Applying an Autonomous Learning Approach to an English Academic Writing Course

Jane SINGER,　Tazu TOGO,　Shiho MOCHIZUKI,　Miwako TANAKA

Abstract

A team of researchers developed learning materials and a curriculum for applying an autonomous learning approach in a university English academic writing class of students with diverse levels of proficiency and motivation. The approach included initial setting of performance objectives, self-monitoring and self-assessment, and a peer tutoring system. The team gauged the efficacy of the approach by observation and analysis of classroom behavior and by examining written paragraphs to identify common writing deficiencies, and they revised learning materials accordingly. The students' final scores in the course were significantly higher than their initial objectives, suggesting a positive effect on academic performance and motivation. The team intends to revise the approach to foster more collaborative learning and to test its application in diverse classroom environments.

A mastery of spoken and written English is widely recognized in Japan as indispensible for fostering global citizenship and a competitive workforce, and the Ministry of Education has vowed to strengthen English education at every level (2008). To this end, most Japanese universities require some study of spoken and written English. However, levels of proficiency and motivation may vary widely in university English classes, complicating effective instruction and making it difficult to ensure that the least motivated students complete the required coursework and fulfill attendance requirements. This is particularly true of courses of academic writing in English, a subject that can arouse trepidation among even the highest-level Japanese students.

Since students write at varying speeds and with varying degrees of fluency, managing writing courses is often a challenge. With a curriculum based heavily on exercises, paragraphs and short essays following a process approach, rapid writers may finish assignments quickly and then wait for their slower classmates to catch up, while more deliberate or unmotivated writers risk falling behind irrevocably and eventually dropping out of the class. For these reasons, allowing students to learn autonomously, according to each individual's pace, objectives and level of proficiency can be

an especially effective approach.

Learner autonomy has been defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981). By allowing students greater control over their learning they gain responsibility and become decision-makers with the capacity for choosing from among the available resources (Chan, 2003). Research has indicated that greater learner autonomy can correlate with successful, sustained learning (Little, 1996). This is particularly true for language learning, which often involves learning over long periods and in non-formal settings (Scharle, A. and Szabo, A., 2000).

Classroom implementation of an autonomous learning approach necessitates the creation of a tailored curriculum and classroom materials. This paper summarizes the work of a team of university instructors and researchers who created a curriculum and materials for a writing course for low-proficiency English language students at a private Japanese university. The major elements of the autonomous learning approach that the team adopted, including determination of achievement objectives, self-monitoring and self-correction, peer tutoring, and self-assessment, are described below.

Background and Rationale for Autonomous Learning Approach

The decision to adopt an autonomous learning curriculum initially arose in response to poor attendance and academic results for a remedial English-language academic writing class applying a conventional instructor-centered approach (Togo 2007). Research suggests that learner-centered classes, where students can progress in accordance with individual learning styles, may help students acquire foreign language proficiency more quickly and effectively than instructor-centered classes (Kajiura, 2006.)

Researchers from a variety of disciplines thus formed a team to develop an autonomous learning curriculum and materials and to test their efficacy in this course. The team members adopted a common vision: the approach should be suitable for diverse levels of English competence and motivation, it should foster autonomous learning, it should produce measurable results for analysis, and it should allow for continuing revision and enhancement, with each team member contributing her individual expertise (Mochizuki, et al., 2009). The first trial of the autonomous learning approach was in the spring of 2007. After revision, the team applied the curriculum to another remedial course in the fall of that year.

In the spring of 2008 the team developed a new curriculum for a class of first-year students taking a compulsory academic English writing course. This was the third trial for this approach. The team subsequently made substantive changes to the learning materials for use in the course

taught in spring 2009, the fourth trial of this approach, as reported by Togo, et al. (2009). The results thus generated allowed the team to compare the paragraphs produced by students in the third and fourth trials to examine the effectiveness of the revisions.

The class under discussion here was a compulsory one-semester English Writing I course for non-English-major first year students at a private women's university in Kyoto, Japan. The students, including remedial students, were the lowest scorers on a standardized English assessment test. The students studied paragraph writing using a coursebook, *Get Ready to Write 2nd Edition* (Blanchard and Root, 2006). Composition of the research team changed prior to the start of the course, with two new members assisting two continuing members in revising materials, recording behavior and analyzing results.

Development of Materials and Curriculum

At the first classroom meeting, students were introduced to the autonomous learning approach. They were asked to decide on their final learning objectives for the course, choosing from among three levels of completion – Superior, Good and Fair -- for a themed paragraph assignment, and then indicating the number of exercises they wished to complete. Self-assessment of their final paragraph, based on length and content guidelines, combined with the points accrued for completed exercises, would determine their final grade on a 100-point scale. For example, those satisfying criteria for the Superior level for their paragraph and receiving more than 85 points on their class work would receive a grade of AA (90 points) while those choosing the Good level and 70-82 class work points would receive a B and 70 points.

The curriculum was predicated on a symbolic approach developed by Nishinosono (2009) which involves creating metaphors and images that allow us to share ambiguous ideas by referring to well-known examples. A symbolic approach also allows us to change metaphors or images when revising the framework or system. The team selected appropriate symbols for division of the coursebook exercises according to writing skills. For the spring 2009 course we adopted fairly universal metaphors related to one's living environment. Each segment of study was symbolized by furnishings or other features of a comfortable and appealing home environment, including flowers, a pet, a car and a fountain/pool (Figure 1).

The metaphor of a luxury hotel was adopted to help explain the final grading scheme. The choice of the Superior level for the theme paragraph was represented symbolically by the penthouse or ocean-view floors of the hotel, the Good level was the middle floors with a mountain view, and the lowest, Fair level was depicted as first-floor rooms with shared bathrooms.

Figure 1. Metaphors for Writing Course

	Writing Skills	Metaphor
Segment 1	English grammar	
Segment 2	Paragraph format	
Segment 3	Preparing paragraph content	
Segment 4	Paragraph writing 1	
Segment 5	Paragraph writing 2	

The Self-Study Process

Students studied the first four chapters of the coursebook over the one-semester course. To enable them to proceed at their own pace and correct their exercises independently and to facilitate autonomous learning for students with limited understanding of the English-language coursebook, the team prepared the following materials in Japanese: a supplementary guidebook which explained the coursebook contents and the exercises and provided model sentences and other types of assistance; a "learning menu" of coursebook exercises covering basic paragraph writing skills such as organization, format, grammar and unity, with the exercises color-coded to indicate which were compulsory and which were supplementary for students wanting higher grades; and assessment sheets with criteria for advancement based on response accuracy on exercises, which allowed students to plot their progress. Materials were also prepared to assist tutors, including a task sheet for each chapter and writing checklists.

The self-study process proceeded as follows:

1. Creating a study plan and writing a first draft of the theme paragraph
2. Reconfirmation of individual study plans at the start of each class
3. Completing coursebook exercises
4. Consultation with tutors
5. Self-correction
6. Review of individual study process and adjustment for next class
7. Revision of paragraph at the end of each chapter

As their major assignment, students were required to write an original paragraph explaining why they had decided on their academic major. The initial draft of the paragraph was written after

completion of the first chapter of the coursebook; it was then revised after completing each subsequent chapter according to a checklist. This allowed students to incorporate the information studied in each chapter in their paragraphs via a process writing approach. For final assessment students evaluated their final written paragraphs according to a checklist to determine their level, and they calculated the number of exercises they completed. Following a rubric showing writing levels and exercise totals they then decided their final grade for the course. While the reliability of self-assessment grading has been questioned, Blanche (1990) found that if criteria and methods were well-understood by students, this type of self-assessment could correlate favorably with objective test results or teacher assessments.

Peer Tutor System

Another important element of the autonomous learning approach was the implementation of a peer tutoring system. In a large class where students are learning autonomously, it is extremely difficult for the instructor to respond adequately to individual questions and concerns, so a tutoring system is frequently adopted, with graduate students playing the role of tutors. However, this practice negates the secondary benefit of a peer tutor system: promoting academic motivation and self-esteem for students who take on this role (Topping, 1996). Tutoring has also been found to advance students' cognitive and metacognitive skills such as planning, perceiving and reorganizing existing knowledge (Sternberg, 1985). It has been reported that student tutors can play an important role in fostering a supportive environment for autonomous learning in the classroom, and study suggests that serving as a peer tutor has a positive correlation to academic performance in the course (Damon, 1984). Peer tutors may show more understanding than an instructor of other students' difficulties and may thus be perceived as being more sympathetic by other students (Moust and Schmidt, 1994).

In the class under discussion, students wishing to improve their final scores were encouraged to volunteer to be peer tutors before beginning each of the coursebook's four chapters. Students could choose to be tutors for one chapter or for all four chapters, and English ability, as measured by standardized test scores, was not a consideration in selection. Tutors served as intermediaries between students and the instructor: only tutors could confer directly with the instructor, and the instructor offered some course instruction only to tutors, but in turn tutors were required to assist students with their questions, preferably by jointly referring to the coursebook or guidebook or, when necessary, by asking the instructor. Becoming a tutor was rewarded with extra class exercise points, so the students who chose to participate can be assumed to be motivated to score highly in the course. Ten students served as peer tutors in spring 2009; three of them were tutors for all four chapters of the coursebook.

After peer tutoring was initiated, the team members monitored students' behavior and interaction in the class with participant observation and analysis, as described by Mochizuki, et al. (2009). This allowed the team to explore students' perceptions of this unfamiliar approach, to understand how the tutor system functioned in the class and to identify areas that required improvement. After receiving student approval, two team members each focused on one student (one tutor, one ordinary student) in a fourth-week class, recording their behavior with a digital camera, video camera, and IC recorder. The researchers also recorded the conversation of the targeted students and their conversational partners. Later, the team selected recorded comments concerning tutors or instruction and categorized the comments according to the students' presumed intentions, then analyzed the comments' implications (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Analysis of Observations (Sample)   (Mochizuki, et al., 2009)

Data	Analysis
S1 → S2: Should we continue to p. 19?	Decided study according to remaining time
S1 → S2: We haven't gotten too far in the coursebook, have we? We spent lots of time correcting mistakes.	Spent too much time on corrections so haven't done as much as anticipated.
T → Tu1: You don't need to correct the grammar as a tutor, just check the checklist.	Tutor was unclear about what to do, so teacher needed to confirm the tutor's understanding of her responsibilities. Need to rewrite tutor instructions.
S1 → S2: Be sure to check that. This should be a capital letter.	After experiencing tutor assistance, non-tutors appeared to participate spontaneously in collaborative learning.

S1, S2 = non-tutor students; Tu1= tutor; I=Instructor

Analysis of English Paragraphs

During the spring 2009 course, the team assessed the paragraphs produced in the previous year's course to identify frequent writing errors and general trends (Togo 2009). As indicated in Figure 3, the team listed and categorized the grammatical and organizational elements covered in the coursebook as well as other categories of grammatical usage and counted the mistakes in each category. We identified the categories with the most mistakes or, in the case of mistakes like indenting where the student could err only once, the highest frequency per student. These mistakes were categorized by type into organizational, format, and grammatical mistakes.

The team then identified some general trends. Students showed positive results in the areas of paragraph format and organization, being generally able to produce paragraphs that conformed to designated format and organizational requirements, including indenting, margins and physically linked sentences.

The frequency of mistakes in paragraph format and organization was fairly low. Most students could write clear and functional topic, supporting and concluding sentences, and a majority added supporting sentences to lengthen paragraphs in compliance with paragraph guidelines. Final paragraphs showed marked improvement in terms of these fairly straightforward format and organizational rules when compared with their first drafts.

Paragraphs showed a relatively low number of spelling mistakes, missing periods, or improperly capitalized initial words and plural nouns. Students had been asked to note their corrections on each draft; most recorded several spelling and capitalization corrections, made either independently or after consultation with a peer tutor. Their paragraphs also showed an adequate understanding of the need for unity.

However, as is common with Japanese learners of English, the students showed a poor understanding of grammatical points such as conjunctions, verb tense and verb-noun consistency, articles, pronouns and plural nouns. In addition their writing lacked coherence and depth, with a predominance of single-clause sentences unleavened by many adjectives or adverbs, even though coordinating conjunctions, frequency adverbs and transition signals were covered in the coursebook.

Revision of Learning Materials

In response to these findings, the team decided to make several adjustments in learning materials for the spring semester course to promote achievement of the common vision of autonomy and versatility.

Grammar was not formerly included in the final assessment of student paragraphs, as the team concluded that it would be unrealistic to expect low-scoring students to be able to identify and correct common grammatical mistakes such as misuse of prepositions or articles simply by using a checklist or consulting with a peer tutor. Instead, in order to hone grammatical accuracy, an integral measure of writing ability, the team developed a test for identifying and correcting 20 common grammatical errors. Because students were assessing the accuracy of their paragraphs by using a checklist without understanding the grammatical or organizational content, the team also created an advice sheet to explain grammatical points in easily comprehensible Japanese. Finally, a new scoring rubric was created as a tool for assessing the final paragraphs; it guided students in assigning final scores on the basis of paragraph organization and coherence as well as number of sentences.

To assess the effect of revised course materials in improving students' writing, the team then

compared grammatical and organizational errors in final paragraphs submitted in 2008 and 2009. Those categories of errors showing significantly lower frequency in 2009 are presented in Figure 3. It appears that, although students made a great number of grammatical errors in 2009, their total frequency appeared to have declined, even after taking into consideration the smaller sample size (26 final paragraphs in 2009 and 33 in 2008). No categories showed an increase in number of errors. However, although no count was made, it appeared upon cursory examination that final paragraphs in 2008 contained more sentences as well as more original sentences than in 2009, which may partially explain a greater total number of grammatical mistakes.

Figure 3: Grammatical Mistakes in Final Paragraphs in 2008 and 2009

Grammar Point	Frequency		Comments
	2009 (26 papers)	2008 (33 papers)	
Physically linking sentences	2	14	Most students corrected their paragraph format, learning to start each sentence directly after the preceding sentence.
Use of pronouns	19	53	Students commonly forgot to use "I" or "she"
Use of conjunctions and sentence fragments	32	60	Many students started sentences with conjunctions ("and," "but) but this was not explicitly forbidden by coursebook
Punctuation	9	34	Commas and apostrophes showing possession were often placed incorrectly
Other grammatical/usage mistakes	95	167	Includes incorrect word choice as well as grammar not covered by coursebook, so wide range of mistakes

Results and Summary

Of the 33 students initially enrolled, 26 students passed the course and 8 of the students achieved their objective in final evaluations, with 18 exceeding their objectives, with evaluation based on objective performance-based criteria (see Figure 4). None of the students who completed the course achieved results that were lower than their initial goals. This suggests that the autonomous learning approach positively affected student motivation and performance. However, it would be helpful in future trials of the approach to interview or survey students at the conclusion of the course for their subjective opinions and assessments.
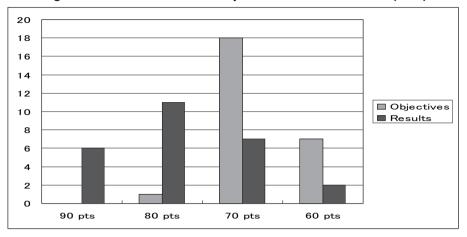
Figure 4 Student Performance Objectives and Actual Results (2009)

The efficacy of the peer tutor system was judged to be more problematic. In terms of academic performance the correlation with serving as tutor is unclear. Only students who served as tutors could receive the top score for the course of 90, and tutors received extra exercise points. Not surprisingly, final scores for tutors averaged 84, considerably above the class average of 78.1. While tutors benefited from access to the instructor and additional instruction (three students told the instructor that for them, this access was compelling motivation for serving as tutor), it is also possible that mainly high-performers had the confidence to volunteer in the first place. Further research in this area is needed.

In conversations recorded by the researchers some students indicated some reluctance to seek assistance from tutors they didn't know personally, with some expressing distrust of tutors based on their perceived failings in English. Although written records were incomplete, the recorded total of only 34 consultations with 10 tutors during the semester indicated lingering uneasiness with peer tutors. On the other hand, many students who were not tutors willingly joined in collaborative study with their classroom friends, suggesting that collaborative learning can occur spontaneously among friends but may be difficult to foster in artificial arrangements. Anderson and Boud (1996, p. 17) suggested that for peer learning to be effective, "a tradition of mutual help in the classroom" needs to be established, and that a highly managed approach should be avoided.

The team concluded that the peer tutor system needs to be revised in future iterations to change the primary objective from that of merely conveying information and instruction from the instructor to the other students to a system in which tutors both convey information and help promote collaborative learning with other students (Togo 2009a). In addition, the formation of collaborative learning teams among students to achieve parallel, mutually beneficial autonomous learning should be explored. As for the paragraph content and expression, team members felt that

many students imitated model paragraphs in the 2009 course rather than writing spontaneously, which suggests that we explore new approaches for generating creative and individual writing.

Finally, the learning materials developed for this course were specific to the coursebook used and the level of English proficiency in this class, but it would be helpful to attempt to implement this autonomous learning approach in other, higher-level English writing classes to assess its performance and versatility. Because creation of tailored learning materials and preparation for classroom use was extremely time-consuming, we hope to streamline and simplify materials and implementation. The team aspires to develop guidelines that will allow English academic writing instructors to implement autonomous learning across the broadest possible spectrum of proficiency levels and class compositions.

References

Aagård, R., Deeg, H. & Jover, G. (2003). Learner autonomy in developing writing skills. In K. van Esch & O. St. John (Eds.) *A framework for freedom: Learner autonomy in foreign language teacher education*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Anderson, G. & Boud, D. (1996). Extending the role of peer learning in university courses. *Research and Development in Higher Education*, *19*, 15-19.

Benson, P. (2001). Testing and researching autonomy in language learning. *Applied Linguistics in Action*. Tokyo: Longman.

Blanchard, K. & Root, C. (2006). *Get ready to write*. NY: Pearson Education Inc.

Blanche, P. (1990). Using standardised achievement and oral proficiency tests for self-assessment purposes: The DLIFC Study. *Language Testing 111:* 202-29.

Chan, V. (2003). Auonomous language learning: The teachers' perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education*. *8(1)*, 33-54.

Damon, W. (1984). Peer education: The untapped potential. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology. 5(4)*, 331-343.

Goodlad, S. & Hirst, B., eds. (1990). *Explorations in peer tutoring*, Oxford: Blackwell Education.

Holec. H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Ministry of Education and Culture. 2008. Retrieved on August 29, 2009 from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/hyouka/kekka/08100105/022.htm

Kajiura, A. (2006). Self-management in the EFL classroom in Japan. *Polyglossial*, *12*, 7-17.

Little, D. (1996, August). The politics of learner autonomy. Paper presented at the Fifth Nordic Workshop on Developing Autonomous Learning, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Mochizuki, S., Togo, T., Singer, J., & Tanaka, M. (2009, September). A study of collaborative development of autonomous learning by extracting tactics for material development. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Japan Society for Educational Technology, Tokyo.

Moust, Jos H.C. & Schmidt, Henk G. (1994). Facilitating small-group learning: A comparison of student and staff tutors' behavior, *Instructional Science*, *22(4)*, 287-301.

Nishinosono, Haruo & Togo, T. (2009, February). Symbolic approach for designing collaborative m-learning. Paper presented at the IADIS International Conference for Mobile Learning 2009, Barcelona, Spain.

Scharle, A. & Szabo, A. (2000). *Learner autonomy: A guide to developing learner responsibility*, Cambridge handbooks for language teachers, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sternberg, R.J. (1985). *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Togo, T. (2007). A framework for designing autonomous learning in an English writing class for disinterested learners: A study of a writing class for retakers, *Journal of the Chubu English Language Education Society. 37*, 63-68.

Togo, T. Tanaka, M. & Singer, J. (2009, June). A study of designing autonomous learning to accommodate diverse learners in an English writing class. Paper presented at the Chubu English Language Education Society, Shizuoka.

Togo, T., Mochizuki, S., Singer, J., Tanaka, M., Nishinosono, H. (2009, September). A study of designing autonomous learning materials to improve learners' English grammar abilities and paragraph organization skills in an English writing class. *Proceedings of the 25th Annual Conference of JSET*, pp. 335-336. Presented at the Japan Society for Educational Technology annual meeting, Tokyo.

Topping, K.J. (1996). The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education*, *32,* 321-345.