

Self-Directed Learning at MIC: Current Strategies and Future Possibilities

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Abstract

In this paper, the author considers the possibility of developing self-directed learning at MIC. Self-directed learning means learning which is planned, carried out and evaluated by students themselves. After describing the growth of interest in self-directed learning in English-Language education over the past three decades, the author examines our campus and programs with a view to identifying where self-directed learning is already occurring and how further promoting of self-directed learning might benefit students. Drawing on case-studies of programs at other universities, suggestions are made about how small-scale changes might be implemented to increase the awareness and effectiveness of self-directed learning. It is further suggested that any changes should be accompanied by research into self-directed learning and students' learning needs.

Introduction

Self-Access Learning Centers (SALCS) have been growing in popularity since the 1990s. As Sheerin (1991) explains, this shift was part of a methodological trend away from teacher-centered pedagogies such as audiolingual or behavioral training, towards learner-centered methods. One reason for the popularity of self-access is that it is a way to deliver individualized learning (Sheerin, 1991, p. 143). During the 1990s, interest in learner autonomy and self-directed learning was steadily growing in Japan (Aoki & Smith in Cotterall, 1999, p.19-28). One of the first self-access centers in Japan was established at Akita International University in 2004, under the direction of Garrold Murray (Murray, 2018,

p. 102). By 2019, there were over 40 “Language Learning Spaces” listed on the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning homepage.

Understanding self-directed learning is becoming imperative for language educators in Japan due to the increasing diversity of student levels and nationalities. The total number of overseas students in Japan in 2014 was over 138 thousand, over double that in 2000 (MEXT, 2014). At the same time, a larger proportion of 18-year olds are enrolling in university (92% in 2010, *ibid*), leading to a wider range of ability among domestic students. Accommodating such diverse needs with appropriate levels of challenge and support requires more resources, more hours of contact with the language, more individual attention than the conventional classroom can provide. A resource-rich environment, together with guidance on how to use it, has been found an effective way of helping students to take control of their own learning and develop both learning skills and language. In this paper, I would like to reflect on the provision for self-directed learning at Miyazaki International college, with a view to stimulating discussion and further research. For the purposes of definition, this paper will presume that self-directed learning means learning with an agenda created by the learner, whereas self-access learning means learning done without a teacher. Self-access learning is more concerned with the space and the resources for learning, while self-directed learning describes learning planned by the learner.

Context

Miyazaki International College (MIC) has a tradition of content-based learning in English stretching back to its founding in 1994 (Mulvey, 2018). Currently the college has a small self-access center known as ARC (Academic Resource Center) and a social learning space (“the international lounge”). Since 1999, the focus of research has been on methodologies for fostering student engagement in content-and-language-integrated learning (Isbell, 1999, 2004) and active learning (Mork & Howard, 2015), more than self-access learning. Due to increasing diversity of student levels and nationalities, the following questions arise: “How could we exploit self-directed learning at MIC to help students at the upper and lower end of the learning ability spectrum and those whose first language is not Japanese?” “What can we learn by looking at provision for self-directed learning at other universities who have been emphasizing self-directed learning over several curriculum cycles?”

Connecting Active Learning with Self-Directed Learning

The term “self-directed learning” became widely used in the USA during the 1980s, referring to adult education. The term “self-directed learning” is defined by Knowles as "a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes" (1975, p. 18). Saks and Procedia, in a study of components of self-directed learning and self-regulated learning, identify active participation as one component in self-directed learning. (Saks & Procedia, 2014, p. 191). Christmas (2015) following Astin (1999) describes the following elements of active learning: transparency of course goals and assessment, student engagement with class content and with their peer group (Christmas, 2015, p. 45). These features constitute scaffolding for self-directed learning but are not enough per se to guarantee continued learning outside the classroom. Saks and Procedia point out that self-directed and self-regulated learning require the following: “setting goals and analysis of the task, accomplishment of the plan and self-assessment of the learning process” (p. 192).

Active Learning has long been a curricular focus at MIC but it has gained new vigor since the implementation of the MEXT Acceleration Policy in 2014 (Howard & Mork, 2015, p. 67-8.). MIC’s content-based program has undergone many cycles of development to raise teachers’ awareness of active learning and to promote the use of teaching strategies which encourage engagement and critical thinking. The concept of Active Learning outlined by Howard and Mork involves learner autonomy, but does not focus on the role of out-of-class learning and the possibilities of a materials-rich environment.

Self-directed learning is an important issue in an English-medium environment like MIC. The transition from being an active learner to being “self-directed” seems to happen naturally for some learners, as a result of being in a stimulating environment. But in the author’s experience, many first year students at MIC undergo an “initiation period” akin to starting study abroad. For weaker students, that initiation can be marked by anxiety, particularly when compounded with difficulties in oral/aural skills and anxieties about social skills in L1. Group-cooperation is vital. For example, students receive a challenging task such as making an e-portfolio or pptx presentation in a group. One or two students informally take a leadership role by asking questions to the teacher during the class, and explaining to classmates. In the classes I have taught and participated in as a team-teacher, there is

frequently a period of questioning and checking (sometimes in Japanese) after the teacher has stopped talking. This period gets shorter as the students get accustomed to all-in-English instruction and to the particular activities of a course. When making group presentations for a class taught by the author in Spring 2019, about a fifth of the students made office visits for the purpose of more detailed explanations. Students' written reflections revealed that they had undergone a tough experience but also bonded with their classmates and gained confidence from being able to achieve a goal. However, some of the skills which were developed in the course of this learning trajectory were not formally assessed or counted as goals within the program. If their listening was not good enough to understand first time, the students who had enough social skills, could learn from classmates, or visit the teacher. But if shy students missed out due to their lack of language skills, then they risked failure on a content goal (such as the pptx or the Mahara page). Thus, more scaffolding might help students whose English language level is low. It would also be useful to do further research into how students deal with these kinds of challenges and whether they believe that they develop transferable skills.

During the academic year 2019-20, stimulated by the experience of teaching a mixed ability group for the teacher license course in the previous year, I began reading about self-directed learning with a view to comparing the learning environment at MIC to that of other liberal arts programs in Japan. I was particularly interested in knowing more about long-established programs, such as those at Akita International University (AIU) and Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) as sources of insight into strategies for enhancing self-directed learning. These universities have developed credit-carrying courses, which are taught in a self-access language learning environment with guidance by instructors and support staff. It was notable that their use of self-access was personnel-intensive, as both places use 1:1 consultations with learning advisors. In this paper, I ask what can be learned from programs which foreground self-directed learning, and put forward ideas related to future curriculum development and further research into language learning environments at MIC.

Self-Directed Study at MIC

In many ways MIC offers an ideal environment for self-directed learning. A high proportion of faculty have expertise in both content and second language-acquisition. The college's emphasis on active learning and critical thinking offers affordances for rapid language development. The success of the program is evidenced by the increase in students' average TOEIC scores and vocabulary scores from year 1 to the end of year 2 (Bennett, 2018). Although there has been no unified "self-directed study" program to date, there are plenty of resources available. Without further research into how students perceive these resources it is difficult to get a complete picture of how and to what extent their needs are being met. In particular, in the third year of study students are required to write a senior thesis which requires a high level of self-directed study and planning, for which many seem to be unprepared. Having experience of self-directed learning projects before they undertake their senior thesis might aid students in these situation. Furthermore, explicit instruction in self-directed learning could also help students to extract more benefit from study abroad in their second year.

Overview of Resources for Supporting Self-Directed Learning at MIC

- Professors, available for several hours per week within office hours and by appointment. Many entertain drop-in visits throughout most of the week as well.
- Student learning assistants, who are available to assist with a particular class or learning need at the request of a particular professor, can provide help during class time and also provide valuable role models, if professors choose to employ them.
- The academic resource center (ARC), staffed and managed by a graduate of the college for several hours in the afternoon and evening each day.
- The international lounge, a study and meeting space.
- The library, a large, traditionally quiet space with a video watching space and many private rooms which can be booked for private sessions.

One-to-One Consultations

All students are allocated an advisor for the purpose of registering for classes and monitoring their learning and general well-being while at university. First year students must meet with their advisors at least once per month and are encouraged to do so more regularly. At the time

of registration, freshmen have access to a senior student mentor who can interpret between them and their advisor and help with advice on study. By the end of the first semester, freshmen should have met their advisor for three or four individual meetings, focusing on their progress across the curriculum. However, the function of the “advisor” is (in my experience) mainly administrative and does not routinely include detailed attention to the student’s learning needs unless students request it or unless they are failing. Since several classes include tasks such as “interview a lecturer about their special area” or “survey the opinions of foreign faculty” students are also likely to have visited at least one other professor’s office to ask about that professor’s special subject area. In addition, if students are having difficulty understanding something in class, they are encouraged to follow up by visiting the professor in office hours to ask a question. This is particularly necessary when students are learning to use new apps for the reading course or creating e-portfolios. Last but not least, some students visit in order to practice conversation skills, even making a goal of visiting a different professor every day. This allows self-motivated students to develop their oral skills and academic knowledge rapidly.

However, for those less fluent or less confident in English, visiting a professor’s office, even with a friend, can be challenging. We find that according to a study of students at Oxford University, even the elite students at Oxford University worry about what to say and do in tutorials:

For many.... the greatest anxiety is quite simply not to know exactly what it is that their tutor expects from them in each tutorial..... In most cases it is only... after 2 or 3 terms that students say they are entirely sure about what they expect to do in, and take away from, their tutorials. (Clarke, 2008, p.93).

While MIC is less demanding than Oxford, students the world around are observably anxious especially the first few times they visit their professors’ offices. Moreover, foreign language anxiety is phenomenon that has been widely researched. (Kimura, 2008, p. 173). Further research into how students use one-to-one consultations might reveal more about whether they need further support and whether students and teachers have similar expectations or not. On the plus side, the first few compulsory visits to the advisor build up familiarity, which makes it easier for students to visit. In addition, students are encouraged to

visit voluntarily either to get clarification about projects or to practice English. Students who do this are enthusiastic about it. Teachers generally make an effort to be approachable. But many students still seem to experience nervousness about speaking and listening to English and some rarely make it to the teacher's office on a voluntary basis.

Social Learning Spaces

The term social learning spaces has come into vogue to emphasize the social function of learning centers. Murray writes about how the learning space has become a place where students use English and also create relationships and feel they belong. (Murray, 2018, p. 108). This is particularly important for overseas students who may not be able to speak Japanese well enough to integrate socially outside class. The most visible social learning space at MIC is the International Lounge. It is used for a bi-monthly "World Café" hosted by students with the support of the International Centre. The world café was instituted to encourage friendship between domestic and overseas students. Attendance varies from about 10 to 20% of the freshmen. The space is otherwise used for students to do their homework and hang out. It generally has a rather studious atmosphere. Further research could be carried out into how the International Lounge, ARC and library are used.

Self-Directed Learning within the Curriculum: Akita International University and Kanda University of International Studies

In this section we will draw on accounts of self-directed learning at two universities in Japan which have very different approaches to ours at MIC, with a view to gaining a better understanding of what processes and environments were found to encourage self-directed learning elsewhere. The two universities studied are much larger than MIC. They have larger self-access facilities. On the other hand, MIC has the luxury of a high teacher: student ratio and presence of relatively large numbers of "content experts" on campus.

One of the first educators to report on self-directed learning in Japan was Garrold Murray of Akita University of International Studies (Murray, 2009, in Smith & Strong, 2009, p. 61-70). Akita International University established a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) in 2004, with Murray as its first director. Murray emphasizes the importance of *how* spaces

and resources are used, and of offering real choices to students when they are learning to take control of their own learning. In his study, Murray describes a compulsory foundation course that is taken as a pre-requisite to Global Studies/Global Business studies and taught in the SALC and assessed by portfolio. Students learn to make an inventory of their skills and write a language learning autobiography, before moving on to make a plan for work they will carry out in the SALC centre. Each class meeting begins with a 10-minute mini-lesson focusing on topics such as how to do self-evaluation and how to find resources, followed by 80 minutes of self-study during which the professor is on-call. Other topics covered include: how to find and use materials, how to set a specific and realizable short-term goal and how to measure one's own progress in relation to a specific goal. Students keep logs and report on their progress to their professor every two weeks. Their portfolio includes weekly logs with evaluations of which materials helped them to achieve their learning goals and final written reflection about whether their views on language learning have changed during the course. Murray emphasizes the principles of planning, reflection, support and personalization, which guide the process at Akita. One interesting feature is the fact that grades are negotiated and students are graded on their ability to make and carry out a study plan rather than on their progress in language skills.

In end-of-course feedback on the course, students remarked on developing increased ability to talk in English to proficient overseas students on their campus, increased ability to understand humor, better reading speed. Murray notes that, from the instructor's point of view, the change from teacher to facilitator is challenging. Murray comments on the difference between the role of teacher and advisor: "As a teacher, one of the biggest challenges I faced was relinquishing control of the learning to the learners...I realized that the starting point of my work for this course had to be their understanding of how they learn." (Murray, 2009. p. 67). At MIC there might be a lack of personnel for implementing a course like this but some features could be borrowed or adapted, as we will see below in the final section of this paper.

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) has had a self-access learning center since 2001 (KUIS homepage), although the development of credit-carrying courses was somewhat later. Freshman orientation to the SALC takes place during class time as a required part of the first semester compulsory, credit-carrying language course. There are also

one-off workshops which students can attend at the SALC for interest or for fun, and workshops which can be requested by teachers to deal with topics like “motivation” or “research skills”. A further, credit-carrying course called “Effective language learning” has also been developed as an optional course which can be taken by students of various years (Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). There are also modules in self-access learning which are optional and not for credit. Kanda has a team of advisors who are on hand full time and are also engaged in research, trialling and reporting on various initiatives. They have developed out-reach through materials such as posters, handouts and the SALC website (including a group on social media) to increase students’ awareness of self-directed learning as well as “learning tools” such as diagnostic tests, activities designed to help learners to set goals and implement a plan of self-directed study, readings/questionnaires and worksheets on motivation. (Kato & Mynard, 2015).

A hallmark of the program at Kanda is its emphasis on the development of programs hand-in-hand with a research agenda. This has kept the program accountable both to students and management. Developing the curricula and materials takes a lot of time, effort and commitment. Although the creation of a large study centre and hiring a dedicated team of advisors might not be suitable for MIC, there may be some useful strategies which can be adapted to fit MIC. The details might depend on initiatives and willingness of individual teachers to participate in fact-finding about the current state of self-directed learning at MIC and on what kind of the student needs they identify. It is noteworthy that before credit-carrying self-access course was opened to all freshmen at Kanda (KUIS), versions of it were carried out voluntarily on a trial basis by interested professors.

Conclusion: Suggestions for Further Exploration of Self-Directed Learning

By looking at accounts of self-directed learning courses at other universities, we have been able to identify some common elements. These basic courses emphasize learning-to-learn, to the extent that students are graded on their ability to carry through their learning plan rather than progress in language skills. As we saw when comparing active learning with self-directed learning, the capacity to make one’s own goal and measure one’s progress, is not something that comes naturally to all students. Students at MIC have some robust support systems including the advisor system, but some students are still lacking in self-directed learning skills at the end of their second year. One possibility which could be explored is the development of materials to stimulate self-directed learning by individual teachers, for

example by piloting and sharing diagnostic materials, asking students to write language learning histories and make learning plans. Following the principles outlined by Murray (2009), the emphasis would be on planning, reflection, support and personalization of learning. Stronger links could be created between class learning and out-of-class use of English by creating homework tasks which include options such as a visit to the ARC or World Café. ARC could benefit from being linked with an on-line social network which is not confined to individual classes, to stimulate those students who are keen but shy or isolated in their own class. Borrowing from KUIS, the ARC environment could be enriched by posters and fliers addressing topics such as goal-setting, how to deal with learning anxiety and how to self-motivate. In order to help students to approach advisors, and non-Japanese-speaking classmates, topics such as “How to visit a professor’s office” and “Intercultural Awareness” could be picked up in workshops during freshmen orientation period. At whole-school level, a survey of students’ perceived needs might also help to give insight into how students are using the one-to-one consultations and learning spaces already available and how they experience the challenges of adapting to the English-medium environment. It would be useful to know students’ feelings on their needs and preferences for paper-based resources and real or virtual spaces for English study. Further investigation could include effectiveness with respect to catering for diversity, considering that MIC has students of various language backgrounds and extreme ends of the English/Japanese language ability/IT ability spectrum. Further research might help us to understand why not all students improve equally, and help those who do not.

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