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Understanding self-regulated learning: thoughts from attending the Self-Regulated Learning Symposium in Shimonoseki

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As a learning advisor who has been working in self-access learning for six years, I consider myself to be familiar with the field of learner autonomy and self-directed learning, drawing on the work of Henri Holec (1981), David Little (1991), Phil Benson (2011), Anita Wenden (1998) and others in my advising practice, curriculum design projects and research. From time to time in my work, I have come across the concept of self-regulation, as opposed to self-direction, and have had the opportunity to attend several presentations on the subject, where I have found myself in a familiar-sounding yet ultimately different universe. Some of the constructs used were familiar to me, but the terms used to describe them (such as forethought and performance monitoring instead of planning and reflection), and the researchers most referenced (typically Zimmermann and Schunk (2011) as opposed to Holec or Benson) were notably different.

I was thus eager to take part in the symposium at Shimonoseki City University, Yamaguchi, entitled *Self-Regulation in Foreign Language Learning: Shared Perspectives*, to learn more about it.

The symposium ran for two days, with only one presentation room, which meant that every participant was able to attend all the presentations. This and the relatively small size (around 40 participants over the weekend) created a friendly and supportive atmosphere, conducive to discussion and the sharing of ideas.

Day One

Many of the papers presented at the symposium are now available in this special issue, so, in the interests of conserving space, I would like to focus on several presentations and interactions from the symposium which have helped me to understand the relevance of the concept of self-regulation for my own advising and self-access practice, and my understanding of how it relates to the fields with which I am more familiar: learner autonomy and self-directed learning.

The presentation that did most to impress upon me the similarities and essential differences between learner autonomy and self-regulation was the keynote

given by Garold Murray, from Okayama University, on the first day of the symposium. Garold compared the two constructs, showing both similarities, and ways in which they diverge. In particular, he pointed out the different “mindsets” of learner autonomy and self-regulated learning, and their differing backgrounds: learner autonomy emerged from within the tradition of TESOL pedagogy and therefore has been researched by practicing language teachers, whereas self-regulated learning has its origins in educational psychology.

As Garold asserted in his presentation, both autonomy and self-regulation are seen as learner characteristics, and both now acknowledge the important role of the social context, in addition to the individual’s cognitive and metacognitive processes. However, there are also some notable differences. Research into self-regulated learning usually frames the learner as responding to a task ultimately set by the teacher, whereas, within learner autonomy, learners tend to be acknowledged as being able to take responsibility over initiation of the learning task itself. In this way, the ability to self-regulate could be seen as a prerequisite for, but not synonymous with, a learner becoming autonomous.

This point resonated more deeply with me later in the day, during the presentation by Stella Millikan from Kyushu Sangyo University. She explained the difficult journey she and her students had undertaken to improve their time management skills for a course which required intensive vocabulary learning out-of-class each week, and which many of her students had previously failed.

As one of the participants commented to Stella after her excellent presentation, the course was hardly autonomous; all students had a set list of the same words to learn and had to record the same required information about each word, regardless of their individual familiarity with each term. However, Stella’s use of a detailed scheduling document that she first encountered working in a junior high school to make the students’ aware of and accountable for their spare time, and the success she has had with engaging students in this approach, reminded me that self-regulation did not necessarily imply full autonomy.

The students she described were not very autonomous in the wider sense of the concept; they may not have a strong awareness of their motivations for language learning or the ability to set personally meaningful learning goals within the constraints of the course. However, through Stella’s work on time management

strategies they had to a certain extent become self-regulated, if only to a narrow degree.

This made me think about whether autonomy itself should always be the ultimate goal for students in my own context. The starting point for any self-directed learning, after building awareness of some of the major concepts, is a process of goal-setting and the writing of a learning plan. This was the approach taken in a course designed to foster self-directed learning skills I previously ran at Kanda University of International Studies (Navarro & Thornton, 2011). While I strongly believe that learners who can set their own learning goals, carry out a plan designed to help them achieve these goals, and reflect on their chosen learning strategies will be more effective language learners, my experience as an advisor has also brought me into contact with many students who seem reluctant to engage in this style of learning. While there may be many reasons for this, such as unfamiliarity with this way of learning, or a lack of motivation, Stella's presentation made me think that the way I had organized my previous course was, to a certain extent, the wrong way round. Whereas I had started the course with goal-setting activities, I now realize that this is actually quite a cognitively challenging task, for which many students, especially freshmen, were just not ready. These students may have benefitted from a more structured approach to the development of single cognitive strategies for self-regulating their existing language learning practices, such as the time management focus described by Stella, before moving on to the more difficult task of identifying personal learning goals.

A similar point had also been raised by Caroline Hutchinson from Kanda University of International Studies, in the first presentation of the day. Caroline followed a similar structure to my own course as part of her freshman English class designed to develop independent learning skills. She had also found that some students seemed overwhelmed by the demands of the course and ultimately became demotivated. As freshman students, many of them had little previous exposure to alternative ways of learning English and did not have the ability to articulate specific language learning goals or choose suitable learning materials and strategies. One of Caroline's conclusions was that students may benefit from being given more time to experiment with several new learning strategies before deciding which areas of their English they want to focus on. This resonates with my thought that to start a course

with a full-blown needs analysis may be setting students a higher metacognitive task than some of them can handle at the beginning.

Providing instruction and support at a suitable level for learners was a theme which was returned to in the closing discussion of the first day. Many participants admitted to struggling with this issue, especially in larger classes where one-to-one support is rarely possible, such as the course described by Martin Mullen and Chris Fitzgerald, from Meisei University, in their presentation on the teacher's role in fostering learner autonomy. Even in my work as an advisor, where I do have the opportunity to work with individual learners, it can often be very difficult to gauge the degree of guidance suitable for each student at each stage in their learning. In addition to different approaches being employed for learners at different stages, individual advisors and teachers also differ in their approaches, and while there may be a general consensus in much of the literature to avoid too much prescription, from the discussion it was clear that there is a significant gap between this ideal and what many practitioners, including myself, consider realistic and practical in their own contexts.

After a full day of engaging presentations and constructive discussion, delegates took the opportunity to unwind over a very nice meal of Shimonoseki's signature dish, *fugu*, or blowfish, organized by the symposium conveners, Kristen Sullivan and Paul Collett, who both work at the host university, Shimonoseki City University.

Day Two

The second day of the symposium kicked off with a presentation from Kristen and Paul, who had selflessly given themselves the most unpopular timeslot of the weekend – the morning after the night before; but they were greeted with a high level of attendance despite the previous evening's festivities. Kristen and Paul reported on the latest findings of their long term project to develop their students' self-regulated learning skills through the use of a Study Progress Guide which they have developed to supplement the textbook used by teachers at the university. They emphasized the fact that being aware of and understanding both teacher expectations of using such materials, and student reactions to using them, is vital for such materials to succeed in their aims. This point chimed with my own conviction of the importance of being aware of learners' beliefs about language learning and self-directed learning, and how these beliefs influence student behaviour, which I had emphasized in my presentation

the previous day. This idea was echoed in the following presentation by Akiyuki Sakai and Atsumi Yamaguchi, from Kanda University of International Studies, about investigating teachers' views on how self-directed learning skills should be taught.

In the second and final keynote presentation of the symposium, Yoshiyuki Nakata, from Hyogo University of Teacher Education, gave a comprehensive overview of self-regulated learning, situating it within the wider fields of learner autonomy and motivation, and focusing on the ways in which affect, cognition and behaviour interact. Through data from two studies, a quantitative analysis of over 1000 Japanese secondary students, and a qualitative study of 12 graduate school students undertaking self-regulated learning, Yoshiyuki highlighted how it is not just cognitive actions, but also one's emotions, which require self-regulation for successful learning. He emphasized that students require not only cognitive scaffolding but also motivational/affective scaffolding from teachers, again highlighting the role of teachers and significant others in developing self-regulated learning skills.

The following presentation by Sakae Onoda, from Kanda University of International Studies, reinforced the importance of the role of affect, in the form of self-efficacy beliefs. In his study, structural equation modeling was used to investigate the relationship between self-regulation strategies, self-efficacy, and L2 vocabulary learning.

The closing discussion of the day was facilitated by Kristen and Paul, the organizers, who asked participants to jot down or tweet questions and thoughts they wanted to explore during the day. Rather than addressing any single presentation, these questions and the ensuing discussion were quite broad. Topics touched on included when and how self-regulated learning instruction should take place, in what format (e.g. in a stand-alone course, integrated into language curriculum, or in a self-access centre), and from what age. The vast majority of researchers in the field, and certainly the presenters at this symposium, are working as teachers in universities, and therefore it is maybe unsurprising that the presentations focused almost exclusively on higher education. However, the point was made that students have 12 years of schooling before they reach university, and if self-regulation is such an important and transferable skill, we shouldn't be waiting until they reach university to focus on it.

Conclusion

By the end of the weekend, although tired from listening to many presentations, I was happy to have had the chance to reflect on my own practice, and discuss ideas and approaches with the other delegates. In recent years, I have come to realize that small, focused events such as this one held in Shimonoseki are far more valuable to me than huge conferences where I end up missing more promising presentations than I see. The opportunities to meet and connect with like-minded people and exchange ideas for both teaching/advising and research have made such events invaluable, and this enjoyable weekend was no exception.

Notes on the contributor

Katherine Thornton is a learning advisor and the Program Director of E-CO (English Café at Otemon), a self-access centre at Otemon Gakuin University. She has worked as a learning advisor for five years, most recently at Kanda University of International Studies, after gaining a MA in TESOL from the University of Leeds, UK.. She is also the current president of the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL).

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