

Learner Autonomy and Practice in a Flipped EFL Classroom: Perception and Perspectives in New Digital Environments

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The phenomenon of globalization is overwhelming as it is constantly driven by the rapid growth of political and economic migration, trade exchange, increased mobility, and by ever-developing media technologies. The constant tide of influences contributes to the emergence of Global English that further ushers to more complex tasks for language educators. Many language classrooms now attempt to take advantage of the trend and incorporate new technology in their hope to make learning more relevant to the learners' lives. Technology has been found to accelerate language learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms urging many educators to reorganize approaches and processes that could address new learning needs, learning styles and emerging literacies.

Teachers investigate more on attitudes and anxieties among young people who are becoming more concerned of their readiness for their future careers and work life, with many increasing their effort to supplement formal schooling with independent study, TOEIC exam preparation, EIKEN, private English language course, or Business English vocational programs. How to prepare lessons that are relevant to students' needs has now become a major objective for many a university teacher. But just as teachers focus on more student—centered education, technology could be competing as well and sharing a big slice of the learners' attention via the internet, digital games, and social networking like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others.

This ever-growing influence of new technology in the learners' everyday lives could actually be regarded as a positive factor to improving teacher strategies. New technology allows for more autonomy and ushers learners for a greater sense of responsibility over their learning. Autonomy, seen as multi-dimensional as it takes different forms depending on various contexts of learning, could possibly address many concerns in learning a second language. Autonomy is regarded as a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning, although it is displayed in different ways and to different degrees according to unique characteristics of each learner and each learning situation (Benson, 2011).

Could more autonomy further increase students' motivation to learn English in the university? Referring to motivation as a unitary concept is insufficient to explain and fully understand its dynamics in the classroom because individual motivation exists at different levels of generality (Tanaka, 2014) but if we understand how students regard

the posture they have gained out of their new skills, and how they value English competence, it would be a step closer to more teaching-learning success.

Applying a motivational classroom could be one way to develop intrinsic motivation in learners and answer their basic psychological needs. Tanaka (2014) emphasized on the importance of observing motivational intervention that could trigger intrinsic trait motivation and intrinsic classroom motivation, traits that are believed to be strongly correlated with the need for competence.

Providing more practice for listening skill would also lead to increased intrinsic motivation for listening activities, trait that is correlated with the need for autonomy and competence. It is also suggested that intrinsic motivation for speaking activities is strongly correlated with the need for autonomy and relatedness. What specific activities to employ in the classroom to usher students to these paths will be investigated in this paper. Would a combination of increased autonomy and practice in classroom and homework tasks develop students' intrinsic motivation for English competence? A short study of freshmen university students' first steps to English language learning in the university could shed some answers to these questions.

Purpose of the Study

The increasing potential for autonomy and practice to address the English learning difficulties of freshmen university students in Japan motivates this researcher to write this paper. This research attempts to investigate autonomy not as “freedom to learn a new language or not to learn it”, neither as “learning in isolation”, nor “learning without a teacher”, but autonomy as “learning with opportunities for home practice to be able to exercise control over learning” and its relevance to the current practice in language education. It will also study how more digital lesson practice opportunities at home and outside the classroom could strengthen student autonomy leading to more personal responsibility for language learning.

Some students found English as difficult to learn, driving them to choose courses with lesser English subjects, so ushering this business-track class closer to English would require a test of strategies that could trigger interest towards the language. During the first two months of their English learning in the university, freshmen students engaged in doing controlled role plays and their favorite reading aloud (RA) with the teacher, but struggled to construct intelligible sentences on their own during extemporaneous conversations. Having observed these difficulties, this researcher suggests that flipping the classroom, meaning, providing digitally recorded dialogs through videos, practice exercises and unit quizzes for students to access at home before and after the teaching time could make students propel progress.

The opportunity to watch video-recorded conversations, try unit practice exercises and attempt unit quizzes at home in advance could foster prior understanding of the

learner of the lesson, provide more valued teacher-led discussions and practice inside the classroom thus resulting to better English fluency and competence. This teaching-learning method has been seen as a major factor in effecting changes in the classroom.

Background and Related Studies

Several studies pose that identity, L2 motivation, attitudes, environment and learning methodology greatly affect students' learning of a second language. The notion of integrativeness, as in Japanese learners' generalized international outlook, with reference to Japanese learners interest in international affairs, termed as "international posture", their willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with international partners, openness, and non-ethnocentric attitude towards different cultures (Yashima, 2002, 57; in Dornyei and Ushioda, 2009) drive motivation for English competence.

With the spread of Global English and the growth, fluidity and complexity of context across which English is now learned and used, it is becoming more and more difficult to explain people's motivation for learning English in terms of an interest in the target language culture and community and a possible desire to integrate into this community (Ushioda, 2013). This current trend explains why in today's English learning styles in Japan and new literacies emerge.

In the 1970's, the world was not only a world without mobile phones, or videos or Playstations, but one without search engines and World Wide Web-and one in which email and the internet were available only to a tiny minority. The figure continued to rise at a staggering rate so by the end of the twentieth century, the world saw a development of technology which transformed the way many people communicate (Tagg, 2012). Adults and students in Japan should be among the 360 million people estimated to be online or able to access the internet by the year 2000, considering the country as one of the major suppliers of computers worldwide. In a university classroom for example, there are 26 students out of 30 who have access to the internet at home adding to the nearly two billion internet users (Internet World Stat 2010).

A quick review inside some language schools in Japan, for example saw new programs offered answering recent demands from consumers, thus, programs like E-mailing, Weblogs, Online Shopping, Copyright search and Social Networking have been recently added to the older business-related courses like Presentation, Letter Writing, etc. Popular exam preparation courses for TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS and EIKEN on the other hand remain attractive to young workers or graduating students especially in urban areas as these are requirements in many job openings. Some continuing education courses are even formed just to teach senior citizens upgrade their computing skills and social networking. Looking closely at these factors, we may ask further if these current trends in international communication are indeed the

primary drivers for English learning in Japan and whether they are true to all learners across ages. If graduating students and professionals are highly motivated to learn and use English due to the more complicated demands of work and career, modern ways of international communication, do the freshmen students share the same motivation?

A study on Japanese women suggested that personal motivation could also affect individual's interest in English. The book found out that many women were attracted by the allure of the foreign realm and associated activities such as: language learning, particularly English, studying overseas, working for an NGO (non-governmental organization), or an NPO (non-profit organization) or romance with Western men (Kelsky, 2001 in Takahashi, 2013). In a related vein, another study explored Japanese women's "akogare" or desire for the West or English language and found that it intersects with Japanese women's life trajectories (Takahashi, 2013). Furthermore, the researcher reported that the women's language desire intersected with their second language learning, identity transformation, migration, power and gendered life choices.

In some learning environments like in language schools this researcher has worked in, some programs offer adult learners and professionals intensive courses filled with realistic lessons with options for face-to-face immersion or home-stays, or internet access, special software for more home practice or sophisticated gadgets which can be used in the presence of the teacher or during independent study.

Some support schools in Japan (Juku) providing study modules and practice also have modified their programs to offer independent study packets that come with gadgets and interactive software, or given internet access for more skills exercises. In an interview, some Japanese junior high school students expressed their satisfaction over their multi-media self-study kits subscribed from a private corporation specializing in independent study courses.

Formal education had its teaching-learning methodology developed to allow more internationalization with many public schools utilizing state-of-the-art equipment like interactive white boards (IWBs) with internet access to connect to other peoples of the world especially for cultural immersion. In her combined four years of work in the past decade at elementary, junior high and senior high schools in Japan, this researcher has also observed great improvement in international language and cultural exchange in formal education curriculums. Either through their foreign teachers called the JET, the ALTs or assistant language teachers, or through international student visitors and exchange students, learners now enjoy more natural English interactions.

But as direct contacts with English speakers rise, digital media also heighten their influence in the learners' lives. Smart phones, YouTube site and other social networks like Facebook and Twitter offer advanced functions and applications motivating the young and adults to interact digitally.

The improved speed to connect with interlocutors, caused by the popularity of digital-electronic technologies now also affect the success of students and professionals'

communication abilities, including when students share or inquire about their homework, or when workers report about business transactions with colleagues, an interview with sophomores in the same college revealed these to be prevalent nowadays.

Contemporary changes have impacted on social practices in all the main areas in everyday life within modern societies: in work, at leisure, the home, in education, in the community, in the public sphere (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011) resulting to the transformation of social practices. Such new practices continue to emerge at a rapid rate involving students' new ways of communicating to peers, or professionals' means of sharing information by producing, distributing, exchanging of multi-modal forms of texts that can arrive via digital code as sound, text, images, video, animations, and any combinations of these.

In the light of these developments, how we prepare students to their current and future communication tasks may suggest how relevant our teaching-learning situations are in and outside the classroom. Thus, the use of technologically-enhanced materials is imperative. It is not suggested that traditional teaching method be replaced by technology-enhanced education, considering the highly valued teacher-student interaction is still regarded as the most effective activity in language education in Japan. But to gain more class time to allow for more of these activities to happen and cover materials that need to be covered requires independent home practice with up-to-date digitally-enhanced electronic materials that contain rich exposure to sound systems and structure of the language including phonic sounds, text, images, video and animations which must be provided to students to prepare for classroom tasks. A number of recent studies call this provision of lesson preview method as "flipped classroom", seen in Western schools as a revolutionary approach to teaching and learning.

The flipped classroom calls for infusing the curriculum with technology in an organized meaningful way, flipping the classroom, or providing knowledge opportunities in advance and offering additional practice at home to better prepare students.

Flipping the classroom method has been gaining popularity in many learning situations in the USA. Making opportunities available for advanced or enhanced learning outside the classroom especially when the natural environment lacks authentic use of the language, can reach out to all students in class. One Math classroom owes its success from flipped classroom as it gave the teacher time to pay struggling students ample attention and assessment to meet their needs, resulting eventually to the teacher achieving flexibility in providing alternate assessments on an individualized level (Cockrum, 2014) . This success of Clintondale High School in Michigan flipping its Math classroom has led to having all subjects in grade nine flipped their classes including Language Arts. By the end of its first semester of implementation, the school saw a failure drop rate of 28% in its ELA courses, and in a more impressive report, saw a 28% increase in its students' writing skills and 34% in reading in Michigan Merit Exam

(Green, 2012 in Cockrum, 2014) . The model adheres to many second language learning principles dealing with autonomy, practice, collaboration, automatization and student-centered learning.

The term, “flip the classroom” refers to inverting the traditional method of teaching; that is, turning upside down the model in which information (the teaching lesson) is presented during class time and the homework is assigned for practice at home. This demonstrates that the teaching lesson is assigned for students to access out of class time (Fulton, 2014) . Typically, the lessons are captured in video format and prepared or curated by teachers who may appear in a corner of the video frame narrating, or appear full-on teaching, or narrate the lesson while appearing on corner of a slide, or provide the voice in the background describing the action on a white board or computer screen. In this research, the structure will be partly modified giving more importance to its home practice component rather than on its importance on home-accessed teaching time.

One of the many reasons why the flipped-style classroom was widely welcomed in the US was because it benefits many learning classrooms as teachers can now best use of their face-to-face time with the students and apply more student-centered activities. In its common structure, there is also an intentional focus on higher level thinking rather than rote memorization (Morris, Thomasson, Lindgren-Streicher; Kirch and Baker, 2012 in Fulton, 2014) .

Another reason for the flipped classroom model receiving increased attention in educational circles and the media is mainly due to the rich structure where students receive necessary resources and interactive exercises on the content area for homework as preparation for class. Teachers redesign the lesson into easy-to-understand instruction reaching out to the various levels of their students employing creativity through multiple teaching strategies to enhance learning. This transforms the classroom into a place for active learning, questions, collaboration, discussion and completing assignments allowing students spend more class time working with their peers in a collaborative setting (Keengwe, Onchwari, et al., 2014) . Would this teaching-learning model fit Japanese students’ learning styles as well? This paper will further examine the effects to English language learning as well as find implications for flip model’s relevance in Japanese education.

The Lesson Format

While many see the flipped classroom’s lesson sequence as a significant factor for the learner’s prior knowledge of the lesson, this researcher plans to utilize the method in the Japanese language context not only for the purpose of introducing the new concepts to the learners and providing additional practice, but also to allow students to practice autonomy, accessing the lesson at any time, any place and as many times

as they please. Giving the learners autonomy to choose time, place, speed and access times could establish more control and confidence in the EFL student. The class textbook comes with a digital version of the book, plus videos, songs, listening exercises and short and long quizzes taken under a time frame. A partially flipped classroom is applied throughout the semester of study as one way to observe autonomy to further increase motivation in students resulting to more achievements and progress in their English skills.

The Participants

Two groups of English language learners will be investigated in their attempts and effort in studying English, with Group A, freshmen university students of General English, and Group B, a Conversation class of professionals. Group B is composed of 4 professionals employed in private companies in Japan, namely, a senior consultant/mechanic, a sales representative, an architect-project officer, and a travel agent who were invited to evaluate and assess learning activities to compare with university learners' preferences.

Research Question and Assumption

The study focuses on a longitudinal qualitative investigation of students' initial attitude towards conventional and digital-interactive practice in their first year General English course, their reflection on their weekly activities, and their changing perception of English language learning.

The class meets once a week for 15 weeks. A pre-assessment test measuring their general abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing was conducted after two weeks of introduction to the course, review of basic vocabulary and a few friendly dialogs. Initial assessments revealed the class level as low beginner with an average achievement of basic grammar in a written test.

The First Five Weeks

At first month, the learners used a textbook accompanied by an interactive CD-Rom-Active Book (Top Notch 1, by J. Saslow and A. Ascher, Pearson-Longman) . As the material is accompanied by a digital book, students could preview all the contents of their lesson before or after the class teaching time. The first four weeks focused on classroom vocabulary discussions, dialogs, listening and student-student and student-teacher interactions. Succeeding weeks included grammar class discussions with dyadic speaking exercises. Homework engaged students in additional vocabulary enrichment with encouragement for independent study, listening enhancement through videos and

free communicative writing through diary entries or journal writing.

At the end of the course, students were then asked to evaluate the impact of such activities to their learning of English through a bilingual Japanese-English questionnaire. The students were asked to express their perception of the tasks and rank them as: very effective, effective or has little effect to their English learning. Their responses are shown in the graph below.

Of the four major activities in the first four weeks in and outside the classroom, students found small-group conversations and discussions the most effective to their learning, followed by textbook-based dialogs, movie viewing, and lastly, diary writing.

At small group discussions of four to five members, students gave small talks about their likes and dislikes, community descriptions and hobbies. Using colorful posters with pictures of their pet, club members and favorites, students found the task very effective as they listened to each other about interesting things in their lives. Peer questions and confirmations were less threatening making the speaker feel more relaxed and confident encouraging natural remarks from the four listeners. Students considered the task a more relaxed activity after a more formal teacher-led grammar discussion.

Small group interactions allow for more pragmatic discourse competence where students easily recognize usage of target language. The supervising teacher or a student co-interlocutor could lead students into more individualized instruction of special expressions. In this pragmatic discourse event, language is analyzed from the point of view of the users as they hear it during familiar context, reflecting the choices they make and the constraints they encounter while sharing information to their peer group. Students realize on the spot what the effects of their use of language have on the other participants during this informal talk.

Why students value this informal interaction with peers could tell us the necessity of

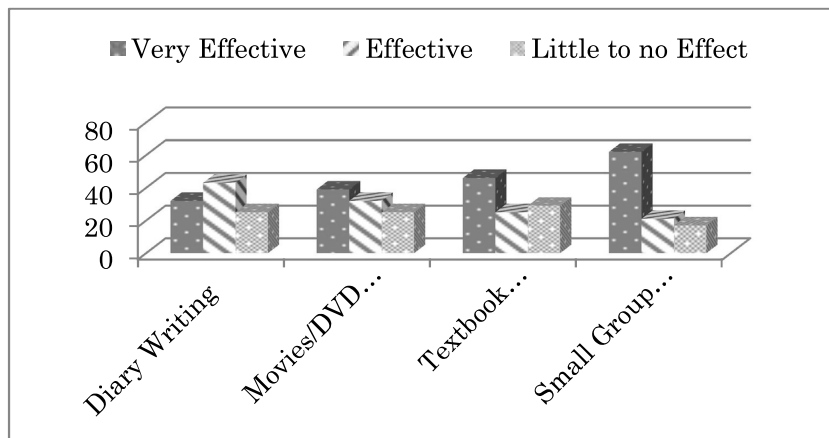


Figure 1. Learners' Initial Perception of their Activities (Weeks 1 to 5)

familiarity and extensive use of the language with less pressure. In one study as well, Gass and Varonis (1984) said that familiarity with a foreign accent was a significant factor in comprehension. Learners' familiarity with the interlocutors also adds to the listener's understanding of the nonnative speech in general, and with a given topic. Although familiarity with the topic could be the primary factor for the students' preference for this activity, other factors like lower expectations and peer tolerance of mistakes among other factors play a facilitating effect on comprehension. Placing interlocutors in a more familial mood could prepare students at the early stages of communication until they are ready to face foreign interlocutors like a foreign teacher.

Learners' attitude gradually changed towards the next term of their course when students have become familiar with the teacher's strategies, and interacting with the teacher as well as imitating the mentor's examples speaking before the whole class became easier for the many of the students, a follow-up interview revealed.

Colorful pictures and clear listening exercises contained in the textbook were also seen as very effective. With each page of the textbook projected on screen, students could clearly read most of the words uttered by the teacher and understand grammar rules and usage aided with graphics and illustrations. The discussion established students' awareness of the language before they applied them in their oral communication. Learners gain metalinguistic awareness thinking about, reflecting upon, and manipulating the forms and function of a language, apart from its meaning (Lems, K., L.D. Miller., and T.M. Soro, 2010). This enables students distinguish real words from non-words, and their ability to hear the phonological error in a mispronounced word and be able to correct it, or be able to hear the error in a syntax pattern and correct it.

Although most of the exercises could be accomplished just by sitting, teacher dynamics transform paper-based activities to more speaking drills and application. This is done while avoiding the unpredictability of speaking activities and the moral ambiguities of intercultural lesson content and learner prioritizing performance in their assessments (Lamb and Budiyanto, in Ushioda, 2013) . An EFL context in Asia observed by Lamb and Budiyanto revealed the "reading-out of answers" to their written exercises, the giving-out of short responses to motive questions, and working in pairs to prepare a dialog, are the most-preferred activities by students. These same classroom dynamics work well with the university students under investigation. The tasks were a ubiquitous form of speaking practice in the early stages of language learning. All the course units employed these starter activities and they worked well as pre-communication activities.

Movie watching is preferred by the more advanced students with competence of at least low intermediate able to comprehend the plot and the flow of events. Comprehension check was randomly included in the interview test or friendly chat with the teacher.

Dubbed into multiple languages, DVD movies are now popular for movie enthusiasts,

medical workers learning medical English, and lawyers learning technical English in Japan. But university students may have just begun to discover what movie-watching could offer as only eight students out of these 28 participants considered watching English movies interesting, easy to understand or fun. While two stressed the benefit of knowing other people's cultures and learning natural expressions, five students claimed it doesn't help their English learning at all as the conversations are hard to comprehend considering speed and vocabulary. While a significant number dislikes the task, the larger majority consider movie watching a good habit that boost their English skills if adopted as a hobby. In Japan, some private language students have requested the use of movies as course material instead of the more popular textbooks from publishers primarily due to the movies' naturalness and audio-visual features.

Initially, majority of the participating students didn't find regular writing of diary entries as very effective, but a significant number could see the upside and usefulness of the task citing improved verbal ability, emotional-psychological benefits, and gained freedom and autonomy in expressions, among personal reasons. Difficulties in grammar and not having enough vocabulary are the main concerns of the rest not liking the regular writing task, although fully aware of the positive eventual effect of habitual composition writing.

A diary is defined as a first person account of everyday life, or in pertaining to a language, a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular and candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events (Bailey, 1996). In this study, diary entries were also used to provide more practice for learners through written communication. Participants were encouraged to talk about any topic of their desire, or narrate events in at least three sentences daily applying recently-acquired vocabulary and grammatical patterns. However, many students in this freshman class found the task difficult at first as it involved past memory and openness. Some students preferred writing notes on their digital diaries or entering texts in their smart phones due to convenience and privacy.

Students' diary entries were collected every week, evaluated as a whole with the general grammar and vocabulary errors discussed in class. Individual correction was avoided allowing students to gain confidence and creativity while developing fluency in writing. Long paragraphs getting perfect scores regardless of errors pushed for more interest and speed as students became more at ease with writing over time. Peer comments were limited to just for the purposes of variety, speaking practice and appreciation of others' works.. This is due to the fact that peer assessment may deter improvement. In one related research, Mangelsdorf (1992) revealed that many students disliked peer assessment, with 77% of her 40 ESL college freshmen viewing their English ability to be insufficient to critique their peers' texts. While many consider peer editing a more tolerant and flexible critiquing that could also serve as practice for students to serve as not only writer but also reviewer, there could be more downsides

than positive effects to both writers and reviewers.

In a related study, the analysis of 43 Chinese EFL learners' diary data showed that students' English language proficiency was perceived as a salient factor influencing the use of peer assessment (Zao, 2011). Reflections of reviewers revealed influence on the focus of peer feedback, influence on appropriateness, influence on the type, and influence on the use of peer feedback in revised drafts, reflecting an overwhelmingly negative peer assessment and constraints of students' English language proficiency on the efficacy of peer assessment in EFL writing instruction. In addition, cultural issues also play important roles in foreign language learning, so teachers must consider how peer editing could affect individual privacy, peer acceptance and self-worth. Also in Japan, many students may not feel comfortable sharing thoughts with new classmates, and may not be as open to the opposite sex, as they are with their fellows. This also explains why at groupings, students prefer to choose who they want to interact with by gender or closeness. Considering all these factors, the most applicable strategy for freshmen with high beginner competence should be writing without boundaries if we are to aim for autonomy and fluency.

The Need for Practice and Enrichment Activities Done Outside the Classroom

Being highly valued by learners and teachers alike, meaningful interactions and discussions must be allotted more classroom time to provide extensive usage of the target features allowing for more automatization of salient features of the lesson. This would mean adjusting the sequencing of the lesson components to extend more teaching and interaction time to be done inside the classroom, and expanding practice time to be accomplished at home or outside the classroom. This could be realized by applying the flipped classroom methodology where much of the explanations of the teacher and teacher-led practice are provided to students using pre-recorded virtual classrooms captured in interactive CD-Roms or digital videos. Unexpectedly, majority of the class had difficulty comprehending the instructions without any Japanese translations. This was easily addressed through teacher homework explanations and examples. After the first two units however, students had gained facility in following directions and had shown competence with repetitive self-testing.

The Next Five Weeks (Weeks 6 to Ten)

From week six to week ten, learners were assigned to go over the digital recordings of the past and current lessons and review salient features of each unit. For the lesson's home practice, each week, students were asked to choose any six practice exercises they think are easy for them to accomplish, assigned to perform the chosen tasks and exercises, and then told to record their feedback on a checklist. The checklist will then be collected by the teacher to monitor students' achievements and feedback on

their own performance. Students were asked to assess their own performance in each of the exercises, encouraged to be honest in their evaluation and personal analysis of their strengths and difficulties. Assured that what matters in the practice are not their scores nor speed in accomplishing the tasks, students should be able to form the habit for more practice at home in their own free will, time, place and frequency. Selected digital activities from the homework package are listed below, including how students rated them in their relevance to their English learning.

Students were asked the question: How do you find these activities in their relevance to your English learning?

Digital practice in class was considered by many students as more effective if compared to digital practice at home or digital pronunciation test. The projected computer screen gave the class further training and understanding as they viewed the tasks together. While many cited sense of empowerment and satisfaction for practice at home as they could use their skills in everyday exercise; however, a significant 39 % of the students found it having little or no effect to their current learning. This is partly due to the very little feedback in assessments in the first five weeks detailing individual progress, and the struggle felt in dealing with totally new activities different from traditional practice. Most students who liked the digital practice found it easy to use computers and operate the software, while students who disliked it had very little prior computer literacy.

Random class check was employed asking chosen students to perform the digital exercises with the whole class viewing the projected screen. Unless it's a graded activity, students would hesitate or not volunteer to perform the tasks for fear of class criticism when errors were made. However, practice exercises made into games with two competing players or teams could lessen anxiety among students and overall create a less-threatening atmosphere.

Exercises like these, especially if accomplished at home could gradually solve students fear of English learning and usher students to more accuracy and fluency. With the manner students do their tasks with increased speed, accuracy and confidence over time, more of these digitally-enhanced strategies are planned to supplement their succeeding course in the next semester to heighten their learning momentum.

Computer-based skills assessment, the CBELT or Computer-Based English language Testing, brought about to address the issue of whether language tests delivered by microcomputer can benefit from the speed, patience and memory of such computers in order to effect changes in test method or content is being tapped to remedy students' poor study habits and insufficient language practice. Adopting CBELT immediately after the classroom trial, then later altered to allow students' decisions to determine the time, level of difficulty, content and mode of testing would allow students take part in decision-making, study time scheduling and in choosing the type of skills exercise they wish to accomplish. All done through menu choices with little or no instructions from

the teacher, learners would gradually gain autonomy and confidence in practicing the language at the right time.

Their course book simply addressed all these modifications giving the learners chance to practice independent choices in their work at home. Utilizing the practice strategy to work for the learners' benefit, the possibility of gathering simultaneous ratings from learners of their performance, their self-evaluations, their opinions on test items, and their introspective accounts of what they think they had to do in order to answer an item—all these possibilities allow for increased learner-centeredness in test development and test use (Alderson, C.,1990 in De Jong, J. and Stevenson, K. 1990) . The big difference between tests and exercises lie in their purposes such as: practice exercises aid learning whereas tests do not. Practice inside the classroom aided by the teacher makes students overcome their many hands-on inadequacies especially in using the computer and unfamiliar software The added assistance from the teacher characterizing exercises would also make practice the ideal drive to make learners progress within expectations.

Digital home practice ushers for an ultimate independent learning. With our current world now seeing technology permeate every aspect of our lives, letting students use technology to learn a language is also preparing them to their future lives. Apart from its labor-saving function, technology can also inspire creativity and bring new opportunities to people, connecting them to new ideas and people they otherwise might not have met...the computer has generally been more associated with applications in the written language, but recently with the developments in Web 2.0, teachers and learners' increased access to the internet for language learning and teaching (Stanley, G., 2013) . This drastically changed the way computers are now used suggesting to students to record their performance using Web 2.0 tools and utilize other functions. This research also uses a book with practice package that includes a recording function that allows students to hear their own voice and have their speech instantly evaluated.

Doing their digital practice homework offered fun and worthwhile time, learners eventually realized, with several options in the practice list copying game techniques and sound effects. Songs and karaoke versions also can lessen burden and stress especially when students get confused with tasks. Many regarded the activities as highly engaging and interactive providing a source of real language both written and spoken.

Downsides to the home practice include complaints on insufficient explanations, and unclear target skills. But regular practice leads to declarative accuracy and automatization, as task repetition breeds task familiarity which is capable of bringing complexity and accuracy together without ignoring fluency (Effiong, O., 2014) .

Similar to many universities programs in Japan adopting CALL, the procedure provides a convenient use of software necessary in aiding classroom projects. Some issues raised in the use of CALL are alarming though, and partly adopting the method

pose several difficulties as well. It's been noted that many computers cannot initiate or evaluate communicative activities, and that computers can only contribute to linguistic competence, and the more advanced skills can be reserved for teachers to assess during practical classroom situations (Odendaal, 1982 quoted in Higgins 1983).

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as defined in the work of Levy and Hubbard (2005) is the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning, embracing a wide range of information and communications technology applications and approaches. Gaining popularity in university language programs, CALL evolved from the traditional drill-and-practice programs that characterized CALL in the 1960s and 1970s to more recent manifestations of CALL like the virtual learning environment and web-based distance learning extending to the use of corpora and concordancers, interactive whiteboards, computer mediated communication (CMC), language learning in virtual worlds, and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL).

The rise of new smart phones equipped with CMCs and MALL are expected to overwhelm learners as more and more teachers welcome the use of these advanced gadgets that could encourage independent language learning. During a follow-up interview, sophomore students admitted doing a regular use of their smart phones in searching for information that could substantiate their English essays, watch movies online, or find definitions for a difficult word. Others simply navigate online fashion shops or popular restaurants in their everyday lives. While they avoid social networking in English primarily due to their insufficient language ability or lack of confidence in their expressions, their attempts to search for information using their gadgets have pushed their vocabulary and overall language ability at least by 15% on average, according to some students.

The 28 freshmen participants in this investigation have gained a positive view towards doing more practice via the computer towards the last part of their General English course. Results in the recent students' combined oral and written exams showed great improvement in accuracy, fluency and creativity in their communication, although, speed in replying and vocabulary are still a major concern.

Another new device for a digital exercise the students tried is the digital pronunciation test, (Prontest). It is a commercial software distributed by a private company (Hatsuo Kentei) designed to train and improve non-native English speakers' pronunciation of English words. Some language schools in Saitama as well as private individuals use this software in improving their speech stress and intonation, smoothness in reading, emphasis, production of consonant clusters, absence of katakana-style reading, and speed in reading English sentences. Students record their voice while reading short passages imitating a native speaker model. The software assesses the recording and supplies a percentage mark accompanied by a graph representation of their rating. The software has just been used twice inside the classroom just to show

students an example of software that can improve their reading and pronunciation without any constant supervision of their teacher. The activity also aimed at inspiring learner independent study while adapting the idea of digital self-testing.

Students found it entertaining to see a pronunciation test program arrive at a very detailed evaluation of their utterances. However, as the measure is based on just a small sampling of voice recording, students didn't find the software highly reliable. It could at least give hints to students which aspect of their reading needs obvious correction. While five students gained pride in their consistent good ratings and therefore approved of the necessity of pronunciation testing, the majority of the class hesitated on constant application of the program when testing their reading ability in class. Reading speed is a major concern, while missing consonant sounds like r, l and y are a usual weakness of the freshmen speakers. A similar application is included in their textbook package and can be easily accessed using a computer.

The *Prontest* software could be downloaded from the internet to smart phones or Ipad, but it is more advisable to use laptops or desktop computers with matching highly-sensitive earphones for more accurate sound detections. .

With the few attempts to use it in class, *Prontest* software showed so much importance on speed, intonation and smoothness but ignored accuracy in assessing recorded sounds. Yet, despite the flaws in the software, it is a good tool for pronunciation practice as it provides fun time to enhance learner motivation.

Inside the Classroom, Outside the Classroom or a Combination of Both?

Students' responses showed a preference on certain activities performed inside the class, outside of class, or combining strategies that are less-threatening and enjoyable.

Student preferences suggest the manner tasks could be well absorbed and enjoyed, practiced repeatedly and chosen to suit their needs and difficulties. Digital practice are

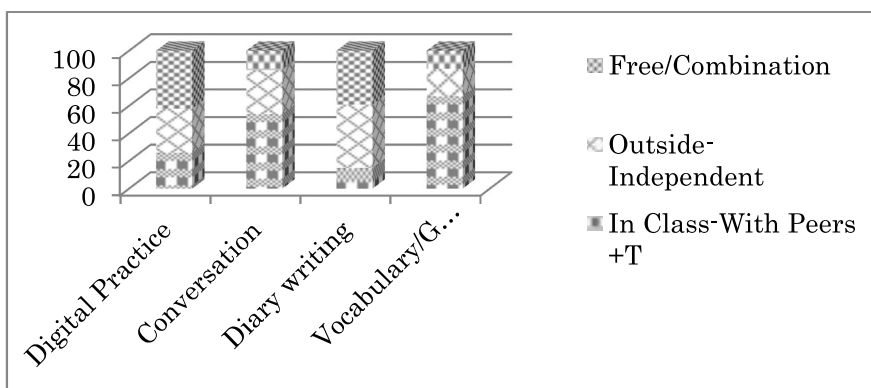


Figure 2. Course Activities and when to use them

seen by students as more productive if instructions are well explained in the language they understand, that is, in their native language, or in simple English but with a lot of examples. Classroom rehearsals clear out flaws or confusing procedures, and may also unlock vocabulary jargons they could encounter.

Conversations are also better enjoyed if students interact with familiar faces and familiar accents. Even if the unfamiliar teacher accent is an issue, the constant exposure of the students to teacher talk would accustom the learners to target utterances.

Diary entry writing done at home and during their free time would develop deeper analysis and memory enhancement. It also provides opportunities for better automatization of lessons and foster love for the target language. Accounts of everyday happenings in student lives could be repetitive, but if students are taught to be creative and apply recently acquired structures with model entries, it could be a great starter for better compositions.

Grammar and vocabulary always occupy a big space in Japanese learners' hearts as they were trained to analyze structures in detail leading to more accuracy, and memorize an enormous amount of vocabulary resulting to success in many tests and other assessments. Learners see the big importance of the discussion to correcting their misuse or language transfers.

These preferences reveal learners' progress, pointing out their current stage of proximal development. Ideally, assessing individual progress could be further realized through a series of exams, group discussions and interviews conducted by the teacher, but considering the time frame and the limited number of meetings which is just once a week for five months, achieving all the important course targets would be impossible. This is where individual autonomy and decision-making in learning come into play when students continue their accustomed language learning practice at home during vacations and free time.

Group B: Conversation Students: Professional Participants

A group of professional students responded to the same survey given to the freshmen, but the survey was conducted through oral interview allowing the respondents to give more explanations and personal assessments. Their continuing English Studies (English Conversation-Business English Course) with this same researcher utilizes a lot of the strategies employed for university students with additional advanced level projects and tasks.

With the travel agent spending an average of one hour a day for her English learning trying various types of activities like CD-listening tasks, Pronunciation test and news reading, totaling 9 hours per week, she considers oral discussions and interaction with the teacher as necessary in her job skills. Her work involves a lot of customer interactions, so oral conversations using business and academic expressions are a

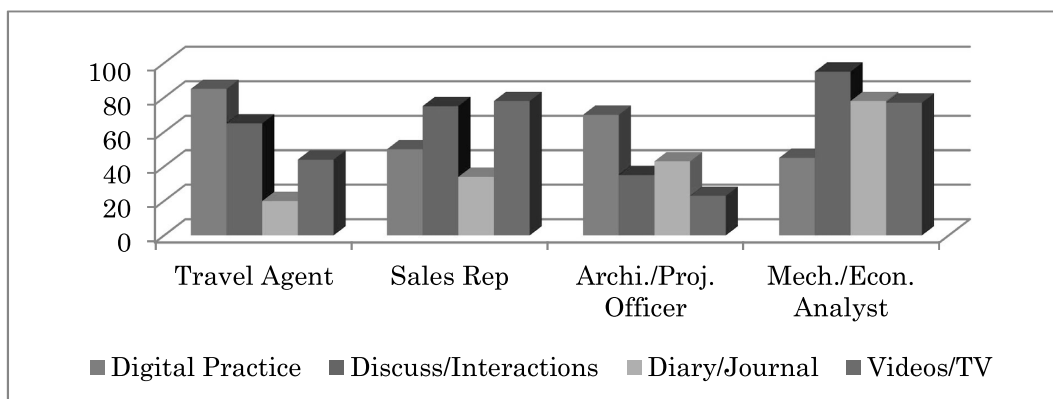


Figure 3. Professional Students Evaluate Learning Activities: How Effective Are They?

primary target in the course. Movie watching for comprehension and vocabulary building, emailing and social networking through Facebook are not seen as giving sufficient practice although they add fun to the complexities of her job. TOEIC drills, Pronunciation Test –Prontest for her reading practice with the use of Ipad make her long commute time to her advantage. A regular two-hour conversation lesson hone further skills gained independently.

Compared with the freshmen’s initial concept of digital practice, the travel agent’s perceived importance of digital software is far higher due to the its convenience and relevance to her work. Motivation at work plays a great role too in encouraging her to pursue higher goals.

Participant 2, the sales representative, finds videos and TV as the most helpful and effective in his communication learning. With the very limited study time left after a 12-hour work, English movie and TV watching is considered both as a form of relaxation and a method of English learning. Listening to English radio programs for 3 hours of commute time daily, and a one hour newspaper reading also at commute time ushered this learner to gain a level A in TOIEIC in just three years of English study.. With occasional job opportunity for translation and on-the-spot interpreting, sales rep participant further improves and maintains his proficiency level. In comparison to freshmen students’ motivation, sales rep participant is clear and confident with his English goals and exhibit determination to gain as much vocabulary and expressions in his daily English practice through a combination of multi-media: newspaper, radio, oral interaction and an added pressure to translate and interpret Japanese to English documents. Pressure to achieve higher proficiency as required by his part-time translation job is encouraging this learner to higher competence. Could pressure therefore push freshmen increase their motivation towards English? The pressure to accomplish the homework tasks was encouraged, but was not a main part of the course assessment. Younger learners may take pressure differently, but this researcher sees

this “pressure” element in learning a language as another research question for the future.

The figure below (Figure 4) shows the differences between the two participant’s progress ratings after 240 hours of study under their self-designed programs.

Participant 2 received marks in all five major skills including speaking and reading comprehension based on his TOEIC results. Daily listening tasks and newspaper reading enhanced both vocabulary and grammar, while speaking in debates and discussions on weekends helped him maintain his competency level.

Participant 3 had less than 100 hours of class time, but now able to comprehend survival English needed to learn from architectural seminars for their company business and reply in simple English to emails received from abroad. Using the internet for architectural ideas and discussing about them in class gave natural conversations and work-related studies to this learner. He has so far received an award for architectural design from a private association, an achievement which could be partially attributed

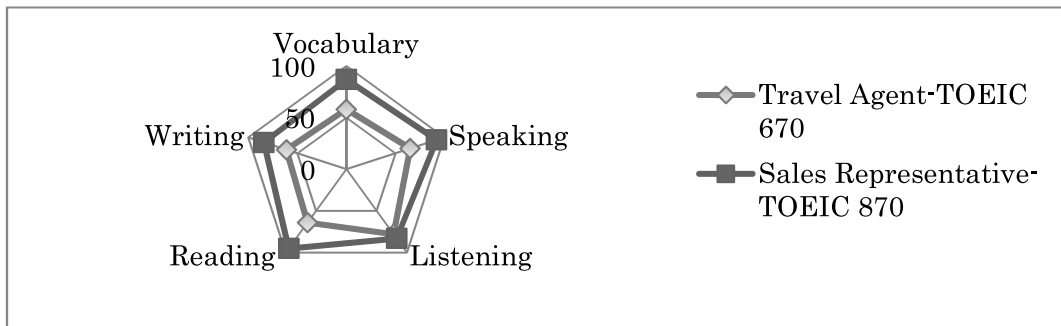


Figure 4. Participant 1 (Travel Agent) TOEIC-Video-CD Conversation Text Versus Participant 2 (Sales Rep) Combined Multi-media/Newspaper Text

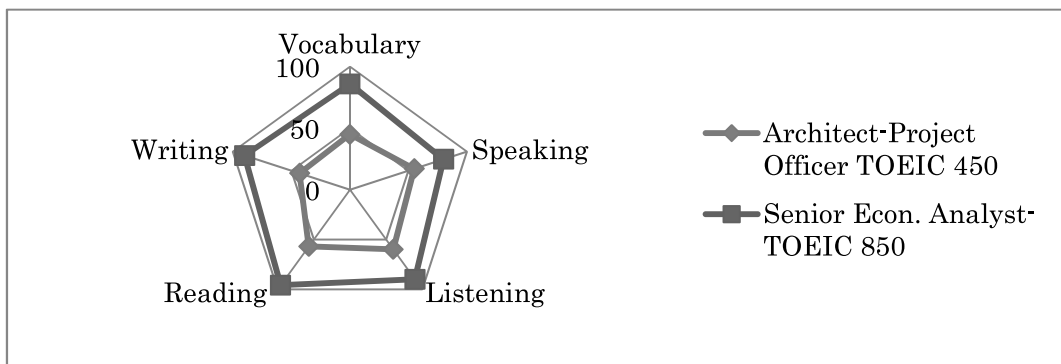


Figure 5. Participant 3 (Architect) Basic Conversation Text Versus Participant 4 (Mechanic/Senior Econ. Analyst) Web-Newspaper Text

to his choice of web materials in his eight months of Conversation-English for Specific Purposes course with the instructor.

Participant 4 has been maintaining his Conversation-Business English course with this researcher in the past five years (250 hours of class time), immediately applying his acquired communication skills in his monthly business travels abroad representing his company in business transactions. His proficiency could have been gained from his entire work experience until his age of 63, but so much of his achievements could be more possibly attributed to his motivation and effective choice of course materials that include newspaper articles, web news broadcasts and oral debates in class on technical issues more relevant to his needs. Keeping connected online due to his work as a mechanic, economic analyst, and sometimes copyright researcher, his diligent attendance in his English course are seen as contributory to his success in English.

Participant 4 prefers strategies that include recording his classroom interactions with the teacher, a material he reviews repeatedly for a week to notice his errors and teacher's indirect and explicit correction to his speech, a vocabulary bank recorded digitally in his notepad for easy access, a monthly discussion with other classes, and a regular private lesson for argumentation and discussion with the instructor on his chosen news article relevant to his job. The learner finds this program as very effective compared to many outdated textbooks that usually contain stories irrelevant to his field and current work needs.

The Need for Independent Choices for a More Relevant Education

All four professional learners observe independent choices in their use of course materials allowing them to evaluate effective steps to their target goals. Utilizing new technology to enhance their learning and practicing in the same systems being used in their workplaces led faster acquisition of their desired levels in communication.

Looking at the freshman class's situation, several factors must come into play before the younger learners could make pace with the professional learners' practices. While availability of materials is one factor, experience with several learning styles and tasks also affect the way young university students' attitude in dealing with their activities in class. Younger learners are not ready to make independent choices of learning materials considering their resources, background as well as knowledge of future work pressures and requirements.

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation and analysis of two groups' attitude towards classroom activities and how the learner perceive the activities' relevance to their learning revealed issues in current teaching-learning situations, as well as raised implications for

a more informed and guided procedure in ushering students to language automatization and acquisition.

An immediate application of a teaching method which is partially new or entirely unfamiliar to learners may cause struggles and difficulties that when not properly addressed may hinder progress or build negativism towards the language being learned. A learner's feelings towards the study of English may be experience-driven or work-driven, psychologically rooted, personally motivated, or simply caused by the type of procedures and processes employed in his attempts to study the language. If learners could realize the benefits of the language learning activity and find convenience and comfort in the use of its systems, their perception of the activity would improve propelling independent drives for their learning. Teachers must conduct needs analysis and preferences study prior to their adoption of appropriate teaching-learning methods and strategies for more effective teaching-learning situations. If educators provide various learning styles in and outside the class, students could make informed choices and become more independent and responsible for their language needs. This could eventually result to more salient practice that could lead to autonomy in language learning.

A flipped classroom employing digital practice exercises is not actually seen as ineffective by students, rather, very useful and interesting as they include exciting games with a modern interface. It is their inadequate computer skills and the exposure to the use of the digital exercises that cause the learners' indifference to home digital exercises. As the home exercises improved their oral and written performance in class, students gradually gave better importance of interactive and digital skills practice. But for a better implementation of the method, teachers must provide prior computer training to students, and supply sufficient explanations to tasks before independent digital practice be assigned outside of class, with or without translating to their native language. With the students' continuous and constant practice outside the classroom, they could possibly achieve the ideal 10,000 hours of practice towards native-like speech or communicative competence. As their final term scores and personal self-assessments reported significant improvements in their over-all skills, specifically increasing accuracy and fluency in speaking and writing, students would see the value of practice and autonomy to language learning.

Autonomy has been overlooked or untapped, leaving out many slow learners still focusing on written grammar and vocabulary drills but unable to carry out simple conversations. As meaningful interactions with peers and their teacher are seen as enjoyable and effective by many, more of these exercises should be done in the classroom, assigning grammar, structure and speaking rehearsals to homework digital-interactive tasks or to a Flipped Class strategy, promoting autonomy-building and ushering learners to more practice and finally communicative competence.

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—Abstract—

This paper investigates how learners view their classroom activities in relation to their relevance to their English learning. The researcher believes that learner attitude and perception of the tasks they perform greatly affect their learning progress and achievements. Other interrelated factors such as motivation, autonomy and practice are also seen as contributory to the way learners value the importance of their tasks and competence in communication. To further discover what activities they consider as essential or deterrent, and what materials students regard as stimulating or less-threatening, technologically- enhanced teaching-learning situations, a modified version of flipped classroom is added to the traditional method of instruction. After two months of study, the learners are observed, interviewed, and requested to fill out a questionnaire form to evaluate the tasks they performed. I then discuss the results and the students' opinions and overall assessment of their activities executed inside and outside the classroom.