

Reflective self-study: Fostering learner autonomy

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The Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan, offers a range of optional self-study modules for all freshman students and sophomore students, to develop skills such as goal-setting, selecting appropriate resources, and self-monitoring strategies. Supported by a learning advisor, reflection is an integral part of these modules, with learners submitting diary entries with each unit's work, which are then commented on by their advisor, creating a written dialogue which serves to raise awareness of their language learning beliefs and habits. In this paper, we will detail the ways in which our modules encourage learner autonomy through reflective study while helping learners to develop the cognitive and metacognitive skills needed to take charge of their own language learning and become truly autonomous language learners.

設立以来8年間、神田外語大学のセルフアクセスラーニングセンター (the Self-Access Learning Centre: SALC) では1年生と2年生を対象に選択制の自主学習コースを開講している。このコースでは目標設定、適切な教材選択、自己管理等のスキルを学ぶことを目的としており、学習者はラーニングアドバイザーのサポートのもと、自主学習を行う。毎週、章ごとに課題および考察記録を提出し、提出物はラーニングアドバイザーからのコメントが加えられて返却される。このラーニングアドバイザーとの日記を介した対話により、学習者は自身の言語学習に対する考え方、また学習方法についての認識を深める。この論文ではこのコースがどのように、言語の自律学習に必要な認知学習能力や高次認知学習能力の発達をサポートし、自己との対話に重きを置いた学習を通して、学習者の自律性を育成しているかを詳しく紹介する。

SINCE ITS inception in 1987, Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) has been dedicated to the pursuit of designing English language programs based on three main principles: 1) interaction, 2) interdependency, and 3) individualization. The programs aim to help learners learn how to become independent learners by raising awareness of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge about learning strategies and study skills in the classroom. In order to address learner needs and to encourage learners to put these skills into practice outside the classroom, the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) was established in 2001. The SALC aims to foster learner autonomy by training the learners “to take charge of their own learning” (Holec, 1981). A range of optional self-directed courses are offered to all freshman and sophomore learners as one of the channels through which learners are able to become more independent. The modules lasting 8 weeks foster learner autonomy by helping learners to develop life-long learning skills such as goal-setting, selecting appropriate resources, and



self-monitoring strategies for continued language development. In these modules, learners have the freedom to choose when to study, what to study, and how to study, so that learning is tailored to suit their individual needs. A large part of learner training is the development of critical reflection skills.

Critical reflection has been described by many researchers as a key component in autonomous learning (see Benson, 2001; Little, 1991, 1997; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Smyth, 1991; Kohonen, 1992). For Benson (2001), reflection is a crucial component of autonomous learning. He states that “the autonomous learner is essentially one who is capable of reflection at appropriate moments in the learning process and of acting upon the results.” (p. 95). Kohonen (1992) suggests that “conscious reflection on learning experiences... makes it possible to increase one’s awareness of learning” (p. 24). As such, self-reflection is an integral part of these modules and used as the main tool to foster learner autonomy.

Smyth’s (1991) model of reflective learning is represented by a series of questions which deepen the reflective process. Questions such as “What do I do?”, “How did I come to be like this?” and “How might I do things differently?” are designed to help the learner understand the learning process and then take action to improve. The SALC self-study modules are based on this model of reflection and action, and learning advisors (LAs) offer assistance through written and verbal dialogue. Advisor feedback allows the learner to deepen his/her reflection and further communicate it to the LA in an ongoing dialogue. This dialogue takes place through weekly written reflective diaries submitted and commented on by the LA, face-to-face workshops, and meetings with the LA. It is hoped that through the self-reflection that occurs in the dialogue with the LA, learners will get a deeper understanding of their language learning beliefs and habits and further learn how to take control of their own learning.

In this paper, we will detail the ways in which the SALC self-study modules encourage learner autonomy through reflective study. The paper begins with a description of the self-study modules with a focus on the reflective process and the role played by the advisor-learner dialogue. Positive feedback from the learners about the self-study course in the form of learner voices will be presented and the paper concludes with the realization that even with successes of the program, there is always room for improvement.

Reflective study through modules

First Steps Module (FSM)

The FSM is a module for freshman students taking the first steps toward being good independent language learners while learning necessary skills and concepts for self-directed learning. The purpose of the module as explained to learners is to:

- become a better language learner.
- become a more independent learner.
- learn how to use the SALC effectively.
- write an effective learning plan for self-study.

Based on the concept that reflection is an integral part of being an autonomous learner, the FSM was created to help learners develop necessary skills to be independent language learners through self-study activities that focus on reflective skills. The units are placed on a shelf in the SALC and, after completing one unit and handing it in to LAs, learners take the following week’s unit and begin working on it. Learners receive weekly written feedback from their LA as well as attending three face-to-face workshops. The workshops are held as a means of establishing contact with learners, checking that learners understand the connection between units, answering any questions that learners may have about the self-study module and encourag-

ing learners to share ideas.

The written learner-advisor dialogue encourages learners to reflect more deeply on their learning and discover alternative methods of language learning. They learn essential skills for self-study before moving on to the next stage, the Learning How to Learn (LHL) Module, where the new skills are put into practice.

The self-study module consists of seven units and a final project in the eighth week, where students design a learning plan based on their learning goals, using the knowledge they have learned in the previous 7 weeks. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the FSM contents. Each unit is similarly patterned, containing four steps that encourage dialogue: 'self-study activities,' 'self-reflection,' 'advisor feedback' and 'learner response.'

Table 1. Contents of the FSM

Unit	Description
Unit 1: Needs analysis	This unit will help learners reflect on why they are studying English and decide what and how to study.
Unit 2: Time management	This unit will help learners reflect on the way they study and introduce ideas that may help them arrange their schedule in a different way.
Unit 3: Learning styles	This unit will help learners reflect on the kind of learner they are.
Unit 4: Affective strategies	This unit will help learners reflect on the different strategies that they can use to help them deal with their emotions while studying.

Unit	Description
Unit 5: Resources	This unit will help learners reflect on the different resource that they can use to help them with their studies.
Unit 6: Good language learners	This unit will help learners explore a variety of ideas about what it means to be a good language learner.
Unit 7: Learning strategies	This unit will help learners discover some useful study skills.
	This learning plan is an 8-week study plan. This will help learners to think about what they can achieve in a short period of time.

Self study activities: Internal dialogue (learner → self)

Each unit includes a series of activities where learners are expected to read and internalize the concepts and skills necessary to be a good language learner. Learners answer questions that require them to think more deeply about the concepts and skills introduced to them and then to form their own ideas, relating them to their language needs and learning situation. These activities are designed to raise awareness of cognitive and metacognitive skills that help learners to be more autonomous and reflect more critically on their learning practices.

Self-reflection: Internal dialogue with LA (learner → advisor)

After completing the self-study activities, learners write a reflection on what they have learned. The reflective questions found at the end of each unit are designed to help learners review the things they have learned not on the surface level but deeply

enough for them to critically reflect on their study habits and think about ways to improve them to achieve their goals more effectively. Learners are given many opportunities to ask themselves self-reflective questions, such as “Was analyzing your needs helpful?” or “How does setting small goals help you to achieve your big goal?” From here the learners take what they learned through a process of self-discovery and communicate it back to the advisor in a 50-100 word reflection.

Advisor feedback: Written dialogue (advisor → learner)

LAs give feedback to learners on their reflections to ensure that learners correctly understand the concepts introduced in the unit and ask open-ended questions to encourage the learners to think more deeply about what they wrote. LAs try not to give answers or instruct learners, but give suggestions, question or challenge learners in order to make them realize on their own what can be done better to learn more effectively.

Learner response: Written dialogue with LA (learner → advisor)

Although optional, learners are asked to reply to advisor comments or answer any questions. This back and forth dialogue continues throughout the module for 7 weeks. Learners or LAs are also free to ask other questions unrelated to the module as a means of building rapport.

Learning How to Learn (LHL)

This module was designed to help learners make a plan of action using the learning plan that they wrote as the final project of the First Steps Module (FSM). They are allowed to create a new plan if they have changed learning goals. Learners are expected to apply concepts and skills learned in the FSM in the 8-week LHL

module. Learner-advisor dialogue takes a central role in this module, similar to the FSM, through diary exchange and interviews. The LHL differs from the FSM in that it is totally individualized and the learners have complete freedom of choosing what to study, when to study, and how to study, with the support and guidance of their LA. Learners analyze their needs, decide which skills to work on, choose appropriate materials to improve those skills and make decisions on the most effective learning strategies to help them achieve their study goal. Learners are required to meet their LA three times during the semester – in the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the semester – to discuss their learning. Unlike the FSM where learner reflection was guided by pre-designed activities, in this module, learners decide which areas to focus on such as goal-setting, materials, strategies, etc and then reflect more critically in these areas.

This module consists of a learning plan, eight reflective diaries, final report and three interviews with the LA. Similar to the FSM, this module forms dialogues, through self-study activities, self-reflection, advisor feedback and learner response. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the LHL contents.

Table 2. Content of the LHL

Name	Description
Learning plan	This learning plan will help learners to design their study for 8 weeks and make decisions on their weekly plan.
Diaries	This weekly reflective diary helps learners to put skills learned from the FSM into practice. There are eight diary entries.
Final report	This is a 500-word reflective report. Learners need to reflect on and evaluate work completed in the previous 8 weeks.

Name	Description
Interviews	Learners are required to meet with the LA face-to-face three times during the semester to discuss their learning and check their progress.

Diaries

Self study activities: Internal dialogue (learner → self)

Unlike the FSM where many reflective questions were prepared for learners at the end of each week's activities, the learners in the LHL are responsible for asking questions of themselves while doing self-study activities, which becomes the core of the internal dialogue. There is a constant internal dialogue, especially at the brainstorming stage when making the study plan. Whereas in the FSM, learners had only one opportunity to make a hypothetical study plan, the learners need to make their own decisions about their study every week in LHL. This includes creating a new study goal each week, selecting materials to achieve that goal, and choosing strategies for the effective use of the materials. The learners reflect on work completed for the week and consider how successful they were (or were not) and why. Finally, they explore areas that they could have done better in to improve their previous plan, and decide on a new plan of action based on what they have learned about themselves.

Self-reflection: Internal dialogue with LA (learner → advisor)

The learners write a report about their self-study activities in the form of a reflective diary that consists of five sections:

1. Goal for the week.
2. Material choices and reasons for these choices.
3. How they used the materials.

4. How successful they felt they were.
5. Their plans for the following week.

Sections 1 and 2 are related to their weekly study plan and Section 3 reports on the work they did. Section 4 is a self-reflection and Section 5 is an outline for the following week's study plan. Each section encourages learners to think more deeply about their actions and performance and helps them to monitor their progress more effectively. Like the FSM, students transform their reflections into the first part of the learner-advisor dialogue. Here, the reflections are less guided than the FSM, and the learner decides what he or she wishes to focus on in reflection following simple guidelines in each section. Therefore, they can reflect on any aspect of their learning.

Advisor feedback: Written dialogue with LA (advisor → learner)

Unlike the FSM, where the learners reply to set questions, in the LHL, LAs have to be able to provide written feedback that caters to individual learning needs. This can range anywhere from improving casual conversation skills to academic writing for TOEFL. LA feedback takes the form of skills such as questioning and suggesting (Kelly, 1996) in order to scaffold, encourage and guide the learner to think about their choices and to make decisions and changes by themselves. In the initial stages, the LAs let the learners carry out their learning plan as originally planned even though it may not be the most effective way of learning. This is done to monitor whether the learners can find the ways to improve the plan on their own. If it is too challenging for the learner, the LA will ask questions to draw attention to the area that needs more improvement.

Learner response: Written dialogue with LA (learner → advisor)

Learners use this section to respond to the LA's questions. Since the questions are more specific and directly related to what they did in the week, students need to reflect back on their studies to answer the questions. By doing so, students are able to become more focused and can deepen their reflection on further independent study.

Interviews

Internal dialogue, self-reflection, feedback and response: Spoken dialogue with LA (learner ↔ advisor)

In this module, more interaction between the learners and the LA takes place through face-to-face interviews. Unlike the written dialogue through weekly diaries, through spoken dialogue in the interviews the learners and the LA can communicate in a much more personalized and efficient manner. In the interviews, the learners have the opportunity to discuss and evaluate work done during the week and negotiate with the LA what they want to do in the weeks before the next interview. The LA uses this time to respond to the learner's comments or queries, and asks questions that stimulate more critical reflection. In the final interview at the end of the semester, learners are asked to analyze their independent study in the following six areas:

1. Needs analysis / Goal-setting.
2. Time management.
3. Learning materials.
4. Motivation / enjoyment in learning.
5. Learning strategy.
6. Reflection, review, self-evaluation.

Learners identify levels of satisfaction in each area, and then reflect on which skills necessary for independent study have improved and which skills need more attention. After the final interview, learners write and submit an evaluative report in which they write about what they have done and other thoughts about their self-study. More importantly, they talk about what they will do in order to improve specific areas of weakness, make an action plan to achieve this goal for their further self-study, and finally, they make a promise to the LA to carry out these actions.

Discussion: Learner feedback

Over the past 4 years, the SALC has seen a steady increase in demand for the self-study modules. Upon completing the FSM, learners are asked to fill out a survey to help LAs make improvements to the module and the manner in which it is carried out. The program has consistently received positive feedback from the learners on the reflective activities and advisors' feedback. In the 2006 survey, learners were asked to respond to how they felt about the module and, in particular, about writing reflections. The results (see Table 1) revealed that in each case, more than half the learners saw the benefits of writing the reflective diary.

Table 3. Partial results from 2006 FSM survey

Statement	Completely agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Completely disagree
(a) Writing things in my diary helped me to think about my learning more clearly.	70.4%	26.7%	3%	0%

Statement	Completely agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Completely disagree
(e) Writing about experiences changed the way I see myself as a learner	32.3%	51.1%	13.5%	2.3%
(f) I can see ways in which my behavior has changed as a result of the things I wrote in the diary.	25.2%	53.3%	18.5%	2.2%

Note: $n=137$

Although many found writing the diary challenging, learners frequently commented on its usefulness and, in particular, the benefits of feedback from their LA:

I had busy times every week and sometimes I felt this is a troublesome works. But now, I think it was good experience for me anyway (FSM student)

Sometimes, it could be hard for me to write a diary every week. However I was very looking forward to getting feedback from my LA (FSM student)

The structure of writing weekly diaries helped me to keep studying. I might not do independent study without it. (LHL student)

There was one comment in particular made by a learner that summed up the purpose of the self-study modules quite effectively:

... I could think about myself deeply, and I found “what” my problems are “why” I think so, “how” to solve it. This activity gave me opportunity to think about these things. Writing my diary, my thought became more clearly. Write down my thought benefitted me, and learning adviser’s response too.

Two surveys carried out last year at the end of each semester (Spring and Fall, 2009) showed that out of 177 students who completed the FSM and answered the survey, 171 students said that they thought their advisor’s feedback and comments helped them to deepen their understanding of their own language learning. 158 students also said that the feedback and comments motivated them. In addition to the positive feedback from the module takers, we also received comments to help improve the current system. Of 56 comments, 24 comments were about learners wishing to meet their LAs more frequently. These comments clearly indicated that students felt a need for more support through face-to-face dialogue along with the written dialogue in the module. It also vindicated the claims of the researchers who have argued the importance of having LAs as a support in a SALC (Gardner & Miller, 1997; Kelly, 1996). In 2009, based on the results of the survey, changes were implemented into the program. LAs added an extra workshop to the course to increase face-time. However, we agreed, as a team, that having learners decide and take action to arrange a meeting with an LA by themselves during their busy school life, using the advisory service which is available for them to use anytime, would train them to be more responsible learners.

Conclusion

Although there is always a need for further improvement, the modules have proven to be successful in helping the learners to become more autonomous. As the learners work through the

module, reflection on their leaning process clearly starts to become deeper and more specific. This, in turn, filters back to the classroom where learners have been able to identify and focus more closely on aspects of their learning they wish to improve. Judging from the improvement in reflection over the 8 weeks, it can be said that the learners have developed skills needed to be good language learners. Changes to the SALC modules are made each semester in order to stay flexible and meet the learners' individual needs. However, the essence of the module, which encourages reflection through dialogue to foster learner autonomy, is kept regardless of the surface changes. Based on 6 years of positive feedback from learners and consistent growth in the program and the advisory team, LAs have been given permission to take the modules into the classroom as a credit-bearing course. This marks a great achievement for KUIS and the language advisors who work in the SALC. Hopefully, this is a trend that will be adopted by other institutions as more SALCs emerge.

Bio data

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