

Autonomous Learning: A Case Study of Four University EFL Learners and Their Self-Study Skills alongside English Language Academic Courses

RICHARD HILL

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

Abstract

In this case study students were to balance courses with self-study when attempting to improve their skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing in English. However, with the emergence of the novel coronavirus and subsequent restrictions related to on-campus learning, students have had to study English online and have been unable to access their tutors for one-to-one council in person. As teachers and students alike adapt to online classes it is important to still look at students' self-study. Students' opinions from reflections, questionnaires and interviews are offered with information that shows a self-study planner has helped students continue with their self-study. This is a preliminary study that was conducted over two semesters. The results show that asking students to reflect after they have studied has an impact on their planning process for future self-study.

Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). More recently autonomy refers to the learner's broad approach to the learning process, rather than to a particular mode of teaching or learning (Benson, 2011). If students enter a mandatory course or program, then they are deprived the freedom of choice essential to the development of autonomy (Riley, 1986). However, autonomy does not directly mean independent study where a student isolates themselves (Benson, 2011). Kohonen (1992) explains that autonomy can include independent study, but also can be when a student is responsible for their own conduct in the social context. Bliidi (2017) and Lai (2017) recognize that students fostering autonomy can begin with educators or teachers. Therefore, autonomy can be utilized when a learner uses a particular mode of learning, social or independent study and could utilize freedom of choice in language development; or supported learning such as teacher-suggested handouts or materials. If a student uses a handout shown to them by a teacher autonomous learning can still develop. Kershaw et al. (2010) explain that students may feel overwhelmed by choices and may not have a clear idea of themselves of what they want or need. Benson (2001) adds that promoting autonomy is not leaving students on their own but that they are actively encouraged or assisted. Kershaw et al. (2010), referring to a self-access center, explain that materials can be extremely motivating resources and give additional support to learners. Perhaps materials given to a student with instructions is not autonomous learning but can encourage students to plan and reflect in their self-study. This ongoing study examines how a self-study planning and reflection sheet supported four first-year students pursuing their private language goals as they dealt with an online mandatory English course. This is research that will continue beyond the current study however this paper looks at the first two semesters in which the self-study planner is trialed and used. The following section includes context on the participants, background into the self-study planner and data collection.

Participants

The participants of this study were four first-year university students enrolled in a mandatory integrated skills course called ‘Core English’ (CE). I chose these learners from among my CE students as they consistently attended a voluntary English club online over the year. Having a good rapport with the students helped with the interviews, questionnaires, reflections and general participation as explained below in the self-study planner section. Each student’s self-study planner usage is described in the profiles below.

Kana

1 st year Female Core English Student
Information received from the study planners:
Used the study planner 22 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the planning part (top half) 22 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the reflection part (bottom half) 20 (times) weeks out of 24
Successful Planning (planning that was accomplished or more) 16 times out of 24

Miki

1 st year Female Core English Student
Information received from the study planners:
Used the study planner 17 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the planning part (top half) 17 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the reflection part (bottom half) 0 (times) weeks out of 24
Successful Planning (planning that was accomplished or more) 5 times out of 24

Sara

1 st year Female Core English Student
Information received from the study planners:
Used the study planner 24 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the planning part (top half) 24 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the reflection part (bottom half) 24 (times) weeks out of 24
Successful Planning (planning that was accomplished or more) 24 times out of 24

Keisuke

1 st year male Core English Student
Information received from the study planners:
Used the study planner 11 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the planning part (top half) 11 (times) weeks out of 24
Filled out the reflection part (bottom half) 11 (times) weeks out of 24
Successful Planning (planning that was accomplished or more) 7 times out of 24

Data Collection and Procedures

In English Club, the students and I regularly talked about the pandemic and its effect on their personal and academic lives. It became apparent that the students were unhappy (see questionnaire and interview highlights in results below) about the amount of homework they were receiving and felt that it was due to the changed circumstances of their English courses from the classroom to

online. They were particularly concerned with being unable to continue with their self-study, achieving personal goals and general English language acquisition and development. I introduced the students to a textbook by Ellis and Sinclair (1990) titled 'Learning to Learn English'. The book is designed to help teachers train learners of English as foreign or second language from lower-intermediate level upwards (Ellis & Sinclair, 1990). This book outlines two goals for learners: 1) to become effective language learners, and 2) to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Although dated I believe this textbook still holds relevant self-study ideas and teaching suggestions relevant to present day. Furthermore, the book has all the components that help students to make a self-study planner. After all the students were shown the textbook, and through collaboration online during an English club in May 2020, we made the self-study planner included here as Appendix A.

The top of the handout contains a planner so students can choose and plan how to achieve their desired goals. In English club, they shared their study planning habits and often talked about different study methods to achieve their respective goals. The handout is a simple planner splitting the days into three parts—morning, noon and evening—designed so as not to put more pressure on the students. For example, studying at a specific time might cause a student to feel hindered rather than motivated (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Once the planned studying had occurred or not as the case may be students were asked to fill out the second half of the handout which is a reflection. As with all plans, some things do not occur as intended, so students would specifically describe how they studied and made note of when the studying took place. This would encourage students to accurately see what they did and to show them whether their plans were realistic or not. Filling this out weekly would hopefully further encourage students to more realistically adjust their plans and goals. The students, lastly, also directly stated how they were feeling. After a few weeks, they were able to check and make educated judgements as to why plans did or did not work. Thus, the next time they make a goal autonomously, it may have a better chance of success. The planner was designed to be simple so I could instruct or remind students to use it if they stopped and they could start again without feeling burdened or overworked. They received one example (already filled in) when I introduced the planner to the students and in English club they were offered explanations anytime they had any questions.

The self-study planner was utilized by the four participants from June 2020- November 2020. In this six-month period I received the planners by email every week after completion. Some planners were submitted late, and some weeks students did not write a plan. As this is an ongoing study, I would suggest that all of my classes use these planners in the future and to cover different goals. The longer the study-planner is used for the more data would be collected and a student's language learning journey could be traced. However as stated above this paper will cover early findings of students' usage with the self-study planner.

In addition to the Self-Study Planner, I also collected data from two interviews with each participant and questionnaires. The students were individually interviewed twice, once at the beginning of June and once after November. The June interview took place three weeks after the study-planner was distributed. All interviews were recorded online with the participants' permission and were all conducted in twenty minutes each on average. In the questionnaires all students were asked the same initial questions, but received different follow-up questions intended to allow them to elaborate further. Questionnaires were made and filled out in Google Forms. Students received four questionnaires each, once in June, July, September and October. Regarding

data below, only relevant highlights are presented in this paper below with reference to the students' usage of the study-planners.

Research Questions

- 1) While students conduct their university studies (online or in adapted programs) what impact does the self-study planner have on students' private study?
- 2) What are the effects of reflection on future planning?

Students' Narratives

Below are student narratives which show highlights from interviews, questionnaires and reflections. They show insight into the students' feelings and thoughts while using the self-study planner. Although students consented to data collection, to maintain their privacy I have replaced all names with pseudonyms.

Kana

Study Planner Highlights:

I have (a) part time job most nights and so when I get home I feel so sleepy and I am unable to study.

I think my vocabulary study is too little. I need to study vocabulary in the morning and the evening and not just one time.

I am not motivated on the weekends. I never do my plan on the weekends.

Kana using the self-study planner is thinking about her part-time jobs or other commitments that take time or effort. Furthermore, I am happy to see that the students feel certain study, such as vocabulary, is more effective at certain times of day. I hope Kana continues to reflect on what kinds of study she feels would be more effective at particular times of the day. This could enable her to successfully achieve her goals with more informed planning.

Questionnaire Highlights:

'It made me feel guilty when I didn't study.'

'I feel I have studied more because I write a plan on Sunday that I wouldn't do (have done) if I hadn't used the sheet (study planner).'

Perhaps Kana would not feel guilty or reflect without the study planner.

Interview Highlights from December:

'I had not considered planning my own study before only school study.'

'One time after studying I used English in my part time job, like, naturally, and my boss praised me. After that I planned a lot to study the next week on my sheet (study planner) because I felt good...I felt motivated.'

Kana shows that motivation is related to how she plans. Having received praise Kana noticed how motivated she felt the next week. Furthermore, the students show that they prioritize planning school study over personal study.

Yes. There were weeks I did more because I wanted to write reflections.

It is interesting to me that the students wanted to do more to have more to write about when reflecting. I believe if Kana were to continue with the self-study planner for another semester at least she may learn more about reflecting. It is positive though that through using written reflections Kana studied more.

Miki

Study Planner Highlights:

Miki never reflected on the study planner. She reflected in the interviews and there is an excerpt below explaining her feelings on why she did not write a reflection. Miki did not understand how reflections could be useful. In future research I will spend more time with participants on the positives and various outcomes that could occur through reflection.

Interview Highlights from December:

I didn't know what to write to be honest. I wasn't really happy studying online so my motivation was always...kind of...hesitant? Yes. Like low.

In early English clubs I showed different examples of reflections. In hindsight, this was insufficient and students needed more from me to show how reflections are more than just a writing exercise but used to guide future planning. This is something I would like to address in the 2021-2022 academic year.

I want to keep using the study planner for vocabulary but I want to learn how to reflect. It made me study more but I think I can do much more...much. I want to use different study planner(s) for speaking, listening, reading...writing.

I am encouraged by Miki's desire to change or use the study-planner more. If the students adapt the study-planner for their own needs, I believe it can only increase their awareness of their own studying. I will encourage Miki to keep using the study-planner into a second year and to try various goals. Hopefully she will learn more about her studying effectiveness and thus improve future planning.

Sara

Study Planner Highlights:

I like this because before I planned my studying on my phone but this (study planner) feels more real or more serious.

My listening is getting better but I don't know why. I am listening to podcasts more (time than she had planned) than my planning. I like English (British) comedians.

I want to use this planner for homework too. And make homework red and self-study blue (Sara is referring to color coding her planning time-table).

These reflections could lead to Sara changing her future planning. Sara explained she will listen to more British comedians or podcasts after reflecting. Furthermore, she desired to improve her planning time-table.

Questionnaire Highlights

Definitely. Before (before the pandemic) I wanted to go to abroad this summer but I can't. So I will study more...I will speak more. I want to use the planner to speak to my friends and practice speaking...I will practice English conversation.

Sara did note that she wanted to use the study-planner for more speaking, but she did not. Perhaps further discussion for the study-planners' possible different uses is needed.

Interview Highlights from December:

I like the study planner but I want to do debate more in English Club. I don't think the study planner helps me with debate or some other speaking skills. I think it helps with time but I don't know how to write about speaking skills. Please teach me!

This was the most direct comment I received with regards to speaking and the study-planner. Clearly, the students have the desire to incorporate speaking skills in their personal language development. Sara explained that she did not know how to write about speaking skills so in future, I need to provide some expressions or more examples of reflections so students have the tools to precisely express their feelings. They were writing reflections every week so without a variety of expression it could feel repetitive which may be damaging to their motivation to continue with self-study planners.

Keisuke

Study Planner Highlights:

I am bored of reflections. Thank you Richard for helping me but I don't know what to write except good or bad.

This student does not see the use or benefit of reflections. As I have stated before, I believe this is an area I can address in English Club.

I like that I can that I write something and I know you (myself) will read it. It makes me think more about my work and studying.

Some students were not independent enough and still needed some guidance from their teacher involved in their self-study programs. Perhaps knowing a teacher will read their thoughts encourages them to be more considerate in their writing. However, I would like them to feel that the self-study planner is their own. This latter comment does contradict the previous comment, so Keisuke perhaps had mixed feelings on reflections in this study.

Interview Highlights from December:

I think this (study planner) helped me talk in English club. I always could check and speak about something I studied.

If the study-planner helps with English club or other aspects of the students' language learning world then I feel it is a benefit more than a chore or hindrance. Also checking previous planners does have benefits for students such as Keisuke to have records of what they have studied. Keisuke has explained above that the planner gives him content to talk about in conversations at English club. As this study is ongoing, there may be more benefits that are unforeseen in the planning process. More data and more research are needed.

Summary

The students' study-planner usage feels more positive than negative. More research is needed to determine an answer to the first research question, however the students have made it clear they are thinking about planning more. I intend to keep using and analyzing study-planners with students to see the effects on their planning and reflections. Reflection perhaps needs more guidance or support as one student never reflected and another seemed discouraged at reflecting weekly. I believe that planning then reflecting consistently has impacted the students' future planning to be more obtainable and realistic. There are also comments made by the students that suggest they are thinking about the time they have allocated to study and what they are studying. Additionally, students have expressed opinions on their study-life balance and questioned their motivation for studying while keeping part-time jobs and other commitments.

Conclusion

The self-study planner and its usage have contributed to students thoughtfully considering the way, how and amount of time spent studying. The thought and self-analysis that occurred particularly in the interviews, questionnaires, and reflections is very promising. Furthermore, this research will continue in the 2021-2022 semesters. I would like to revise the study planner with English Club members (new and existing) and investigate the relationship between planning and reflecting self-study. This study will also be extended to participants who do not attend English club, but in regular university classes as more data is needed to determine how effective the self-study planner can be.

BIO DATA

Richard Hill holds an MA in TESOL and has experience in English language teaching ranging from kindergartens, junior high and high schools, colleges and universities. He currently teaches integrated courses at NUFS having previously been a Learning Advisor at Meijo University.

References

- Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Pearson Education.
- Blidi, S. (2017). Collaborative learner autonomy. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2048-3>
- Ellis, G., & Sinclair, B. (1989). *Learning to learn English: a course in learner training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Cambridge: Pergamon Press.
- Kershaw, M., Mynard, J., Promnitz-Hayashi, L., Sakaguchi, M., Slobodniuk, A., Stillwell, C., & Yamamoto, K. (2010). Promoting autonomy through self-access materials design. In A. Stoke (Ed). *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings: The Teaching-Learning Dialogue: An Active Mirror* (pp. 151–159). JALT.
- Kohonen, V. (1992) ‘Experiential language learning: Second language learning as cooperative learner education’. In D. Nunan (Ed.) *Collaborative language learning and teaching* (pp. 14–39). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lai, C. (2017). *Autonomous language learning with technology: beyond the classroom*. Bloomsbury.PLACE
- Riley, P. (1986). Who’s who in self-access. *TESOL France News*, 6 (2), 23-35.
- Rovai, A. P., & Wighting, M. J. (2005). Feelings of alienation and community among higher education students in a virtual classroom. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 8(2), 97–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2005.03.001>

Appendix

Name:

Date :

What I would like to focus on this week :

What will I use to achieve this:

When I can do it:

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M
Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon
P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M

Date:

What did I study:

How I did it:

When I studied:

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M	A.M
Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon	Noon
P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M	P.M

How did you feel about this week of studying?