

Guided Self-Study Program as a Component of a Mandatory English Course

Ayako Aizawa

Graduate School, Rikkyo University

a.aizawa@rikkyo.ac.jp

Yumi Matsumoto

University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo

y.matsumoto@u-sacred-heart.ac.jp (Corresponding Author)

Author Biographies

Ayako Aizawa is a Ph.D. student in Intercultural Communication Studies at Rikkyo University and has been working as a language learning advisor at the University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo. Her research interests include second language acquisition and language testing, with a particular focus on testing first language Japanese users' knowledge of English formulaic language.

Yumi Matsumoto is a lecturer and language learning advisor at the University of the Sacred Heart, and also teaches at Tokyo Kasei University, where she designed and launched a course called 'English Workshop', aimed at fostering autonomous English learners. She received her MA in TESOL from Temple University in 2007. Her research interests include learner autonomy and corpus linguistics.

Abstract

This paper outlines the guided self-study English listening program at the University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo, a program integrated in a mandatory English course for all first-year students, which has provided English listening practice to first-year students for over three decades since its inception in 1991. A distinctive feature of this program is its structured and *guided* approach to self-study, which requires students to adhere to specific study durations and pacing while choosing from a wide variety of selected listening materials. This paper highlights how the program has maintained its core objectives while adapting to technological advances and evolving student needs. The program's long-term implementation provides insights into integrating guidance and autonomy in self-study within language programs, even with limited resources.

本稿では、聖心女子大学で行われている1年次生向けの必修英語科目に付随する英語自習プログラムを紹介する。本プログラムの特徴的な点として、自己学習に対する構造化されたガイド付き（guided）アプローチが挙げられる。それにより、学生は特定の学習時間やペースに従うことを求められる一方、アドバイザーにより幅広く選定されたリスニング教材から学習内容を選択する自由が与えられている。本稿では、基本的な方針を維持しつつ、時代の流れや学生のニーズの変化に適応しながら、どのように運営されているのかを紹介する。長期に渡って実施されてきたという本プログラムの実績は、限られたリソースの中でも、語学プログラムにおけるガイド付きアプローチと自律性のバランスをとり入れた自己学習のあり方についての示唆を提供している。

Keywords: guided self-study, self-access, language learning program, language learning center

A guided self-study listening program at the University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo (USH) has a history of 33 years, starting in 1991 with eight English learning materials (Decker, 2004). The program has been integrated into the First-Year English (FYE) program, a mandatory component for all first-year students. Since USH adopts late specialization, all first-year students belong to the Basic Program in the Faculty of the Liberal Arts and decide their major near the end of their first year from 10 choices. Every year, approximately 600 students participate in the FYE program, which is managed by the English Department and consists of two 100-minute classes per week. In addition to this, all FYE students participate in a 60-minute-per-week self-study component, known as the MCAL self-study program, which focuses on developing their English listening skills and the habit of self-studying English. This program is supported and managed by the Language Lab (LL) in the Media Center for Active Learning (MCAL). To clarify the structure and responsibilities of each component, Table 1 summarizes how the self-study program fits into the broader institutional context.

Table 1

Components of the FYE Program and the Broader LL Services

| Component | Target Students | Management | Instructional Format | Purpose |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| FYE Classes | All first-year students | English Department | Two 100-minute classes per week, taught by instructors | General English course covering grammar, vocabulary, and four skills |
| MCAL Self-Study Program (part of FYE Program) | All first-year students | LL and Language Learning Advisors | One 60-minute guided self-study session per week | Develop listening skills and self-study habits |
| Broader LL Services | All USH students in any year | LL and Language Learning Advisors | Drop-in advising, self-study resources, ongoing support | Individualized language learning support |

Self-Study Program in First-Year English Course

Goals

The MCAL program was designed with a special emphasis on listening proficiency, building on early pedagogical insights from its founding period. Decker (2004), who initiated the original program, observed that “students’ scores on the listening component of a standardized test were often lower than their scores on the structure component” (para. 5), which highlighted the need to give more focused attention to listening instruction. Given her observation that students “have little chance of receiving this variety of input outside the classroom” (para. 6), the program incorporated a wide range of audio-based materials that students could select themselves. In addition, studies show that people spend more time listening than using the other three skills (reading, writing, and speaking), both in their first and second languages. For example, as previous research has shown, listening tends to carry the greatest weight in language use overall, accounting for approximately 40% in the first language (Burley-Allen, 1995) and more than 50% in the second language (Nunan, 1998). This emphasis on listening remains pedagogically significant in the current implementation of the program, particularly within FYE classes, which are designed as general English courses rather than skill-specific training modules. While students receive English input during the two 100-minute classes, this exposure alone is insufficient to develop strong listening skills. Building listening proficiency requires access to varied and sustained input, which can be more easily practiced independently. Considering these challenges and the program’s limited human and financial resources, the use of curated listening materials continues to be a practical and pedagogically sound approach for supplementing classroom learning and promoting autonomous skill development with having the opportunity to use various materials.

The MCAL program also aims to develop students’ responsibility for their own learning, which is often referred to in connection with autonomy. While autonomy is defined in different ways depending on the context and research, the common understanding is that it is a sense of ownership in one’s learning, with the capacity to take control of it (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). As the MCAL self-study program is integrated into the curriculum, there are rules that students must follow; however, to nurture the students’ sense of ownership in their learning, they are given the freedom to decide on how to proceed with their self-study. This process encompasses the essential elements of autonomous learning as proposed by Benson (2011): determining the learning content (goals and what to learn), managing learning (when, where, how to learn), and

engaging in the cognitive processes (reflection).

How Students Work

This section will explain how the MCAL program operates and how freedom is constrained in each aspect.

Setting Their Own Goals

At the start of each semester, students select their learning objectives from a list categorized into two levels: advanced and general. Recognizing that some students may find it challenging to determine their goals independently, language learning advisors (hereafter advisors) pre-select approximately 20 objectives covering a wide range of vocabulary, listening, reading, and speaking aspects. Students are required to select two or three objectives from the list of twenty. They are encouraged to consult with their course instructors or advisors as needed during the selection process.

Determining the Learning Content: Materials

Advisors select the materials available for self-study, offering students a choice between printed resources housed in LL and recommended free online websites which they can use anywhere, anytime. In selecting online materials under budget constraints, it became clear that very few truly free websites offer adequate pedagogical guidance in Japanese, particularly for lower-intermediate learners. As a result, the program continues to emphasize guided material selection, including paper-based resources. Materials are classified into five levels, corresponding to the class levels, and students are expected to select from the corresponding level. Additionally, instructions on effective self-study procedures are provided by advisors and attached to each material to facilitate students' study sessions.

LL now houses an extensive collection of over 500 curated resources categorized by topics such as travel, culture, study abroad, news and documentaries, English exams (e.g., Eiken), grammar and vocabulary, and English-subtitled dramas and movies. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program also began recommending selected online learning resources (e.g., news, English lesson, and video streaming sites), enabling students to study remotely at their convenience. While online resources have become ubiquitous, paper-based materials still have an important role in LL. Some students prefer paper-based materials, as they reduce digital distractions and offer a more focused learning experience. Based on the advisors' observations, such resources are valuable for supporting productive and immersive study.

To enhance students' listening skills, most of the materials feature audio resources, and efforts are made to incorporate various English varieties. Research on Japanese university students' listening comprehension demonstrates significant disparities between first and second language English speakers (Tara et al., 2010), as well as among first language English speakers using different English varieties (Uchida, 2021). Therefore, resources for studying abroad and news media highlighting English varieties are provided to expose students to diverse linguistic contexts.

Managing the Learning Process: Time and Pace

Each semester, students are required to get eight points by completing eight 60-minute self-study sessions and submitting reflection forms over a 10-week period, with a limit of one session point per week to discourage last-minute cramming. If students meet the requirements, it means they have studied English outside of class for more than eight hours in 10 weeks. Two weeks are designated as spare for unforeseen circumstances such as accidents or illnesses. Students are welcome to study more than twice a week during the 10-week period (but only one point is given per week), and/or complete nine or ten sessions if they want to.

Monitoring the Learning Process: Taking Notes and Reflecting on Their Self-Study

Students are provided with a dedicated notebook for the MCAL program created by the advisors. Students take notes in the notebook; for example, they can record lesson answers and unfamiliar vocabulary and take notes on what they were unsure about. While students are encouraged to use the notebook to keep a record of their learning process, its use is not mandatory. In practice, the degree to which notebooks are reviewed varies by instructor; some may check them periodically during the semester, while others may not. To ensure a baseline of accountability and reflection, following each session, students are required to submit a weekly reflection form via Google Forms to get a point. In the form, students report the purpose of the study session, what materials they used, and what they learned during the self-study. At the end of the semester, students submit a required semester reflection form indicating how well they were able to meet their learning goals for the semester.

What Has Changed in 20 Years

Over the past two decades, the self-study program has undergone significant transformations to adapt to evolving student needs and technological advancements. While the core principles of the program have remained unchanged since the MCAL's inception in

1991, the operational framework has evolved, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adoption of Online Platforms

The inclusion of online resources in the self-study program had been under discussion before the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of ongoing efforts to expand learning options. At that time, however, most high-quality platforms offering structured guidance comparable to the paper-based materials were subscription-based, and financial constraints limited their adoption. The pandemic accelerated the shift, and from the 2020 academic year, 12 free websites suitable for autonomous learning were selected and introduced. These online platforms, like their paper-based counterparts, were chosen by advisors based on their suitability for autonomous learning. Emphasis was placed on clear instructional design and pedagogical value.

In recent years, while developments in AI-powered language learning tools, such as chatbots and adaptive feedback systems, are receiving increasing attention, the program has not yet incorporated these tools into the list of selected online resources. This is primarily due to concerns about students' readiness to engage with AI tools in a pedagogically meaningful way, as well as the difficulty of providing adequate guidance and oversight. The potential of such technologies is recognized, and their inclusion may be considered in the future. For now, priority is given to tools that align with the program's emphasis on clarity, learner autonomy, and consistent instructional quality.

Structured Note-Taking Instructions

Another recent development has been the introduction of structured note-taking guidelines (see Figure 1) to augment students' cognitive processes and facilitate more effective learning. These instructions underscore the importance of reflective practices, prompting students to contemplate not only the content they have encountered but also their learning methodologies and experience to encourage students to discern patterns, identify areas for improvement, and refine their study strategies accordingly. The goal is to increase students' awareness of their learning behaviors to optimize and enhance the efficiency of their English self-study.

Figure 1

Example of a Structured Note-Taking Instruction

SAMPLE

Worksheet for First-Year English MCAL SELF-STUDY

| Date | Time | Website / Category | Material No. (for Language Lab materials only) | Level |
|------|-------------|--------------------|---|-------|
| 5/11 | 10:50~12:15 | elllo | | ★ |

Material Title
"Dressing for School" Views #1407 / High-Beginner 3

Sarah and John talked about fashion, especially what to wear to school.
Both think school uniforms are great.

Write a summary of the materials you used
→ So that when you look back, you can understand what kind of content you

I misheard "clothing" as "closing." The pronunciation is really similar...

When I checked in the dictionary, I found out they're different.
But I feel like I've started to understand fast English better!

Write down what you notice while listening
→ This can help you see what parts you struggle with.

Praising yourself is totally OK too!

For fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice questions, don't just write the answers—write down the questions too.
→ This helps you understand what kind of questions they were and what kinds of mistakes you made.

Quiz

1) She wants students to wear... a) what they want... b) school uniforms... c) school uniforms

The correct answer was c) school uniforms. "They" in a) refers to students.

About uniforms, the word "appropriate" means suitable or proper.

For the questions you got wrong, think about why you made the mistake and what you misunderstood, then write it down.
→ Learning means discovering and understanding what you didn't know or misunderstood.

Vocabulary

else: in a different or additional manner or place
ex. What else do we need to buy?

When learning new vocabulary, don't just write the translation or definition. Include an example sentence too.

multitasking: the ability to do several things at the same time...マルチタスク

Are you satisfied with today's self-study session? Why do you think so?

How satisfied? 😊 😐 😞 Choose your level of satisfaction with your learning.

Why do you think so?
I love the story, especially its main character, who is terrible at cooking... The story was not that difficult. I read the story while listening to it, but next time I will listen to a story first and then read it.

It's helpful to write down what you want to do in your next self-study session.

Weekly Reflection Form

SAMPLE

What did you learn from the material today? What did you find interesting?
Whether about the usage of English OR the content of the material, WRITE SPECIFICALLY.
Yellow Notebookの書き方サンプルにある注意点を参照してください

回答を入力

Start by saying which topic you're going to write about.

About the usage of English
I learned many ways to say what I like and what I don't. For example, I can say, "I enjoy singing" instead of "I love singing."
When I first heard "multitasking," I didn't think it means マルチタスク because it was pronounced differently from Japanese. I learned it is important to check pronunciation.

悪い例: I learned how to use prepositions.
It's not clear what kind of prepositions you studied. Try to write more specifically about what new things you discovered or understood during this study session.

Note. In the original notebooks given to students, the comments in the speech bubbles are written in Japanese.

Changes in Student Reflection and Record-Keeping Practices

Finally, the program has evolved its approach to students' records and reflections. When the program started, students submitted paper worksheets after every self-study session, a process that later transitioned to an on-campus intranet system. Under the current program, which has been in place since April 2020, students submit their reflections via Google Forms, offering a more accessible and streamlined platform for documentation.

Language Lab and Language Learning Advisors

Language Lab

While the MCAL program primarily serves first-year students, LL, a self-access language learning center, is open to all USH students, regardless of their year of study. Housing over 500 materials primarily for English learning, LL also offers resources for second foreign language classes (French, German, Korean, Mandarin, Spanish, and Japanese). Students have the flexibility to utilize materials within LL, bring their own

resources, or access online materials through personal devices. Additionally, some materials in LL are available for borrowing.

Individualized Support by Language Learning Advisors

As many other self-access centers in Japan offer language-learning support, since 2015, LL has been staffed with advisors who play a multifaceted role. Currently, there are two advisors, and both work eight hours a week. Their duties are coordinating the MCAL self-study program for the FYE course and providing language learning assistance and support to all USH students. Students can talk to the advisors for advice on learning methodology and problems in language learning. Some examples include how to choose appropriate materials, how to get into the habit of studying languages, or more specific ways to study for particular language skills.

Institutional and Collaborative Roles

Advisors also create handouts on self-study tips for English exams (e.g., TOEIC), hold workshops on topics such as how to prepare for English exams, how to take notes in English classes or when studying on their own, and how to learn language from movies and social media. They also work collaboratively with FYE instructors and staff members from other offices such as the International Center and Career Center to provide support for different students' needs (i.e., study abroad, career development). The advisors want students to continue the habit of self-study outside of the program during the semester, so they provide students with information about interesting online resources and study tips on Google Classroom during the holidays. They also administer a Google Classroom course dedicated to language learning and open to all USH students and share information about study tips and standard language exams.

Conclusion

Since the LL's inception in 1991 with just eight materials, the MCAL self-study program has evolved significantly alongside the growth of technology and student needs for self-study. As emphasized by Decker (2004), achieving the right balance between freedom and guidance is crucial for successful self-access language learning. However, challenges persist, particularly with having the correct balance in terms of guidance. For example, it is not possible to review each student's notes and weekly reflections to make sure that they have completed an hour of self-study and provide feedback on them due to resource constraints. Furthermore, since advisors can only interact with students who voluntarily visit

LL, it is often difficult to reach those who may need help the most. Strategies to address these issues include open access to advisors during LL hours, collaboration with other offices to promote LL, instructor referrals for struggling students, and regular follow-up requests from advisors to encourage use of support services. LL also organizes events, such as note-taking workshops, to raise awareness and increase student engagement in self-directed learning. At present, no systematic collection of student performance data or post-course feedback is in place. To better understand the program's effectiveness, it may be beneficial to gather information on student perceptions, learning progress, and long-term engagement with language learning.

The MCAL guided self-study program, as an integral part of the mandatory FYE course, serves as an important gateway for students to begin developing the habits and mindset of autonomous language learners. For advisors, implementing the program provides valuable insights into student needs, learning behaviors, and the kinds of support that most effectively foster independence. These insights inform ongoing improvements to both individual advising practices and program design. Shifts in student learning behavior, influenced by the recent availability of online resources, have contributed to a decline in physical use of LL. Instead of competing with digital tools, advisors aim to make LL a hub for language learning, supporting students in becoming independent learners who can continue studying languages beyond graduation. Looking ahead, efforts are being made to incorporate online tools and AI into the support framework to better respond to the evolving needs of learners, with the aim of ensuring that the program continues to serve students effectively for the next 30 years and beyond.

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