Articles

‘Mining the materials’: A framework for student-led self-study task creation

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Meaningful independent learning is rightly viewed as a central component of successful study in L2. Given that the considerable majority of learners’ time is spent outside the classroom, the self-study space has become a source of great intrigue for English language teachers (Benson and Reinders, 2011). However, precisely because self-directed learning lies beyond the typical boundaries of the teacher’s gaze, it is influenced by a variety of factors, not least learners’ familiarity with *effective* independent learning practices. Indeed, this teacher has been guilty of simplistic assumptions about students’ competence and experience with self-regulated learning, assumptions that prove particularly problematic with learners newly arrived in tertiary level instruction where autonomy is central to the instructional philosophy.

This summary article traces and evaluates the implementation of a framework for student-led self-study task creation with a group of 14 foundation pre-sessional students making the transition from secondary to tertiary study at the University of Glasgow with little or no existing concept of effective self-study practices. The trial aimed to provide a space for students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in English and establish independent learning priorities, as well as a more critical awareness (‘mining’) of regular classroom tasks as potential models for independent learning activities. Obtaining feedback at regular intervals, coupled with data from weekly reflection cycles, the investigation tracked developments in self-study practices while highlighting obstacles to enhanced independent learning. The trial also presented plentiful opportunities to reflect on the definition of effectiveness with regard to independent learning.

Rationale

The rationale for this study emerged from recurring challenges (and periodic bouts of déjà vu) experienced with foundation students on consecutive cycles of a 12-week ‘Preparatory English’ course in 2015-2016. Typically, these learners are Level 1 undergraduates, fresh from high school, living and studying abroad for the first time with English levels roughly equivalent to IELTS 4.0-4.5 (CEFR A2/B1). Upwards of 90% of students are from China. Weekly 1:1 consultations, during which much of the focus is on students’ self-study habits, revealed that they:

i. had difficulty identifying strengths and weaknesses in English and required direction;
ii. had little or no experience (and therefore concept) of what constituted self-study beyond conventional homework;
iii. had misconceptions about effective independent learning activities and processes.

Although it is not uncommon for students – particularly those at lower levels – to experience challenges identifying strengths and weaknesses in language development, without recognition of learning preferences and relative successes, effective self-study may be repeatedly hindered (Kormos and Csizér, 2014). Likewise, an inability to draw on previous experience or established habits can significantly obscure the path to normalising independent learning. As a consequence, weekly consultations inevitably resulted in the teacher-led prescription of self-study activities – hardly ideal when attempting to foster autonomy. Where some concept of independent learning did exist, learners' educational and cultural backgrounds proved a significant determinant. Students often reported that they regularly tried to remember upwards of 50 words per day or learn by-heart entire IELTS writing responses, a product of an edu-culture which prioritises memorisation and 'teaching to the test' (Hu, 2002).

The prevailing situation as regards independent learning practices proved increasingly unsustainable, while ad hoc moves to address the deficit in an already busy syllabus (standalone 'study skills' workshops; a resources library tour; a 'Useful Resources' document on the course Moodle) were either fleeting, clumsy or aroused only momentary enthusiasm. A much more considered and regular approach to enhanced self-study was required.

Preparation

In order to limit the impact on regular class time, semi-structured discussion/interview tasks were introduced as short lesson segments over one week. These aimed to illuminate the self-study space by inviting students to share their experiences or intuitions concerning independent learning. If eventual uptake was to be meaningful, the initial raw material upon which the framework was based had to be derived from the students' existing habits, interests and preferences. Tasks such as the questionnaire seen in *Figure 1* sought to encourage students to make explicit the inclinations which until that point may have remained unexplored and certainly unchallenged, while implicitly inviting students to generate and share ideas about potential self-study practices.

Figure 1:

1. *Think about what you like to do to practise English in class and out of class.*
2. *Write notes in the table under 'Me'.*
3. *Speak to at least 2 classmates. Share ideas and complete the table.*

	Me	*Classmate 1:*	*Classmate 2:*
*In class, I like/prefer practising… (*S-L-R-W-G-V-P) …because…*			
Outside class, I like/prefer practising… (S-L-R-W-G-V-P) …because…			
To do this in class, we usually…			
To do this outside class, I/we usually…			
1=Useful; 3= Not useful A=interesting; C=not interesting			

**Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation*

These exploratory activities largely confirmed the insights gained in the weekly consultations, with occasional exceptions. Some students were able to mention specific websites or apps (e.g. *BBC News*) that they had used, although this tended to be irregular and, in the learner's view, of little benefit. Happily, the discussion tasks did highlight some awareness of the means through which particular skills are addressed in class. Despite a lack of transference to the context beyond the classroom, activities such as group discussions, lecture recordings, skim/scan reading of short articles, summary writing, using mono-lingual dictionaries and pronunciation drills were clearly present in the students' minds. It was this latent awareness that the framework sought to tap into as a means of enhancing and normalising independent learning by modelling potential self-study tasks on typical classroom activities.

Process

In order to normalise and, in the early stages at least, regulate students' self-study practices, a framework was borrowed and adapted from the work of Blackstone et al. (2007) on a cycle of peer-reviewed blogging tasks to enhance autonomous learning among English language students. Blackstone's study used a 'blogging buddy' system to encourage greater interaction between learners and foster reflection on skills development. Likewise, this independent learning framework centred on a collaborative cycle of self-study task creation, completion and reflection. Learners would produce and exchange tasks based on their learning preferences and be invited to reflect on their experiences. In order to minimise impact on the syllabus and to maximise uptake by drawing on existing competencies, the self-study framework relied on a cycle of weekly reflective diary forum posts using the existing course Moodle. The process comprised six main stages outlined below and further illustrated in Figure 2:

1. A daily 'traffic light' rating system to raise awareness and evaluate worth of in-class activities. Students rate activities (1-3) in terms of *difficulty, usefulness and interest*.

2. *Thursday*: Students form collaborative ('mining') pairs and exchange self-study preferences (e.g. listening, grammar, pronunciation). The random selection method for the formation of pairs was chosen democratically by students.

3. Each student works to 'create' at least 2 self-study activities to match their teammate's preferences.

4. *Monday*: Tasks are exchanged, completed and reflected upon. Although there is no strict deadline, it is anticipated that this will happen within the week in order to avoid backlog.

5. *Weekly*: Students update a reflective diary and post to Moodle. Each entry consists of two reflections: i) on the tasks the student created; ii) on the tasks the student completed.

6. Students receive both peer and teacher feedback based on forum posts.

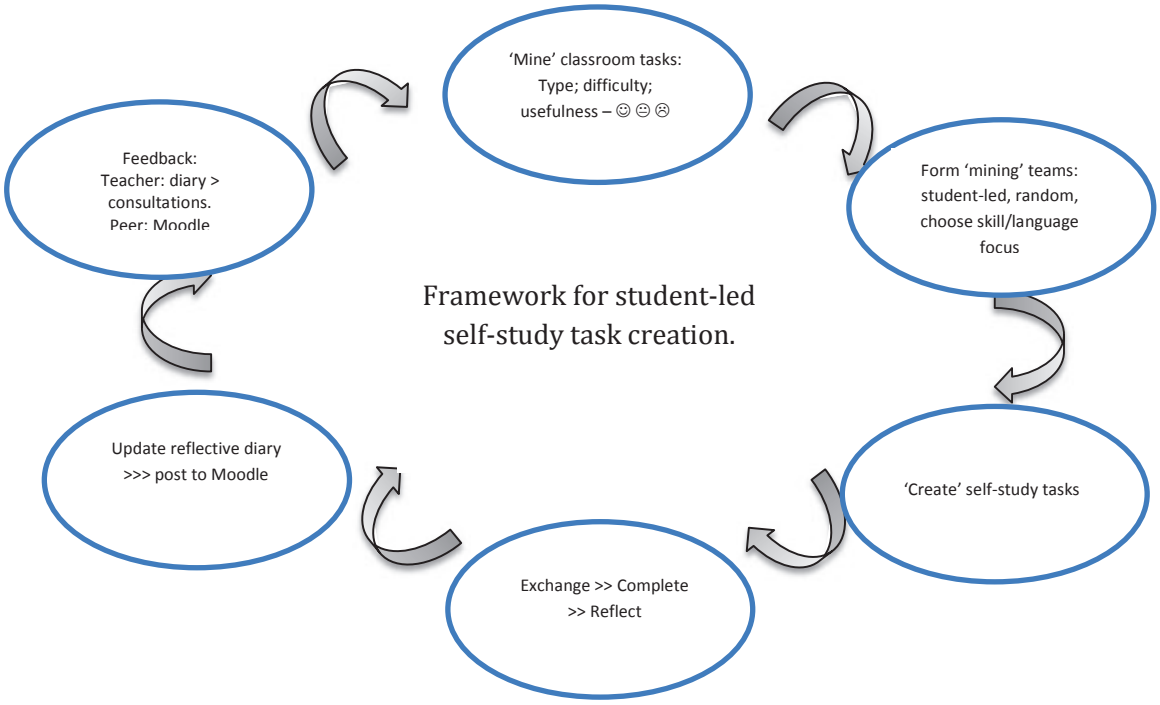

Figure 2: Framework for student-led self-study task creation.

The value of short written reflections has been well documented as a means of promoting autonomy and encouraging criticality regarding learning choices: focussing on which skills/items are prioritised and targeted; which materials/resources are selected; how these are used (Lee, 2010). Accordingly, students were invited to post a modest (approximately 150 word) reflection each week using a simple rubric. A model was provided in the first week of the cycle from which students could deduce typical content and scope. These reflections fulfilled a dual function: in the first instance, a written record of students' impressions of – and (it was hoped) developments in – independent learning practices; secondly, *de facto* peer feedback on the tasks produced. In order to maintain as far as possible the 'student-led' focus of the cycle, once the routine was established, the input from the teacher was minimal, consisting mainly of brief comments and observations on diary reflections and the facilitating of weekly renewal of pairings. The framework, then, hoped to meet a number of core criteria:

✓ Encourage criticality in relation to in-class practices.

✓ Foster learner ownership of content.

✓ Normalise independent study.

✓ Raise awareness of learning strategies.

✓ Integrate easily into busy syllabus.

✓Foster meaningful out-of-class collaboration.

Outcomes

Notwithstanding the modest sample size, the results of the trial were striking. 100% of students reported that they found the weekly cycle 'useful' or 'very useful', and more than two-thirds noticed 'significant' improvement in self-study habits. Nearly 90% said that they felt motivated to do more practice outside class, the cycle gradually encouraging students to normalise regular independent learning. As expected, in the early stages of the cycle, the tasks 'created' were somewhat unimaginative. Examples included exercises copied from grammar books/websites with minimal adaptation and questionable comprehension prompts to accompany reading texts. Happily, however, as the framework bedded in and students began to respond to feedback, tasks became increasingly ambitious and sophisticated, encompassing multiple skills and recycling of target items. A favourite example involved students listening to an online lecture from *TED Talks*, taking notes, writing a summary, consulting the transcript to highlight use of the present perfect and writing a draft letter

to the speaker requesting further information on key aspects of the talk.

A number of unintended benefits also emerged from the cycle. Even the less ambitious tasks produced in the early stages required learners to seek out and engage with resource deposits which had hitherto remained underused, such as the University's Language Resource Library and 'Useful Materials' study aids on Moodle. Likewise, the experiences emerging from the framework began to provide a welcome focus for weekly 1:1 student consultations, which had until then been largely devoid of any meaningful discussion and, therefore, frustratingly teacher-centred. This implicit orientation to not only physical materials but the more reflective, autonomous study typical of tertiary education served to further justify the exercise.

Finally, and perhaps most pleasingly, the framework seemed to inject much needed enthusiasm into the group. Students genuinely appeared to relish the challenge of task creation, the opportunity to personalise their practice and the competing demands that continually refreshed collaborations produced.

Obstacles

The trial was not without challenges. In feedback sessions towards the end of the course, some students reported that the expectation to produce and complete weekly tasks began to feel more like homework than self-directed learning. This clearly represents a limitation of the framework and highlights an inherent contradiction in the notion of collaborative self-study. Nevertheless, the principal aim of the trial was to enhance students' awareness of a broader range of learning strategies and task types as well as to normalise regular out-of-class study. That the overwhelming majority of learners reported that they not only found the process useful but were actively doing more outside class arguably justifies the somewhat contradictory means by which this particular end was achieved.

Furthermore, as is typical with small-scale 'action research' projects, the opportunity to observe and evaluate impact was finite. The positive feedback received at the course's conclusion was limited to the students' then current impressions and reflections on the preceding 12 weeks. Although the majority expressed a strong desire and determination to carry forward the principles and practices unearthed in the framework to the next stages of their studies, the absence of any meaningful tracking mechanism makes it impossible to measure true uptake, particularly as pre-sessional courses tend increasingly to focus on subject knowledge and away from language.

Conclusions

The guiding aim at the outset of this trial was to encourage critical awareness of in-class practices as a basis for potential self-study activities, to expand the breadth of strategies at the learners' disposal and to foster greater autonomy. In these regards, the modest framework was successful. However, the trial also highlighted the need for teachers to temper expectations of student capacity with regard to self-directed learning. Given that a range of factors from motivation to native edu-culture inform the extent of independent learning, surely any attempt to better illuminate the self-study space by more closely tying together the in-class and out-of-class contexts is worthwhile. Indeed, what better or more abundant raw material to 'mine' than the regular classroom processes and activities that students and teachers too often take for granted.

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