

Fostering Learner Autonomy of EFL Students at a Japanese High School:

Logbook Research

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Background

In response to the recent trend of learner-centered language learning and life-long learning, the significance of fostering learner autonomy in school education has been emphasized globally (e.g., Dam, 2011; Kojima, 2010; Smith, 2008). As much research has shown, autonomous learning plays an important role in improving students' proficiency in a second language and establishing their learning cycles which guarantee their learning throughout their lives (Benson, 2011; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Little et al., 2017). In addition, previous studies have clarified that metacognitive strategies (MS) use and learner autonomy are inextricably linked (e.g., Zimmerman, 2002). However, there is a lot of room for exploration in learner autonomy research in Japan, especially after the issuance of the latest version of Course of Study, which highlights the significance of being autonomous in the current dynamic society (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2016).

Purposes and Research Questions (RQs)

The purpose of this study was to foster learner autonomy by stimulating students' MS use through logbook writing at a Japanese high school and to examine to what extent logbooks were accepted by EFL students in such a school. Based on these purposes, three RQs were set:

RQ1: How does logbook use change MS use of EFL secondary school students in Japan?

RQ2: How should logbooks be used to foster MS use of EFL secondary school students in Japan?

RQ3: How do secondary school students in Japan perceive and evaluate logbook writing?

Was the reaction positive or negative?

Methods

79 Japanese EFL first-year students (37 males, 42 females, ranged in age from 15 to 16 years old) belonging to a public high school in Saitama prefecture participated in this study. A contrast group was not set for ethical reasons. They had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least three years at junior high school before entering high school. No one had an experience of going abroad for more than a month. As for their English ability, most of them (75%) had passed grade 3, pre-2 or 2 of *Eiken*, which suggested that their English proficiency corresponded to the range from A1 to B1 level of the European Common Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

In this study, logbooks were introduced as tools to foster participants' MS use, thus promoting learner autonomy. The author explained to students about them at the first intervention. Although the submission of logbooks was optional, participants were told to write and hand in the logbook every week over the course of 11 weeks. They were basically allowed to use only English.

The idea of using logbooks was originally from Dam's (1995) work. Based on it, the

author set a *daily logbook* section, where students document their daily English learning. The section consisted of four parts: *what to do today* (participants plan the daily learning), *what I learned today* (participants record what they learned about English both inside and outside the classroom), *today's me* (participants self-evaluate their English learning by giving themselves points ranged from 0 to 10 and write the reason for the point), and *diary* (participants write about anything that they experience that day). These four sections are mandatory, and at the same time, participants were granted the freedom to personalize their logbooks, with no restrictions on the format and the design. In addition to the daily logbook, participants engaged in *weekly logbooks* and *monthly logbooks*. The biggest purpose of the weekly logbook was to develop participants' metacognitive skills for English learning, by letting them look back on their current ways of learning English and seek more effective ones. For that, they carried out the task which was assigned by the instructor every week. In the monthly logbook, participants were instructed to write three monthly goals at the beginning of each month. The purpose of this is to keep participants motivated to learn English and to let them get used to making goals, thus promoting MS use. They were allowed to include general goals (e.g., *I will make as many friends as I can*) and English learning goals (e.g., *I will memorize 40 words each day*).

Feedback was given to participants from the instructor every week, adopting constructive content-based feedback (Ellis, 2013), which allowed participants to modify their

way of using MS. Feedback from an instructor could lead students to introspection that integrates theory, concepts, and practice (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Also, seeking ways of providing more effective and stimulating feedback to the students, the author followed Hattie & Clarke (2019). They argue that effective and motivational feedback must involve specific strategy instructions and comparisons with learners' early work to find their progress. Based on this, the instructor often gave them explicit strategic feedback and comments complimenting their growth compared to their previous strategy use.

In the 11-week logbook intervention, a questionnaire related to MS use (the MS questionnaire; MSQ), semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire related to students' evaluation of the logbook use (the logbook evaluation questionnaire; LEQ) were conducted and analyzed.

Results

The results revealed that (a) those students who used logbooks at a high frequency reported their increasing use of MS; (b) the way of using logbooks as well as the frequency was important for a higher level of MS use and greater autonomy; and (c) some gave positive evaluation of logbooks in terms of the effect on their metacognition and the improvement of English skills, while others gave negative evaluation.

Specifically, students who had recorded their learning at least on a weekly basis significantly improved MS use, especially in terms of planning and reflection of their

learning. Moreover, these students came to believe that MS use while learning something was an important process for them to achieve academic success. However, not all the students who used logbooks frequently improved their MS use. The key consisted in their way of using logbooks. That is, choosing what to do voluntarily while learning and being aware of the importance of MS use were proved to be important aspects for the students to be autonomous learners. Voluntary choices involved their strong will to select what, when, and how to learn by themselves. In addition, it was revealed that students should find how effective and important the use of MS while learning was; otherwise they would not keep recording writing in their logbooks. Finally, regarding the evaluation of logbook use, the results were dependent on the learners. For example, the more students feel enjoyment, the more they are likely to record learning in their logbooks. Regarding toughness, whether they found logbook writing tough did not depend on how much they wrote in their logbooks. Moreover, it became clear that learners who used their logbooks a lot found them useful. In particular, they felt their usefulness in terms of writing skills and metacognitive skills (i.e., planning, monitoring, and evaluating). From the interview data and open-ended questions asking reasons why they would or would NOT write in their logbooks in the future, similar results were obtained.

Conclusion

The current study is a significant examination of the impact of logbook intervention on

EFL students' MS use at a Japanese high school. The findings from quantitative data indicate that the more students engaged in logbook writing, the more significantly they improved their MS use. Because there was no control group, the findings of this study should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive. However, judging from MS gains of each group categorized by the frequency of logbook use, it seems clear that logbooks worked well to promote students' MS use. Therefore, it can be concluded that logbooks should be adopted at least into secondary schools at an advanced level. Also, from the results of the semi-structured interviews, it was revealed that not all the students who wrote in their logbooks with high frequency showed significant improvement in MS use. In other words, not only the frequency and the amount of writing but also how students record their learning is important. Voluntary choice and awareness of MS importance are some of the predictors for successful logbook users. Those who work as English teachers in an EFL context need to introduce logbooks carefully so that learners can keep writing logbooks and find them enjoyable and beneficial for their learning. Finally, regarding students' perceptions of logbook writing, it can be concluded that students have "likes" and "dislikes" towards this process: some liked it because, for example, they noticed advantages of using logbooks in terms of their academic performance, while others did not. These findings are important data and must lead to more progress of logbook research in any context.

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