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## **Redesigning an Independent Learning Course Component: Recognizing the Role of Instructor as Guide**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes how an Independent Study course component is being revised to include a greater focus on teacher-guided goal-setting and reflection, inspired by Nunan's (1997) five levels of autonomy. It reports the findings of a pre-study in which the new component was trialled in 14 classes, and more in-depth qualitative findings from my own class, aimed at establishing the pros and cons of the new component for both students and teachers. Finally, I will report on improvements made following the pre-trial, and future research aims.

*Keywords:* reflection, autonomy, independent study, goal-setting

The idea that learners need to be able to take charge of their own learning in order to be successful has become widely accepted in language teaching, and is a guiding principle at Kanda University of International Studies. We are lucky to have an attractive Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) that students often cite as one of their primary reasons for choosing the university. Despite this we still face the question of how best to encourage independence and the development of student autonomy without forcing it.

Many students I have talked with, especially those with less language proficiency, say that while they are motivated to make the most of facilities such as the SALC or its Learning Advisors, they hesitate to do so. They report lacking the courage to discuss their wants and needs in English, or struggling to identify their wants and needs in the first place. While a self-access centre is not the only context in which students can take charge of their learning, such conversations suggest that many learners do not come to Kanda well-equipped to do so, no matter how much they might want to.

This observation formed the starting point for my 2013 redesign of the Independent Learning Component of Kanda's Basic English Proficiency Program (BEPP) course, a compulsory course taught throughout the freshman year, taken by all students in the English program. Although this is a multi-skill course, which is taken alongside a reading-writing course and basic grammar instruction, its primary focus is on spoken interaction.

Originally, the Independent Learning Component had been a series of one-off lessons in the introductory "Orientation Unit" of BEPP. However, on the basis of teacher feedback and future

curriculum directions, the decision was made to extend it to allow for several cycles of independent study and reflection throughout the freshman year. A grade weighting was also given to indicate the component's importance and ensure that all teachers covered it. This paper will describe and evaluate the redesign of the Independent Learning Component, and outline aims for the future.

### **The Old Course**

The curriculum at Kanda is currently in transition from a model focussed on communicative language tasks and individualisation referred to as a "personal curriculum" (see Johnson, 2002, p. 2), to a process-based framework incorporating a strong focus on self-analysis and reflection. With this in mind, in 2012 feedback on existing BEPP materials was collected from teachers, with the goal of addressing problem areas and updating materials to better reflect the new framework. Teachers identified the existing Independent Study Component as being in need of an overhaul, which I undertook to do in my capacity as a BEPP project committee member.

The existing materials were designed to be taught to freshman students in the first few weeks of semester one. They asked students to identify a target skill to work on, and to choose three activities which would help them to improve this skill. No suggestions of possible skills or activities were given to students; teachers who wished to provide scaffolding were not given guidance as to how to do so. The students were then given several weeks in which to try their activities, inside or outside class at teacher discretion. In final teacher consultations, students were asked to discuss the success of their independent study activities.

With almost no scaffolding or support, and an unlimited choice of potential target skills and activities, students frequently chose poorly matched goals and activities (such as "I will read books to improve my pronunciation"), and felt pressure to report success at the end. Once the consultation had been completed, most teachers dropped the issue of independent study due to the component's lack of success the first time around and the lack of support for turning it into a regular part of classroom practice. Most teachers reported that it was too time consuming and not beneficial enough to justify the classroom time needed, especially as students' independent study did not factor in final grades.

### **The Revised Course**

I felt that the existing materials, while strong on individual student choice, failed to support the students in developing their ability to choose goals and learning activities effectively. Rather than expecting students to demonstrate a substantial degree of autonomous behaviour from the beginning, I hoped instead to create an ongoing process of goal-setting and reflection that would aim to develop their capacity to make informed decisions about their learning. I also felt that

students needed greater guidance and support from the teacher. To better identify the stages towards autonomous learning and support them through the revised curriculum, I used Nunan's (1997) five levels of autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence.

In the revised course, students would first focus on increasing their **awareness** (level 1) of learning strategies, their own learning style, and of choice in language learning. At the same time they would enhance their **involvement** (2) by making choices about their learning based on a range of suggestions provided by the teacher. The teacher would also provide support for learners to modify activities or goals to suit their needs, what Nunan calls **intervention** (3). The **creation** (4) of goals, objectives and tasks would be encouraged but not required of students until they were judged to be ready. **Transcendence** (5), in which students connect what they have learned to the outside world, is considered a broad goal for the program as a whole, but not an explicit focus.

The new Independent Learning Component was given a 10% grade weighting within the Basic English Proficiency Program, and was designed to be revisited throughout the semester at flexible intervals with differing degrees of teacher intervention. With my low tier class, for example, students set goals and identified activities in class with my guidance, then had a week to try their activity and a week to complete a reflection.

In the initial year of the project, we decided to focus on improving speaking skills, which most new students identify as a weakness. Following a series of **awareness**-raising activities about learning styles and preferences, students recorded an initial diagnostic discussion, and then used a combination of teacher feedback and their own interests and needs to identify a goal from a list: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discussion skills (**involvement**).

Based on shared interests, students formed groups and either chose an activity that suited their goal from a list, or visited the SALC with a teacher or learning advisor (**involvement**). They were given time to complete their chosen activity, and then asked to reflect on what they had done, how useful it had been, and what they would change in the future (**intervention**). This reflection was also combined with an in-class speaking activity, enabling students to reflect more concretely on whether their study activity had helped them. These stages cycled throughout the semester, and I met with every student in my class at least twice to discuss their progress.

### **Initial Findings**

The materials were trialled in 14 classes in the low- and mid-tiers (approximately 20 students per class) for one semester, with teacher feedback collected at the end of the semester. I carried out research on my low-tier class of twenty students, taking field notes, collecting student reflections and recording 30 minutes of consultation with each student. I set out to analyse how students approached the activity, how they viewed and dealt with poor study choices, and to explore

the pros and cons of the new component model for students and teachers with a view to future changes.

Most of my students took well to the project, seeing it as an opportunity to explore the resources available to them. They tended to be more honest in face-to-face consultations than in their written reflections, especially when admitting that they had not found a study activity motivating or useful. This allowed me to clarify both that enjoyment does not necessarily detract from learning, and that they were allowed to have and voice negative opinions when they did not enjoy an activity. A number of students discovered new study activities that they found motivating, and others experienced success in modifying activities to better suit their goals and preferences.

There were a few students who I felt benefited less from the project. Several repeatedly chose gap-fill exercises from the same high school grammar textbook, and so were unable to use comparison between their study experiences as a means of evaluating activities. Finally, two of the twenty students consistently failed to provide any meaningful reflection on their study, or to actually complete their planned study. This came in spite of the fact that their reflections were assessed; I suspect that these students did not see the value of independent study.

In a final reflection on the four cycles of goal-setting and reflection we completed in semester one, 19 of 20 students felt that their skills had improved, and 17 felt that the goal-setting project had helped their English skills in general. While there is a tendency for students to “seek to please the teacher” by reporting positively on their study experience and trying to manifest the ‘autonomous’ behaviours expected of them (Breen & Mann, 1997, p. 143), I did notice an increase in student confidence, especially in using the meta-language of talking about study. Students seemed more confident in accessing and evaluating the resources available to them outside the classroom, and I also felt more aware of students’ needs and wants, enabling more targeted teacher interventions in class.

On the negative side, teacher feedback pointed to the heavy workload for teachers, who were required to identify activities and guide students individually. Especially for students with a low English level and little experience of making decisions about their study, student choice was probably still too wide open. This freedom of choice also allowed students to make conservative choices, and therefore not to push themselves to explore new activities or supplement their existing awareness of study resources.

### **Future of the Project**

Based on the findings of this trial period, and the teacher feedback, I revised the materials again. The diagnostic test was dropped, as it was felt to be too soon to accurately measure student weaknesses, and too daunting for new students. The in-class speaking activity was also dropped, as

it was felt to be a misleading measure of whether a study activity had been beneficial. In response to feedback that both teachers and students needed more support, I introduced what I have termed a 'strong model' of the component, in which teachers preselect a range of activities, rather than have students identify their own goals and then find activities to fit those goals as in the initial 'weak model'. This allows students to focus on managing their learning in class and evaluating their choices in reflection, and is recommended for lower-level classes. Teachers can choose between the two models depending on the needs of their students.

The dual model version of the Independent Learning Component is being trialled in the 2014 academic year. In my class, we are following the 'strong model', which has meant less focus on the individual setting of goals and more emphasis on group-based activities and reflection. In terms of research, this year I hope to explore changes in student motivation and beliefs about language learning more deeply, using pre- and post-test questionnaires, reflection and consultation data, and final interviews with selected students. I also intend to explore the role of L1 in supporting and extending student reflection.

#### **Notes on the contributor**

Caroline Hutchinson is a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan. She is also a member of the Basic English Proficiency Program project committee.

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