Learning to Learn Digitally: Getting Students on the Road to Autonomy

N. M. Terhune, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan

ABSTRACT

How can educators empower and encourage their students to be more proactive, and give them the tools necessary to learn on their own, utilizing digital language learning resources in a culturally sensitive way? Described below is a project that introduced students to how technology and the Internet can empower the independent language learner. The goal was for the students to develop knowledge of and confidence in self-instruction and learn how to use technology and the Internet to further their language education independently. This article first outlines research into autonomous language learning with computers, offers a list of key elements for autonomous language learning, gives a description of how an independent language learning project was implemented and reports on results of student surveys that measured student response to the project. These students lacked the skills, knowledge and confidence to study on their own. However, by learning autonomous language learning concepts, and with instruction on how technology and the Internet can support a digital language learner, they gained the understanding and confidence to set and accomplish language learning goals on their own.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Digital Learning, Independent Language Learning, Internet Resources, Learner Autonomy, Learning Styles and Culture

INTRODUCTION

The project reported in this article introduced students to autonomous language learning and digital resources available to the independent language learner and encouraged students to challenge themselves with an independent language learning project. In a 15-week semester consisting of 15 classes, the first seven prepared students for independent language learning projects through presentation of autonomous language learning tasks like formulating short- and long-term goals and participating in self-assessment and group discussion of language learning techniques. Students were then left on their own for the next eight weeks to carry out independent language learning projects. Students selected sites and media they felt would best help them reach their language learning goals. They developed language learning strategies that carried them through their eight-week independent study. Students then documented and reported on their language learning experience. Data was collected with beginning and end of class surveys to gauge students’ knowledge of and feelings about autonomous language learning, technology and language learning possibilities on the web. Results, presented below, showed that students found the project and media on the Internet useful for independent language learning.

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PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Autonomous Learning Dilemma

Learner autonomy in language learning is a concept many students feel uncomfortable with and have a difficult time understanding. In this project, first attempts at implementing autonomous language learning proved unsuccessful, as many students were overly dependent on the guidance and supervision of an instructor. Students were accustomed to having their learning directed by a teacher and lacked knowledge of where to find and use resources on their own. In class, they expected to be taught, not sent out on their own. In particular, it is difficult for Asian students, in this case in Japan, to accept that the teacher will not be telling them what to learn but be guiding and encouraging them to learn independently. As-Saber, Crosling and Rahman (n.d.) in a study of international students (mainly from Asian countries) observed that “autonomous or independent learning may often be contrary to their home-country learning cultures where students are trained to rely heavily on their teachers as guides as well as providers of knowledge” (p. 14). Studies of Asian students adapting to western learning by Chan (1999), Phuong Mai et al. (2005), Robertson (2006) and others have discussed the difficulties Asian students have with learning without the guidance of a teacher and adjusting to western bias towards individual learning. Minsheng (2006) in a study from China expressed it this way: “Foreign teachers’ attempts to give Chinese students autonomy and responsibility for their own learning are often perceived by Chinese students as abandonment of the students and abdication of responsibility, and as a failure to fulfill their expected roles” (p. 124).

Many Asian students, including Japanese, expect to be told what to learn and find it difficult when left on their own to decide what and how to study. Dias (2000) references Takeo Doi to explain the Japanese attitude towards doing things on their own.

In his ground-breaking work on the Japanese psyche (Doi, 1971), the psychiatrist Takeo Doi relates an experience he had soon after he arrived in America to study psychiatry. Although he knew that Americans used the expression ‘please help yourself’ as a matter of kindness, it left an unpleasant ring in his ears. He understood that it meant ‘please take what you want without hesitation,’ but he could not help but feel that the phrase implied ‘if you don’t help yourself, nobody else will.’ He could not see how it came to be understood as an expression of goodwill. (p. 49)

Students may be hesitant to help themselves and believe they must be cared for and presented (told) what to learn. They may be disappointed that the teacher is not “teaching.” This outlook leaves little room for autonomy and emphasizes the importance and difficulty of introducing concepts of independent learning.

Furthermore, despite the technological advances in Japan, students know very little about how to apply technology to language learning and even less about how to do this on their own. Although students indicated on surveys and demonstrated in class that they could use computers and other technology, most of this was limited to using movies to learn English. Students knew very little about the myriad possibilities on the Internet and other resources available for autonomous language learning. Technology has great potential to help language learners and is especially helpful to the independent language learner. Levy and Stockwell (2006) in their book on language learning and technology, CALL Dimensions, point out that “[o]ne of the great potential strengths of CALL is the possibility of students learning on their own in a self-access center, library, public access area, or even in the home at a convenient time and appropriate pace” (p. 29).

Learner Autonomy

Many terms have been used for learner autonomy: teacher-independent learning, self-instruction, independent learning, self-study,
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