Facilitating Japanese College Students' Autonomous Learning Outside the English Classroom

Tomoko Yabukoshi
Nihon University

Kazue Kato
Nihon University

This study explored the effectiveness of an autonomous learning support program implemented with 23 Japanese college students to promote self-instructed English learning outside the classroom. The program incorporated the following five learning activities: language learning strategies, setting goals, making plans, reflecting and self-evaluating, and receiving feedback from an English teacher, all of which have been considered significant elements of autonomous learning (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). At the end of the program, an original questionnaire was administered to the students. English proficiency test scores and evaluation sheets recorded by their teachers were also collected. Analyses of the data showed that: (1) the program had positive impacts on out-of-class learning, such as increasing student motivation, clarifying learning goals, increasing study time, and improving English proficiency; and (2) the students were likely to have difficulties following their study plans when they had less contact with their teachers and classmates.

外国語教育では様々な自律学習支援が教員によって実施されている。本論では日本人EFL大学生23名を対象とした教室外での自律学習支援プログラムの有効性を調査した。プログラムでは先行研究に基づいて、(A)英語学習方略の紹介、(B)学習目標の設定、(C)学習計画の作成、(D)学習の反省と自己評価、(E)教員によるフィードバックの5つの活動を実践した。プログラム終了後、参加者に質問紙を配布し、各活動の有用性や自身の自律学習の変化について尋ねた。さらに教員による学習者評価シートや英語能力テストスコアのデータも収集した。分析の結果、本プログラムの有効性として、参加者の学習意欲の向上、学習目標の明確化、学習時間の増加、英語能力の向上が示唆された。一方、計画的学習の遂行は、教員やクラスメートとの接触が少ない時期に計画の遂行度が低いことが確認された。

The exploration of learner autonomy has been an intriguing area of study in second and foreign language (L2) education research. According to Benson (2011, pp. 123–124), learner autonomy refers to "the capacity to take control over one's own learning," and autonomous learning refers to "learning in which learners demonstrate a capacity to control their learning." In autonomous learning, learners are expected to have the responsibilities of setting their learning goals, making plans to achieve those goals, monitoring their learning process, and solving their learning problems. Autonomous learning has been promoted in L2 education. One of the main areas of practice can be seen in self-access language learning centers (e.g., Gardner & Miller, 1999) and computer-assisted language learning courses (e.g., Ying, 2002). Learner training was also widely implemented in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on insights from language learning strategy (LLS) research (Benson, 2011). For example, Yang (1998) implemented LLS instruction with 40 university students in guiding them through the process of self-assessment, goal-setting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own language learning. The study found that the instruction helped the students raise their awareness of strategy use, learn how to assess their own language proficiency, set their own goals, evaluate their progress, and eventually experience greater overall autonomy in language learning.

Similarly, in Japan, several attempts have been made to help promote autonomous learning in the form of programmed learning incorporating learner training methods. For example, Fukushima, Seki, and Coulson (2004), following a process-oriented approach proposed by Dörnyei (2001), helped Japanese college students set their learning goals and taught them study skills in English classes to motivate them to learn English and control their own learning. The study found that the students' study time gradually increased, and their TOEIC scores improved. Subsequently, Seki (2006) elaborated on the practice and proposed the "Motivational English Learning Model," which aims to maintain learner motivation and facilitate autonomous learning. This model incorporates the following six activities: (1) self-assessing previous English language learning, (2) setting learning goals, (3) learning study skills, (4) self-monitoring one's learning process by keeping journals, (5) engaging in collaborative learning with classmates, and (6) self-evaluating one's learning. The study suggested that English learners who used

the model improved their English proficiency, motivation, LLS use, and study time.

Previous studies have suggested potential effects of autonomous learning programs; however, the number of empirical studies on this topic is limited in Japan. This study was conducted to explore the effectiveness of an autonomous learning support program designed by the authors for Japanese college students. It addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the support program have any effect on students' autonomous learning? If so, what kinds of activities are helpful for them?

RQ2: Are students able to follow their study plans at different learning periods?

RQ3: Do students improve their English proficiency?

Method

Participants

The participants were 23 Japanese university freshmen (11 males and 12 females) enrolled in a social science department. They were required to obtain a certain minimum score on either the TOEIC Listening & Reading test or the TOEFL iBT test by the end of the academic year in order to advance to the second year at the university.[1] They took the TOEIC Listening & Reading Institutional Program (IP) tests in April and December as part of the curriculum requirement.[2] One of their main objectives in learning English was to pass qualification exams, particularly the TOEIC tests.

Procedure

An autonomous learning support program was implemented by full-time English teachers at the institution in 2010. The following five activities were incorporated to facilitate the participants' out-of-class English language learning: (A) learning LLSs, (B) setting goals, (C) making plans, (D) self-evaluating, and (E) receiving feedback. These activities have been considered significant elements of autonomous learning (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981) and implemented in previous studies (Fukushima et al., 2004; Seki, 2006; Yang, 1998).

Table 1 shows the schedule of the support program. The orientation involved three activities. As for learning LLSs (A), students were introduced to cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies for four language skills and vocabulary learning based on Takeuchi (2003). A teacher (the first author)

stood in front of the students and introduced the strategies outlined on the strategy lists distributed to the students (Appendix A). In the demonstration, she explained how to use each strategy with several examples using PowerPoint in Japanese. Due to time constraints, the students were not given opportunities to practice strategy utilization in the orientation. In addition, learning materials for raising one's score on the TOEIC and TOEFL were introduced. These materials included guidebooks and test preparation books recommended by the English teachers. After the LLS instruction, the students engaged in two activities: setting goals (B) and making plans (C). They were asked to write a draft of their goals and weekly plans for meeting their objectives on a plan document prepared by the authors. The majority of students set a goal in relation to the TOEIC such as achieving a certain score on the TOEIC by the end of the academic year. Their study plans included using TOEIC materials such as learning ten words a day listed in the TOEIC vocabulary book and completing the TOEIC test-preparation book by the next TOEIC test.

Table 1. *Schedule of the Support Program*

Month	Activity
Jun.	***Orientation*** (A) Learning LLSs, (B) Setting goals & (C) Making plans
Aug.-Sep.	***Out-of-class learning period 1 (summer vacation: 7 weeks)***
Oct.	Counseling 1: (D) Self-evaluating, (C) Making plans & (E) Receiving feedback ***Out-of-class learning period 2 (mid-semester: 4 weeks)***
Nov.	Counseling 2: (D) Self-evaluating, (C) Making plans & (E) Receiving feedback ***Out-of-class learning period 3 (mid- to end-of-semester: 8 weeks)***
Jan.	Counseling 3: (D) Self-evaluating, (C) Making plans & (E) Receiving feedback

After completing the plan document, the students engaged in out-of-class learning (i.e., self-study outside the classroom based on their plans). As shown in Table 1, there were three periods of out-of-class learning, each followed by student's self-evaluation (D), making the next plans (C), and receiving feedback from a teacher in an individual counseling session (E). In the counseling session, the students submitted a self-evaluation sheet and the next plan

document. The teachers reviewed these papers, and gave the students feedback on their learning. After counseling, the teachers completed an evaluation sheet for each student. The evaluation sheet required teachers to report on the degree to which each student carried out his or her study plans in percentages based on the student's self-evaluation sheet and verbal interchange with the student. For example, 80% was marked for a student who learned six out of ten words a day (i.e., he achieved 60% of the target) and completed the TOEIC test-preparation book to the end as he planned (i.e., he achieved the target 100%). Teachers also recorded problems the students encountered during their self-study and wrote suggestions for the students on the evaluation sheets (Appendix B). Seven full-time English teachers, five Japanese, including the authors and two native speakers of English with excellent Japanese proficiency, conducted the counseling mostly in Japanese.

Data Collection

To assess the effectiveness of the support program, (1) original questionnaires, (2) evaluation sheets kept by the teachers, and (3) English proficiency test scores were collected and analyzed.

An original questionnaire consisting of three parts was developed to examine RQ1 (Table 2 & Appendices C-1, C-2). First, the five activities (learning LLSs, setting goals, making plans, self-evaluating, and receiving feedback) were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from very helpful to not helpful at all. Second, six question items were included for measuring students' perceptions of their autonomous language learning after receiving the support program. Four items asked about (a) clarifying goals (Item B-3), (b) improving LLS use (B-2), (c) monitoring and following plans (B-4), and (d) evaluating improvement in English proficiency (B-6), which were formulated based on Holec (1981). Two items, (e) increasing motivation for learning (B-5), and (f) increasing out-of-class study time (B-1), were included because autonomous learning and motivation are closely related (Ushioda, 2011), and learners should secure a certain amount of study

time for successful autonomous learning. These six items were assessed based on 5-point Likert scales ranging from extremely true to not at all true. Finally, an open-ended question asked students to write their opinions about the program in Japanese. The excerpts presented in the Results and Discussion section were translated into English by the authors. The contents of the questionnaire were reviewed by the seven English teachers conducting the counseling. The questionnaire was distributed to the students after the last counseling session.

Table 2. *Contents of the Questionnaire*

Part	Topic	Number of items
1	Helpfulness of the five activities	5
2	Student's autonomous language learning	6
3	Student's opinions about the program	1

To examine RQ2, the evaluation sheets recorded by the English teachers (Appendix B) were collected and the first item answered in percentages on the sheets, Attainment Level of Study Plans (%), was analyzed to examine the extent to which the students were able to follow their plans at each period. To answer RQ3, students' progress in English proficiency was measured by the TOEIC IP tests administered in April and December since many students set goals of gaining higher scores on the TOEIC and few students took the TOEFL iBT. The authors gained the university's permission from the dean of the department to conduct this study.

Results and Discussion

This section reports students' evaluation of their own autonomous learning and the support program, teachers' assessment of students' out-of-class learning, and students' progress in English proficiency.

Students' Evaluation

Tables 3 and 4 show students' responses to questions regarding their autonomous language learning and the helpfulness of the five activities incorporated in the program, respectively. The Cronbach's α coefficients were .78 for the autonomous language learning scale and .68 for the helpfulness of the five-activity scale.

Table 3. *Students' Perceptions of Their Autonomous Language Learning*

Autonomous language learning	*M* (*SD*)
(a) Clarifying goals	4.1 (0.9)
(b) Improving LLS use	3.8 (0.7)
(c) Monitoring and following plans	3.7 (0.7)
(d) Evaluating improvement positively	4.0 (0.7)
(e) Increasing motivation	4.2 (0.8)
(f) Increasing out-of-class study time	4.0 (0.6)

Note. Five-point Likert-scale.

Table 4. *Students' Evaluation of the Five Activities*

Activity	*M* (*SD*)
(A) Learning LLSs	4.3 (0.6)
(B) Setting goals	3.9 (0.8)
(C) Making plans	3.6 (0.8)
(D) Self-evaluating	3.7 (0.8)
(E) Receiving feedback	4.5 (0.5)

Note. Five-point Likert-scale.

As shown in Table 3, students provided a Likert scale response of 4.0 or higher on a scale of 5 on four items, by which the authors infer that students (a) clarified their goals (*M* = 4.1, *SD* = 0.9), (d) evaluated their improvement positively (*M* = 4.0, *SD* = 0.7), (e) increased their motivation (*M* = 4.2, *SD* = 0.8), and (f) increased their out-of-class study time (*M* = 4.0, *SD* = 0.6). Students' responses to the open-ended question provided insights into the positive impacts of counseling on these aspects as follows:

> *After I talked to my teacher, my learning goals became clearer, and I have become motivated to learn English.* (Student 2)

> *By receiving the counseling, I have become more interested in English and motivated to learn English.* (Student 10)

> *I had regular opportunities to talk to the teacher, and I have got into the habit of studying English.* (Student 4)

Similarly, students found it helpful to receive feedback in the counseling sessions, as shown in Table 4 (*M* = 4.5, *SD* = 0.5).

On the other hand, students' responses to (b) improving LLS use (*M* = 3.8, *SD* = 0.7) and (c) monitoring and following plans (*M* = 3.7, *SD* = 0.7) were less positive compared with their responses to the other items (Table 3). Concerning strategy use, although students found it relatively helpful to learn LLSs (*M* = 4.3, *SD* = 0.6) (Table 4), some students might not have used them effectively. This may have been because of the instruction procedure. In the orientation, students were not given opportunities to practice strategy utilization due to time constraints. In the future, practice time should be provided for students, as suggested by Cohen (1998). As for monitoring and following plans, some students followed their plans successfully, while others did not. In order to gain insights into the results, the students' execution of their plans was examined and reported in the next subsection.

Teachers' Assessment

Table 5 shows the teachers' evaluation of the extent to which students were able to follow their plans expressed as percentages during three different periods of time: (1) Period 1 (summer vacation for seven weeks), (2) Period 2 (mid-semester for four weeks), and (3) Period 3 (mid- to end-of-semester for eight weeks). To answer RQ2, one-way repeated measures ANOVA were used. The analysis revealed that the attainment levels differed significantly among the three periods ($F(2, 34) = 5.53$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .25$). A post-hoc test (Bonferroni correction) showed that the attainment levels in Period 1 (36.7%) were significantly lower than those in Period 2 (60.5%) ($p = .03$).

This result may have been influenced by two factors. First, Period 1 had been carried out before the first counseling session, and there was no effect of the counseling on the results of Period 1. Second, the results of Period 1 reflected out-of-class learning that took place over the summer vacation, and the students may have had difficulties keeping their learning motivation high on their own. In fact, many teachers reported in the evaluation sheets that lower motivation was one of the factors inhibiting the students' self-study during the vacation. Several students mentioned in the counseling sessions that talking with their classmates who were studying English very hard motivated them to do the same. In short, the students seemed to have difficulties following their study plans when they had less contact with their teachers and classmates.

In future support programs, the duration of out-of-class learning should be carefully considered, and students should be taught self-motivating strategies especially for the long vacation period.

Table 5. *Students' Attainment Levels for the Execution of Their Plans (%)*

Period	Duration (Weeks)	*M* (*SD*)
Period 1 (Summer vacation)	7	36.7 (23.2)
Period 2 (Mid-semester)	4	60.5 (23.6)
Period 3 (Mid- to end-of-semester)	8	53.9 (20.2)

Note. N = 18. The available data were reduced to 18 because a few teachers did not record some of their students' attainment levels in the evaluation sheets. See Appendix D for details.

Progress in English Proficiency

The participants' TOEIC IP scores in April (before the program) and December (nearing the end of the program) were obtained (Table 6) and a dependent *t*-test was performed to answer RQ3. The *t*-test revealed a significant improvement in English proficiency with a large effect ($t = 3.37$, $df = 21$, $p = .003$, $r = .59$).

Table 6. *Students' TOEIC IP Scores in April and December Tests*

N	Apr. *M* (*SD*)	Dec. *M* (*SD*)	Score Progress
22[a]	463.2 (86.2)	524.3 (99.9)	61.1

[a] One outlier was deleted from the data analysis.

Note. The significant values of the Shapiro-Wilk test were greater than .05, indicating the data were normally distributed ($p = .110$ for the April test, $p = .544$ for the December test).

As discussed in the Students' Evaluation section, after finishing the support program, students evaluated their improvement in English proficiency positively ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.7$) (Table 3). One student explicitly mentioned her improvement in English proficiency as follows: "*I made my study plans. Following my plans, I improved my English proficiency*" (Student 2). Based on these results, the authors determined that the support program has the potential to improve students' English proficiency.

Conclusion

This study explored the effectiveness of the English support program for Japanese college students, and several suggestions were made for the future program. Limitations of this study are the small number of participants, the lack of a control group, and the shortage of data pertaining to participants' autonomous language learning before implementing the support program. In addition, other variables (i.e., extracurricular activities, overseas experiences, etc.) might have affected the results of this study. In the future, more empirical studies, such as ones based on an experimental-control research design as well as ones employing qualitative methods, should be conducted towards a more in-depth understanding and provision of an effective learning support program for students.

Notes

1. The TOEIC Listening & Reading test is a paper-and-pencil, multiple choice assessment, measuring learners' ability to listen and read in English in the global workplace (ETS, 2017a). The TOEFL iBT test is a test delivered via the Internet, assessing learners' listening, reading, speaking and writing skills to perform academic tasks at the university level (ETS, 2017b).

2. The TOEIC Listening & Reading IP test is conducted on the date and at location determined by each school, corporation or organization (ETS, 2017c).

Acknowledgements

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Tomoko Yabukoshi (Ph.D. in Foreign Language Education) is an Associate Professor at Nihon University, Tokyo. Her research interests include language learning strategies, autonomy in language learning, and self-regulated language learning. Contact: yabukoshi.tomoko@nihon-u.ac.jp
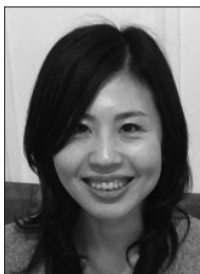
Kazue Kato (Ph.D. in Language and Linguistics) is an Associate Professor at Nihon University, Tokyo. Her research interests include extensive reading for language learning and autonomy in language learning. Contact: kato.kazue@nihon-u.ac.jp

Appendix A

A Sample of the Strategy List (Original in Japanese)

Reading
- Read texts analytically, paying attention to the sentence structures and looking up unknown words in dictionaries.
- Read texts extensively, looking for the main ideas without using dictionaries.

Listening
- Listen to English deeply and dictate the input, paying attention to details.
- Read English texts aloud in various ways.
- Listen to English news and take a memo, trying to understand the main ideas.
- Watch movies in English subtitled both English and Japanese.

Speaking
- Memorize basic phrases and sentences presented in the English conversation textbooks.
- Make new sentences by applying the phrases and sentences which you have memorized.
- Learn how to pronounce new words online.

Writing
- Keep a diary in English regularly.
- Read a lot of relevant materials and write an essay in English, using the model expressions presented in the materials.

Vocabulary Learning
- Make a plan of the amount of vocabulary to learn per day.
- Review the new words/phrases repeatedly.
- Learn new words/phrases in a meaningful context.

Others
- Make an English study group with classmates.
- Use spare time effectively for English language learning.

Appendix B
The Individual Counseling and Evaluation Sheet

The counseling was conducted with the students one by one, lasting approximately 20 minutes each. The individual counseling sessions were conducted three times throughout the support program. After each counseling session, teachers recorded the following evaluation sheet about each student. Therefore, the evaluation sheet was recorded three times for each student.

Evaluation Sheet (Original in Japanese)

Date

Class	Student ID	Name

1. Attainment Level of Study Plans *Check the contents of student's study plans and record the degree to which he/she carried out his/her study plans in percentages (%).

2. Problems *If the student did not carry out his/her study plans, what plans did they not implement and why? What difficulties did the student have?

3. Future Directions *If the student is having problems, ask him/herself how he/she is going to cope with the problems. Then, give suggestions for improvement and make the next study plans with him/her. If the student does not have major problems, make the next study plans with him/her, considering whether he/she will continue the present study plans or change some of them.

Teacher's Name

Appendix C-1
Questionnaire (Original Version in Japanese)

クラス:　　　学生番号:　　　氏名:

このアンケートは, XXコースで実施した「英語学習サポート(学習方法の紹介, 計画書・報告書の作成, 面談の実施)」について調べるものです。正しい答えや間違った答えはないので, 正直に答えてください。この結果が成績に影響することはありません。また, 皆さんの名前が公開されることもありません。

A.　以下のことは, あなたの英語学習にどの程度役立ったと思いますか?　5段階(1全く役立たなかった〜5とても役立った)のうち, あてはまる数字を○で囲んでください。

1	英語学習方法の紹介	1	2	3	4	5
2	英語の学習目標の設定(長期, 中期, 短期の目標設定)	1	2	3	4	5
3	英語の学習計画書の作成(週単位の学習内容を計画)	1	2	3	4	5
4	学習報告書による自己評価	1	2	3	4	5
5	面談の実施	1	2	3	4	5

B. 英語学習サポートを受けたことで, 以下のことはあなたにどの程度あてはまりますか?5段階　(1全くあてはまらない〜5とてもあてはまる)のうち, あてはまる数字を○で囲んでください。
英語学習サポートを受けたことで…

1	授業外での英語の学習時間が増えた。	1	2	3	4	5
2	英語の学習方法が改善された。	1	2	3	4	5
3	英語の学習目標が明確になった。	1	2	3	4	5
4	目標に向かって, 計画的に英語を学習できるようになった。	1	2	3	4	5
5	英語学習に対する意欲が高まった。	1	2	3	4	5
6	英語力が伸びた。	1	2	3	4	5

C. 英語学習サポート(学習方法の紹介, 計画書・報告書の作成, 面談の実施)について, 感想や要望があれば, 書いてください。

以上です。ご協力ありがとうございました。
提出は教務課へ

Appendix C-2
Questionnaire (Translated Version in English)

Class:　　　Student ID:　　　Name:

This survey is about the English language learning support program (i.e., learning LLSs, making plans, reflecting and self-evaluating, receiving feedback, etc.) conducted in the course. There are no right or wrong answers to any questions. Your responses will not affect any of your course grades. Your anonymity is secured.

ARTICLES

JALT PRAXIS

JALT FOCUS

A. To what extent were the following activities helpful for your English language learning, ranging from 'very helpful' (5 point) to 'not helpful at all' (1 point)? Please circle the ones which are true of you.

1	Learning LLSs for English language learning	1	2	3	4	5
2	Setting (long-, medium-, and short-term) goals for learning English	1	2	3	4	5
3	Making weekly learning plans for English language learning	1	2	3	4	5
4	Reflecting and self-evaluating, using the self-evaluation sheets	1	2	3	4	5
5	Getting feedback from the teacher at the counseling sessions	1	2	3	4	5

B. You have participated in the support program, and to what extent are the following statements true of you, ranging from 'extremely true' (5 point) to 'not at all true' (1 point)? Please circle the ones which are true of you.

Participating in the support program . . .

1	My out-of-class English study time has increased.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I have improved my approach to learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I have clarified my goals in studying English.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I have been able to follow my plans to achieve my goals.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I have been motivated to study English.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I have improved my English proficiency.	1	2	3	4	5

C. Please describe your opinions and/or requests regarding the support program (i.e., learning LLSs, making plans, reflecting and self-evaluating, receiving feedback, etc.)

Thank you very much for your cooperation.
Submit this form to the Student Office

Appendix D
The Extent to Which Students Followed Their Plans at Each Period (%)

Student ID	Period 1 Summer Vacation (For Seven Weeks)	Period 2 Mid-Se-mester (For Four Weeks)	Period 3 Mid- to End-of-Semester (For Eight Weeks)
1	25.0	30.0	35.0
2	45.0	50.0	60.0
3	NAª	75.0	85.0
4	75.0	NA	NA
5	3.3	93.3	24.0
6	65.0	75.0	20.0
7	15.0	31.3	55.0
8	60.0	60.0	70.0
9	15.0	100	80.0
10	53.3	22.5	33.3
11	25.0	50.0	70.0
12	70.0	75.0	50.0
13	15.0	100	80.0
14	60.0	NA	60.0
15	33.3	65.0	46.7
16	31.3	60.0	NA
17	75.0	70.0	80.0
18	3.0	70.0	70.0
19	40.0	30.0	35.0
20	47.5	46.7	30.0
21	NA	80.0	NA
22	55.0	67.5	66.7
23	15.0	53.3	65.0
N	18	18	18
M (SD)	36.7 (23.2)	60.5 (23.6)	53.9 (20.2)

ª Some attainment levels were not recorded by teachers, and students including missing data were excluded from the data analyses as shown in the shaded regions.

Note. The data passed the assumptions of homogeneity and sphericity. The significant values of the Shapiro-Wilk test were greater than .05, indicating the data were normally distributed (p = .280 for Period 1, p = .442 for Period 2, p = .120 for Period 3). Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had not been violated ($\chi^2(2)$ = 2.557, p = .278).