Creating a community of self-directed learners

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This paper reports on a yearlong, classroom-based, structured Independent Study (IS) course component for Beginner and Basic level students of English at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. The IS component is intended to complement and augment the other aspects of the course characterized by a textbook-based, integrated skills, communicative language teaching approach. Besides explaining the major characteristics of IS and reflecting on general student feedback, this paper provides example of a community of students creating an identity as self-directed learners.

It is proposed that entire classes of students who are not accustomed to self-directed learning -- as applied to the study of English -- can change their attitude toward it and benefit from a carefully guided and supported independent study approach.

　本論文は、神田外語大学の英語コースに設置された自主学習(IS)に関する報告である。ISは初習および初級の英語学習者（外国人留学生）を対象とした教室中心のコースの一部として開発された。コース自体はコミュニカティブ・アプローチにより、教科書に基づいて4技能を教授しているが、ISの要素をコースに取り入れることによって、コースのほかの面を補強し、拡大することを目指している。本論文では、ISの主な特徴を説明し、収集した学生のフィードバックをもとに考察を加える。さらに、学生たちが自律的学習者として自らのアイデンティティーを創造していく事例を紹介する。本論文では、英語学習においてもともと自律学習を経験してこなかった受講生の誰もが、自律学習についての適切な指導とサポートによって、学習態度を変化させることができ、自律学習の受益者になる可能性があることを示唆した。

Since 2001, an increasing number of foreign students, mainly from Korea and China, have entered Kanda University of International Studies as four-year undergraduates. In the 2005-06 academic year, 124 foreign students were enrolled in two departments. In addition to taking the general courses conducted in Japanese, they are required to achieve at least an intermediate level of English proficiency before

graduation. Due to their comparative lack of experience learning English and/or prolonged absence from English study, they usually do not have sufficient ability to allow for their participation in the English proficiency courses offered to the Japanese students. Therefore, the English Program for Foreign Students (EPFS) was created in April 2004 to accommodate the special needs of the foreign students.

The curricular framework of the English Program for Foreign Students (EPFS)

The EPFS consists of three ability-differentiated courses: Beginners English (true beginners or those with less than 1 year's experience studying English), Basic English (mostly those with 1-3 years of experience studying English), and Intermediate English (which students must pass in order to fulfill their graduation requirements). The basic tenet of the EPFS is to develop not only the students' ability to understand and use the target language but also the skills useful for a life-long pursuit—if they choose—of language learning. Thus, the EPFS framework draws on the idea of learner autonomy.

The learner autonomy goals and approach of the English Program for Foreign Students are informed by Littlewood's "Framework for developing autonomy in language learning" (1996, p.431) which defines 3 domains of autonomy:

- **Autonomy as a person** (who can express personal meaning and create personal learning contexts)

- **Autonomy as a communicator** (who can use the language creatively and use appropriate strategies for communicating meanings in specific situations)

- **Autonomy as a learner** (who can engage in self-directed learning and use appropriate learning strategies in and out of the classroom)

With respect to "autonomy as a learner", the EPFS also incorporates the following definitions:

- The capacity to take control of one's own learning in the service of one's perceived needs and aspirations

- The skills, knowledge, motivation, and confidence necessary to:

  - Take responsibility and make choices concerning what, why, and how to learn

  - To implement the plan

  - To sustain the effort

  - To evaluate the outcome of learning (Aoki, 1999)

Background of the Students

In April 2004, a needs analysis was administered to the foreign students to ascertain their background and purpose for learning English. Please refer to the following table:

Table 1. Background of the foreign students

Countries of origin	China (various regions), Korea
Japanese ability	high level of proficiency
Average age	25.2 (older than the average Japanese student at the university)
Total number of foreign languages studied/learned besides English	1-3 (including Japanese, Korean -- for the Chinese who live near the Chinese-Korean border, regional dialects)
Work/Professional experiences	some worked in companies or at other professions previously
Educational experience	some students graduated from universities in their home countries
Experience with English	33% never formally studied English before arriving at KUIS; 5% studied for one year or less; 12% studied for up to 3 years (mostly in conversation schools or in middle school); 50% studied for more than 3 years
Motivation for learning English	high motivation (to increase their future job opportunities)

With the needs of the students and the program goals in mind, the following course structure and content for the English Program for Foreign Studies was implemented in 2004. At the Beginners level, there are six lessons per week: four textbook-based lessons (ninety minutes each) are designated for building fundamental knowledge of and skills in English, one lesson focuses on improving pronunciation and listening skills, and one lesson called Independent Study (IS) allows students to work on areas and skills of their own choosing. At the Basic level, there are four lessons per week: three textbook-based lessons per week are spent on building fundamental knowledge of and skills in English, and one lesson is designated as IS. The following section explains Independent Study (IS), an innovative component of the program.

The Independent Study (IS) Component of the English Program for Foreign Students

The IS component is intended to complement and augment the other aspects of the course characterized by a textbook-based, communicative language teaching approach. As explained, 90-minutes (one lesson) per week is allotted to the IS course component at the Beginners and Basic course levels. One purpose of this is to create the **time** and **opportunit**y for students to pursue a more individualized style of learning. As differences in knowledge, experience with English, level of proficiency, learning style, learner preferences, and learning pace naturally exist among the students, the IS provides a means for them to study according to their personal needs. The IS also attempts to provide an accessible, comfortable environment for students to become immersed in self-directed learning. Although the university itself possesses an award-winning self-access learning center, the foreign students have generally underused this facility, citing such reasons as lack of learning support, their English level, low confidence, and feelings of discomfort. To counter these perceived obstacles as well as to foster in students the capacity for self-directed learning, the Independent Study environment purposefully incorporates scaffolding in the following three areas: *teacher support, content support, and materials and resources support.*

Teacher Support

Teacher support is seen as crucial to the students' learning process, and the IS instructor assumes multiple roles. One key role is to act as intermediary between the students and

the target language so that lack of English ability does not impede success in learning it. For example, the IS instructor interacts with students largely in Japanese—the language that all students are fluent in—to advise them on ways to study English, to understand their perspectives and needs, to allow for two-way communication, to offer encouragement and feedback, and to explain difficult and unfamiliar concepts such as learning strategies and learning styles. The instructor is also responsible for introducing the course content and managing the in-class IS materials and resources. Finally, the IS instructor is available at all times during the lesson as a resource for the students, for instance, when they have questions about English usage or are in need of a conversation practice partner.

Content Support

Content support is in the form of learner training. At the start of the school year, students undergoing Independent Study complete a self-assessment aimed at raising consciousness of their own preferred ways of learning and the type(s) of learner they are. They are then encouraged to think about how they have learned other languages and how to transfer their experiences to the study of English. Next, students are introduced—most for the first time—to general language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). Class discussions allow students to exchange ideas on how to apply strategies concretely to their everyday learning of English. The rational for raising awareness about strategies is based on the view that, as Cohen states, "There is no single set of strategies that will work best for all individuals and thus learners should experiment widely to decide which strategies are most personally suitable and effective" (1990, p.15).

After the introductory lessons, students then spend the remainder of the academic year (about one and a half semesters) engaged in learning cycles of 3-7 weeks each (cycles are short to begin with and then gradually get longer as students gain more experience with this type of learning). To guide the process, at the start of each cycle students fill in a personal English learning plan and then try to follow it for the duration of the cycle.

This English learning plan (see Appendix 1) contains elements that, according to Holec (in Benson, 1995, p.48), enable a learner to become more autonomous. First, students set overall learning goal(s) for the cycle. Then they set sub-goal(s) for each week of their learning cycle and think of appropriate activities, strategies, and materials. When students arrive in class each week, they take out their learning plan and conduct their learning accordingly. At the end of every lesson, students engage in guided self-reflection and write down their feelings and experiences in the learning plan. The reflection questions use the following schema suggested by Benson (1995, p.9):

- *What did I do? (describe)*

- *What did it mean? (inform)*

- *How did it come about like this? (confront)*

- *How could I have done it differently? (reconstruct)*

After each 3-7 week learning cycle is completed, the students reflect on the entire cycle as to whether they were able to reach their overall learning goals. They then use their experiences and self-knowledge to set goals and learning strategies for the next cycle. Meanwhile, the

previously finished learning plan – along with the work done during that cycle (for example, handouts, drawings, notes, vocabulary lists, self-assessment, etc.) – is added to the students' personal portfolio. To clarify, for the initial learning cycles, students must work alone so that each individual can experience and get used to the process of goal-setting, following a plan of study, and then reflecting upon it. Later on, students have the option to work with a partner; this is meant to recognize the importance of peer interaction/interdependence in developing autonomy.

One key element in the learning cycle process is *timely intervention* by the IS instructor—in the form of direct written and oral feedback—to facilitate and monitor student progress. After the students set their overall learning goal(s), the instructor looks over each learning plan and makes appropriate written comments or suggestions. The instructor also provides written feedback upon reading the weekly reflections and the end-of-cycle reflections. While the students are conducting their learning each week, the instructor is available to speak to students and to advise them upon request.

Materials Support

The third type of scaffolding, materials support, is embodied by the Mobile Independent Learning Center (MILC). This is a portable trolley—containing resources/equipment such as print materials, cassettes, audio CDs, CD-Rom, videos, language games, personal tape cassette players and CD players—transported by the instructor to and from the classroom for each week's lesson. The items on the MILC are especially selected or created to suit the English abilities of the students, and can be easily updated or changed accordingly.

The Issue of Control

Besides offering three types of scaffolding amd support, the Independent Study (IS) component takes into account the issue of *control*, as in how much control the students have in directing their own learning. Benson (2001) distinguishes 3 levels of control important to a person's autonomy: *control of learning management* (planning, organization, and evaluation), *control of cognitive processes* (attention, reflection, and meta-cognitive knowledge), and *control of learning content* (p. 50). The IS attempts to give a *high degree* of control to students at all three levels. Using the learning plan, students decide what they want to study, set their study objectives, create a plan of action, decide on which learning strategies they wish to employ, and then attempt to follow through with their plans. The instructor offers feedback and is available at all times if needed but otherwise, students are responsible for the learning content and management of their study. Student choice is also promoted as far as selecting the learning materials and the place where they wish to study. Once students check in with the instructor at the start of the IS class period, they can go anywhere on the university campus to carry out their learning.

As stated, at the end of each week's IS lesson students undergo reflection to try to understand any gaps between what they tried to do and what actually happened. They then apply their awareness of what they learned, including evaluation of successes or failures, toward creating the

next learning plan. The instructor regularly peruses the students' portfolio to understand what they are doing, but otherwise tries not to interfere—except when asked—with their learning. The hope is that through this type of self-experimentation and repeated process of formulating, then trying to adhere to their learning plans, students may gain a better knowledge of themselves, how they learn, what methods and strategies best work for them, where their strengths or weaknesses are, and how to improve their language proficiency through self-directed means.

General Student Feedback Concerning the Independent Study Component

During the 2004-05 academic year, data was gathered from all IS students (9 Beginners, 20 Basic level) through the following: (1) student needs analysis; (2) each student's three learning plans and self-reflections during the second semester; (3) an end-of-the-year questionnaire which included both closed and open questions; (4) a private 15-minute interview (recorded in Japanese) with each student after they completed the questionnaire. Table 2 summarizes some pertinent student feedback.

Analysis of the Student Feedback

The information in the table, the responses to the questionnaire, and the content of the private interviews suggest that students generally liked English better by the end of the school year. The reasons for shifting from negative or neutral feelings to a more positive attitude include: feeling more confident and enjoying the learning more as a result

of increased knowledge of English, liking English more for itself (intrinsic orientation) rather than viewing it as a required subject necessary for their future jobs (extrinsic orientation), and being able to see their self-effort translate into results or progress. It may be generalized that "liking" seems to be linked to students' level of confidence, increased knowledge of English, and feeling of some success.

In addition, most students who initially resisted self-directed learning started to like it either *a little* or *a lot* by the end of the year. The self-reported negative feelings at the start were due to the following (translated from Japanese): *I wasn't used to this, It's best to find one's own learning style without having to take this course component, I couldn't do it well, I don't know why I have to learn about ways to study, it was boring, I didn't know how it would be useful, I didn't understand what it is.*

Reasons for the positive feelings experienced at the end of the year include: *being able to study what we want to study, being able to work on our weak points, being able to find/use ways to use methods of studying most suitable for myself, having someone teach us about the ways to study, being able to work at my own pace, having the teacher there if I have questions, being able to decide my own goals freely, having the time to study/review, understanding the purpose of it and how to do it, English is now something I can do myself, I could see the payoff of my study, I think it is most effective.*

For the most part the students gained at least a little confidence in their ability to set personal learning goals and reach them. This response reflects the reality that sometimes students couldn't reach their goals, mainly because the inexperienced goal-setters tended to establish aims that were

Table 2. General student feedback

	Feelings about English at the start of the school year	Feelings about English at the end of the school year	Feelings about the IS at the start of the year	Feelings about the IS at the end of the year	Confidence in own ability to set learning goals & achieving them	Personal Belief about English learning
Beginners Students	Like it a lot (1) Like it a little (3) Neutral (4)	Like it a lot (7) Like it a little (2)	Negative (9)	Like it a lot (7) Like it a little (2)	Gained a lot of confidence (1) Gained a little confidence (8)	If I try my best I can succeed (7) I am good at learning English so I can succeed (1) I don't have enough ability (1)
Basic Students	Like it a lot (5) Like it a little (9) Neutral (3) Don't like it (3)	Like it a lot (10) Like it a little (9) Don't like it (1)	Negative (13) Positive (7)	Like it a lot (5) Like it a little (13) Neutral (1) Don't like it (1)	Gained a lot of confidence (4) Gained a little confidence (13) No gain (3)	If I try my best I can succeed (10) I am good at learning English so I can succeed (2) I don't put enough effort into studying English (7) I don't have time to study so I can't learn English well (1)

Note: The number in ( ) indicates the number of students who gave the response

impractical, vague, overly ambitious, or all-encompassing (for example, *learn 50 words each time*, *improve vocabulary*, or *become fluent in English*). With repeated practice and constructive feedback from the IS instructor, students were guided toward setting smaller, more concrete and achievable short-term goals to reach their long-term goals.

The Importance of Goal-Setting

The importance of learning goals has been mentioned by those involved in educational psychology. According to Montalvo and Torres (2004),

> Numerous studies show that students who pursue and adopt learning goals use deeper cognitive strategies (elaboration and organization), and deeper meta-cognitive strategies (goal planning

activities and activities pertaining to self-observation of one's own comprehension); they have more adaptive motivational beliefs toward themselves and towards the tasks (high beliefs of self-efficacy when faced with difficult tasks, formation of an adaptive attributional pattern; a great intrinsic interest and enjoyment of the tasks; high levels of value, usefulness, and importance assigned to these tasks; a greater number of positive affective reactions to the tasks); and they show higher levels of effort and persistence, as well as more behaviors of seeking academic help when they have difficulties than we find in students with other types of goals (cfr. Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan and Midgly, 2002; Pintrich 2000). (p.10)

As such, within the IS component, priority is placed on training students to understand the rationale for setting learning goals, to be able to set goals appropriately and to envision concretely how to achieve their goals within a given time span.

To illustrate, some of the end-of-the-year comments by students concerning goal-setting include:

- Planning and setting goals were difficult at first but now I can set goals quickly and understand what I have to do to achieve the goals; broad goals don't work, rather achievable small goals are better for studying.

- There is a plan every time and I can start (studying) right away; I have gotten used to making plans even outside of this class. This is a big influence on my other studies.

- Now I make a plan often. Setting small goals is useful. When I achieve them, I feel like "I made it! Good job!" When a plan doesn't go well, I feel disappointed.

- Now I make plans and set goals in my head before studying. In the past I studied at random, blindly, but now I organize my own study and I feel accomplishment. I feel safe with my own study. Setting goals is very important.

Additional Comments Concerning Student Feedback

Turning to beliefs concerning English, the data showed that students generally attributed success in learning English to effort (or lack of) rather than innate ability. This perspective implies that students understand that effort makes a difference in their level of English, and have an awareness of personal responsibility for their own learning.

Interestingly, differences between the responses of the Beginners and Basic students existed. All of the Beginners with little or no prior experience studying English started with either a neutral or positive attitude toward English. In contrast, three of the Basic students reported feelings of dislike, suggesting a possible negative prior experience with learning English. However, by the end of the Independent Study course, only one student retained negative feelings toward English.

As for their attitude toward the IS component, all Beginners reported feeling negative at the beginning of the year. This may be due to their lack of experience with both English learning and self-directed learning, as they expected to be "taught" the

language rather than being encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning from the outset. By the end of the year, their attitude shifted, with the majority reporting that they like the IS component *a lot*, as they began to discover the merit of directing their own learning. As for the Basic students, most started with the same negative attitude toward IS as the Beginners although several did possess a positive outlook; perhaps these students, having had some experience studying English, were more inclined to learn it in a new way. By the end of the year, the attitude of all but two students changed to positive. However, compared to the Beginners more Basic students like the IS "a little" rather than "a lot"; perhaps the Basic students are more influenced by or used to their prior experience studying English in a traditional classroom approach and thus require more time to adjust to the IS style.

Issues in the Implementation of Independent Study (IS)

Comments from students and the IS instructor elicited the following issues associated with implementing this type of structured independent learning:

- It takes time and *sustained* learner training to overcome student resistance to self-directed learning

- Direct experience and *repeated self-experimentation* are necessary for students to realize the usefulness of this way of learning and to be able to take advantage of it

- Students must be advised to try various ways of learning and learning strategies to find out what works best for themselves

- Students need continuous guidance and repeated practice to learn to set realistic, achievable short-term goals for English learning (in order to reach their long-term goals)

- The IS component is highly labor-intensive for the instructor (management of resources, student portfolio and advising of students)

- The IS instructor must be trained to advise the students effectively

Current Follow-up Research

The trialing of the Independent Study component yielded some positive initial feedback. At this juncture, further research includes:

- Longitudinal study of the current Beginners students undergoing 2nd year of Independent Study in Basic English

- Study of the 2005-06 Basic English students to see whether their attitude and experience correlate with that of the previous year's students

- Study of those who have completed two years of IS to determine if the treatment has any long-lasting effects

- Investigation of students' level of awareness of their own learning processes

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Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to explain the Independent Study (IS) component of the KUIS English Program for Foreign Students and to share some initial feedback concerning this method of scaffolded self-directed learning. While further research and overall program improvements are undoubtedly necessary, the results of the first year of implementation seem to show that the IS was mostly a positive and beneficial experience for the Beginners and Basic level students regardless of their previous experience learning English. The changes in attitude toward English and toward self-directed learning, the growing confidence in their own ability to set learning goals and achieving them, and the acceptance of personal responsibility for their English learning, indicate that a majority of the students undergoing IS are starting to form an identity as autonomous learners.

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Appendix

Independent Study - English Learning Plan (Sample of a 4-Week Cycle)

(This version is in English; the version EPFS students received is in Japanese with sufficient space for answers)

Name:

Course Name (circle one*)*:
Beginners English   Basic English

Start Date of Learning:

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Part I: Planning

My goals for learning English the next 4 weeks (What do I want to learn?):

English skill(s)/aspect of English that I want to focus on:

Learning strategy/strategies I wish to try/use:

Materials/activities/equipment I want to use:

Learning environments (library, SALC, Media Plaza, classroom, other) I wish to use:

Part II Reflection

Week 1:

1a. What did I study?

1b. How did I study?

1c. What materials/activities/equipment did I use?

1d. Where did I study?

1e. What did I add to my portfolio to show my work/ learning?

1f. What learning strategy/strategies did I use?

2. What did I learn?

3. How successful/useful/enjoyable was my study? Did I use the time well?

4. What problems did I have? How did I try to solve the problem(s)? Did I ask anyone for help when I needed it?

5. What would I do differently next time?

6. My ideas for what/how to study next week.

Week 2: (Same as above)

Week 3: (Same as above)

Week 4: (Same as above)

Post-Cycle Self-Assessment

To what extent did I achieve my learning goals for the past 4 weeks? (Explain in detail)

How well did I plan and manage my own learning?

My feelings about this style of self-learning: