Developing learner autonomy in a grammar class

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Traditionally, grammar classes have tended to follow a teacher-led, prescriptive curriculum with students given little opportunity to demonstrate understanding, or lack of it, on a given topic before being asked to tackle the next grammar point in a textbook. The university class under study made such an approach even more challenging by being open to students from a variety of year groups and language learning backgrounds. With a view to establishing a class which could allow students of all levels to examine the weaknesses in their grammar and share learning patterns, the curriculum was adjusted to allow for the variety of levels and encourage autonomous learning of grammar. The resulting classes made for a dynamic and collaborative learning environment which allowed students the freedom to examine and share a variety of learning styles of grammar points relevant to their English levels.

伝統的に文法の授業は教師に主導される規範的なカリキュラムに従う傾向がある。残念なことに、この方法では教科書の次の文法項目へと進む前に、現在の文法項目に対しての理解度を学生が示す機会がほとんどない。大学で様々な学年や学力の学生で構成されたクラスを教える場合、文法項目の理解度の差がより一層顕著になる。本論では、様々な学力の学生全員が、自身の文法の苦手分野を見つけ、新たな学習方法を互いに共有することができるようなクラスづくりを目指した。様々な学力に対応し、自律的な文法学習を促進するようにカリキュラムを調整した。このような形式のクラスは、学生に各自の文法の弱点を見つけ、様々な学習スタイルを共有する自由を与え、さらに活動的で、協働的な学習環境を形成する。

Traditional grammar classes can often follow a teacher-led, sequential pattern which may arguably be of benefit to early learners of a similar level in their second language course. The purpose of this study is to examine an alternative method to grammar study in a mixed ability university grammar class. The students were required to self and peer analyse group spoken and written output for grammatical errors before creating and carrying out learning plans designed to assist in addressing methods to remedy those errors in subsequent performances. Finally, presentations on the degree of success of these study methods were given. Students' reception to the class was wholly positive and demonstrated a viable alternative to traditional grammar instruction.

How best to teach grammar?

A casual glance at the EFL section of most bookshops will demonstrate the plethora of texts available to students and teachers. Curriculum designers may be further assisted in their design of a course by the understanding of the learning errors that are common to most language learners. In addition to some of the more common sequences of grammar points featured in the early chapters of many grammar books, such as tenses, modals, subject/verb agreement, and other universal developmental errors, such as the omission of plural "s," omission of 3rd person "s," overuse of article "the," underuse of article "a," double comparative (e.g., more faster) (Ellis, 2002, p.27), can be a guideline to establish the base of a grammar course applicable to most language learners.

While the application of knowledge of the more typical L2 developmental errors might help the teacher of students all starting from the same page, or might help in an environment where a proactive approach could aid students in the completion of a group task, students coming to a grammar class with varied grammar knowledge

and skills will get less from such a prescriptive model. In such a class, conformity may well breed contempt if students perceive a disconnect between the material being taught and the perceived inadequacies in their current language skillset. Indeed, Benson (2001) observes that, "learner-training materials tend to treat learners as 'decontextualised' individuals and do little to address the relationship between the process of learning a language and the role of language in the learner's lives"(p. 147). Benson instead suggests that giving learners the opportunity to "criticise conventional methods of learning may be more conducive to the development of autonomy than a focus on awareness of strategies and skills." Norton (1997) similarly links motivation to the development of a sense of "ownership of a second language" (Benson, 2001, p. 100). According to Benson, "if the language to be learned is ultimately the learner's own, it follows that the locus of control regarding linguistic content should lie with the learner rather than with the teacher, the textbook or the syllabus." In such circumstances, "the goal of a grammar syllabus becomes not that of teaching learners to use grammar but of helping them to understand how grammar works" (Ellis, 2002, p. 27). With this in mind, it was believed this class of mixed-ability learners would benefit from the creation of an environment in which they were encouraged to notice the gap between their own current skillset and the level they wished to reach, gaining explicit knowledge of the practical limitations of their current grammar knowledge.

In its original form, the grammar course in this study consisted of a largely prescriptive curriculum, with students given little opportunity to demonstrate understanding, or a lack of it, before the next grammar point was introduced. The course featured students from a variety of language learning backgrounds; first year students with no experience studying or living abroad may be mixed with third or fourth year students returning from spending many months in an English-speaking country. This had resulted in boredom and frustration at the curriculum (expressed verbally and/or in weekly student journals) for those students who were more adept at recognising and using the grammar point in focus, and dissatisfaction for the less able students required to study at an uncomfortable pace.

It was hoped that the creation of a learner-centred course, with freedom given to students to examine individual modes of learning, would allow for greater opportunities for learner control. In addition, it was surmised that the support network of teachers and peers within the classroom and the resources and support available in the university would facilitate the creation of an effective, autonomous learning environment. By giving students greater agency in their learning, and by allowing them to focus on the weaknesses identified by themselves, their peers, and the teacher, it was hoped that students would become not only more effective in their language learning methods, but also that this identification of their grammar weaknesses would, in turn, help them to become more proficient learners, able to focus on identified weaknesses in their language study methods.

Autonomy and resource-based learning

According to Holec (cited in Dafei, 2007), an autonomous learner is one that may be described as being independent and who takes full responsibility for all the decisions concerning their learning. That is: "defining the objectives; defining the constraints and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedures of application; evaluating what has to be acquired" (pp. 5-6). However, even if the learner is willing to undertake these practices, it does not necessarily follow that he/she will be *permitted* to engage in them. Rather, there are various material, social and psychological constraints at play that might limit implementation of these responsibilities:

- Universities may not have the materials or facilities available to enable autonomous study on campus or students may not have independent access to the materials.

- Students may be more used to a teacher-led, prescriptive grammar curriculum and feel uneasy about being asked to shoulder such responsibility and independence for their learning.

- Students familiar with a top-down style of teaching may feel uncomfortable in an interdependent environment in which they are asked to share with and learn from their peers.

In an attempt to foster autonomy in the classroom under study, the existence of a Self-Access Centre (SAC) and other resources at the university meant that the implementation of an autonomous resource-based grammar curriculum was axiomatic. Resource-based learning puts the impetus on the learner to discover and interact with available learning resources. In addition to the selection of resources chosen by students to aid them in their task, students following this learning style are expected to manage both their learning plan and the evaluation of their learning and are "expected to develop the skills associated with these activities through processes of experimentation and discovery, in which freedom of choice is a crucial factor" (Benson, 2001, p. 113). Holec and Little (as cited in Dafei, 2007) also argue for the establishment of certain responsibilities within the learner programme in creating an autonomous environment, specifically "that autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly take responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness." In establishing these goals, it was hoped that a largely autonomous environment could be created which would enable the students to foster what Dafei highlights as key in the practice of learner autonomy: "insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others" (p. 6).

Setting

The lessons took place once a week over 13 weeks in a class of 16 students. The class was an elective grammar course open to all students, regardless of year group from the university's International Languages and Culture (ILC) department. The university has an award-winning SAC which holds a large amount of study materials in the form of grammar books and worksheets, in addition to thousands of audio CDs and DVDs and books. Furthermore, the SAC and its learning advisors hold an elective course (open to freshman and sophomore students) aimed at helping students become more effective language learners through a guided but student-led approach to learning strategies outside the classroom (see Resources at the end of this paper for more information). During the course, students are asked to complete a SURE (Study, Use, Review, Evaluate) learning plan to further assist their becoming more responsible and independent in their learning methods. I decided that the use of the SURE plan from this course would help these students better shape their grammar goals in a way which, once completed, would be simple to follow not only for the students themselves during their study but also for their peers and the teacher to examine, in order to better understand the study method(s) they had used.

Method

The 16 students that attended the class were asked to make groups of four. The groups were given a contentious topic and were recorded speaking for ten minutes on that topic. The students were then given performance analysis sheets and were asked to listen back to one of their group members' utterances and make notes on their performance. The grammar points which the students were asked to identify were selected after consulting a number of the university's teachers and learning advisors on grammar errors commonly made by their students and after having examined the frequency of those grammar points in a number of grammar textbooks available in the SAC. When all four members had completed the sheets, they all then listened back to another member's utterances, filling out the performance analysis sheet for that student and so on, until all four members had had their recording analysed by all members of their group. The groups then discussed the points that they had made for each student before handing the performance analysis sheets to the respective speaker for examination.

In the week before the next class, the teacher listened to the recordings and filled in his own performance analysis sheet for each student. The following week, using the feedback from the teacher and group members, students decided on a grammar point to study and filled out the SURE learning plan (Appendix A), detailing the methods they were going to use to carry out study on the grammar point chosen. If no grammar

point had been identified, or if students thought that their grammar weakness lay somewhere outside of the judgements made by their peers or the teacher, they could make an independent choice on a grammar point to study. When they had completed the SURE learning plan, students were asked to show it to the teacher, who judged whether it had been filled out correctly (students had already been handed a demonstration plan to emulate). When the plan had been completed to the students' and teacher's satisfaction, students could spend the remaining time of the lesson and all of the following lesson time researching their grammar point in the way that they had identified in their SURE learning plan.

In the following week's lesson, students first presented the learning method they had chosen according to a guided presentation format (see Appendix B) in groups of 4. After changing groups a couple of times and practicing their presentation in this way, students were asked to present their study method to the entire class. Students were also asked to submit a written report detailing their study methods and results at this time.

In the 6th week of study, the process was repeated. However, this time, the students were asked to produce some writing (selected for variety and also because the university requires that students get a score of 600 on the writing-heavy TOEIC). In the 10th week of the course, the students were asked to make and analyse another recording.

Before completing the SURE learning plan in these subsequent tests, students were asked to remind each other of the grammar point they had studied before by writing the grammar point and their name on the blackboard at the front of the classroom. Students who were going to be studying grammar points that other students in the class had already studied were asked to first meet with those student(s) to be reminded of the study methods they had found useful or not useful when examining this grammar point.

Grades were awarded on the relevance of the research and the advice given to other students, demonstrated in the presentations and the written report, rather than on explicit "improvements" made in their subsequent performances. Students were also graded on correct completion of the SURE print and evaluation sheets.

Student feedback

Students were asked to complete a feedback form at the end of the course stating their overall impressions of the classes in addition to specific elements of the course which they liked or disliked. Apart from one student stating simply: "*It is hard to do this course,*" the remainder of the responses were wholly positive, with comments (all in their original form) such as:

"It was hard work, especially presentation, but my grammar skill is up."

"This class was freedom so I could try to new way in myself."

"I knew study method when I talked with others."

"I think it was a little bit hard because I had to decide my plan but it is really good for me."

"I like this class because we can share the good way of study each other."

When writing what they enjoyed about the course, all students commented on the benefits they felt arising from the collaborative nature of the class as well as from the freedom of finding their own way of studying:

"To find a new learning way."

"Watching presentation and know how my friends improve."

"To learn by myself. I could choose my way to study."

"I enjoyed my presentation time because that time I could tell my best way of how to study English."

"I enjoyed discussing because my friend always give me good advice."

Asked what part of the course they didn't enjoy, many students voiced their displeasure at having to listen back to their own recorded voices and of giving presentations:

"To present, to record."

"Recording."

"I had to do presentation many times."

"Presentation."

"Recording because I felt nervous."

Limitations

This study was carried out in an environment with many resources available to students for autonomous study. Below are indicated some ideas for alternative ways in which the above methodology might be applied in schools or universities which have fewer resources available.

Recording equipment and methods: For this research, the students were recording onto MP3 recorders (at the time of writing these cost about 4000 yen per unit). However, many students' smartphones also have the capability to record, thereby negating the need for the purchase of special equipment. In fact, many of the students enrolled in the above-mentioned student learner-strategy course cite recording themselves into their smartphones and analysing their own output as being particularly beneficial to their language development.

Resources: While students at most schools and universities will have access to traditional grammar textbooks, a wealth of grammar examples and tutorials can also be found online. Simply typing "past tense" or any other grammar point into the search field of YouTube <youtube.com> will reveal a large number of resources for students. A more dynamic online resource is Lang8 <lang8.com>, a free, web-based journal-sharing system in which users are invited to share their L2 journal entries with proficient speakers of the language they are learning. Members then partake in a grammar correction exchange of the entries made within those journals. The site currently boasts over 250,000 users from 180 countries. However, teachers and students should be made aware of the potential unreliability of advice posited as factual when accessing largely unfiltered portals offering knowledge as well as the potential dangers of online interaction.

Conclusion

The creation of a grammar curriculum in which students were given the opportunity to engage with their learning made for a dynamic change in the roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Student reports, feedback, and presentations suggested that the curriculum enabled them to direct their learning in a more personal and focused manner than they had previously been allowed in other grammar classes. The introduction of an autonomous environment encouraged a col-laborative classroom in which the sharing of ideas and resources became standard practice. Various material, sociological and psychological elements are at play in the classroom that, in other teaching-learning environments, might act as barriers to the successful implementation of the concepts introduced here. A number of online and other resources can be utilised by students and teachers in learning environments without the materials used in this study. Despite the positive feedback from students on the course, future measures of the development of grammar proficiency stemming from this study will help to further improve the claims of effectiveness, or otherwise, and help to refine the course in successive years.

References

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Resources

Information regarding Kanda University of International Studies' Self Access Centre and support modules: <www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/salc/learningadvisorysupport/modules.html>.

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Appendix A. SURE learning plan

My grammar goal	

STUDY it	Choose a grammar point to focus on and study	How will you study for your goal? What resources, activities and strategies will you use? Be specific!
USE it	Practice the language	How will you practice using the new things you studied?
REVIEW it	Review what you have learned so you don't forget it!	How will you review what you learned?
EVALUATE it	Evaluate your SURE model. Is your plan working?	How will you check if this SURE model is helping you reach your goals?

Appendix B. guided presentation format

Communicative Grammar Presentation

Please say your name before you begin your presentation

1. **What grammar point did you study?**
2. **How did you study it?**
3. **How did you use it (practice)?**
4. **How did you review what you learned?**
5. **How did you check to see if your way of learning was good (evaluate)?**

} Use your SURE sheets to help you explain what you did!

6. Explain to your group whether you thought your plan was a good way to study this grammar point - do you recommend your method?
7. Explain to your group ways in which you could have improved your study method.
8. Ask if your group has any questions or suggestions on ways in which you could improve your study method. Use the back of this paper to add any of these hints that you think might be useful to you.