

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Japanese university students' awareness of learning English outside of class

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This paper reports a study of Japanese university students' awareness of ways to learn English autonomously out of class. It was found that students in the sample group had reasonable repertoires of ways to learn individually and socially but did not seem to know about learning with electronic media besides simple audio and video. Using functional and technical literacy paradigms to articulate students' ways to learn English in terms of *learning literacy* (McKay, 1993), students showed evidence of bringing to the classroom a set of preferred ways to learn (functional literacies), and approximately half of the students could articulate coherent rationales for their preferred ways to learn, showing an aptitude to develop these as required (technical literacies). Implications of the study include the need to increase student awareness of the range of learning options available and adaptation of the learning cultures from which the students come.

本稿では、日本の大学生の授業外での英語学習法に関しての彼ら自身の気づきに関する研究を報告する。結果として、サンプル集団の学生は、個々にかつ社会的に学習を行う際に十分なレパートリーを持つということがわかったが、単なるオーディオとビデオ以外の電子メディアテクノロジーを用いた学習に関するデータは全く得ることができなかった。「ラーニングリタラシー」の観点から、学生の英語学習法を明らかにするため、ファンクショナル/テクニカルリタラシーのパラダイム(McKay 1993)を用いた。その結果、全学生は学生自身の好む一連の学習法(ファンクショナルリタラシー)を教室でも利用しているということ、約半数がなぜその学習法を好むのかという事に対する論理的根拠を示すことができたということ、また要求されているように論理的根拠を発展させることができる能力(テクニカルリタラシー)を示したことがわかった。この研究から示唆できることには、利用可能な学習オプションに関する学生の気づきを増やす必要性と学生が帰属する学習文化の適応がある。

It is not only second language knowledge and skills that develop in a language course or any other learning process. It is also what is going on while learning is taking place, how the learner learns, and optimizing ways and opportunities to learn. Ellis and Sinclair (1989a, 1989b) made an innovative attempt to develop this last point, which has never really been taken up in English as a second or other language (ESOL) course books. However, attention to utilization of ways to learn has become more evident



in the literacy field and in research on independent language learners and their learning.

This brief paper reports on a small-scale study of students commencing a higher-level intensive English course. Specifically, their awareness of ways to learn that learners can and do bring to second language-learning is reported and discussed. In the context of this paper, ways to learn include both observable methods and approaches as well as less tangible strategies and mindsets apparent in the language learning process

Independent and autonomous learning and literacy

McKay (1993) observed that people (e.g., migrants, refugees, students) moving from their first language (L1) culture to a second language (L2) culture carry with them literacy skills and practices from the L1 culture. Such literacy skills are often used in a measured way in the L2 culture as well as in the person's L1 culture. Similarly, all learners except for young children bring "functional literacies" (McKay, 1993, p. 11) to the classroom or other language-learning situations. It is in this context that an individual's prior learning skills, or knowledge of ways to learn, acquire significance. However, McKay asserts that learners may also attain "technical literacy" (p. 12): the necessary reading and writing skills, theoretical knowledge, and social practices needed to move forward or succeed in a given field. The crucial difference between functional literacy and technical literacy is that a person with the latter is able to mature and move forward in their field, whereas a person may display functional literacies at the outset but then remain static (i.e., their literacy does not develop and their awareness of ways to do things does not change).

This notion of technical literacy can be extended to students' awareness of how to learn inside or outside of a language classroom. If students just go through the motions, do only what their teacher tells them, or just continue trying to learn in their old and tried ways, of course they can learn. However, once learners start to reflect on and gauge the effectiveness of ways to learn and then adapt and change those ways to learn more effectively, they gravitate towards technical literacy. Language learners can display greater autonomy in this way.

Learning is an individual cognitive process, even in a social environment such as a classroom. From the outset, learners are individuals, even before they enter a classroom. Also, when they leave the classroom they return to social life as individuals. As individuals then, learning often needs to be done autonomously, and how to learn is often decided by the learner individually and autonomously, through choice or by necessity. This is as much the case with second languages as with other disciplines. Motivated students may well wish to know the most effective ways to learn. In a sense, this is arguably why people choose to do higher-level, intensive English courses such as in the context of the research reported here.

In a report on two case studies of two adult second-language learners (Murray, 2004), the defining characteristic of both learners was that over time both of them independently developed and pursued their own preferred learning strategies with notable success. Murray's observation is that both learners chose this independent-learning pathway, whereas they also could have chosen in-class, institutionalized ways to learn as supplements or

alternatives to learning by themselves. A more fundamental point needs to be made, however: the participants in Murray's case studies had or were able to develop their learning strategies independently. In other words, when asked, the participants were able to relate both effective and ineffective ways to learn.

It is a reasonable assumption that mature learners have experienced or at least know particular ways to learn prior to the start of any learning process. Even in school, students may not know what happens in a course, but they can reasonably assume that in the end some learning will take place. Outside of class, independent choice is more likely. In this case, explicitly knowing ways to learn takes on special significance. The life-histories of the participants of Murray's (2004) study show how each one started with certain learning strategies, but as time passed each participant expanded their repertoires of ways to learn due to three core reasons:

- to meet their changing learning needs and purposes for learning
- interest
- noticing success

Murray was interested in mature adult subjects with more life experience than participants in the present study, who at the time of writing are only in their 2nd year of undergraduate university study.

Regarding the present study, a similar research question appears in part of Malcolm's (2004) questionnaire study of Arabic-speaking medical students who, being assembled at an international conference in Bahrain at the time of data

collection, form a comparable random group. Malcolm's participants reported "practising (talking) with native speakers" and "watching TV/Video/movies" equally as the "most useful methods for improving English" (Malcolm, 2004, p. 6). As such, prior to processing findings in the current study, it was predicted that a mix of social and audiovisual ways to learn would be found. Further, based on findings by Malcolm and Pearson (2004), it was predicted that technology-based learning media including computers or even mobile phones would feature in data collected from Japanese university students due to the preponderance of technology in modern Japanese culture.

Present study

At the start of the 2008 academic year, a group of 20 Japanese 2nd-year students about to commence a one-semester intensive English program in Kochi University's International Studies Department were given a diagnostic essay task in English. The essay question required them to explain or describe effective (in the essay task these were called *Good*) ways to learn English outside of the classroom as well as less effective (*Bad*) ways. Students went on to receive input regarding independent learning (IL) strategies later in the course. But at the outset, it was possible to glean reflective accounts of the opinions, knowledge, and experience of what were motivated, intermediate level students of similar demographic and academic backgrounds.

The purpose of the essay was threefold:

- a diagnostic assessment instrument for placement of students in the course

- to introduce students to the implication that learning independently, or at least learning outside of class, was an option available to them (and that out-of-class learning was implicitly expected of them, in the sense that an essay on this topic was a task presented on the first day of the course)
- to collect data from a relatively random population of motivated students of comparable English levels and similar demographics

The students were between 19 and 22 years old and comprised 16 females and 4 males. All were Japanese native speakers and approximately 60% came from outside of the prefecture. Several had had overseas home stay experience, and all had had previous experience with native English-speaker teachers at school or in their first year at university.

All students completed the essay task at the same time in class. Essays were collected and for research purposes the names of students were removed. Essay data were synthesized into two categories: (1) generically according to the essay question (soliciting *Good* ways and *Bad* ways to learn English); and (2) reexamined to determine their choices regarding

- good ways to learn individually
- good ways to learn that incorporated self-access centers (SACs), interactive electronic media and information technology
- good ways to learn with other people (including going overseas)
- bad ways to learn individually

- bad ways to learn that incorporated SACs or other people

Secondly, following an initial synthesis of results, no data relating to good ways to learn that incorporated SACs and only negligible data for bad ways to learn that incorporated SACs were collected. Data were then re-categorised into the following categories:

1. Good ways to learn individually
2. Good ways to learn socially (i.e., with other people, including going overseas)
3. Bad ways to learn

Findings from this subsequent set of research data are the focus of this report.

Findings

The most striking finding relates to the virtually complete absence of data related to learning in dedicated facilities like SACs, to learning with interactive communication media or with information technology (e.g., mobile phones, computers, the Internet). This is in contrast to Malcolm's (2004) study in which 6 out of 55 responses regarded the Internet as the most useful way to study, and 59 (or 56%) of Chinese students responding to an end-of-course questionnaire in a New Zealand university saying they used the Internet "to improve [their] English" (Pearson, 2004, p. 4).

All other cited ways to learn, good and bad, were more traditional, being available to previous generations of second language learners. This finding was immediately apparent

in the early general data analysis and is what prompted the second, closer analysis of students' individually mentioned ways to learn English out of class, which is reported below.

The subsequent analysis categorized data in three groups labeled *Good ways: Individual*, *Good ways: Social*, and *Bad ways*. To do this, each way to learn English outside of class was counted and categorized. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Japanese university students' good and bad ways to learn English outside of class

| Good ways: Individual (33) | Good ways: Social (31) | Bad ways (17) |
|--|--|--|
| Reading (5) [Newspapers (2); English books (3)] | Instruction in out-of-class locations (3) [English conversation school (2); Private teacher (1)] | Reading (3) [Reading silently (1); Reading English books (1); Just reading (1)] |
| Study-relevant (including writing) (8) [Grammar and vocabulary study (1); Study grammar (2); Writing and saying words (1); Preparing for English tests (2); Review class work (1); English words memorization (1)] | Interaction and involvement with peers (3) [Group rule (e.g., speak only in English for 30 minutes) (1); English club (1); Study with students who are good at English (1)] | Study-relevant (including writing) (8) [Study only writing (1); Doing just homework (1); Studying grammar (3); English text books (3)] |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Listening (10) [Radio news (2); English radio conversation programs (1); Listen to music (3) English songs (2); Music CDs (1); Discipline specific educational CDs (1)] | Social interaction: Local (17) [Communicate with foreigners (5); Find and talk to native speakers (2); Find and talk to expert users of English (1); Go to teacher's office (1); Find exchange students (4); Be with people who use English (3); Talk with people in English with a dictionary' (1)] | Listening (1) [Listen to radio (1)] |
| Visualising + Listening (8) [English TV programs (2); English language movies and DVDs (general) (3); English movies with subtitles (2); English movies without subtitles (1)] | Social interaction: Overseas (6) [Study abroad (1); Go overseas (4); Email to host family (1)] | Visualising + Listening (0) |
| Other (2) [Not translating (1); Make a plan and stay with the plan (1)] | Other: Social (2) [Take an English-medium course (1); Use English in conversation (1)] | Other (5) [Translating (2); Attempting things above one's level (1); Learning without a plan or goal (1); Too many textbooks (1)] |

Among the entire sample, 64 Good ways were mentioned in contrast to just 17 Bad ways. An explanation for this could be that students were asked to describe Bad ways as the

second part of the essay task and were therefore less likely to give them consideration: three students mentioned no Bad ways and six mentioned just one Bad way.

The Good ways: Individual category totaled 33, the most numerous. This category comprised: Reading (5), including newspapers or English books; Study-relevant (8), including writing (i.e., diary-writing, preparation for English tests like the TOEIC, grammar and vocabulary study and reviewing class work); Listening (10), including radio news, music, English songs, or even discipline-specific CDs in English; Visualising + Listening (8), including English TV programs, movies and DVDs with and without subtitles; and Other: Individual (2), including making and staying with a plan.

The Good ways: Social category totaled 31 and were the second most numerous. This category comprised: Instruction in out of class places (3), including English conversation schools; Peer involvement (3), including English clubs or simply study with students who are good at English; Social interaction: Local (17), including finding exchange students, native speakers, communicate with foreigners, or simply talk with people in English with and without a dictionary; Social interaction: Local (6), including mainly simply going or living overseas; Other social (2), including one mention of taking an English-medium course.

The Bad ways category totaled 17 and was the third most numerous. This category included no examples in the Social column. Among these, Reading (3), including reading silently, reading English books, and just reading; Study-relevant (including writing) (7), including doing just writing, studying grammar specifically, and doing homework; Listening (1), including radio programs; Visualising +

Listening (0); and Other: Individual (5), including simply translating, having no plan, attempting too high a level, and buying too many textbooks.

In Table 1, Study-relevant ways to learn clearly hold significance for the group. Seven students made specific points about more and less effective ways to approach the same ways to learn: for retention for instance, reviewing class work rather than just doing homework; studying grammar for accuracy and not just for its own sake; and studying grammar before proceeding with (speaking and) reading; and avoiding the translation regime of the classroom. Though the number of students in the study was limited, a significant number of students (11) provided clear rationales for their views in their essays. In so doing they showed that they were aware of effective and ineffective approaches to different ways of learning..

Yet the most significant ways to learn valued by students (total 26) involve some social interaction with either peers or with native English speakers or non-Japanese speakers. Of these, 17 mentions require meeting or soliciting such people in no specific location. This suggests these students' concern is primarily the social interaction—where to find such people locally is either assumed knowledge or not considered. Only “outside of the home country” is given as a specific if nondescript location, and no student ever mentioned English-speaking countries. Social interaction with English-speaking groups or individuals, foreigner and non-foreign, was considered very favourably. However, this sort of approach does not seem to have been thought through by the students as consistently as more individualized ways to learn, which seem to have grown out of students' classroom-learning

experiences.

The last point relating to students' previous (and possibly preferred) learning experiences is most resoundingly significant in the virtual absence of data relating to SACs and interactive and electronic media. It is naïve to assume or suggest that students have no experience with these, yet something is amiss. Whether these ways to learn are effective or not is a separate issue, but it seems that students have rarely or never been shown, taught, inducted, nor perhaps even exposed to them. Even students who mentioned experience living or travelling overseas failed to mention them.

Regarding SACs, surprisingly there would seem to be a lot of work to help to get students accustomed to them for language-learning purposes, even if SACs were presumed to include computer or language laboratories.

Despite the small sample, it is promising that a substantial number of students in this study have been able to think through effective and ineffective, though more traditional ways, to learn English out of class. This strongly suggests that students are capable of and do formulate learning strategies on their own. To this extent they can well become, in Dickinson's (1987) words, *self-directed learners*, which in effect is to possess technical literacy in ways to learn.

Implications

Analysis of university students' writing about ways to learn English outside of class points to a consistent malaise among students: despite the students' criticism of and resistance to established traditional learning modes

based on exams, translation and grammar, low realization of the distinction between in and out-of-class learning was surprisingly apparent. In other words, numerous individual ways to learn mentioned by the students are also common as in-class modes, such as studying grammar and vocabulary, homework and review, and preparation for tests. Also, despite familiarity with a range of alternative, communicative learning modes, students seemed unaware of the full range of options available, such as computers, internet and self-access centers..

This research also has let students articulate how they learn in their own words with their own voices. The use of a reflective essay may have produced unnecessary pressure on the students because it was done in class as part of the program, and this dynamic possibly pushed the students to think and organize their thoughts more for readership of the 'teacher'. In any case, analysis of the data enables a list of ways to learn to be made. The list in Table 1 comes not from professional education practitioners, rather from, the most essential stakeholders—the learners themselves. A final implication is that on hearing students' voices, teachers, teacher-librarians and other professionals involved in planning, establishing and maintaining SACs can become better enabled to provide autonomous language-learning options for students.

A limitation of the current study is the small sample—just one class in just one institution. Also, a different data collection instrument, such as a Likert-item questionnaire, could have elicited awareness of a greater range of autonomous learning modes than the students could recall unsolicited for the essay. In fact, a follow-up survey

(questionnaire and/or focus group discussion) immediately following the reflective essay may have been a way to triangulate and validate findings from the initial data collection.

In conclusion, this study has pointed to gaps in students' awareness of modes of learning available outside of class. This suggests students' limited experience with new learning technologies, at high school and in their first year of university. Clearly there is work to do:

- to raise students' awareness of interactive and multimedia learning options;
- to update or change the learning cultures the students have come from.

But all is not bad—students did show repertoires of individual and socially interactive ways to learn (or moreover to practice) English outside of the classroom, and a few individuals articulated clear rationales for their learning preferences. Those individuals would then share a similar independent-learning ethos to the two subjects of Murray's case studies described above. Further, such students show promise of being able to develop and achieve—to borrow from McKay's terminology—technical literacy as L2 learners. Supporting this process should be a utilitarian aim for L2-learning institutions and SACs, for both independent and also class and course-based learning.

Howard Doyle has been at Kochi University since 2006. Before that he worked in various university contexts in Japan and Australia. His interests are literacy education, flexible and autonomous learning, discourse, and pragmatic analysis.

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