Toward university students' autonomous learning: From the perspective of Japanese university students

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Reference Data:

This study presents a description of first-year university students' attitudes toward learning a foreign language with special reference to autonomous learning. A questionnaire was developed based on previous studies and was administered to approximately 700 first-year students at Kyoto University. Results show that most students hold an overall positive view toward learning a foreign language. However two-thirds of the students do not seem to be confident in self-monitoring their own language learning and less than half of the students claim that they are engaged in out-of-class language learning. The results of this research suggest that students' positive attitudes are not necessarily initiating their actions to actively engage themselves in language learning other than through regular classes. It is possible that students could benefit from guidance provided by teachers on what and how to learn outside the classroom. Students should learn that they are capable of taking the initiative in learning a foreign language and should bear their share of responsibility for their own learning.

大学生の外国語学習に対する意識調査のために、外国語の自律学習に焦点を当てた質問紙が作成され、大学生約７００人に対して質問紙調査が行われた。質問紙の分析の結果、大多数の学生が外国語学習を好意的に捉える一方で、外国語学習の自己管理に関わる方略に自信が持てると回答した学生は約３割、外国語の教室外学習経験があると回答した学生は半数以下であるとことがわかった。調査結果より学生の外国語学習に対する好意的意識が必ずしも実際の学習行動に結びついていない実態が明らかになった。教師が具体的に教室外学習に関して指導することにより、学生自身が受動的な外国語学習から脱却し、能動的に学習に関わるようになる可能性が示唆された。

The importance of developing autonomous learning has been widely acknowledged in foreign language education (cf. Holec, 1979; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1995). One recent example is the trend of promoting out-of-class learning through Computer Assisted Language Learning in Japanese universities (see Takefuta & Suiko, 2005). From a perspective of second language acquisition research, it is

unlikely that an EFL learner is able to learn an L2 solely by attending, for example, a 90-minute class twice a week. In fact the overall English language ability of Japanese students is often said to reach a peak around the time of graduation from high school. Thus the promotion of autonomous learning is all the more necessary in higher education in Japan.

Out-of-class learning experiences, in which students take control of what, how and when to learn (Brown, 2005), are seen as activities embodying autonomous learning according to Benson's (2001) definition of autonomy; a capacity to take control of their own learning. In the field of higher education research, students' out-of-class experiences are assumed to contribute to various educational outcomes as much as in-class experiences do (cf. Kuh, 1993; Terenzini, et al., 1996). The importance of out-of-class language learning is also repeatedly mentioned in the literature (cf. Rubin, 1975; Bialystok, 1978; Pickard, 1996; Suh et al., 1999; Hyland, 2004).

This study intends to give a brief overview of language learning attitudes of Japanese students during their first year at university. Many previous studies regarding autonomous language learning, including out-of-class learning, are based on research investigating ESL students (cf. Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Suh, et al., 1999), EFL students majoring in English (cf. Chan, 2001), and students with high English proficiency (cf. Picard, 1996). This study investigates students of various majors with no particular focus on their English proficiency. Since it is argued that language learning attitudes are likely to reflect students' readiness for autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995), the results of this study are expected to provide suggestions for teachers to support students' autonomous language learning.

Method

Participants were first-year undergraduate students in 18 compulsory English classes from all faculties at Kyoto University. A questionnaire was administered in May during the 1st semester and in November during the 2nd semester in 2004. The number of participants was 787 in May, and 689 in November.

The questionnaire was developed based on questionnaires used in Cotterall (1995, 1999) and Chan (2001). Cotterall investigates university ESL students' beliefs about language learning and argues that such beliefs would affect students' receptiveness to autonomous language learning. On a similar line of study, Chan investigates university students' attitudes toward autonomous language learning and concludes that they are in their early stage of learning autonomously. Questions regarding language learning motivation for the present questionnaire were selected from Coleman (2004) and the Quick Motivation Test (Cook, 2004). Coleman seeks to explore the types of motivation university students have for language learning, and Cook offers a selection of eight items for checking instrumental and integrative motivation of ESL students. The present questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions required five-point scale answers: *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree,* and *strongly disagree*. The open-ended questions asked about specific out-of-class activities the participants were engaged in or the reasons for not being engaged in such activities. The questionnaire was pilot-tested on 123 Japanese university students. The questionnaire took from eight to 15 minutes. All questions were asked in Japanese.

Results

Language learning attitudes

In order to allow generalizations to be made about overall trends in the participants' responses, responses of *strongly agree* and *agree* were grouped as positive responses. Likewise, responses of *strongly disagree* and *disagree* were grouped as negative responses. The results for the questions are shown in Appendix A.

The majority of participants were strongly motivated to study a foreign language because they thought they needed it for their future career, because they wanted to become more educated, and because they were interested to learn about foreign cultures. Nearly half of the participants thought that they would gain respect from others if they were able to use a foreign language. One third of the participants thought they were studying foreign languages merely to meet a course requirement. As for their beliefs on the nature of language study, the majority thought that learning a foreign language was a long process, acknowledged that out-of-class activities were important, and considered language learning to be different from studying other academic subjects. Participants did not show any particularly strong preference regarding learning styles. Studying in small groups and studying by themselves were slightly preferred over studying with the whole group. As for self-monitoring strategies, nearly half of the participants answered that they were able to explain why they needed to study English, whereas positive responses to questions on self-evaluation ranged from 30% to 40%. As for the role of a language teacher, the majority of the participants thought that a teacher's role was to help students learn effectively and to discuss their progress and difficulties with them. A relatively high percentage of the participants showed positive responses to a teacher's role of creating opportunities for practice. Responses to the teacher's role as a goal-setter, on the other hand, were relatively negative.

Out-of-class language learning experiences

Participants were asked whether they had any out-of-class language learning experiences before and after entering university. They were also asked to list specific out-of-class activities they were engaged in or to give reasons for not being engaged in out-of-class activities. The frequency figures for the first and second semester are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Out-of-class learning opportunities before and after entering university (1st semester)

			Out-of-class Experiences after Entering University		
			Yes	No	Total
Out-of-class Experiences before Entering University	Yes	Count	170	191	361
		% of Total	22.1%	24.8%	46.9%
	No	Count	82	326	408
		% of Total	10.7%	42.4%	53.1%
	Total	Count	252	517	769
		% of Total	32.8%	67.2%	100.0%

Note: chi-square values=63.35; df=1; p<.01

Table 2. Out-of-class learning opportunities before and after entering university (2nd semester)

			Out-of-class Experiences after Entering University		
			Yes	No	Total
Out-of-class Experiences before Entering University	Yes	Count	162	133	295
		% of Total	23.9%	19.6%	43.4%
	No	Count	97	287	384
		% of Total	14.3%	42.3%	56.6%
	Total	Count	259	420	679
		% of Total	38.1%	61.9%	100.0%

Note: chi-square values=62.18; df=1; p<.01

Over 20% of the participants recognized that they had language learning opportunities both before and after entering university, whereas over 40% thought they did not have such opportunities either before or after entering university. The percentage of participants who considered that they had language learning opportunities outside the classroom before entering university but have not had any afterwards dropped from 24.8% in the 1st semester to 19.6 % in the 2nd semester. The percentage of participants who considered that they did not have language learning opportunities outside the classroom before entering university but have had some since entering rose from 10.7% in the 1st semester to 14.3% in the 2nd semester. In both semesters, the percentage of participants who considered that they have had out-of-class language learning opportunities since entering university was lower than those who felt they had such opportunities before entering university.

Participants' descriptions of specific out-of-class activities and the reasons for not being engaged in such activities were grouped according to keywords and were categorized. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4. For full details, see Appendixes B and C.

Table 3. Out-of-class activities

Activities	Before Entering University	1st Semester	2nd Semester
	Count	Count	Count
	% of Total	% of Total	% of Total
Private Activities	114	117	108
	31.1%	46.4%	41.2%
Institution-related Activities	93	43	39
	25.4%	17.1%	14.9%
Total	444	296	312
	121.3%	117.5%	119.1%

Note: before entering university—421 invalid cases, 366 valid cases; 1st semester—535 invalid cases, 252 valid cases; 2nd semester—464 invalid cases, 262 valid cases

As for out-of-class activities after entering university, more than 40% of the participants who experienced such activities were engaged in individual receptive activities using various forms of media, such as listening to the radio and watching TV. There was a decline in the figures regarding institution-related activities after entering university. As for reasons for not being engaged in out-of-class activities, the most frequently cited reason was that the participants did not feel it necessary to use the language. The next most frequently cited reason was that they blamed themselves for

Table 4. Reasons for not being engaged in out-of-class activities

Reasons	Before Entering University	1st Semester	2nd Semester
	Count	Count	Count
	% of Total	% of Total	% of Total
Unnecessary	135	141	97
	33.3%	27.3%	23.2%
Not being active	94	109	137
	23.2%	21.1%	32.9%
Busy	47	92	49
	11.6%	17.8%	11.7%
Total	431	552	443
	106.4%	106.8%	106.5%

Note: before entering university—382 invalid cases, 405 valid cases; 1st semester—270 invalid cases, 517 valid cases; 2nd semester—310 invalid cases, 416 valid cases

not actively seeking such opportunities. This view seemed to be more frequently expressed in the second semester. The third most frequently cited reason was that they were busy with activities other than language learning. This view was expressed frequently especially in the first semester.

Cluster analysis was conducted following principal component analysis to see if the participants could be grouped according to the similarity of their responses to the close-ended questions about their language learning attitudes. Classification function coefficients were calculated and the participants were grouped into four groups which had some common features in both semesters. The groups were named according to their features: the All-rounder group, the Independent-study group, the Guidance-requesting group, and the Reluctant-learning group. The All-rounder group consisted of participants who held positive views in most areas of language learning. They were comfortable about studying by themselves as well as willing to take advice from their teachers. They seemed to be ready to seize any kind of learning opportunities. The Independent-study group consisted of participants who preferred learning a language without depending on their teachers. The Guidance-requesting group consisted of participants who felt comfortable about receiving feedback from teachers and having teachers set learning goals. The Reluctant-learning group consisted of participants who took language learning merely as a course requirement. They held overall negative attitudes toward language learning. In order to look into students' potential for autonomous learning according to group, each group was cross-counted with the students' out-of-class learning experiences after entering university. The results for both semesters are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Participants in the All-rounder group and in the Independent-study group tended to have more out-of-class learning experiences than the Guidance-requesting group and the Reluctant-learning group. In all groups, however, more participants indicated that they did not have out-of-class learning experiences than those who considered they did. As for the number of participants in each group, the Guidance-requesting group was the largest, followed by the All-rounder group, the Independent-study group, and finally the Reluctant-learning group. The cross-counts in both semesters showed similar results, except that in the second semester the All-rounder group participants who had out-of-class learning experiences outnumbered those who did not.

Table 5. Out-of-class learning after entering university within student groups (1st semester)

| | Out-of-class Experience | | | | Total | |
| | Yes | | No | | | |
	Count	% within Group	Count	% within Group	Count	% within Group
All-rounder	94	44.1	119	55.9	213	
Independent-study	62	42.5	84	57.5	146	
Guidance-requesting	66	25.3	195	74.7	261	100
Reluctant-learning	24	17.8	111	82.2	135	
Total	246	32.6	509	67.4	755	

Note: chi-square value=39.22; df=3; p<.01

Table 6. Out-of-class learning after entering university within student groups (2nd semester)

| | Out-of-class Experience | | | | Total | |
| | Yes | | No | | | |
	Count	% within Group	Count	% within Group	Count	% within Group
All-rounder	90	52.9	80	47.1	170	
Independent-study	75	45.7	89	54.3	164	
Guidance-requesting	65	29.8	153	70.2	218	100
Reluctant-learning	28	23.0	94	77.0	122	
Total	258	38.3	416	61.7	674	

Note: chi-square value=38.06; df=3; p<.01

In summary, participants had high motivation or high hope to study a foreign language. They were not so confident in using self-monitoring strategies and they generally welcomed teacher guidance in learning a language throughout the first academic year. They thought out-of-class learning was important but were less engaged in such learning than they used to be since entering university

mainly because they did not see the necessity to use or practice a language outside the classroom. Participants were grouped into four types according to their language learning attitudes: the All-rounder group, the Independent-study group, the Guidance-requesting group, and the Reluctant-learning group. Participants in the All-rounder group tended to be engaged in more out-of-class learning than participants

in other groups, whereas the Guidance-requesting group was the largest in terms of numbers of participants.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that first-year university students are not necessarily ready for autonomous learning. First, this is indicated by the relatively low percentages (around 30%) of students who feel confident in self-monitoring (measuring their own progress or self-correcting) their language studies. In Cotterall's study (1995, 1999), autonomous learners tend to show confidence in self-monitoring strategies. This is confirmed in this study where the All-rounder group students, who are confident in self-monitoring their studies, tend to be engaged in out-of-class learning. Second, students generally feel comfortable following their teachers' guidance in language studies except for students in the Independent-study group, which is formed by less than 24% of the students. Thus this study gives grounds for teachers to offer guidance for students to become autonomous learners, especially in using self-monitoring strategies. Some ideas are given by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) in their textbook for enhancing the use of self-monitoring strategies and by Ryan (1997), who reports on providing guidance on raising students' awareness about available out-of-class resources. Through these awareness-raising suggestions, teachers will be able to help students cultivate not only what to do for out-of-class learning but also how to do it. Students may come to realize their strengths and preferences in the choice of out-of-class learning and its relationship to classroom learning.

On the other hand, students' overall high motivation to study a language can be seen as their high potential for autonomous learning. However, the relatively low percentage (less than 40%) of students who considered themselves to be engaged in out-of-class learning after entering university suggests that such motivation is not necessarily initiating actions. Furthermore, in the second semester the percentage of students who are not actively seeking learning opportunities outside the classroom increases although their motivations remain strong. This also suggests that high motivation is not necessarily associated with action. Thus the question is how a teacher can encourage students to connect their motivation to action. Hints are suggested in Brown (2005) and in Oettingen (2000) regarding goal attainment theory, in which additional contribution to a person's behavior besides motivation variables is explained to be how people frame goals and how their goal pursuits are self-regulated. Teachers will be able to encourage students to link learning opportunities and students' learning goals by offering suggestions to set self-regulated realistic goals, such as listing desired goals as well as listing expected interference, and to specify when and where to start actions through their own will, such as forming statements as "When it is Wednesday at 9, I will listen to the news in English". Although the effects of such suggestions from the field of educational psychology have not yet been fully verified in language learning, they add some varieties in the suggestions teachers can offer to students.

Conclusion

This study looked into university students' language learning attitudes during their first year at university and intended to see how ready they are for autonomous learning. The data suggests that most first-year university students want to become able users of a foreign language and think attending language classes is not enough for their learning success. However, less than half of those students seem to be putting their desire into action. Autonomous learning is claimed to be one of the critical means to increase time of exposure to the target language and it should be done in an effective way. It is possible that students could benefit from guidance provided by teachers on what and how to learn outside the classroom in the initial years of their language education at university. Students should learn that they are capable of taking the initiative in their language learning and that they should bear their share of responsibility for their own learning. Future studies need to look more closely into why students feel less confident in self-monitoring their studies and to closely investigate whether fostering autonomous learning brings about better language learning. This would lead to the development of effective self-study materials, which in turn would increase the opportunities for students to be engaged in autonomous language learning.

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Appendix A

Results of students' language learning attitudes

LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION Studying foreign languages is important to me because…		Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)	Total (%)
I will need it for my future career.	I	2.8	5.8	91.3	
	II	1.9	3.9	94.1	
it will make me a more educated person.	I	3.8	10.2	86.1	
	II	3.3	9.3	87.3	
it will enable me to understand and appreciate the art and literature of the country where the language is spoken.	I	11.1	17.3	71.7	100
	II	9.3	16.8	73.8	
other people will respect me more if I can use a foreign language.	I	25.9	29.9	44.3	
	II	17.5	25.4	57.0	
I need to meet a course requirement.	I	37.3	31.9	30.8	
	II	32.4	32.3	35.1	
THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING **I believe in /that…**					
studying foreign languages in the same way as studying other subjects.	I	62.1	23.5	13.7	
	II	62.6	23.0	14.1	
language learning takes a long time.	I	2.3	7.2	90.2	100
	II	2.7	6.8	90.2	
my language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom.	I	1.6	9.3	89.1	
	II	2.3	6.7	90.8	
LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCE **I like studying/working…**					
by myself.	I	29.4	38.2	32.4	
	II	24.8	40,3	34.7	
in small groups.	I	27.0	38.6	34.3	100
	II	27.3	43.8	28.9	
with the whole class.	I	35.9	46.3	17.8	
	II	41.2	42.5	16.2	

SELF-MONITORING STRATEGIES I can/know how to…					
explain why I need to study English.	I	24.2	25.7	50.2	
	II	23.9	24.9	51.0	
measure my progress in English.	I	34.4	34.7	31.0	
	II	34.7	35.7	29.5	100
find and correct my mistakes in English.	I	36.5	30.9	32.4	
	II	29.4	32.2	38.3	
find my own ways of practicing English.	I	31.5	39.9	38.6	
	II	28.8	31.7	39.3	
THE ROLE OF A LANGUAGE TEACHER I believe the role of a teacher is…					
to set my learning goals.	I	53.0	31.1	15.7	
	II	43.8	36.1	20.0	
to create opportunities for me to practice.	I	11.3	21.1	67.3	
	II	10.0	19.7	70.1	
to help me learn effectively.	I	5.6	12.2	82.1	
	II	5.6	15.5	78.7	100
to tell me what progress I am making and to say what my difficulties are.	I	6.1	12.7	81.1	
	II	4.9	15.9	79.0	
to give me regular tests.	I	63.3	26.7	9.9	
	II	56.2	29.7	13.9	

Note: I = 1st semester; II = 2nd semester

Appendix B

Specific out-of-class activities

Activities		Before Entering University		1st Semester		2nd Semester	
		Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)	Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)	Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)
Private Activities	Radio, CDs, Tapes (Music)	49	114 (31.1%)	50	117 (46.4%)	26	108 (41.2%)
	TV, DVDs, Videos (Movie)	38		36		36	
	Self-study	12		10		13	
	Internet	8		5		16	
	Books, newspapers, magazines	7		16		19	
Institution-related Activities	Overseas programs	66	93 (25.4%)	0	43 (17.1%)	0	39 (14.9%)
	Native speaker teachers, foreign students	24		21		17	
	Club activities	3		22		22	
Language schools, Cram schools		68 (18.6%)		10 (4.0%)		22 (8.4%)	
Foreigner friends		39 (10.7%)		40 (15.9%)		23 (8.8%)	
Unplanned events (e.g. being talked to by foreigners on the street)		38 (10.4%)		33 (13.1%)		70 (26.7%)	
Family related activities (e.g. oversea tours, living overseas)		65 (17.8%)		0		0	
Oversea tours, home-stay programs		0		4 (1.6%)		35 (13.4%)	
Others (e.g. emails, boy scout, teaching English)		10 (2.7%)		13 (5.2%)		8 (3.1%)	
No answer		17 (4.6%)		36 (14.3%)		7 (2.7%)	
Total		444 (121.3%)		296 (117.5%)		312 (119.1%)	

Note: before entering university—421 missing cases, 366 valid cases; 1st semester—535 missing cases, 252 valid cases; 2nd semester—464 missing cases, 262 valid cases

Appendix C

Specific reasons for not being engaged in out-of-class activities

Reasons		Before Entering University		1st Semester		2nd Semester	
		Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)	Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)	Case Count	Total (Pct. of case)
Unnecessary	No need in daily life	71	135 (33.3%)	87	141 (27.3%)	60	97 (23.3%)
	No foreigners around	39		34		18	
	Living in Japan	14		15		9	
	Living in rural areas	8		0		0	
	No chance to go overseas	3		5		10	
Not Being Active	No opportunity seeking	66	94 (23.2%)	85	109 (21.1%)	98	137 (32.9%)
	Lacking motivation	24		24		39	
Busy	Busy with other studies	34	47 (11.6%)	10	92 (17.8%)	8	49 (11.8%)
	Busy in general	9		78		35	
	Busy with club activities	4		4		6	
Indifferent	Not interested	15	23 (5.7%)	12	19 (3.7%)	11	18 (4.3%)
	Dislike	4		4		4	
	Avoiding	2		2		3	
	Nervous with foreigners	2		1		0	
Introvert	Limited behavior pattern	3	5 (1.2%)	7	12 (2.3%)	12	14 (3.4%)
	Unsociable	2		5		2	
Others (e.g. too expensive, not having TV)			11 (2.7%)		14 (2.7%)		4 (1.0%)
Do not know			24 (5.9%)		30 (5.8%)		15 (3.6%)
No answer			92 (22.7%)		135 (26.1%)		109 (26.2%)
Total			431 (106.4%)		552 (106.8%)		443 (106.5%)

Note: before entering university—382 missing cases, 405 valid cases; 1st semester—270 missing cases, 517 valid cases; 2nd semester—310 missing cases, 416 valid cases