

FOSTERING AUTONOMY THROUGH REFLECTION AND SELF-STUDY

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Abstract. *The importance of empowering students to take charge of their learning and become active participants in their own education cannot be overemphasized. Developing student autonomy should be a primary objective not only in language learning but also in any educational context. Reflecting critically on one's study and the ability to set learning goals are frequently lauded as the cornerstones of developing autonomy. This small-scale study examines the impact of utilizing a set format for low proficiency students to reflect on their lessons, identify weaknesses, and set their own individual study goals. The study found that implementing this approach over a fifteen-week semester saw an overall improvement in student autonomy, with positive feedback received from the students. While there is certainly room for improvement and refinement of the method, given the ease of implementation and small-time commitment of the activity, behooves teachers to consider implementing similar activities in their own classroom.*

Key words: *autonomy, self-study, reflective learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Even the most motivated and dedicated students will struggle to achieve linguistic mastery if they are unable to pursue learning above and beyond what they encounter in the language classroom. It is almost certain that students who have the ability to set and pursue their own study goals will perform better than those reliant solely on the support and directions of a teacher. This observation has led to an increased awareness of the need to empower students to take control of their own learning habits and foster them in becoming lifelong learners, able to pursue their own independent studies beyond the classroom.

This statement is particularly true in Japan, where it has been noted that, despite government policy emphasizing the development of communicative competence (MEXT, 2003), high-school level language classrooms tend to focus on knowledge acquisition for the sake of passing exams (Matsuzaka et al., 2004; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). It has been theorized that this process of rote learning has led to students viewing learning as a teacher-driven process, leaving them reticent to take charge of their own learning, and, even when motivated to do so, uncertain where to begin (Nowlan, 2008). It has been

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pointed out, however, while numerous language teachers fall into the trap of assuming their students are passive due to a lack of external activity, Japanese students may often be *internally* active and seeking to take control of their own learning (Murase, 2012).

In order to facilitate students in developing the ability to look beyond the classroom and aid them in making the move towards become autonomous learners, this study seeks to examine the effect that incorporating reflection on lessons and the setting of self-study goals has on student autonomy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While the essence of what is meant by learner autonomy seems easy to grasp, it is particularly difficult to accurately define. Little (2005) sums up the concept by stating that “the essence of learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” (p. 5). This involves taking responsibility for a range of decisions regarding a variety of aspects of the learning process, such as determining objectives, defining content and progression, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the acquisition process, and evaluating acquired knowledge (Holec, 1979). Autonomy is not a process that occurs in isolation, as it “entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person” (Dam, 1995, p. 1). It is through the collaboration with other, more capable learners that one develops the capacity for self-regulation that is necessary for a learner to become autonomous (Shin, 2021).

One major predictor of learner autonomy is the use of language learning strategies by learners in their pursuit of language expertise (Oxford, 2017). These language learning strategies consist of a number of metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and affective strategies (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990). Metacognitive strategies involve the setting of learning goals and planning one’s own learning, monitoring learning while it is taking place, and reflection and self-evaluation post learning. Cognitive strategies include strategies such as note-taking and grouping that allow students to mentally manipulate learning material. Affective strategies are those strategies that involve interacting with others such as cooperation and self-reinforcement.

There are a number of compelling reasons for why promoting learner autonomy is of utmost importance. In general students autonomous learning has been shown to be more effective in developing linguistic abilities than non-autonomous learning (Sakai and Takagi, 2009). In addition, in a review of the literature on learner autonomy, Dickinson (1995) found a strong correlation between motivation and autonomous learning, concluding that there is “substantial evidence from cognitive motivational studies that learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control” (p. 174).

The question is what exactly is the best approach to fostering autonomy in learners. A vast majority of learning strategies utilized by autonomous learners are metacognitive in nature, and it has, in fact, been argued that these metacognitive aspects form the central core of autonomy (Benson, 2011). Prior research has established that metacognition can be acquired and enhanced through guidance and socialization (Uebuchi, 2007). Given this,

stimulating learner's metacognition through classroom activities should enable learners to develop autonomy.

This capacity has been demonstrated repeatedly. Nguyn and Gu (2013) conducted 9 seminars focused on metacognitive strategies, each lasting one hour, over the course of a 36-hour academic writing course. The seminars were designed to introduce a broad spectrum of strategies to the learners, ranging from planning through monitoring to reflection and self-evaluation. They found that the learners who participated in these seminars reported developing significantly higher levels of self-regulation when compared to control groups who did not participate in these seminars. Furthermore, learners reported that since undergoing the metacognitive training, their approach to writing an essay had changed fundamentally.

While Nguyn and Go focused on a wide-range of strategies, a number of studies have shown improvement in autonomy via using a more specific focus. Of particular notice is the improvements related to incorporating reflective techniques into learning. Reflective learning is particularly important in autonomy as contemplation works to enhance learner's insight into their strengths and weaknesses, promotes an understanding of one's learning goals, and aids in the contextualization and understanding of knowledge (Farrell, 2016; King and Kitchener, 1994; Mezirow, 1998). These reflective mediations typically involve writing, whether that is in the form of a logbook, reflective diary, journal, or reports, and it has been shown that reflective writing has a number of benefits such as enhancing learner's sensitivity to the process of learning (Nunan, 1997) and promoting positive changes in learner beliefs and attitudes (Klimas, 2017).

Studies that have examined whether reflective writing leads to increased autonomy in the field of language learning have tended to show positive results. Menegale (2020) asked students in a Master's program in Language Sciences at an Italian university to keep a learning logbook tracking the language learning processes they encountered over a period of seven days, alongside any difficulties, strengths, or other relevant information they wished to add. They were then asked if they enjoyed the task, and if they believed it to be useful, and in what ways. They found that not only had the students generally enjoyed performing the task, but the process of reflecting on their language learning had "had helped them reflect on the way they were learning and the vastness and usefulness of the language inputs they were immersed in. This had activated an "awakening" process, which made them understand the value of personal active involvement in the language learning process" (Mengale, 2020, p. 116). While overall the feedback was positive, students did comment that the process of keeping regular logs was time-consuming and required perseverance and organizational skills, and only half indicated that they might continue to keep logs after the activity was finished.

Within the Asian context, Kaneda (2022) investigated the use that keeping regular logbooks has on developing high school student's metacognitive strategies. They asked high level students to keep a regular logbook planning their learning, describing what they learned, and giving a self-evaluation of their learning, with the allowance for students to add or remove sections as they saw fit. These logbooks were to be submitted to their teacher on a weekly basis over an eleven-week period. Alongside this, students were asked to complete a weekly writing task designed to improve their metacognitive skills, alongside asking each student to set three goals for the month at the beginning of each month – though these could include non-learning related aspirations. At the end of the eleven weeks, Kaneda concluded that the process of recording their learning in logbooks had helped students improve their metacognitive strategies, though this improvement

varied based on the frequency that logs were kept and how engaged the learners were in the process,

Similar findings have been found throughout a number of other studies. The process of writing reflective reports on extensive listening outside the classroom was found to increase awareness of how to study outside of the classroom and develop the initiative and enthusiasm to pursue those opportunities (Kobayashi, 2020). The use of reflective writing in foreign language studies at a tertiary institute in Australia found that students believed the activity to be useful in promoting independent study (Absalom and Léger, 2011). Additionally, a study into the use of learning diaries in an English language class at an Argentine university, while primarily focused on their use in providing insights into the students' perceptions of the class, found that the act of recording their reflections worked to raise learner autonomy (Porto, 2007).

While the majority of these studies have found that the student's reaction to keeping learning diaries to be mainly positive, that was not universally the case, with students frequently focused on the time commitment required. Studies specifically focused on examining the perceptions of students towards keeping a logbook or diary have echoed this as many learners commented that the activity was repetitive, time-consuming, and tedious (Litzler, 2014; Litzler and Bakieva, 2017; Vajirasarn, 2014).

An additional point to be made about the majority of the studies is that they have been conducted using comparatively advanced level students who are, ostensibly, highly motivated. The majority of studies have taken place at a tertiary or post-graduate level, with highly proficient students. Even the study that was conducted at a high school made note of the level of the students, commenting that reflective diaries may not be as successful with the majority of high school question. Which begs the question, would reflective diaries be successful with less capable students.

As such this study sought to explore the following questions:

1. Could a streamlined, less time-consuming version of reflective journals enhance autonomy in low proficiency students?
2. Would low proficiency students perceive reflecting on their studies as useful?
3. Would low proficiency students find the task arduous or enjoyable?

3. METHOD

The study was conducted over a one semester period with 12 first- and second-year students enrolled in the English and Tourism department at an all-women university in Japan. English oral communication is a compulsory subject for all students in their first two years, with both years being at approximately a CEFR A1 to A2 level. Each semester lasts fifteen weeks, and the students have one 90-minute Oral English class per week.

At the beginning of the semester the nature of the study was explained to the students, who gave their written consent to partake in the research. It was carefully and clearly explained to the students that, while keeping a reflective diary and setting self-study goals was a component of the course and expected of all students, participation in the study was not compulsory and would have no impact on their grades for the course. In addition, it was stressed that students who consented to participate in the courses should endeavor to answer any questions as honestly as possible, without fear of their answers affecting their performance in the course.

The streamlined reflective journal (Appendix A) was designed around the core items for reflection as outlined by Ghanizadeh et al. (2020) in their exposition on reflective journals. The journal was hosted online so the students could access it with ease. It consisted of five questions reflective questions centered around what the students learnt in the class, what they thought they did well, what they found difficult, and what areas of English they felt they needed to improve. In addition, students were asked to decide and record their plan for how they would improve English in their own time that week, and how many hours they would endeavor to spend doing so. Finally, the students were given the optional opportunity to provide any extra thoughts or feedback on the week's class.

During the first class of the semester, students were introduced to the research. It was explained that reflection on the course and engaging in self-study, in addition to any homework specifically set by the teacher, were core components of the course and expected of all students, regardless of participation in the study. Before being introduced to the reflective diaries, students were asked to fill out a survey designed to gauge their learner autonomy, which was based on the Measuring Instrument for Language Learner Autonomy (Murase, 2015). While the survey results are presented in English, to avoid possible misunderstandings, the students were presented with a version translated into their native language. Once the survey was complete, the students were asked to access the reflective journal. It was explained that they could answer each question in as little or as much detail as they chose, and that, while the self-study was to be done in the student's own time, the reflective journal would be written in the last five to ten minutes of each class. A further fifteen minutes of the class were spent with students brainstorming and discussing various methods of study to improve different English skills, and the results of the discussion, alongside additional study methods, was collated and hosted online for easy reference.

In the final class of the semester, students were asked to once again take the learner autonomy survey. Additionally, they were asked to fill out a feedback sheet to garner their perspective, and additional feedback was gathered during in-class discussions during the final class.

It should be noted that there are a number of limitations presented by this study. The most notable being, given the complexity of learner autonomy, the difficulty in accurately measuring a learner's autonomy. This is a widely recognized issue in the field of learner autonomy, due the incredible number of variables involved. Some studies utilize teacher observations to assess autonomy, some measure it through discussions with learners, and others, as this study does, utilize self-rated surveys. However, while such measures do offer us some insight into a learner's autonomy, the results may be colored by numerous other factors. This particularly applies to studies, such as this one, where the small sample sizes could lead to misleading results. Additionally, while students were requested to be forthright and the importance of honesty was constantly underlined, the nature of the teacher-student dynamic may have led to students skewing their feedback to align with what they believe the teacher expects or desires, though this is a limitation that applies to most classroom-based research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Effect on Learner Autonomy

The results of the survey pre- and post-semester can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Analysis of Individual Items

Item	Pre-semester mean	Post-semester mean	P
I set long term goals and plans for learning English.	2.818	3.417	0.046
I make study plans for that day before I start to study English.	2.909	3.333	0.144
I set achievable goals in learning English.	3.182	3.750	0.241
I organize my study to make the best use of my time	3.364	2.917	0.366
I assess how much of my goal I have achieved	2.818	3.583	0.035
I keep records of what kind of methods I used for my English study	2.455	3.333	0.014
I keep records of what I learned from my English study.	1.636	2.167	0.095
I ask my teacher and other students for advice about my English learning.	2.636	3.250	0.158
I am aware of the goals of the English class I take.	3.364	3.667	0.368
I reflect upon what I learned after I finish studying English for the day.	3.636	4.083	0.336
I evaluate the improvement in my ability to use English effectively.	3.182	3.833	0.149
I revise my English study plans if they don't work well.	2.818	3.250	0.377
I assess how much of my goal I have achieved.	3.182	3.917	0.062
I am able to decide my own goals in learning English if given the freedom to do so	2.909	3.250	0.306
I am able to study English without guidance from a teacher.	3.182	3.417	0.569
If I study English with other students, I also learn from them.	3.727	3.917	0.561

As can be seen, there was a slight increase in learner autonomy across the majority of items, the only outlier being related to time organization. Yet, while a general increase can be observed for nearly all the items, the majority of these changes were not statistically significant. The only exceptions being related to the setting of long-term goals, the recording of study methods, and the assessment of how much of their goal they had achieved, where a significant increase was apparent. As these were the major focus of the reflective diaries and self-study that the students were asked to perform, it is not surprising to see a significant increase in these elements. However, it is surprising that there wasn't a larger increase regarding reflecting on what they have learned, as all students had, to some extent, performed reflection at the end of the class.

While the majority of items did not see a significant change, the larger impact can be seen if the individual activities are categorized into behavioral patterns. Following in the footsteps of Kaneda (2022), the items were grouped into four overall categories: preparation (items 1-4), monitoring (items 5 -9), reflection (10-13), and overall beliefs about autonomy (items 14-16). The results can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 1 Analysis by Behavioral Category

Autonomous Behavior	Pre-semester mean	Post-semester means	P
Preparation	3.021	3.354	0.068
Monitoring	2.567	3.200	0.001
Reflection	3.250	3.771	0.013
Beliefs	3.250	3.528	0.235

Here, we can see a significant increase in terms of the preparation, monitoring, and reflection conducted by the students. It would seem that the process of reflection and goal-setting has, in general, resulted in the development of learner autonomy. As for why there has been comparatively little effect on the student's overall beliefs on autonomy, one plausible explanation could be a function of time. While the student's actions have been impacted via the reflection process, it is possible that there has been insufficient time for their increase in autonomy to be reflected in their belief systems. An equally plausible explanation could be that as the research focused purely on developing the metacognitive strategies regarding monitoring, reflection, and to a lesser extent preparation, no significant impact was had on the student's underlying beliefs regarding autonomy.

It must again be noted that these results should be taken with a grain of salt. There is significant difficulty in measuring autonomy, and a number of external factors could have influenced the students' responses to the survey, which is exacerbated by the small sample size. Having said this, on a purely observational level, there was a noticeable difference in students' behavior and attitudes towards classes as the semester progressed. Students were better prepared for classes, tended to be more motivated and attentive during class, and there was a marked improvement in their overall English ability. While again, this cannot and should not be completely attributed to increased reflection, it would appear that the process of keeping a reflective diary, even in a shortened form, has had an overall positive impact on the student's learner autonomy, echoing the findings of Mengale (2020) and Kaneda (2022).

4.2. Effect on Learner Autonomy

The students' perceptions of the activity were gauged through written and verbal feedback given during the last period of the class. To begin with, the students were asked to respond to a set of questions hosted online. After a twenty-minute guided discussion on their enjoyment of the activity, and perspective on the benefits they felt they gained was conducted.

The vast majority of students (91%) seemed to believe that keeping a reflective diary was overall a worthwhile pursuit. One point that was mentioned in particular was that reflection aided them in memorizing aspects of the lesson, making it easier to recall details of the class at a later point. This was universally agreed on, with every student adding that they found it had helped them to some degree. One student explicitly commented that "the process of remember what was learnt and thinking about it meant I was able to retain the information even more," with another adding that "I typically find it easy to forget things, so I've come to believe that reflecting on the lesson is vital." A number of students specifically mentioned were surprised with the degree to which it had helped them remember certain parts of the lessons, as they had not expected it to have much of an effect.

In addition, several students pointed out that the process of reflecting on each lesson made them better prepared for the next class, as identifying areas that they struggled with in one class helped them think about and set goals for how to approach the next class. This, in the words of one student, "enabled me to approach the next class with a fresh goal in mind and an eagerness to attend the class." This was echoed by other students, who agreed that it helped them "smoothly think about how to take classes", with one specifically stating that they were setting goals and that had helped them become more conscious of their learning. This aspect of reflection leading into the setting of goals for future classes is reflected in the increase regarding autonomous behavior associated with preparation as shown in Table 2. Despite the relatively short time period in which students were asked to reflect on their learning, it is apparent that a number of students went beyond identifying weaknesses and areas in need of improvement, and started setting goals for future classes and their own learning.

Perhaps the most telling point in favor of the activities perceived usefulness is the student's desire to continue the activity in the future. When asked if they would like to continue completing a reflective diary at the end of class in future semesters, 83% of students replied with a desire to do so. One student went so far as to say, "I actually plan to study English this way at least once a week from now on." Another student wrote that she felt the experience would be particularly useful for her in the future, stating that "through self-analysis and planning I have become better able to understand what methods of study suits me best." Finally, a number of students commented that they found the process helped them "gain some confidence in my self-study."

In many ways these comments are similar to those made by students in Mengale's (2020) study, where he references an "awakening ... which had led to increased language learning awareness" (p. 113), expounding that an awareness of "language inputs beyond the classroom not only helps them notice affordances and seize learning opportunities, but also fosters engagement in new and self-directed language learning" (p. 113). Likewise, in this study, the students seemed to have developed a deeper consciousness of their language learning process, and developed a corresponding appreciation for the wealth of opportunities

for language study above and beyond the classroom, hopefully enabling them to pursue independent learning well beyond their university years.

Not all the feedback was entirely positive, however. One student said that she found it pointless, because she never, “really thought about it after class, and usually forgot what I decided to do for self-study, so ended up studying the same way I always do.” Another student also said she struggled with the study component as she often felt her weakest point was conversation, noting that, “it might have been more useful if it was a reading or writing class.” Given this feedback it might have, in retrospect, been better to encourage students to physically write information rather than using an online tool, as, though they could access the online version at any time, the tactile sensation of writing combined with having a physically present copy to refer to could have aided in their self-study. Additionally, extra time spent mid-way through the course to continue to discuss possible study methods, as this could have helped open student awareness to the myriad of opportunities they have to practice the full range of language skills outside the classroom.

4.3. Student Enjoyment

Again, like in most other studies on reflective writing, the majority of students (82%) stated that they found the writing process relatively enjoyable. It didn't seem to spark the same level of joy and memories of childhood diary writing that were found in Mengale's (2020) study, perhaps because the more rigid format lacked the feeling of personalized writing that Mengale's more open format provided. Students did, however, comment that they particularly enjoyed the reflective process, saying that it was “fun to think about what I did well in class and how I can do better,” and that they “enjoyed thinking about different ways to study to help overcome their weaknesses.” When asked, none of the students found the process particularly difficult to do or time-consuming.

It should be noted that two students admitted that they did not particularly find the process that enjoyable, touching on the fact that the process was repetitive and rather dull, similar to findings in prior studies (Litzler, 2014; Litzler and Bakiev, M. 2017; Vajirasarn, 2014). This may have been compounded by the very set process of these reflective diaries. In designing the process to greatly reduce the time required and make it easier for lower-level students to focus on specific points of reflection, the activity asked students to consider the exact same questions lesson after lesson. It might be possible that changing the specific points students are asked to reflect on over the weeks could result in a less repetitive process.

5. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The majority of studies investigating the effects of reflective writing have clearly indicated that it fosters learner autonomy. However, there is still far more research to be done to gain a fuller understanding of the relationship. While this study suggests that reflective writing is effective even in a simplified form and with lower-level students, further exploration comparing the effect of formulaic reflective writing versus a more open style, where the learner is free to explore their reflection as their desire takes them, is required. The insights provided by such a comparison could help fuel pedagogical practices for teachers of all levels, and the strength of the research will only continue to improve as our understanding of autonomy and our ability to accurately measure it increase.

There is also a pressing need to engage in longitudinal studies on the effects of reflective writing. The current research has all been conducted over a period of several weeks or, at most, a semester. To my knowledge no research has examined whether the development of autonomy gained from reflective writing would continue to increase over a lengthier period of time or if the gains would plateau after a learner “awakens” through their insight into their personal learning process. Nor has any research studied the permanency of the effect on learner autonomy to gauge if the effects seen through reflective writing and developing metacognitive strategies continue long term, or is simply a temporary boost. Investigation into these areas could provide critically important information that would have significant ramifications for pedagogy.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has worked to further our understanding of the relationship between reflective writing and the development of learner autonomy. Using a mixed methods approach incorporating both quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from discussions with students and written feedback, the study suggests that learner autonomy can be enhanced with lower-level students by utilizing a simplified, quick form of reflective diary. The process of reflection and contemplating self-study seems to have helped students become cognizant of their individual learning processes and exposed them to the myriad of learning opportunities available outside of the world, helping them become better prepared students, more capable of monitoring their own learning, and better able to engage in reflection and evaluation on their own studies. Furthermore, while some found the task repetitive, the overwhelming majority of students enjoyed the process of contemplating their own learning, and found it stimulated their confidence and interest in their personal studies and in future lessons.

Given the clear benefits to be gained through incorporating reflection into the classroom, it strongly behooves teachers of all levels to consider to what extent their lessons can utilize reflection. While many may consider reflective writing to be a lengthy task, or one requiring highly developed language learners, this study shows that even a small amount of reflection can go a relatively long way towards fostering autonomy in learners of any ability.

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