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Utilising Linktree to Foster Learner Autonomy in Non-English-Speaking Environments

Thomas Entwistle

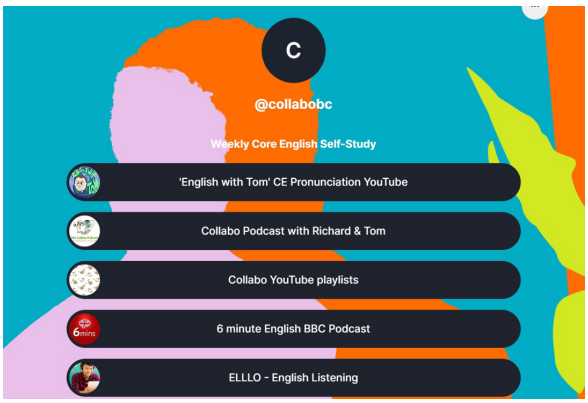
British Council, Japan

Learner autonomy, defined by Holec back in 1981, is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (cited in Benson, 2011, p. 59) and as educators, we would like our learners to be able to achieve this. However, students making the transition from carefully controlled pre-tertiary education (Arroub, 2015) to university often require more support and cannot be expected to be proficient autonomous learners (Mynard, 2019).

Learners in non-English-speaking environments (NESE), like Japan, have less chance to benefit from English outside of the class than those studying in English-speaking contexts (Entwistle, 2020). Although it is true that many modern leaners possess a range of electronic devices to aid their studies (Armitage, 2019), the sheer volume and plethora of choices of English language content can be overwhelming (Lin, 2022). With this being an issue, the choice was made to use Linktree to provide a range of suitable, level appropriate, and high-quality online resources for students to self-study outside of the classroom. This *Wired* review will outline how and why Linktree was utilised in a university context in Japan, the challenges this caused the learners and teachers, and why, in my opinion, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

Figure 1

How Linktree Appears on Students' Desktops

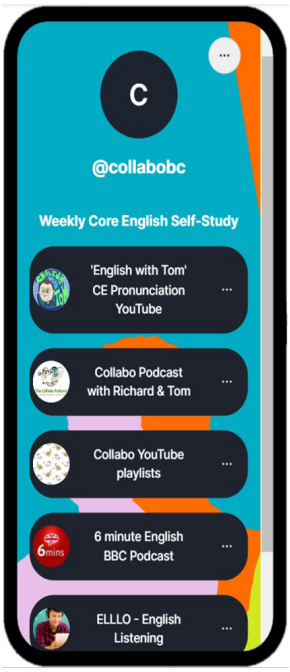


Utilising Linktree to Provide Suitable Material and Foster Autonomous Learning

Linktree was chosen to help provide materials to promote learner autonomy and self-study. Linktree is a "freemium" social media landing page (Reddy, 2020); that is, it is free for basic services with an option to upgrade for a fee, which allows users to upload their entire list of social media, or business links to one place (see Figure 1). All one needs to do is create a username and password using an email address. The free service also lets users make very basic design choices, order the links however they wish, then share the master link with their students. Free service users can then view the analytics to see which links have been accessed the most. However, more in-depth analytics are only available on the premium pricing plans. In my case, I posted the master Linktree link to our university learning management system (LMS) and shared a QR code in class for students to scan on their smart devices (see Figure 2). My Linktree provided extra listening, reading, pronunciation, exam preparation, and study-abroad preparation material that students could experiment with and then tailor their own self-studies to their own wants and needs. In previous studies (Al Jawad & Mansour, 2021), the ability for learners to take control of what digital material they used in their own learning proved successful and fostered greater autonomous learning.

Figure 2

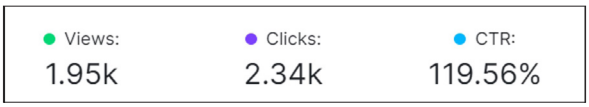
How Linktree Appears on Students' Smart Devices



Although a somewhat limited function when signed up through the free membership, Linktree members can view the analytics of the links provided to students. This allows teachers to replace less popular links with alternative sources to hopefully boost engagement. Figure 3 shows my Linktree accounts' yearly analytics, from April 2023 to January 2024. It shows that our department's freshmen cohort of 97 students visited the Linktree list 1,950 times and clicked on one of the links on the list 2,340 times, resulting in a click-through rate (CTR) of 119.56%. This shows that every visit to the Linktree page led to a student accessing at least one of the curated links. This positive engagement with the provided links can help turn students' NESE into a more language rich environment (Entwistle, 2020) by adding much needed comprehensible input.

Figure 3

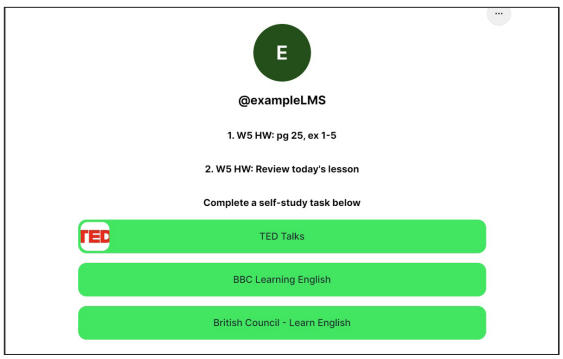
2023's Yearly Analytics



Although Linktree has limited functionality and is primarily a landing page for various links, it could be used as a replacement LMS by educators who either work in contexts that do not have an LMS, or by teachers, like part-time teachers, as a simple one-stop-shop for everything they wish to announce to their class by using the header function (Reddy, 2020). See Figure 4 for an example of a set of fictional, homework (HW) tasks for week 5 ("W5") as a visualisation of how to use Linktree as a stand-in LMS. Note that even on the free Linktree plan, one can add as many headings and links as they like. In theory, one could have a year's worth of HW tasks laid out such as in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Example LMS Design



Challenges Linktree Can Cause Both Teachers and Learners

I started using Linktree at the start of the 2023 Japanese academic year. Of course, integrating new technology into one's classes can be problematic for both teachers and students, and utilising Linktree also has its challenges. It has been shown that when learners are left to themselves to source their own material without any guidance, the task can be a burden due to the huge amount of choices (Lin, 2022). Furthermore, it has been shown that lower-level students often lose interest and motivation when the materials they find are too complex (Li & Medic, 2021). It is, therefore, important that the teacher spends time sourcing suitable links.

Also, to make sure they are of quality, level-appropriate, and meets the students' wants and needs, I found vetting the self-study materials was quite a time-consuming and tedious task. Though now the list has been curated, only periodic checks should be needed to delete, add, or swap content.

Conclusion

This review has shown the potential Linktree has for aiding self-study and promoting learner autonomy. While Linktree does have somewhat limited functionality, especially on the free plan, it has proven to be an extremely useful platform to provide students with appropriate self-study links, thus taking away the burden on the students of sourcing their own material. This in turn has led to greater engagement with English outside of the class, which is key in NESE, and helps learners transition from high school, where their education was much more controlled, to a university setting where they are expected to take more control of their learning.

There are of course different pricing options such as the starter, pro, and premium packages which offer more functionality like greater customisation and more in-depth analytics. Furthermore, there are 30-day free trials available. For more information on Linktree and its subscription packages, please see https://linktr.ee/.

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