Self-Access and Metacognitive Awareness in Young Learners: How Japanese Sixth Graders Learn How to Learn English

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Abstract

This paper discusses theory and practice related to self-access and metacognitive awareness in young learners. While still an emerging field, the paper presents several studies that describe young learners’ self-access through playing online multi-player digital games, watching TV/films, and reading various types of texts. The teaching of metacognitive awareness, or ‘learning how to learn’, is also discussed, and examples illustrate how this knowledge is applied to learning both in class and beyond. The latter part of this paper describes elementary English instruction in Japan and includes practical applications of learning how to learn through examples from a Japanese sixth grade English class. The students discuss motivating factors beyond the classroom, how they access metacognitive knowledge, and strategies they apply to better learn English.

Keywords: self-access, metacognitive awareness, Japan, elementary school, gaming

Self-access and autonomy with young learners is an emerging field. Holec (1981) defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (p. 3), and Benson (2011) takes it a step further in describing autonomy in language learning. He discusses the capacity, or ability, to take control, although the way in which this occurs will vary depending on the situation.

While there has not been a lot of research in the area of self-access and autonomy with young learners, interest has been increasing in recent years, and some studies have shown promising results. In addition to reading, watching TV/films, and using social media in English outside of school, young learners have also been learning and practicing English through playing online multi-player video games. Studies described below will demonstrate how young learners access English beyond the classroom and use the knowledge acquired to demonstrate improvement in school. In addition, there are now resources designed to help educators in teaching children how to learn, so that they can apply strategies both in the classroom and beyond.
This article will be divided into two parts. First, it will discuss language learning and self-access outside the classroom with regard to young learners, and also examine theory and practice related to metacognitive awareness, including instruction on ‘learning how to learn’. In this paper, young learners are defined as those in elementary and junior high school. Because educational systems and the ages of students vary in different countries, it is difficult to draw the line at a particular grade level. For example, in the United States, students finish elementary school in grade five and junior high (middle school) in grade eight, but each level is completed one year later in Japan. With the varying ages of junior high school students (11-15 years old, depending on the country), some learners are still developing metacognitive skills and discovering their personal learning styles at this level. Therefore, the term young learners will not be restricted solely to those in elementary school.

After discussing theory, the paper will describe practical examples where Japanese sixth grade learners of English talk about how they learn, and how various strategies have helped them to become better learners. One of the authors teaches English at an elementary school in Japan. The examples come from her master’s thesis research (Kobayashi, 2015), conducted when she was an observer/researcher in a sixth grade class. For the purpose of this article, the terms young learners and children will be used synonymously.

Language Learning Beyond the Classroom

Most studies have traditionally focused on in-class learning. However, in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of interest in learning beyond the classroom. Any discussion of this topic should begin with Benson and Reinders’ (2011) groundbreaking volume, which is dedicated solely to the variety of ways in which learning occurs outside of a school or classroom setting. Two chapters that are most relevant are discussed here. While some learners are in or approaching high school and therefore might not traditionally be considered young learners, these studies are relevant as examples of self-access and learning beyond the language class.

First, Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen, and Dufva (2011) consider the relationship between agency and context in learning beyond the classroom. The Finnish participants of their study discuss activities they engaged in while learning English during their grade school years (grades 3-12). Findings show that they primarily learned grammar in school. On the other hand, learners not only used social situations...
to improve their English communication and expand their vocabulary through various contexts (TV, the internet, magazines, newspapers, books, radio, and listening to music), but also demonstrated a willingness to search out opportunities to use the language outside of school.

Sundqvist (2011) examines learning beyond the classroom, or extramural English, as she terms it, in ninth grade Swedish learners (ages 15-16). Like other studies discussed in this paper, Sundqvist found that students’ oral proficiency and vocabulary improved through reading various print and electronic media (including the internet) and playing video games. These results are supported by a Swedish National Agency of Education report (as cited in Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014), which states that the majority of Swedish upper elementary school students learn the same amount or more English beyond the classroom.

**Self-access through gaming and other media**

Recently, there have been several studies on self-access in which young learners (ranging in age from ten to fourteen years old) demonstrated academic improvement in English from having played online multi-player video games outside of school (Jeon, 2014; Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio, 2009; Sundqvist, 2015; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). Sundqvist and Sylvén (2014) found that Swedish learners of English demonstrated improvement in speaking and vocabulary through out-of-school gaming. In Jeon’s (2014) study, young Korean EFL learners had positive learning experiences and became more confident using English in school as a result of having played video games on their own. Finally, Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio’s (2009) Finnish participants improved their speaking abilities through repetition of various phrases that were necessary to play the game.

In Iceland, eight year-old children who had not yet begun formal English instruction had nevertheless acquired basic speaking and listening skills through activities done at home, such as playing computer games and watching TV programs, movies, and YouTube videos (Lefever, 2010). In fact, students were already capable of producing sentence-level spoken English when formal instruction began in the third grade.

As part of the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) Project, a large-scale study spanning seven European countries, Muñoz and Lindgren (2011) examine language exposure and improvement in ten to eleven year-old children, based on out-
of-school activities. Results tend to support those of the smaller studies discussed above in that learners’ language improved through various activities, mainly computer games, subtitled TV/films, the internet, music, and radio (Sundqvist, 2015).

**Metacognitive Awareness**

It is generally accepted that when an adult learns a language, he/she can think about how the learning occurs and consciously apply strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1995). Flavell (1979) states that children are not able to talk about their learning in the same fashion as adults. On the other hand, it has been argued that if children have the chance and the teacher presents it in the right way, they can indeed understand and discuss how they are learning (Ellis, 1999, 2001, 2011; Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015). In fact, *learning how to learn* is a key factor to any discussion of metacognitive awareness, as children need to acquire the necessary skills to understand how they are learning a language, and then apply this knowledge to their learning both in and beyond the classroom. Likewise, Phillips (1997) states that children need to learn how to learn and that it is the teacher’s role to assist them in gaining the necessary skills to be able to do so.

There are two texts on teaching young learners how to learn, and each includes numerous classroom activities (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015; Puchta & Williams, 2011). Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) book is comprehensive in its description of metacognitive theory, including a detailed description of exactly how teachers can assist children in developing metacognitive awareness and becoming more autonomous language learners. In addition to metacognitive strategies, cognitive, socioaffective, and communication strategies are also important for a student’s growth as a learner (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015). The authors go on to list numerous practical examples of the first three types (which all relate to communication in one way or another), so that teachers can be conscious of the learning process when strategies are utilized in the classroom. Examples discussed later in this paper illustrate some of these strategies in action, such as reflecting on and communicating personal preferences about language learning (metacognitive), differentiating between sounds and trying different language and learning strategies (cognitive), and collaborating and chanting together in English (socioaffective).

A notable characteristic of learning how to learn, especially with young learners, is with regard to use of the mother tongue (L1) in the classroom. Ellis and
Ibrahim (2015) state that there is no harm in using the learners’ mother tongue to either talk about learning or review something that was already taught. Similarly, Puchta and Williams’ (2011) view is that “the students’ mother tongue should be used as little as possible, but as often as necessary, as long as it facilitates learning” (pp. 15-16). These opinions are applicable to the Japanese context that will be discussed below because, while young Japanese learners do not have the linguistic ability to discuss their learning in English, it will be clear that they are definitely able to do so in their mother tongue.

Several studies discuss metacognitive awareness in young learners. With extremely young learners (ages three to five), Whitebread and Pasternak (2005) found, through video and personal observations, that children are capable of demonstrating metacognitive knowledge. Pinter (2014) asserts that child research participants are not only able to talk about their learning, but can also influence the direction research takes based on their beliefs and interests. Pinter and Zandian (2014, 2015) found this to be the case, as ten year-old learners demonstrated their metacognitive understanding by asking about aspects of the research process that interested them, thereby taking control of it.

O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) established that American high school ESL students use cognitive and metacognitive strategies both within and beyond the classroom in their language learning. Clarke (2014) found 14-15 year-old Japanese learners of English in Belgium to acquire autonomy and metacognitive skills through weekly journal entries. In a related study, Hazari (2013) discusses how ten to twelve year-old Iranian learners of English demonstrated metacognitive awareness through collaborative writing.

Boström (2012) looks at Swedish ten year-old students’ perceptions of their own language learning. She found that the children were able to explain how they learned various English content, as well as discuss their learning styles. This data supports Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) assertion that children are capable of metacognitive awareness. Similarly, Kobayashi (2015) examines Japanese sixth grade English learners’ awareness of how they learn. Based on a very limited amount of English instruction by European standards, her findings nevertheless indicate that students were able to discuss their learning. They also showed signs of taking control

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1 This study does not report on the age of the participants. However, American high school students are generally 14-18 years old.
of their learning, thus becoming more autonomous in the process. Several practical examples from Kobayashi’s study are described in the next section.

**English Instruction in a Japanese Elementary Context**

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2008), while English is a compulsory subject in Japanese elementary schools beginning in the fifth grade, the focus is not so much on learning to communicate as in fostering pupils’ positive attitudes toward the language. A second aim is to increase their desire to communicate with foreigners. One possible reason why actual English learning goals are not mentioned in the government policy might be related to the lack of teachers with both elementary teaching qualifications and high-level English language skills (Japan Business Federation, 2000; MEXT, 2013). Between the government ideology and the actual amount of instruction time allocated to English education (35 hours per academic year, which comes to a little less than one class per week), teaching English at this level has been challenging. According to Kobayashi (2015), Japanese elementary English educational policies have downplayed the students’ academic achievements. While the goal in other subject areas is to learn the content, in English, on the other hand, the top priority is having fun. In other words, English has been treated more as a game than an area of study.

This is not to say, however, that students are unsuccessful in learning the language. One of the authors of this paper conducted a year-long qualitative study in a Japanese sixth grade classroom (Kobayashi, 2015), where she was solely an observer. However, her interviews ended up having an unforeseen, but positive effect on the children in helping them to better reflect on their learning. Thanks to a progressive-thinking principal and an innovative curriculum, the English teachers were able to concentrate on teaching not only language skills, but also how to effectively learn. In addition, they emphasized the fact that English is an academic subject, and while learning can be fun, it is also a serious part of the day. Through observations and interviews (conducted in Japanese), students gave voice to how they were learning. Qualitative analysis was conducted based on the grounded theory approach. Data collected via observation notes and interview transcripts throughout the year were categorized and coded according to an emergent framework.
Kobayashi (2015) explored how young EFL learners develop autonomy at a public elementary school in Japan. The research took place in a sixth grade class of 34 students (ages 11-12). Data included in-class observation notes and transcriptions of two types of interviews: ‘post-class’ and ‘follow-up’, both of which were semi-structured in nature. There were 64 post-class interviews, which focused on any of 21 students soon after each English class finished. The post-class interviews occurred any time something appeared to have changed with the individual and his/her learning (based on observations). Follow-up interviews were dedicated to understanding students’ learning in more detail. Three of these students each participated in a twenty-minute follow-up interview because observations and post-class interview data suggested that they were developing autonomy and metacognitive awareness. Two of the students showed the most drastic improvement in autonomy and language proficiency throughout the year, while the third was very competent at explaining how she was learning.

Seven examples of learner autonomy (selected from 33 cases identified in the study) are described in this paper. While the first two have to do with self-access and learning beyond the classroom, they do not relate specifically to English, but rather to motivating factors. The next three show how students apply strategies to their English learning, and the final two examples relate to how the children demonstrate their understanding of metacognitive knowledge.

**Example 1: Motivation beyond the classroom**

One day, Pupil T looked very excited in English class. In an interview, he told the researcher about a conversation he had had with friends who graduated from the same school a year earlier. His friends told him that the sixth grade English class is helpful in preparing for junior high school. In this case, what happened outside of class strongly affected his motivation to study English. Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) metacognitive strategy, “sharing ideas about language learning” (p. 12), is related to this example because the older students told him about the importance of studying English.

He also mentioned how a returnee (a student who had returned to Japan from living in an English-speaking country) had influenced him. His new goal was to emulate that student’s pronunciation. As he listens to her and repeats, he is applying one of Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) cognitive strategies.
Example 2: Motivation through content

According to observation notes, in the beginning of the school year Pupil E did not look like a girl who enjoyed English. Until the middle of the second semester, she appeared overwhelmed and frustrated in class. However, her attitude and methods of studying English gradually improved. One day, she began to take notes in class and also started to raise her hand to answer questions. The researcher began to pay closer attention to Pupil E and her interests in order to understand why this change had occurred.

In English class, the children had been singing the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* for several months. One day, the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) asked students to write their dream on a handout. The JTE wanted students to focus on “the dream that you dare to” dream, which is a line in the song. During this activity, Pupil E wrote that she wished for world peace, and the JTE later introduced this idea to the class. In the post-class interview, the author and Pupil E had the following conversation:

*Author:* When your idea was introduced by Mrs. (JTE’s name), what did you think?

*Pupil E:* I wanted to sing that song more wholeheartedly. I have been interested in veterinarian as a job in the future, but started to think I want to be an adult who can promote world peace.

She went on to say that she became interested in this field through learning about Malala Yousafzai and Sadako Ogata (former United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees) both in and outside of school.

*Author:* What do you think about learning English?

*Pupil E:* In order to build a peaceful world, English is necessary. I’m not good at English now, but I believe I can make an effort to be good at it.

According to observation notes, Pupil E researched Ogata for a class project (in Japanese) and gave a speech about her. This activity led Pupil E to begin thinking about her own future. Therefore, content learned separately and in two languages combined to increase motivation and also gave her a reason to work harder in English class.
Example 3: Applying three types of strategies simultaneously

The sixth grade English curriculum is based on joint storytelling (a methodology developed by the JTE), where students learn language forms, such as vocabulary and structure, in order to knowingly produce language (Allen-Tamai, 2013). The JTE selected one Japanese folk story and made a manuscript with rhythm, songs, and gestures based on American Sign Language. The term joint storytelling originated from the fact that “students learn to jointly retell a story together or with a teacher, and their first language (Japanese) is used jointly with their second language (English)” (Allen-Tamai, 2013, p. 122).

The students learned to tell the entire story little by little throughout the school year, and in the process applied all three types of learner strategies outlined by Ellis and Ibrahim (2015). Students listened to and repeated after the teacher, in addition to practicing pronunciation through reciting the story (cognitive), and they chanted together with peers (socioaffective). Several metacognitive strategies were applied as well. When they learned to chant the story, they became aware of word stress. As students practiced what they had already learned, they activated prior knowledge, and finally reviewed what they had already learned. In short, students learned about the process of language learning through experiencing it.

Example 4: Gestures as a learning strategy

Pupil F described how a song helped her to learn English. As mentioned in Example two, the class had sung Somewhere Over the Rainbow using gestures based on American Sign Language. According to the student, “In the beginning of the song activity, the teacher sang the song so naturally that it was hard to catch what she said. However, using the gestures was helpful.” She went on to say that it is too difficult to sing without the gestures. Since she would not have been able to read all the lyrics, that method would also have been hard. The student felt that this learning strategy was effective because “we remembered the song briefly by using gestures, then focused on understanding the meaning later”.

Example 5: Note-taking strategy

Students do not usually take notes in English class because spelling is not explicitly taught. However, some students in the class regularly copied words from the blackboard. One day, Pupil E suddenly began to take notes. In an interview, she
said that she copied the spelling and meaning of words because she was imitating another student, Pupil H. She found that Pupil H was able to read the words aloud from having copied them, so she decided to do the same thing. As a result, she was able to learn how to read several new words. By doing this, Pupil E selected criteria for success and therefore applied a metacognitive strategy (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015).

**Example 6: Understanding metacognitive knowledge through peer teaching**

Ten students in the target class participated in a program in which they taught joint storytelling to first graders. (They had been learning this way since second grade, and now had a unique opportunity to teach the younger students how to learn the content.) In doing this, they applied some of Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) metacognitive and socioaffective strategies. First, they reflected on their language learning (metacognitive) in order to access what was needed to pass the knowledge on to the younger children. After that, they were collaborating, cooperating, discussing and listening to each other, and finally helping one another to effectively teach the story (socioaffective). Pupil F discussed how teaching the first graders forced her to think carefully about how to learn. She said, “I think I improved myself by teaching them, because it made me think hard about how to tell the younger students new things.” Before this experience, Pupil F thought that if she could successfully tell the story, it would be easy to teach it. Afterwards, however, she realized, “We need to have a deep understanding to teach someone.”

**Example 7: Understanding how to learn**

In a lesson designed to develop phonological awareness, students were learning about the relationships between letters and sounds. Pupil O understood what was happening and explained why she was learning the phonemes. She said, “Understanding and acquiring each phoneme is allowing me to read such long words.” She also explained about the literacy learning goal of each grade: acquiring consonant phonemes in the fifth grade, and acquiring short and long vowel sounds in the sixth grade. Even though she might not have been managing her own learning yet, she was able to vocalize how she was learning, thus accessing metacognitive knowledge.
Conclusion

The examples discussed above provide a glimpse into the metacognitive awareness and choices made by Japanese sixth grade learners of English. Through use of various strategies, the students took charge of their own learning and made decisions that helped them to be better learners. In doing so, they applied several of Ellis and Ibrahim’s (2015) metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective strategies to their language learning. Since interviews did not contain questions about learning English at home or outside the classroom, the examples focus solely on in-school learning. While it would have been helpful to know if self-access had played a role in their motivation or decision-making, it is nevertheless evident that the children understood how they were learning and were able to explain about aspects of their metacognitive and cognitive awareness.

The interviews might have served the purpose of giving students an opportunity to actively reflect on their learning, thus assisting them in recalling their thought processes while completing various tasks. In this way, Kobayashi’s (2015) data collection might actually have motivated the children by challenging them to recall and think about how they learned different areas of language. Active reflection is a key aspect of learning how to learn (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015), and the interviews likely helped the students to do just that. If a young learner understands how to learn, he/she will be more successful not only in school, but also in learning beyond the classroom. This is especially pertinent in the Japanese system with 35 hours of English instruction per academic year. In this context, a successful learner will likely acquire most language skills outside of the classroom through self-access, utilizing strategies that have worked in school.

While there have not been many studies on self-access with regard to young learners, those described above show promising results. As technology continues to improve, and more children use the internet or play digital games, so too have new ways of language learning emerged. The studies that have been conducted illustrate the need for more research on young language learners’ self-access and ways they apply metacognitive strategies beyond the classroom.

Notes on the Contributors

Robert Werner completed his MA in TESOL at Teachers College Columbia University, and has been teaching ESL/EFL for over ten years at the elementary,
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Yu Kobayashi completed her MA in English Education at Aoyama Gakuin University, and has been teaching English at three Tokyo elementary schools since 2014. Prior to that, she spent five years observing elementary school English classes that followed an innovative curriculum. Her research interests include autonomy, relatedness, and self-determination.

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410


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