

Reflecting on How Electronic Devices can Foster Learner Autonomy Through Homework Assignments

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Introduction

Many adult learners have a busy day at work as well as at home along with their English learning. We know that acquiring a foreign language is a significant investment of time, and it takes years to master a second language. Considering the fact, teaching adult learners English can be a very difficult thing to do in terms of motivating them to continue to study their target language learning. It is particularly difficult to keep students engaged in their homework assignments outside of their classroom, which is a prerequisite for acquisition to occur.

As Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) claim, it is motivation which precedes autonomy. In addition, Benson (2011) states autonomy arises through appropriate methodology, and the teacher is responsible for supporting their learners' autonomous learning. He goes on to say that

if students are given opportunities to take control of their own learning and their learning is positive with teachers' sufficient support, students can perform their control of their own learning, and hence take more responsibility for their learning. Moreover, in language learning, it takes at least two to communicate. Language learning takes two, three, or four ways to communicate. Such interaction is also helpful to stimulate greater motivation and learner autonomy. Rivers (1987) explains, interaction can be two-way, three-way, or four-way, but it should never be one-way. She also goes on to say, "In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learned or casually absorbed – in real-life exchanges where expressing their real meaning is important to them" (p. 4). When we talk with our parents, friends, and classmates, we interact with one another. This is what occurs in real world situations. Hence, language learning has to be more than one way to communicate.

With the increasing use of technology, the use of information communication technology (ICT) in language learning seems to be proliferating and has been becoming popular. Portable devices, such as cell phones, iPads, portable laptop computers make students' language

learning feasible anytime and anywhere. As cell phones are part of students' daily routines in their life, "they help minimize the separation between the classroom and outside world" (Reinders, 2010, p. 21). The same thing can be said for other portable devices, such as laptop computers and iPads. This leads me to the question of what kinds of homework assignments and which uses of ICT might boost my students' motivation and help my learners interact with one another more, which in turn might encourage greater learner autonomy. Because students' engagement with their language learning only inside the classroom is not sufficient, more students' engagement in language learning through homework assignments even outside the classroom becomes necessary. In this paper, I would like to state what kind of ICT homework assignment approaches can be beneficial for my learners through interaction by fostering autonomy at the same time.

Technology Assisted Language Learning

Nowadays, a great number of people seem to use technology including their mobile phones and computers in their everyday life for business and their private use everywhere.

These devices are becoming indispensable for their life. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) and cell phone technology are steadily growing (Okazaki, 2015). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC, 2018), over 90% of Japanese people aged from 13 to 49 use the Internet with computers, tablets, or smartphones, and more than 60% of Japanese people own smartphones as of 2017.

With the growing use of technology for language learning, personal learning environments (PLEs) have become an alternative to traditional language classes (Okazaki, 2015). According to Ibrahim (2010), ICT is a breakthrough which has revolutionized the learning process letting knowledge to be effectively distributed and it can occur in any place. He goes on to mention “Any space is a learning space” (p. 214). In addition, recently the potential for portable devices such as, cell phones have increased more interest in supporting learning and teaching (Reinders, 2010). Somewhat inexpensive and more powerful devices such as cell phones could become even more supportive of learning and teaching activities (Reinders & Cho, 2010).

Okazaki (2015) also reports that 5 Japanese college students in self-directed English language learning who are an intermediate level of English or higher with ICT suggest that they seemed to learn English more effectively and seemed to enjoy learning English through watching English-language online movies and TV programs, using smartphone apps for learning English, and taking a sequence of online English lessons. The findings also suggest some promising ways for Japanese students to practice effective self-directed English learning with ICT resources. Another research suggests that 61 university students in Tokyo have positive perceptions of the online writing tools in forums, blogs, and wikis. The findings also suggest a positive effect on students' language learning progress (Miyazono & Andersen, 2010). Gromik discusses the fact that cell phones are preferred for language learning. With their video recording function, Japanese students made 30-second video creations on a weekly basis which have been discovered to boost the amount of vocabulary they used in one monologue. Therefore, letting the students utilize their cell phones for learning purposes produces students with creative thinking. Also, letting students experiment with audio and video and photo features gives students opportunities to get familiarized with the use of MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning).

Literature Review:

Fostering Autonomy in ICT Language Learning

Learner autonomy in second language learning and teaching has been an important theme for a while. As mentioned earlier, acquiring a target language takes a life-long investment, and learners have to make a commitment to their language learning. For this reason, language learning should not only occur inside the classroom but also students need to be engaged with their language learning beyond the classroom as well to promote their target language skills (Najeeb, 2012).

There has been a great deal of research conducted to foster learner autonomy through ICT in language learning for different purposes at different institutions. As Ching Yang et al. (2007) suggest, Internet technology gave abundant resources to teachers and learners where learning can be enhanced in an interactive way through real world contexts. The study also shows that students experienced the pleasure of learning, and therefore boosted their learning possibilities along with students' computer skills and students' views that their learning can be fostered and enhanced through communication technology towards autonomy. Yip et al. (2006) conducted research on the issues between the two groups with one being the group (experimental group) that would learn vocabulary by

playing online games and the other (control group) being the one that would learn vocabulary by using the traditional face-to-face learning method. The study of the experimental group indicated that vocabulary studying through engaging with online vocabulary games not only enhanced vocabulary learning but also supported memory retention and helped students recall more vocabulary than the control group who was not engaged with online vocabulary games. In addition, the learners could learn online vocabulary games autonomously by showing that they tend to be in control of their own learning while they were engaged with online vocabulary games.

According to Reinders (2010), mobile phones in the classroom “give students control over their own learning” (p. 21). Students can control functions on their cellphones, and teachers offer their learning plans by orchestrating how students can use the functions on their mobile phones the best for their self-directed learning, especially while students are engaged with their daily social activities where their mobile phones are used.

According to Gallardo Echenique et al (2015), mobile devices have become multifaceted tools within and beyond the classroom, while also helping students to foster digital competence. Many mobile phones perform all the functions

of a computer, while other portable devices such as tablets and notebooks enable students to learn in a personal way. Mobile learning also extends the degree to which learners may be able to take greater ownership of their learning and boost their active participation (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). As Motteram puts it, seemingly there has always been some relationship between technology related to education and students' autonomous learning. (as cited in Benson, 2011)

Taking Actions

Considering all the factors mentioned above, and to gain a deeper understanding of students' feelings and opinions, the first step taken was to ask my learners directly what kind of homework assignment helps them learn the most and why. I then considered how ICT might be helpful in their homework assignments to help them learn more effectively and to foster learner autonomy through interaction.

In a survey of my learners' perspectives and opinions, nine adult learners¹ across seven adult classes at my English school completed a questionnaire responding to the questions of what kind of homework assignments help them learn the most and the reasons (see Appendix). The results

¹ Note: The number of students in total is nine. The numbers in the survey add up to more than nine because some students selected more than one answer.

indicate that five students answered that writing was the most helpful homework for them. As for reading homework, three students found that reading homework tasks help them learn the most followed by reviewing (two students) and speaking and listening (one student respectively).

For writing homework, they felt that writing basic sentences, writing a letter or postcard, or writing about everyday experiences helped them learn English in some way. The students perceive that the writing homework seems to enhance their ability to speak, their spelling ability, and their ability to recall English. Two students mentioned that it is important for them to have a record of errors and corrections in writing so that they can refer to them later.

As for reading homework, the students felt that story-reading homework, reading aloud articles, or doing some research on websites such as their favorite singers helped them learn English. Two of the three students felt that the reading assignments supported their producing conversations, and of those two, one said that she can express what she wants to say in English.

In regard to reviewing homework, the students felt that reviewing things they learned from their textbooks and

handouts helped them understand what they learned more clearly and remember more content and longer. One student mentioned that reviewing can enable her to recall things she remembered only vaguely before.

Of the remaining two answers, for speaking, the student said that English everyday conversations are useful for her because she may have opportunities to use them so that she can express those sentences easily. The student who chose listening said that listening to English conversations on the radio (NHK Kiso Eigo) is easier to understand because the teachers on the program are Japanese.

Finally, based on one third of my students' responses in my data, the value of practicing daily conversations is another theme that I discovered. By learning everyday conversations, it seems that they can remember better, and they can use everyday English more because it is something related to their everyday life.

Analysis and Assignment Approaches

Upon carefully analyzing and reflecting on their perspectives and feelings, I came up with six homework

assignment approaches utilizing ICT, which they might find fruitful and which could bring positive outcomes to my adult learners' language learning and foster motivating, interactive, and autonomous learning for my learners. The six approaches are as follows:

1. Fixing Schedules for the Next Lesson by E-mail in English

I used to fix schedules for my learners' next lessons at school in Japanese and English. However, I decided to fix their lesson schedules by e-mail in English. Ideally, my adult learners will be able to expose themselves how to negotiate their next lesson date in English by writing instead of talking. Since my learners are mostly beginner-level students, it seems more beneficial if they see the actual writing instead of talking. This way, they can always refer to the way they negotiated about their next lesson date in English when they see their e-mails which they wrote in the past.

2. Asking Learners to Send me Their Weekly Journals in English by E-mail or Blogs

Asking my learners to send me their weekly journals offers them opportunities to write about such things as how they spend their weekend, where they go, what they do, whom they see, which is usually related to their daily life. This writing practice allows them to have not only some time to write what they want to write but also how they want to write by consulting their dictionaries. Ideally, as they practice writing, eventually, they will not have to consult dictionaries if it is something simple. Also, since their peers or I reply to their e-mails in English, which requires our interactive communication, they are more likely to get motivated to write regularly with more exposure to their second language and more practice (Reinders, 2010). This brings students' success in their target language learning (Reinders, 2010). This is as if they had an e-pal instead of a pen pal. My learners can even take pictures of places they visited or what they ate, they can attach them in their e-mails, and they can talk about the pictures in their e-mails.

3. Describing Their Dream Situations, Such as What Their Dream Job was and What Their Dream Breakfast is by E-mail

Describing their dream job and dream breakfast is something that my learners can write by actually putting themselves in the situation and vicariously seeing themselves eating their dream breakfast at their favorite

hotel or working in their dream company. Writing their dream situations such as their dream job and dream breakfast allows my learners to have affective elements involved in their target language and enrich their target language learning. Also, these activities allow my learners to have their ideal-L2-self (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014). For example, if a learner would like to become a person who uses L2 in a certain situation, they can also talk about an 'ideal L2 self (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014) This is a powerful motivator to lessen the language gap between my learners actual and ideal selves (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014) Writing about their dream situations and circulating this to their teacher and classmates by e-mail enables their peers and me to write something positive as comments, which is also a strong motivating factor in their language learning.

4. Online Discussions

An online discussion is a setting where my learners and I can exchange our opinions regarding topics related to their everyday life, such as our favorite season, favorite restaurant, and favorite food. It is a place where they can discuss their feelings and opinions as freely as possible in English by e-mail. Students can write their opinions anytime and anywhere they like by allowing them to have some time for what they want to write and how they want to write their opinions with their dictionaries. This is a helpful

way to facilitate peer-to-peer language learning (University of Waterloo, n.d.) or teacher-to-learner language learning. Moreover, this offers the opportunity and time to promote the exchange of opinions among students and a teacher (University of Waterloo, n.d.). Furthermore, they can even attach some photos and send them to their peers and the teacher in the same way as weekly journals.

5. Recorded Readings

A recorded reading is another studying method, by which my students record my readings or CDs with their voice recorder or audio video function on their mobile phones, and my students can practice reading articles or stories by listening to my recorded readings or CDs as much as possible. Advantages are that they can not only check accurate pronunciation and where they can pause, but they can also observe how intonation goes for each sentence. Immersing themselves in the recorded readings and practicing it many times enable my learners to acquire new words and phrases as well as expressions. Another benefit I would like to point out is that my students can record their own readings after practicing reading until they can read articles or stories smoothly. This way, while students listen to their recorded readings, they can judge and observe their progress, and they can start recording again if they feel like they did not read quite right. My students and I give them

our positive feedback after we listen to their recorded readings in English.

Brown (2012) reports that students in an ESL class setting listened to native English speakers' recordings from various English-speaking countries with their voice recordings and recorded their own readings by reading the same materials they had listened to. As the project moved forward, students started paying attention to suprasegmentals (e.g. intonation and linking) from segmentals (e.g. vowels and consonants). The research was considered as successful in enhancing their intelligibility and improving their pronunciation. In addition, the learners appreciated more chances to produce output outside the classroom.

6. Speaking Presentations

Speaking presentations are a learning method in which my learners think about how they can write on such topics as hotel reviews or restaurant reviews regarding whether the food they tasted was good or service was excellent or not. They then can practice reading their presentations until they can read their transcriptions smoothly or without looking at them. If they prefer, they can even record their presentations during their practice. When my learners come to their next lesson, they can make presentations orally within a limited time frame. The teacher and students

provide them with positive feedback in English, which facilitates their interactive learning and fosters their learner autonomy.

Reflection and Conclusion

It has been over one year since these approaches were implemented. Based on my subjective analysis and reflection, most of them have been going well. For example, although a couple of my learners completely stopped writing their weekly journals, most of my students still write their weekly/biweekly, occasionally monthly journals. Perhaps I can encourage them to write their weekly journals again by sending my weekly journals first by e-mail to those who completely stopped writing their journals. This way, they may be encouraged to send me their journals once again. They attach photos that they took in their e-mails, and another peer and I give her comments for what she writes. Another student then talks about what she wants to write in English.

In regard to fixing schedules in English, my adult learners mostly respond to me in English for their next lessons. They do not seem to have any difficulty fixing schedules in English. As for the online discussion, I need to give them more ideas to discuss and how they can write their e-mails more often in the future by providing them a sample

writing. With regard to recorded reading, listening to my recorded readings or CDs and practicing reading by using them seem to enable them to pronounce words accurately and enhance their intelligibility while they read. The students who actually practiced reading by listening to my recorded readings or CDs have improved their pronunciation, linking, and sentential stress better. One of my students informed me that she had listened to my recording from 10 to 20 times without me asking her to do so. Her peer in the same class made comments on recorded readings. "...I could practice reading over and over by listening to the recording. As I noticed my pronunciation errors, I could gradually build my confidence. It was worth practicing like this since I could see its progress."

With respect to speaking presentations, students do not seem to enjoy these as much as other activities partly because they do not seem to show their interest in memorizing their speaking presentations. However, on one occasion they seemed to enjoy the activity largely because they had to speak about their daily routines. Since they are directly related to their daily life, and this activity requires everyday conversations, such as "I get up at 6:30am every day." or "I usually brush my teeth at 10pm.", they might have enjoyed the activity and could memorize almost all the sentences that they had to present orally.

By using electronic devices in their language learning, although my adult learners utilize only simple and easy functions, such as e-mailing, blogging, attaching photos, and voice recording functions, based on my subjective observations, they have carried out their homework assignments successfully for the most part by interacting with one another and giving positive comments to each other. They also seem to enjoy doing their homework assignments. Although actually I have never counted their amount of vocabulary my students use, it seems that their vocabulary has increased in their writing and speaking. My students seem to understand what I say during their lessons more than before the project was implemented. They also seem to try to use some difficult words in their writing and speaking. One student mentioned that writing journals provides her with opportunities to think about what she wants to say in English. They are usually about everyday conversations. In addition, she consults her online dictionaries every time she finds difficult expressions and phrases so that she can learn from it. What I analyzed and described shows that my adult learners show their sign of autonomy by doing such things as seemingly enjoying explaining what they did by attaching their photos in their e-mails or blogs, consulting with their dictionaries to look up difficult English expressions, and listening to my

recorded reading many times. In addition, as Rivers states, my adult learners interact with each other where there is a real meaning for them. Language learning has to be communicative and more than one-way (Rivers, 1987) to foster their learner autonomy and promote their second language skills.

Considering their ages between their thirties and seventies, although I expected the opposite; my students have been willing to learn English with their electronic devices through interaction by learning how to use their electronic devices. Also, I learned that I should not jump to the conclusion that my adult learners would not be willing to learn this way or that way regarding those functions on their electronic devices. As long as we provide them with the right kind of homework assignments and positive attitudes in a caring and supportive classroom atmosphere, they respond to their homework assignments positively.

Finally, through this small project, I learned that as long as teachers try to take initiatives, show autonomous approaches, support students appropriately, and homework activities are motivating and interactive, many students tend to learn things more autonomously, and tend to get more motivated. Hence, their attitude toward learning tends to last longer. I would like to end this paper with my

favorite citation. “Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely linked and without sufficient knowledge and guidance, teachers are unlikely to develop the skills to be able to foster learner autonomy in their own classrooms” (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011, p. 22).

Appendix

Questions: What kind of homework task helps you learn the most? And why?

	Japanese	English Translation
1	<p>基本的な文章を「書く」宿題が最も手助けになります。その際に前回の by と until のように文法の違いが理解できるように対比した文章を書きながら理解できるような宿題がより効果的だと思います。理由は文章を読む機会は仕事やプライベートでもありますが、文章を書く機会はほとんどないからです。また、読むよりも書いた方が記憶に残る印象があります。聞い</p>	<p>Writing basic sentences is the most helpful homework. On that occasion, I think it would be more effective if I can see sentences by comparing differences such as, "by" and "until". The reason is that I have opportunities to read sentences at my work and in my private time, but I hardly have opportunities to write. Also, I have an impression that I remember more by writing than reading because I think I will be able to use contents</p>

	<p>たり読んだりした内容よりも、書いたり話したりした内容の方が次の会話の際に意識して使えると思うからです。</p>	<p>consciously next time by writing and speaking than listening or reading.</p>
2	<p>英語を学ぶにあたって、家でできることは、読むことと書くことだと思います。特に書くことはスペリングの確認にもなりますので、大切だと思います。前回の宿題は、薬や病名、症状の単語が難しかったのですが、知らないことを学べて良かったです。英語でも、生活にかかわることを学べると興味を持てて良いと思います。</p>	<p>When I study English, the things I can do at home are reading and writing. Particularly writing is important because I can check my spelling. In the previous homework, words for medicine, disease names, and symptoms were difficult, but I could learn things I didn't know before. So that was good. Also it would be good if I could learn things related to everyday life.</p>
3	<p>私が感じたのは、自分の生活や自分に近い人の話についてのライティングとそれについての発表でのスピーキングが一番身</p>	<p>I think I can learn best when I do writing homework related to everyday life and close people I know and make a speaking presentation based on that. I</p>

<p>につきやすいと思います。物語や文章などを読んで考えることも勉強にはなりますが時間が経って思い出したりすることはなかなかないような...。その場限りになってしまいやすい気がします。自分や自分に近い人や物や出来事の話であれば想像もしやすくそれが英語にしたときはこう言うんだとわかると次にそう言う場面があった時にも自然と思い出しやすいからです。</p>	<p>think I can also learn from reading and thinking about stories and sentences; however, I hardly remember them as time goes by. So, I have a feeling I remember them only at that time. It is easier to recall and remember what to say in English in similar situations in the future if I do my homework related to myself, close people I know as well as things and events related to those people.</p>
<p>4 私は以前に出して頂いた、長文を読んでくる宿題が良かったように思います。やはり先生のご指摘通り、発信力がとても苦手です。でも色々趣向を考えてくださっているのでとても満足しています。色んなのがあって良</p>	<p>I think the story-reading homework was good, which was our previous homework. As you pointed out, I have difficulty producing conversations. However, I am very satisfied because you try to think about different types of homework. I think it's good</p>

	いのではないかと思います。	to have variety.
5	<p>先日の手紙を書く宿題は、私にとってとても良い勉強になりました。英語で文章を作るという事は、会話力の上達にも繋がると思います。又、書いた物を訂正してもらう事で、自分の間違いを記録として残す事も出来ます。それから、記事を熟読して授業で読み上げる宿題も大変勉強になります。語彙の習得と話す力の上達に役立つと思います。これからも生涯学習として英会話を学んでいきたいと思っておりますので、どうぞ宜しくお願い致します。</p>	<p>I learned a lot from my previous homework, which was writing a letter/postcard. I think making sentences in English leads to improving my English speaking skills. Also, I can keep errors I made as a record by having my writing corrected. Another helpful homework is that I read articles thoroughly as homework and I read aloud the articles again in class. This way, I can learn a lot. This helps me to acquire English vocabulary as well as improve my speaking skills. I would like to continue learning English conversation for the rest of my life.</p>
6	<p>やはり復習が大切なので、テキスト中の問題や類似プリントを宿題にす</p>	<p>I think reviewing is important. So, it's helpful to review things we learned from our textbooks</p>

<p>るのが良いと思います。繰り返すことによって授業で習ったことがより理解できますし、少しでも記憶に残ると思います。つい次は何かなと前に進みたくなってしまいます。次の授業に興味を持つことも大切ですが、復習をしないと忘れてしまいます。復習をすることによってうる覚えのところも思い出します。また、自分の解らなかつたところが分かります。</p>	<p>and handouts related to those points. By reviewing things, I learned, I can understand what I learned more clearly, and they will be retained in my memory even a little. I get a little bit eager to proceed and learn new things. It's important to get interested in the next lesson, but I will forget things I learned if I don't review them. By reviewing, I recall things I remembered only vaguely before. Also, I get to understand the things I didn't understand before.</p>
<p>7 私にとっての助けになる宿題は…身近な話題(生活のこととか) についての会話などが自分の身についたらどこかで使う機会があった時に便利に感じるかなと思うので、そのような宿題が日常に反映できそうでありがたいと</p>	<p>The most helpful homework for me is English conversations related to familiar topics, such as everyday life. I feel it would be useful for me to have opportunities to use them. It would be great to have the types of homework that can reflect on everyday life, such as</p>

	<p>思います。簡単に表現できるセンテンスなどで</p> <p>す。</p>	<p>sentences that I can express easily.</p>
8	<p>1. ライティングの宿題。1はスペルは書いてないと忘れます。2. プリントで出す記事など口に出して読む事。2はしゃべってないと口が回らない? 3. 英語の会話を聞くこと。(NHKのラジオの基礎英語。基礎英語1, 2, 3は毎日と言うわけではないですが聞いている。) 3は日本人の英語の先生なので分かりやすい。3つの宿題が英語を学ぶにあたり、最も手助けになっているということです。</p>	<p>1.writing homework: I will forget spelling if I don't write them. 2. Reading aloud articles in handouts: If I don't speak, I cannot express what I want to say? 3. Listening to English conversations on the radio (Not every day, but I listen to them. NHK Kiso Eigo 1, 2, and 3): It's easier to understand because the teachers are Japanese.) Those three types of homework are the most helpful.</p>
9	<p>以前の宿題は予習中心だったように思いますが、私としては、復習中心で習った事を定着させる目</p>	<p>I have an impression that our previous homework was mainly to prepare for the next lessons, but for me it would be</p>

<p>的で出して頂けると有り難いです。履修の全範囲からアットランダムにピックアップ、ヒントとして答の文頭を提示してもらえると答え易いです。要は Review test ですね。また、前回のようにテーマを決め Web で調べたりするのも楽しく 勉強になります。</p>	<p>very helpful to review what I learn on that day as homework so that I will remember them. Review tests would be very helpful, too. Also, I can enjoy learning by doing some research on websites based on some themes.</p>
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