



ISSN 2185-3762

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal
<http://sisaljournal.org>

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A Summary of a Forum at JALT 2019**

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Publication date: March, 2020.

To cite this article

Mynard, J., Ohashi, L., Peeters, W., Shelton-Strong, S. J., Tweed, A. D., Watkins, S., & Wongsarnpigoon, I. (2020). Understanding learner autonomy through research: A summary of a forum at JALT 2019. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 11(1), 53-63.
doi:10.37237/110106

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/mar20/mynard_et_al

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Abstract

This paper reports on a forum featuring four presentations on learner autonomy research, all with practical applications. The paper gives an overview of the purpose of the forum, a short summary of each of the presentations, a discussion of some of the main themes and methods, and a summary of the ways in which the forum themes were continued to be investigated through the Q&A session and in follow-up recordings and interviews. The four projects described in the paper are: the role of classroom teachers in fostering out-of-class, autonomous language learning, exploring online peer interaction in social networking sites, examining the relationship between students' agency and affordances for learning when studying abroad, and investigating learner autonomy in a self-access context from a self-determination theory perspective.

Keywords: learner autonomy, research, methods, Japan

In this paper, the authors provide a summary of a forum held at the 2019 JALT annual International Conference in Nagoya, Japan. The forum featured presentations on four pieces of research related to a particular aspect of learner autonomy. A discussion session followed the presentations, prompted by questions from the audience. Several factors served as inspiration for the forum. One primary purpose for sharing the presenters' work in this setting was to promote interest in research and higher-level scholarship in the field of learner autonomy. While practice-based or smaller-scale studies certainly contribute to the field, the presentations here showed that more rigorous research is feasible as well. Another objective was to demonstrate the diversity of possibilities for such research. As the four presentations each addressed a different learning context, potential researchers might have found something

relevant to their own situations. Additionally, for less experienced researchers, the presentations provided examples of replicable research with practical applications. Finally, the session represented an opportunity for like-minded researchers and practitioners to meet and share ideas. This paper continues with descriptions of the four presentations, followed by overviews of some major themes from the session and of the questions asked in the discussion period.

The Four Presentations

Paper 1: Roles for teachers in fostering out-of-class, autonomous language learning by Louise Ohashi

In the first presentation, Louise Ohashi approached learner autonomy support from the perspective of the classroom teacher. Her stance on learner autonomy is that it is not a solo journey and can be fostered through teacher support (Blidi, 2017). She drew on her prior work in three different teaching contexts at Japanese universities to show how classroom teachers can provide support for learners to assist them in managing their learning beyond their face-to-face classes. First, she introduced key elements she had integrated into a Self-Directed Learning (SDL) course and an English speaking course. The most important element was Planning-Action-Reflection Cycles, in which students:

- outline long-term and short-term goals;
- identify tasks that will build towards goals;
- list the tasks in a SMART¹ way;
- discuss the plans in class;
- take action outside of class;
- discuss the action (or inaction...) in class;
- reflect on the experience;
- modify plans if necessary;
- continue the cycle.

(Ohashi, 2018, pp. 237-238)

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-related.

In addition, students in both the SDL and Speaking courses were given opportunities to learn about and try various study tools and methods, with more time allocated in the SDL course. Questionnaire data (n=50) indicated that students in both courses felt that the structures incorporated to facilitate autonomous learning were useful and committed time to self-study during their courses and university breaks, with longer time commitments for most SDL students (Ohashi, 2018).

In the third context, Ohashi drew on her doctoral work to show the importance of long-term support for learners. In her role as a teacher-researcher in that study, she integrated support structures for learner autonomy into a two-semester English writing course then conducted a follow-up questionnaire and interviews six months later. While many students who had taken the writing course went on to continue learning autonomously, this quote by one student who did not receive autonomy support from her teachers after the writing course shows that she was not ready for the “freedom” to manage her own learning, highlighting a need for longer-term support:

“For those who would really like to study I think there is a good side to this freedom. For people like me who tend to wonder what to do, it gets harder to know what to do and [I/we] end up doing nothing²” (Ohashi, 2019, p. 156).

Ohashi concluded by recommending that teachers and institutions consider the changes that can be made within their own contexts to offer in-class support for autonomous, out-of-class learning.

Paper 2: Understanding learner autonomy through research: Online peer interaction by Ward Peeters

In the second presentation, Ward Peeters introduced his research on the ways learners can build communities of practice and develop their agency within online environments. The presentation featured a number of examples of online peer interaction from a research project using Google Classroom at the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Japan. The sample group consisted of foreign language learners

² Translated from Japanese.

(n=194) who were enrolled in the SALC's Effective Learning Modules. The Modules help learners in setting goals in their learning trajectory, managing resources and learning strategies, making a learning plan, collaborating with their peers and with Learning Advisors, and assessing their own skills and performance (Mynard & Stevenson, 2017; Peeters & Mynard, 2019).

Participants in the project were informed that they could use Google Classroom to talk to their peers if there was anything they would like to share about the Module, their learning, or their lives at university. The Module pack included instructions that reminded them they could use the online space for this purpose every other week. The main goal of the project was to harness their "capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a social, responsible person" (Dam et al., 1990, p. 102) in order to help them develop as autonomous learners. The examples showed how participants shared and discussed their learning goals (including how to improve skills like reading and speaking), resources they used on a daily basis, reflections on their progress, stories about their weekend plans, and discussions about their likes and dislikes.

While the examples showed that students had started to develop a sense of mutuality, or "the interactive building of understanding of a shared learning goal based on diverse viewpoints" (Kenney, Kumar, & Hart, 2013, p. 366), Peeters explained that some flaws in design needed to be resolved in order to fully harness the power of online peer interaction in the future. These include rethinking incentives to promote inclusion and creating a more structured pathway for learners to engage with others, preferably on a weekly basis (Peeters, 2019). Tasks should be designed in such a way that students can create something in collaboration with others (e.g. a one-paragraph essay, a mind map, or a report on an interview), in addition to reflective tasks. These alterations should help learners in exercising their ability and freedom, but also their desire to control their learning (Benson, 2013; Ushioda, 2011). The ultimate goal in this regard is for learners to develop a sense of co-ownership when working together with their peers (cf. Peeters & Pretorius, 2020).

Paper 3: Agency and affordances in study abroad by Andrew D. Tweed

In the third presentation, Andrew Tweed examined how four learners enacted their agency to capitalise on the affordances for language learning beyond the classroom (Benson, 2011) during study abroad (SA). This research was motivated by Tweed's belief in learner autonomy and how it connects with his work in a university self-access center, where he

promotes out-of-class learning and supports study abroad students.. From his work and research, Tweed has noticed that Japanese and other students often fail to take advantage of the language opportunities beyond the classroom during SA (Benson, Chappell & Yates, 2018; Tanaka, 2007). Little research has been conducted on how learners take advantage of the affordances of the SA context, and this study represented an attempt to address this gap.

For this research, students were asked to send the researcher a message via the LINE messaging application every day during their three-to-four week SA trips about their language experiences outside of the classroom. This procedure was intended to get students to notice, act and reflect on the affordances of SA. The research questions focused on the affordances for language learning in SA on which the students reported, as well as how they exercise their agency in order to capitalise on those affordances.

Regarding the methodology, the study employed an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1996; van Lier, 2000, 2004) to investigate students' learning beyond the classroom during SA, focusing on their agency in relation to affordances for language learning. Following Mercer (2011, 2012) and Larsen-Freeman (2019), agency was understood as being multidimensional. Tweed operationalised agency in four dimensions: social, behavioural, cognitive and affective. In addition to the students' LINE messages, data were collected via pre- and post-SA questionnaires as well as post-SA interviews.

It was found that the four learners enacted their agency to explore a range of affordances beyond the classroom. Examples of these were brief exchanges in shops, extended conversations with classmates, teachers, and host families, as well as reading and listening to authentic texts in public. Overall, learners were able to monitor their performances in individual episodes as well as over time, and they expressed goal-related statements in relation to these events. Affective agency (e.g., happiness, excitement, sadness, frustration) was often expressed in conjunction with monitoring and in relation to successful and unsuccessful episodes. Regarding practical implications, Tweed suggested that the use of applications such as LINE could be employed not only to encourage student reflection, but also so that teachers and advisors could offer support to students while they are abroad.

Paper 4: Learners' experiences in interest-based communities: Understanding through a Self-Determination Theory framework by Satoko Watkins

In the final presentation, Satoko Watkins described the benefits of fostering Student Learning Communities (SLCs) outside the classroom as a holistic approach to language

education. The study was conducted at the self-access center of a Japanese university specializing in foreign languages and cultures, where there were nine SLCs autonomously holding regular meetings. Each SLC learned about a variety of content (e.g. pop culture, social movement, and languages) while using English as an authentic communication tool. Membership ranged from three to forty members.

The focus of the study was to analyse the community members' fulfilment of basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, as Self-Determination Theory indicates that the satisfaction of these needs links directly to learners' high-quality motivation, productivity, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In order to explore learners' individual stories and identify shared experiences in various communities, an interpretive approach was applied to two types of narrative data: a bilingual survey (n=31) and six individual interviews.

The findings suggest that the learners felt they had autonomous control over their own learning in the SLC. Specifically, deciding what, how, and when to learn for themselves. Moreover, the learners highly valued the relatedness aspect in the SLCs. Many described their relationships as unique; they did not feel there was a hierarchical relationship nor feel competitive with one another, which they explained was "common" in other social learning contexts in Japan. The learners tended to accept the fact that "they are different" - different ages, majors, and fluency levels but they developed profound bonds due to their shared interests and goals. Five out of six interviewees described that they were all learners and teachers in the community; they participated in the community not just to learn but also to support others. Lastly, the learners felt competence resulting from an improvement in their English skills, gaining content knowledge, and making contributions to the community. The feeling of autonomy and relatedness created a low-stress and enjoyable learning environment where learners can continue to strive and foster a sense of achievement. Watkins believes that SLCs have a positive potential to transfer language education from "language teaching" to learner empowerment - they allow learners to embrace their individual differences, gain confidence in teaching themselves and others, and belong in a community that enriches their lives, which prepares them to further their own aspirations as a learner beyond university.

Themes and Insights into the Field

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the research took place in four different learning contexts: In the classroom (Ohashi), in an online environment (Peeters), in

a study abroad context (Tweed), and in a social self-access learning center (Watkins). In addition, the researchers drew on a number of theoretical models: self-directed learning (Ohashi), communities of practice (Peeters), agency within an ecology (Tweed), and self-determination theory (Watkins). Data included questionnaires, interviews, online interactions, and even real-time LINE messages. However, the methods in all cases tended to be qualitative interpretations of the data conducted by the researchers which is appropriate for exploring the development of a complex process like learner autonomy. Some of the common findings were that a sense of community and the role of others drives autonomy development. In addition, the supportive role of the teacher/advisor was stressed.

The four different studies highlight the creative and varied ways in which researchers might approach the investigation of learner autonomy in various contexts. Each of the projects could be replicated or adapted, and it is hoped that further studies in these areas by other researchers can continue to shed light on ways in which learner autonomy is best facilitated.

Questions and Follow up

The four presentations were followed by a brief Q & A. The facilitators had provided colour-coded question slips to the audience so that those attending could write a question for any of the presenters while they listened, and these were collected at the end of each presentation. This allowed the forum to continue uninterrupted, and at the same time permitted the audience to interact in real time by responding to the content with questions of their own, as they arose. As the forum came to a close, the question slips were collected and read out to each of the presenters and the audience. The time remaining allowed for approximately two questions for each of the presenters, and this time was shared among them. However, as there were many more questions remaining than time left to address, it was decided that these would be used later as part of a videoed interview with each presenter, which would serve as a recorded summary of the forum presentations, including an opportunity to deal with the remaining questions. These recordings were later posted to the online LAb session repository of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education on 28 November 2019 (Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education, 2019) and are available there to be viewed by the general public.

Notes on the Contributors

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Louise Ohashi is an associate professor at Meiji University who specialises in TESOL. Her main research areas are CALL/MALL and learner autonomy. Her PhD thesis examined these areas under the title “Using Digital Technology for Autonomous, Out-of-Class English Language Learning: The Influence of Teacher Support at a Japanese University”. Twitter @ohashilou

Ward Peeters is a post-doc researcher in linguistics at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and a research fellow at Kanda University of International Studies (Japan). He studies social network impact in foreign language learning and has conducted research projects in Belgium, South-Africa and Japan as part of an extensive study on computer-supported collaborative work.

Scott J. Shelton-Strong is a learning advisor and lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. His research interests include learner autonomy, advising in language learning, self-determination theory (SDT) and developing an understanding of the connections that interlink these areas to learner well-being and engagement. He holds an MA in TESOL from the University of Nottingham, UK.

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