaching styles led to a number of variations in the way reflective writing

was handled in the classroom. As such, we would like to take the opportunity to discuss these variations below.

Self-Reflection Variation 1 - Tracy Franz

Two first-year English Communication classes were involved in this project: Pharmacy and Art. In comparison to my experience of other EC1 courses in the SILC, my Pharmacy class' ability as a whole was mid-level; and the Art class was low level. I would say the motivation for both classes was mid-range, though there were certainly exceptions for individuals.

In my classes, generally reflective writing tasks were composed in bound paper notebooks (though I occasionally asked students to reflect on their learning in a shared class forum using Moodle). After completion of key classroom tasks or assessments, I assigned reflective questions, and students were given about 15 minutes to compose their responses during class time. I instructed the students to aim for 50 words at minimum for the Art class and 100 for the Pharmacy class, and they were allowed to continue writing outside of class, as homework. I did not disallow dictionary use, but I did encourage them to write as much as they could, and to not worry too much about producing perfect, error-free sentences. As reflective writing can be quite challenging for students — especially low-level learners — I provided a Japanese-English translated guide sheet of "typical" reflective phrases (we also brainstormed additional reflective language as the class progressed) a few weeks into the reflective writing activity.

Feedback from me was generally in response to the content of their writing, and less about commenting on the quality of the writing — though if it was much too brief or lacking in detail, I informed the student of that problem. Also, I let the students know if their writing was not reflective,

offering suggestions or questions to guide them back to the task. If I saw overall patterns of difficulty for students, I addressed this to the whole class. Additionally, I combed all student writing (including non-reflective writing) for typical errors, and we corrected these together. I gave formal grammar quizzes that covered these types of errors as well. Grading was simply pass/fail. To me, this was especially important because I did not want to think they could not reflect negatively on their learning experiences.

I selected this format for a number of reasons. Firstly, I thought it would be less likely for students to use translation software and/or plagiarize material from Internet sources. Secondly, Japanese students are most familiar — and perhaps most comfortable — with this medium for writing in English; some of them struggle with typing in English on the computer. Perhaps this helped reduce the cognitive load of dealing with a less familiar medium while writing in the L2. Finally, I decided to do reflective writing prompts, rather than standard curriculum-focused or random prompts, because I hoped that reflecting on their learning would help them to understand their own learning processes better. That is, I wanted them to notice how they were learning, as well as to notice how they might improve upon that learning.

I did encounter some challenges with the reflective writing activity. The reflective writing concept was quite difficult for students to grasp at first, but it got much better once I introduced the translated "Reflective Writing Phrases" document (see Appendix A). I'd certainly introduce that right away next time. The word range goals were not always appropriate to student levels in both classes, and think I might aim to set goals for individuals instead next time, asking them to improve upon that goal range at each instance of writing. I do think the students liked writing in their bound paper journals, as opposed to always composing on

the computer; however, this proved to be the greatest challenge for me: carrying around heavy stacks of journals and having to type up all of my data by hand.

Overall, I do feel that this reflective writing exercise was a worthwhile use of time and energy for me and for my students. I feel that my students gained greater fluency in their writing abilities. The medium allowed for a very visible record of progress from the first to last entry. The give-and-take of student and teacher comments improved student-teacher rapport. My Art students, as possibly very visual learners, especially seemed to enjoy doodling picture-type greetings to me in the margins of their writing. I am especially happy to report that all students — even very low-level learners — were able to articulate their progress as learners, though perhaps not at every instance of reflective writing practice. Did my students improve their learner autonomy? That remains to be seen.

Self-Reflection Variation 2 - Craig Yamamoto

In the first semester at the beginning of each class, participants would be introduced to the lesson content. The next step would be for them to copy the daily self-reflection and I would verify that all participants could comprehend the meaning of the reflection. This was done through simplified explanations in English and some translations given in the L1. Participants would use this information to focus on the lesson content and were given the final 5-10 minutes of class to begin writing their self-reflection. Participants unable to complete their self-reflections could take them home as homework. Everyone was encouraged to communicate with the others around them in either the L1 or L2 before writing their self-reflection, but not required to do so. All self-reflections were collected and scored with minimal comments approximately once every 2-3 lessons.

After grading and commenting on all notebooks, I would record some of the students' problem areas in regards to properly answering the question. None of the participants had their grammar, vocabulary usage or spelling critiqued as this was not a grammar/vocabulary activity, but a comprehensive one. All concerns noted were presented to all the classes in a general way, as to minimize any discouraging or negative effect on the participants ability to complete the assignments properly. Once these concerns were presented to the class, students were asked to include this information in their "note-taking" notebook for future reference.

Self-Reflection Variation 3 - Rachelle Meilleur

Initially my students were given reflections every second class, following Craig's model. Students were given the reflection at the beginning of class, and asked to write in the last ten to fifteen minutes of class. Like Tracy, I concentrated more on the content of the writing, rather than the grammar or other issues. However, it became clear quite quickly that, other than the Pharmacy students, most of the students in my other classes did not know what to do with the reflections or how to answer them. As a result, I began to structure the questions into a series of short, but easily answerable questions. This seemed to help, as did providing clear examples of what I was looking for. However, so many students relied on the teacher model that it is uncertain how well the students were answering honestly, or in their own voice. Nonetheless, in the student surveys, as well in the journals themselves, it was clear that the students did see some benefit to the reflective journal writing.

Interestingly, in the second semester I gave the students much more open-ended questions, and they often wrote more reflectively about their own

limitations than when I asked them specific questions in the first semester.

I had the most success with high-level Pharmacy students, and I feel that the lower levels would benefit from writing in Japanese, even though I would not be able to comment on their writing. This is an obvious limitation from both the teachers' and students' perspectives.

5. Results and Discussion

The students that participated in this reflective writing project provide a fairly comprehensive view of the current demographic of EC1 students at Sojo University. Out of nearly 300 student participants in this reflective writing project, 60% were male and 39.2% were female. Likewise, a very broad range of L2 ability levels were represented here as well. With this in mind, we can infer that different — or even subsequent year's — EC1 learners would perform similarly.

After collecting the journals at the end of the first semester, all entries were transcribed and input into an Excel file to analyze the data. The journal entries were assessed to determine whether or not the responses were successful (s), unsuccessful (u) or incomplete (i) according to each teacher-researcher. The decision to base each assessment on the individual teacher-researcher (Rachelle, Craig, and Tracy) and not on a standard scale is due to the fact that students did slightly different variations of self-reflections. The different variations meant there were different writing styles, so the perception as to what makes a response successful, unsuccessful or incomplete would likewise differ.

Overall, the success rate for student performance was high: the teachers reported that 73% of the reflective writing entries were completed in full and were of satisfactory quality or higher (see Appendix B for successful student samples). The entries that were not successful consisted of 17% incomplete and 5% unsuccessful attempts. Though it is not highly desirable for 22% of student work to be below par, it is encouraging to note that only 5% of the entries were not attempted at all. Thus, perhaps we can chalk up some of the poor performance to the natural processes of practice, as it was never anticipated that all students would immediately catch on to the challenging task of reflecting on their learning while composing in their L2. Likewise, we were able to see clear benefits in students writing anything at all in English at the A0-A2 levels.

Word counts for the entries are not necessarily clear indicators of students' efforts or of their higher-level abilities, but they did provide a benchmark for what is clearly possible. At a success rate of 73%, students were on average able to produce about 70 words in English for long-response items and 30 words for short-response items. This may be encouraging to those who might expect lower-level learners to be unable to produce English writing beyond a phrase or sentence, let alone reflect meaningfully on their learning processes at the length of a short paragraph.

6. Limitations

As this was a pilot study, we found that we had to adapt and adjust the parameters of the study to account for the limitations of our students, and ourselves as teacher-researchers. As a result, we were only able to complete the first stage of this study during the 2012-2013 school year.

As can be expected in such self-reflection research, there are apparent limitations. First of all, the timing of when to introduce each step may require more consistency between the classes as some participants received more of one stimulus compared to others. In turn such inconsistencies

may create concerns as to which of the three types of self-reflection processes were more or less effective.

Secondly, the combination of three instructor-researchers using three different process methods can create misconceptions of data collected from surveys taken from each class. Moreover, the rating as to a successful self-reflection may vary depending on what the individual instructor-researcher feels is appropriate or not. The fact that the self-reflections were not all the same questions or variations of the same ones, may also have an effect when concluding the best outcome or differences in outcomes.

A final limitation is related to quantity of self-reflections. In the research, there was never a clear set of guidelines created for the instructor-researchers as to how many of each type of reflection should be used, as well as should they be electronic or hard copy entries. It is clear that an in-class (daily) self-reflection would create a larger quantity of information, but the question arises as to how many daily and longer self-reflection samples should be collected, before they could be considered as quantifiable data.

Conclusion

Through this study, limitations notwithstanding, it is clear the majority of students were eventually able to reflect on their learning through writing after clearly being guided through the process regardless of method. This tells us that there may not be one specific way that works best, but there may be a system that most comfortably matches a class type.

With true beginners it was quickly observed that they lacked the ability to communicate in the L2 at a level where they could reflect on their effort and the content of the lessons/activities. This led to a more simplified self-reflection question, where students would be required to give shorter answers. This enabled students to focus more on the reflection and less on word count, although the count was important in some activities to attempt longer more detailed self-reflections. With this knowledge, future reflections will be adjusted to be loosely-based on class levels determined by the official Oxford Online Placement Test.

As students became more familiar with the task it was clear that many of the students had the ability to write more than first expected. Therefore, it leaves a difficult question as to how much should students write in their self-reflections. Should there be a minimum requirement? If there is no minimum requirement, would students produce reflections to their ability or would they continue only writing basic successful answers? Both questions are legitimate, but at this time are not the main focuses of this research, implying an branch research theme focusing on student motivation in regards to free writing.

Overall, this study shows many first year Japanese students do not have the skills to properly study independently, because they are not engaged in the lessons. Using self-reflective writing tasks more regularly, along with proper guidance students can gain the basic knowledge to further their ability to think critically about their own skills and decipher what their needs are and what to do to improve. Our study has also shown that without enough repetition and practice, as with studying the L2, students are unable to complete the tasks properly.

References

Benson, P. (2010). Measuring autonomy: Should we put our ability to the test? In A. Paras and L. Sercu (eds) *Testing the Untestable in Language Education* (pp. 77-97). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy*. 2nd ed. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited.

Cotterall, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses. *ELT Journal* 54 (2), 109-117.

Dam, L. (2009). The use of logbooks ― a tool for developing learner autonomy. In R. Pemberton, S. Toogood, and A. Barfield (eds) *Maintaining Control: Autonomy and Language Learning* (pp.125-144). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Fukuda, S., & Yoshida, H. (2013). Time is of the essence: factors encouraging out-of-class study time. *ELT Journal*, 67(1), 1-10.

Kemp, J. (2010). The listening log: motivating autonomous learning. *ELT Journal* 64 (4), 385-395.

Lafaye, B. and Tsuda, S. (2002). Attitudes towards English language learning in higher education in Japan, and the place of English in Japanese society. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 11(3), 146-161.

Meilleur, R. (2013). Becoming an autonomous learner: successes and failures. *Sojo Journal* 38, 105-109.

Suh, J-S., et al (1999). *Out of class learning experiences and students' perceptions of their impact on English conversation skills.* Report: Indiana University Bloomington.

Appendices

Appendix A

Reflective Writing Cheat Sheet

(received by all classes)

Read the phrases for reflective writing.

I liked . . .	〜が好きだ。
I didn't like . . .	〜があまり好きじゃなかった。
I learned . . .	〜を学んだ。
_____ was difficult/easy.	〜が難しかった／簡単だった。
I understand/don't understand . . .	〜が理解できる／できない。
I can/can't . . .	〜ができる／できない。
I was/wasn't able to . . .	〜ができた／できなかった。
My strength/weakness is . . .	私の強み／弱点が〜だ。
I will try to . . .	〜をしてみます。
I will improve by . . .	〜をしてレベルアップする。
_____ was useful/was not useful because . . .	〜が役に立った／立たなかった。
I want/don't want to . . .	〜がしたい／したくない。
Next time, I will . . .	今度は、〜をする。
I will try to . . .	〜をしてみます。

Add some of your own phrases here.

Sample Vocabulary Words

Translate the words into Japanese. Then, add some of your own words.

English	Japanese
reading	
writing	
listening	
speaking	
thinking	
grammar	
pronunciation	
Fluency	
Vocabulary	
Sentence	
Communicate	
Communication	

Appendix B

Sample Prompts with Successful Student Responses from CY/TF/RM's classes
(low-level to mid-level students)

Prompt
Family & Friends - *Were you able to introduce your family to your partner? Please explain your answer.*

Student Response
Yes, I can. because I have researched my parents work before. so I could use, and I know word "Great grand~" in this class, so I can talk about all family.
No, I can't. I don't have remembered all the vocabulary and don't have enough practices.

Prompt
Sharing Info (emails & phone #'s) - *Is there anything new you learned from today's lesson? Please explain your answer.*

Student Response
Yes. It's difficult for tell e-mail like, "cu-next-time. so if I tell that I must to say" letter c and letter u, underscore_" like that.
YES - I learned to tell person my phone number and address. First, I think it is easy, but in fact, it is difficult. See you next week!

Prompt
Final Speaking Test Reflection - *After you finish your speaking test today, write a reflection in your notebook. Write for 15 minutes. If you need more time, you may write more outside of class. Tracy will collect the notebook at our next class meeting.*

Student Response
I started speaking English talk. I enjoyed English talking. Partner is very good peaple. I can listen partners talk. Bat, I can't keep talking, and made pauses. And, can't use a lot of differend kinds of grammar and vocabulary. Next time, I want to talking Fluency English. Becomes I will sutudy hard in English. And talking English.
I enjoyed speaking test. I talked with N**** Y*****. My good points is to talk English very fast. I couldn't speak English like it. But I talked English like it today for the first time. I think I growed. By my bad points is that I couldn't speak in detail. I changed the topic fast. I will improve by speaking various people. Next time, I will try to speak in detail. And I want to go America. I want to speak American.

Prompt
Preferences/Survey - *Did you enjoy this lesson? Why? Did you think the survey (and presentation) was a useful activity? Why or why not?*

| Yes, I do. I enjoyed this lesson because I can know which noodles everyone like the best. I want to pronounce not katakana but English Yes, I did. I think it was a useful activity because I could tell about the survey in front of everyone and found it difficult to pronounce English well. Thanks to this lesson, I want to practice speaking English well. |
| Yes, I enjoyed it very much. It was fun to examine the thoughts of everyone. I want to do it again. Yes, I think it was a usual activity, because this activity needs cooperation with a partner. I thought I could cooperate with my partner very well. |
| Of course! Because I had to interview several students, I enjoyed this lesson. It was difficult that I asked them in short time. I hope ponyo will be more popular. I think that this survey will be useful. Because the world will be more global, I think it's nice that we can present in English. I want to try again! |
| Yes, I did. Because I thought about question of survey with my partner. We exchanged views with my partner on a question. Yes, I did. Because I could know opinions of my classmete and I could presentation front my classmate. I can't talk front many person very well so the presentation is a challenge for me. My weakness is pronunciation. Next time, I will try pronounce English well. This activity was useful. |

Prompt
FINAL - *Think about EC1 (and look at your handouts). What lessons and activities did you enjoy this semester? Please explain. What lessons and activities did you not enjoy this semester? Please explain. Do you feel that your English has improved? What would you like to do more of next semester?*

Student Response
I enjoyed all lessons and activities at English, but the most impressive thing is "Family" lesson for me. I often had chances which talked about family in English in the old days. My question and answer is one pattern about it. This lesson gave me new conversation pattern. I didn't have boring lessons and activities but speaking test was felt the strain for me. I'm not good at talking in English so it was useful because I tried to talk in English. English is fun for me. I want to talk classmate in English because my English skill will improve throw English lessons and activities.
I enjoied talking about my hometown and hobbies with my friend. I'm not good at speaking English. So I can't talk well, but my friends and teacher help me. I couldn't enjoy speaking test. It was so nurvous. I don't think that I could be good, but I did my best. I feel that my English has improved, because I can talk with my friend in English and write English sentence. I want to talk more fluently with friends. I want to do activity in SILC.