

Blending Listening and Autonomous Learning: Digital Study-Portfolios (in E3 Classes)

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Abstract

This research investigates the students' and instructors' perspectives on the use of digital study-portfolios (also known as e-learning logs) in E3 Seminar Participation and Academic Discussion classes. The use of study-portfolios is common practice in constructivist, student-centered classrooms, and with the continued expansion of information technology in our modern society at large as well as in our higher education institutions (HEIs), an increasing number of instructors are blending the learning opportunities that they create in order to not only appeal to students but to further facilitate their development as language learners and full-fledged capable digital citizens. Students enrolled in two sections of E3 Seminar Participation and Academic Discussion classes were invited to respond to a short quantitative survey and to further reflect on their learning throughout the course in an extended qualitative fashion. Results, while exploratory at this stage, demonstrate that while students generally accepted the utilization of autonomous listening activities via digital study-portfolios, there are still questions regarding its mode of deployment - i.e., online, digital submissions - and awareness of the learning functions that they serve. The majority of responses point to moderate levels of engagement with the autonomous learning opportunities provided by the use of blended-learning digital study portfolios. The findings of this investigation suggest issues for consideration in making student-centered amendments to the program moving forward, including awareness-raising with regards to the purpose of the autonomous learning activities, explicit instruction given with examples on how to engage with the material, and improvement of the layout of the study-portfolios to improve their utility.

[Keywords] Blended learning, study-portfolio, learning log, reflection-on-practice, E3, seminar participation, academic discussion

Introduction

Constructing a language education curriculum with a consideration for learner autonomy is increasingly regarded as the norm for successful language learning (Little, 2004), particularly in higher education (HE) where students' individual goals for L2 learning may vary as they prepare for the worlds of graduate-level study and employment. Accordingly, the introduction of autonomous

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learning into contemporary HE classrooms commonly sees the simultaneous deployment of digital technology in the promotion, planning, implementation, and evaluation of autonomous learning behaviors (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Such a merging of current digital technology with educational purposes is commonly referred to as blended learning, a somewhat advanced subset of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that seeks to employ learners' personal digital devices to integrate learning from in-class and out-of-class spaces (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). At Kyoto University, the E3 Seminar Participation and Academic Discussion course—which seeks to aid learners in preparing for further study and communication (i.e., listening and speaking)—currently utilizes online digital study-portfolios. These portfolios incorporate a list of authentic aural and visual presentations drawn from across a range of academic fields, provide scope for self-sourcing of content as well as space for students to write their notes. Through reflection-on-practice within this particularly individualized learning context, it therefore came of no surprise that the issues of learner autonomy and the educational use of digital technology (blended learning) were found to overlap. Indeed, as those concerned with pedagogical research and development stress (Hanks, 2018), it is important to first understand the *what* of a learning context (i.e., what is actually happening, what perspectives are held by the stakeholders) before seeking to make improvements to said learning context. Therefore, this paper will explore the perspectives of the students regarding the degree of learner autonomy permitted and fostered within the existing blended-learning arrangement of the course. Existing literature will first be reviewed, focusing on definitions, issues, and practices regarding learner autonomy and blended learning, in order to provide theoretical background for the investigation. Following this, results from the survey will be displayed and discussed; implications for the continued development of the E3 Seminar Participation and Academic Discussion will be drawn, and potential avenues for further research considered.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy in Language Education

Early methods of language education emphasized the role of the teacher while students were expected to attend classes ready to receive, rather passively, instructions to engage with the target language through translation, memorization, or repetition (Brown, 2007). However, later trends in language learning shifted the attention away from the teacher towards the learner and introduced the concept of learner autonomy, or “the capacity to control important aspects of one’s language learning” (Benson, 2013, p. 839). Despite the growing advocacy for developing learner autonomy in many educational settings, autonomy itself is rather difficult to frame, and opinions vary widely on an accepted definition (Everhard, 2016). The concept of autonomy, borrowed from political and moral philosophy, was first introduced in language education by Henri Holec, a teacher-researcher at the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL) as a practical measure to support learners’ ownership over their studies in making decisions about the learning goals, contents, methods and techniques, pace, and assessment (Benson, 2001; Smith, 2008). This practical, yet ideal in some respects, approach to language learning set the stage for self-access

learning. However, the shift away from teacher-led education highlighted the distinction between creating a learning situation that would allow for *self-directed learning* versus the learners' *capacity* or ability to successfully manage their learning process (Smith, 2008). In other words, learner autonomy is dependent on a learning environment that allows for students to take control of their learning, yet their ability to effectively do so may vary. Moreover, this distinction is further exemplified by the fact that the inclusion of autonomous learning in a language education curriculum may demand learners to work autonomously; however, this does not guarantee that learners will further develop this capacity (Little, 2004; Smith, 2008). Thus, to summarize the *what* and the *how* of autonomy, it is "manifested in the form of autonomous language learning, which here refers to learning practices involving learners' control over aspects of their learning or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction" (Benson, 2013, p. 840).

A key aspect of repositioning learning outside of the more traditional classroom context is the inclusion of digital technology, often referred to as CALL technology in language education. Blin (2004) clarifies that earlier attempts to define learner autonomy were mostly informed by the creation of self-access facilities, "whether physical (e.g. as part of a language center) or virtual (e.g. through the use of telecommunication technologies or Virtual Learning Environments)" (p. 378). Yet as previously discussed, the installation of self-access learning facilities does not necessarily lead to the development of autonomous behaviors, and may in fact hinder autonomy (Benson, 2001). Thus, the introduction of technology highlights the conceptual complexity of autonomy, where independence from institutionalized structures, allowing for learners to exercise control in making decisions about their learning, is set within a sociocultural context interdependent on interaction with other learners and teachers (Blin, 2004). This element of interdependence is crucial in determining how, when, and to what extent a learner will engage with self-access technology.

The ubiquity of the Internet and personal devices has further complicated the concept of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013; Blin, 2004). The idea of self-access learning has changed dramatically from institutionally organized digital literacy to self-initiated access, requiring very little involvement of language teachers. Reasonably, the shift of control from the teacher into the hands of the learner calls for redefining the role of the teacher in the learning process. As emphasized above, the ability of students to succeed in an autonomous learning environment can waver; therefore, teachers become indispensable in guiding students through their learning process (Little, 2004; Smith, 2008). Specifically, teachers may be the starting point in making students aware that the responsibility for learning is that of the learner. They may facilitate students in setting attainable learning goals, offer strategies, tools or resources to monitor the achievement of said goals, and give feedback to direct students' own process of self-reflection. This type of teacher involvement does not impede on students' ability to make decisions for themselves, but rather gives learners the necessary tools and strategies for self-direction.

Research in language education and autonomy has focused mostly on the successful implementation of CALL technology to facilitate autonomous learning. Some studies have attempted to measure the development of learner autonomy using questionnaires and/or interview data and have reported gains in autonomous learning (Banditvilai, 2016; Shams, 2012; Toyoda, 2001) or an in-

crease in the use of self-regulating or cognitive strategies demonstrating autonomy (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Figura & Jarvis, 2007). Studies formulated as reflection-on-practice and of a qualitative nature have looked at learners' experiences in a blended learning environment and have reported students having positive attitudes in using CALL (Banditvilai, 2016; Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Figura & Jarvis, 2007), improved motivation (Banditvilai, 2016; Iimuro & Berger, 2010), increased self-confidence (Kim, 2014), and better study habits (Iimuro & Berger, 2010), while also reporting improved overall language skills (Banditvilai, 2016; Iimuro & Berger, 2010;), and specifically in vocabulary acquisition (Shams, 2013), and oral proficiency (Kim, 2014). However, despite positive reports of the impact of CALL on autonomous learning and language skills, some studies highlighted that these were dependent on the proper function of the technology (Branditvilai, 2016), students' computer literacy (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Toyoda, 2001;), proper guidance from teachers in facilitating students' goal-setting and selection of appropriate study methods or materials (Iimuro & Berger, 2010), and teacher feedback (Kim, 2014). Studies investigating the use of e-portfolios or learning portfolios as a tool for autonomous learning reported similar findings where the portfolios facilitated independent learning by providing a personalized learning space and making the students responsible for their learning (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Büyükduman & Şirin, 2010). Chau and Cheng (2010) further explain that metacognitive skills were not only necessary for management of the e-portfolios but the portfolios themselves helped develop independent learning skills such as planning, monitoring, and reflection. For autonomous learning research in the area of listening, Cross (2014) reported successful gains in one learner's ability to regulate out-of-class listening practice and improved performance in a case study using podcasts as listening materials and journal entries to keep track of their listening activity. Similarly, Kemp (2010) found that learners were more personally engaged and demonstrated the use of metacognitive skills by keeping a listening log.

Blended Learning

Blended learning is usually defined, admittedly somewhat loosely, as an approach to learning that combines traditional in-classroom learning activities with an independent technological component (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). As the range of available technologies continues to advance, expand and become normalized—i.e., become a commonly present and accepted part of a society's day-to-day lifestyle (Bax, 2006)—so too does the range of potential technologies teachers could use for blending learning opportunities. Examples of blended learning activities could include students using synchronous file-sharing services such as GoogleDocs to work on a group project during their homework time, watching online videos based around common topics to prepare for in-class discussions with their classmates, or digitally recording presentations for assessment while at home on one's computer and submitting them to the teacher via an online learning management system (LMS). It is important to note that blended learning does not pertain to courses of study which are completely remote, as eLearning courses are; instead, blended activities are commonly employed in courses based in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom and are intended primarily to support this time for the students to interact face-to-face with each other. Blended learning can be construed as being simultaneously both as simple as the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning

experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96) and yet complex, based on the many potential iterations of structure, organization, technology, subject matter and pedagogy possible. As such, while there are indeed depths to be considered, this review will approach blended learning at its simpler, surface level aspects.

Blended learning is noted as bringing several benefits to traditional classrooms with regards to its utilization of technology. First, while perhaps an overlooked point, it helps to bring the technology used for study in and out of the classroom into line with normalized technology use in wider society. Here, technology essentially is defined in theoretical terms as the actions that the digital devices and their software are able to achieve (Kozma, 1991). As many teachers would point out, the level of technology utilized in the classroom to deliver content and instruction in educational institutions commonly falls behind that used in contemporary modern societies. Sherman (2008) discusses the obvious disconnect between educational settings, which may still rely on physical coursebooks, photocopies and audio CDs, and contemporary social settings where students have access to a myriad of videos, streaming audio and digital texts at their fingertips via one of their potentially multiple online devices. A learning experience better aligned to their daily experience would render educational material more motivating (Bayon, 2004; Purushotma, 2005), realistic (Tschirner, 2001), more cognitively familiar (Alter, 2009), and generally more accessible to the modern, digital native student than physical media (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Second, via digital devices the idea of blended learning can help make learning an on-the-go and portable experience (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). This is generally noted as being a key feature in busy modern societies (Ibraeya, 2019), and in particular in time-pressured university learning contexts in Japan. Studies have shown that due to class-loads, club activities, commuting, and part-time work Japanese university students have relatively little free time (Lees, 2015; Benesse, 2017), with many commenting that they do their homework and preparatory study either on the way to class or in the middle of the night (Landsberry, 2018). By having access to learning materials wherever they go, students find it easier to prepare and revise based around their busy schedules (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Blended learning, on the whole, can thus be thought of as a way to help make the learning experience accessible to the student, both in terms of mode and portability.

Blended learning also has several pedagogical benefits based around these technology-supported features. To begin with, concerning content, blending existing audio and video content into classes and courses can help keep the topics used within the learning opportunity both up-to-date and relevant; unlike a textbook written nearly a decade prior, creating listening activities based around current issues—such as news and trends—can “add a dimension of immediacy” and receptiveness to a class (Sharma & Barrett, 2007, p. 11). Though it is of course up to the teacher to consider the range of potential topics for linguistic and sense suitability, as well as cultural content, and quality and pedagogical value (Lonergan, 1984; Fawkes, 1999), the potential to incorporate contemporary content into lessons can be stimulating and motivating. In addition, blended learning has shown potential to help students develop their learning autonomy through its support of individual, student-centered learning. Although, as discussed in the previous section, the vast majority of learning at all levels in Japan’s education system commonly follows the teacher-centered ‘mug-and-

jug' style of instruction (Benson, 2001), mainly due to the need of the teacher to teach-to-the-test (Sato, 2009), blended learning practitioner-researchers claim that the decentralization made possible through the incorporation of online digital devices removes this implicit direction and allows the student to learn in their own way and on their own terms. Lander and Kuramoto (2012), though, explain that it is essential for the teacher's role to still remain in educating, informing, managing, facilitating, and directing learning activities both in and out of the classroom so as not to let the learner become completely disoriented and adrift; learner autonomy can be fostered at the overlap between students' interaction with face-to-face learning opportunities in the classroom and their use of technologies outside of it, as they constructively strive to make sense of and bridge the offline and the online space. MacKenzie, Promnitz-Hayashi, Jenks, Geluso, Delgado and Castellano's (2011) research into courses constructed around blended learning principles similarly point to this constructive bridging, further noting that as the incorporation of technology as content and interaction allows the creation of individual or grouped spaces both inside and outside the classroom. Indeed, blended learning can help to create personalized flow states, which are characterized by more "focus and involvement" on the task at hand when compared to having to wait for instructions from the teacher (p. 56). Finally, perhaps based on the advantages discussed here and above leading to the flexibility of technology-supported learning opportunities, much research points to the blending of learning opportunities being an all-round positive, with particular emphasis on enrolled students' approaches to the online and offline learning. Garrison and Kanuka (2004), in considering a flipped-classroom style of blended learning—which sees content, resources, and instruction provided online through coordinated use of LMSs (Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016), allowing students to engage with the material and learn at their own pace, and puts that which students learn online into practice in the offline, face-to-face classroom through interaction with their classmates (Uzunboylu & Karagözlü, 2015)—suggest that when the offline classroom space and the online digital space are sufficiently considered and constructed to support the cognitive, social, and goal-oriented aspects of a course of study, the incorporation of online, out-of-class content delivery and interaction has the potential to "enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences" (p. 95). Other practitioner-researchers support this; MacKenzie et al. (2010) highlight increased engagement, motivation and satisfaction on behalf of students with the blended learning courses, and Heterick and Twigg's (2003) review of applied blended learning projects noted improvements in completion rates, retention, and students' attitudes towards the subject matter and mode of instruction in the majority of redesigned blended courses vis-a-vis traditional approaches. The blending of learning contexts would then appear to offer pedagogical potential for improving motivation, autonomy, and approaches to learning.

E3 Course Learning Situation

Syllabus objectives and course description

E3 Seminar Participation and Academic Discussion are two sections integrated into one classroom with a shared syllabus. E3 Seminar Participation is an elective undergraduate course offered through the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ILAS) within the category of Career Development. It is designed to help second-year students and above improve their listening and speaking skills with

a focus on preparing them for communication within the academic community. Similarly, Academic Discussion, categorized within the Common Graduate Courses, prepares graduate students for communication within the international academic community, focusing on skills for discussion. Herein, the two courses will be referred to jointly as E3-SP/AD.

The purpose of E3-SP/AD, as outlined in the syllabus, is to “equip learners with the necessary communication skills to engage with the academic community, expand their intellectual interests, and improve critical thinking skills” (Kyoto University, 2019). Since the class is open to both undergraduate and graduate students of all faculties, the course takes an interdisciplinary approach to academic discussion, allowing students to explore new areas of research while exercising their ability to present their own area of research or study. In addition, to achieve the goal of improving speaking and listening skills, student activity during class focuses on discussion in various settings (i.e. small groups, debate, presentations), while activity outside of class focuses on self-directed listening tasks using a variety of online audio and video recordings. Students are expected to perform their listening practice outside of class as a means to prepare for discussion in class using the self-selected listening materials.

E3 Course evolution

From its initial implementation to its current format, the E3-SP/AD has undergone some modifications to address enrolment numbers and students’ needs. The course, offered by ILAS to provide interested students the opportunity to improve speaking and listening skills, targeted undergraduate students, second-year and above. However, the small number of registered students in earlier cohorts and the change in enrolment policy to allow graduate students to register for the class required some revision of the course content; mainly, initial plans to teach the course following units of a textbook seemed futile since the topics were not in line with students’ research interests. Moreover, many of the tasks in the textbook were designed to facilitate mid to large-sized classes, making it very difficult to adapt for a small class of three to five students, depending on attendance. Due to these considerations it was decided to tailor class materials to students’ interests to encourage autonomous learning out-of-class, and to promote attendance and engagement in-class with learning activities based on their individual out-of-class learning. This, in turn, led to the adoption of a blended-learning approach to the E3-SP/AD course.

These curricular decisions led to the creation of the Listening Materials List for E3-SP/AD. The list was first curated by one instructor by simply searching for online material (i.e., TED talks, podcasts) of an academic nature within the students reported area of research interest. The titles, keywords, and links were compiled into a Word document and distributed to students at the start of the semester. Students were instructed to explore the listening materials, noting the amount of time spent on listening tasks and adding to the suggested list of titles if they found some audio or video materials of interest. These new materials were then categorized and added to the list for use by subsequent cohorts. Thus, with each new cohort, the list expanded with the collaboration of registered students by sourcing listening materials. Appropriately, the growing list of co-sourced listening materials guided students in exploring content within their own interests and areas of research as well as being exposed to perspectives and topics from other fields, actualizing the course’s goal

of approaching academic topics from a multidisciplinary perspective. These early versions of the Listening Materials List for E3-SP/AD were then modified and used in the creation of the current digital study-portfolios.

Digital Study-Portfolios

Following a flipped classroom blended learning model, digital study-portfolios were created to guide students with their listening and note-taking skills. The portfolios were produced in GoogleSheets by each teacher and shared directly with students. They consisted of three sections: (a) a list of curated and authentic online audio/video links covering a range of contemporary and academic topics with space to log when and how long students listened to the chosen audio/video (Figure 1), (b) a section for students to post their own links to online audio/video on topics of their

Source	Title	Keywords	URL	Length	Date Listened to	Notes
RADIOLAB	How Do You Put a Price Tag on Nature?	Economy, environment	http://www.radiolab.org/	23:48		
	Playing God: The Broadcast	Intervention, death, ethics	http://www.radiolab.org/	58:47:00		
	Mutant Rights	Trade, human ethics	http://www.radiolab.org/	16:42		
	The Buried Bodies Case	Crime, law ethics	http://www.radiolab.org/	48:44:00		
	The Girl Who Doesn't Exist	Identity, law, government	http://www.radiolab.org/	35:05:00		
	Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl	Law, family court, human rights	http://www.radiolab.org/	43:20:00		
	What's Up, Doc?	Creativity, brain, history	http://www.radiolab.org/	19:28		
	Sight Unseen	Media, journalism, war conflict	http://www.radiolab.org/	31:06:00		
	Outside Westgate	Journalism, terrorism	http://www.radiolab.org/	38:12:00		
	Antibodies Part 1: CRISPR	DNA, biology, bioethics	http://www.radiolab.org/	32:12:00		
	Update: CRISPR	DNA, biology, bioethics	http://www.radiolab.org/	51:31:00		
	Patient Zero	AIDS, epidemic, stories of origin	http://www.radiolab.org/	1:16:08		
	The Bus Stop	Elderly care, dementia	http://www.radiolab.org/	13:25		
	Fountains of Youth	Ageing, society	http://www.radiolab.org/	23:07		
	Why Isn't the Sky Blue	Classical literature, color	http://www.radiolab.org/	21:07		
	The Living Room	Intimacy, storytelling, death	http://www.radiolab.org/	22:13		
	Talking to Machines	AI, technology, society	http://www.radiolab.org/	1:04:24		

Figure 1. Curated Audio/Video Links and Listening Log.

Source	Title	Keywords	URL	Length	Notes
Other recommended podcasts					
- Radiolab (http://www.radiolab.org/) - Science, society					
- TED Radio Hour (https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510298/ted-radio-hour) - Ideas, Innovation, Research, Design					
- Invisibilia (https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia) - Social psychology, Behavior, Society					
- Science vs (https://www.gimletmedia.com/science-vs/) - Science, Research					
- White Coat, Black Art (http://www.cbc.ca/radio/podcasts/current-affairs-information/white-coat-black-art/) - Medicine, Society					
- The Entrepreneurs (https://monocle.com/radio/shows/the-entrepreneurs/) - Global Business, Innovation, Technology					
Where to find podcasts					
- NPR (https://www.npr.org/podcasts/)					
- CBC (http://www.cbc.ca/radio/podcasts/)					
- Gimlet (https://www.gimletmedia.com/shows)					
- Stitcher (https://www.stitcher.com/stitcher-list/all-podcasts-top-shows)					
Feel free to find and recommend Podcasts/Videos yourself by writing them in the spaces below!					
Source	Title	Keywords	URL	Length	Notes

Figure 2. Section for Students to List and Take Notes on Self-selected Audio/Video Links.

choosing (Figure 2), and (c), space to write or post student notes for in-class summary and discussion.

The listening portfolios were designed to support students in the process of selecting topics, keeping track of when and how long they listened to each passage in the relevant sections, and preparing notes and a summary of their chosen issue for in-class discussion. Due to the blended use of online, linked GoogleSheets, the students were able to access them anywhere and at any time via their personal digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers.

Research Questions

Having considered the existing literature and common practice concerning blended learning, autonomy, as well as the portfolio method of study and assessment, the current study seeks to inquire into the following:

- *To what extent did the students autonomously engage with the out-of-class listening activities in terms of the amount of time spent on tasks and on material selection?*
- *How did the students feel about the ease of use of the digital listening portfolios?*

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were 24 students (12 males and 12 females) from two sections of the spring 2019 E3-SP/AD course, with 11 undergraduate students from 6 faculties and 13 graduate students from 7 graduate schools. Different instructors taught each section, which met once a week for 90 minutes. The instructors collaborated to create and distribute the educational materials used in this study.

Research Design and Data Collection

In order to investigate these research questions, data was collected using two sources: (a) a tally of student listening time as self-reported in their portfolios, (b) an end-of-semester survey (Table 2). The voluntary English-Japanese survey was distributed in the final class and consisted of 4-point Likert-scale questions, follow-up open-ended items prompting reflection on possible improvements of the portfolios, and a general comment section. The survey item design replicated that of the mandatory university satisfaction questionnaire for spring courses in an attempt to reduce the chance for survey-fatigue as well as to ease comprehension.

To address the first research question regarding time on task and independent material selection, data from the tally of self-reported listening and survey questions 1 to 9 were compiled. The second research question concerning students' overall experience with the blended learning opportunity provided through the portfolios was answered with data from questions 11 to 14 in the survey. Open-ended items (Questions 10 and 15) provided data specifically for each respective research question.

Results

Tally of Self-reported Listening

Since students logged the amount of time spent on listening by noting the audio or video time length and the number of times listened in their study-portfolios in a GoogleSheets format, a sum function was used to calculate the total time over the span of one semester. The following table (Table 1) shows the averages for both classes, categorized into undergraduate and graduates.

The average tallied time spent on listening activities outside of class show that there is a clear tendency for graduate students to spend more time on listening homework than undergraduate students.

Table 1. Averages for Total Amount of Time Spent on Out-of-Class Listening

	Combined	Graduates	Undergraduates
Averages (hours:minutes:seconds)	5:22:57	7:17:28	3:44:18

Survey

The results from the quantitative Likert-scale sections of the survey (i.e., all questions excluding the open-ended items Q10 and Q15) can be seen in the following table (Table 2). In addition, out of the 24 participants in the voluntary survey, open-ended items Q10 and Q15 received 6 and 5 responses, respectively. In light of the small number of responses, all comments for each respective item were kept for content analysis while the criteria for exclusion was the extent to which comments were relevant to the research questions. Thus, 5 out of 6 comments were retained for Q10, and 2 of 5 comments for Q15. Whole individual answers made up both the sampling unit and the context unit for analysis, and given the qualitative nature of the responses will be primarily featured and examined in the discussion section.

RQ1: To what extent did the students autonomously engage with the out-of-class listening activities in terms of the amount of time spent on tasks and on material selection?

Along with the tally of self-reported listening time, Q1 through to Q9 were intended to explore the extent to which students enrolled in the E3-SP/AD course engaged autonomously with the out-of-class listening materials. General overall impressions of the listening element of the course show that it was rated as positive by 96% of the cohort, with only 4% of the respondents responding with a negative impression of said listening element (Q1).

This positive reception is generally echoed through the following four questions—Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5. Blended learning’s focus on improvement of accessibility through the use of technologically supported online links, viewable through the students’ computers and smartphones, gives support to the overall approach of providing out-of-class material digitally with roughly 87% of the cohort reporting that it was easy to access through the current method of provision (Q2). Also, the suggested

listening materials were perceived as being useful for preparing for class discussions by 92% of the students who responded (Q3), with the same percentage of students considering the listening materials to be of a suitable level for the course (Q5). Regarding whether they perceived the suggested listening materials as suitable for gaining listening experience, however, the students' opinions were less categorically positive, with 20% responding in the negative (Q4).

Q6, in asking whether the curated list of listening materials was appropriate for the student's

Table 2. Results from Likert-scale Items on Survey as Percentages

Question	Responses (n = 24)			
	1	2	3	4
1. How was your overall experience with the listening materials?	<i>Not good at all</i> 0% (0)	4% (1)	32% (8)	Very good 64% (15)
2. How easy was it to access the suggested listening materials through the digital listening portfolio?	<i>Not easy at all</i> 0% (0)	12% (3)	33% (8)	Very easy 54% (13)
3. Were the suggested listening materials useful for preparing for class discussions?	<i>Not useful at all</i> 0% (0)	8% (2)	42% (10)	Very useful 50% (12)
4. Were the suggested listening materials useful for gaining listening experience for seminar discussions?	<i>Not useful at all</i> 0% (0)	20% (5)	20% (5)	Very useful 58% (14)
5. Were the topics introduced in these suggested listening materials at an appropriate level for class discussion?	<i>Not appropriate at all</i> 0% (0)	8% (2)	42% (10)	Very appropriate 50% (12)
6. Were the topics introduced in the suggested listening materials appropriate for your area of interest?	<i>Not appropriate at all</i> 0% (0)	38% (9)	25% (6)	Very appropriate 38% (9)
7. Did you add to the list of suggested listening materials or use listening materials that you found by yourself?		<i>No</i> 25% (6)	Yes 75% (18)	
8. If you answered "Yes" to Question 7, how often did you add or use your own listening materials?	Sometimes 16% (3)	Half of the time 28% (5)	Frequently 28% (5)	Most times 28% (5)
9. On average, how much time did you spend each week on your out of class listening homework?	Up to 30-minutes 28% (7)	Up to 1-hour 44% (10)	Up to 2-hours 20% (5)	More than 2-hours 8% (2)
11. How was your overall experience with the digital listening portfolio?	<i>Not good at all</i> 8% (2)	0% (0)	46% (11)	Very good 46% (11)
12. How easy was it to use the digital listening portfolios each week?	<i>Not easy at all</i> 8% (2)	16% (4)	38% (9)	<i>Very easy</i> 38% (9)
13. How often did you write your listening notes into the digital portfolio?	Sometimes 54% (13)	Half of the time 28% (5)	Frequently 8% (2)	Most times 16% (4)
14. On average, how much time did you spend weekly on preparing notes for the in-class discussions?	Up to 15-minutes 20% (5)	Up to 30-minutes 24% (6)	Up to 1-hour 28% (7)	Up to 2-hours 24% (6)

Note. The bolded text in the table is to highlight the most common response for each question.

area of interest, returned a somewhat split opinion; while the majority thought that the list was sufficient (62%), 38% did not agree and did not consider the materials list appropriate for their interests. Following on from this, Q7 and Q8, in enquiring into the degree to which students elected to search for listening pieces by themselves, provide further support to the diffusion effect evidenced in Q6.

Roughly 75% of the students reported that they selected listening materials by themselves (Q7), and of those who did the majority did so at least half of the time (84%), with 28% answering that they chose their own listening materials “most of the time” (Q8). A minority of students did not select their own listening materials (25%), which is somewhat curious as a higher percentage responded that they did not find the curated listening materials appropriately matched to their area of interest.

Q9—which asked students to estimate how long they spent on their listening homework each week—found that 62% of students spent up to one hour, with 28% spending less than 30-minutes. At the other end of the spectrum, however, 20% of the cohort answered that they spent between one and two hours engaging with the listening materials, and 2 students (8%) reported that they regularly spent more than 2 hours on their listening each week.

While the results from this first part of the survey (as well as the comments from the open response question, Q10, which will be examined in the discussion section) generally trend positive and thus suggest a good degree of autonomous engagement, there are some notable areas for improvement.

RQ2: How did the students feel about the ease of use of the digital listening portfolios?

The second research question was intended to be investigated via the responses to the second set of questions—Q11 to Q14—along with the open-ended Q15. As with the listening activities and content, the student-participants tended to view the blended deployment of the learning materials positively; Q11 saw that 92% of participating students perceived the delivery and interaction mode—digitally available, linked GoogleSheets—as an overall positive.

Delving slightly deeper, Q12’s responses suggest that blended learning’s normalized technological provision of the educational content and tasks, viewable through the students’ computers and smartphones, were relatively easy for the students to utilize, though while an overall positive there was an equal split between “very easy” (38%) and “easy” (38%). It is here, then, that although positive overall some potential aspects for improvement of the digital portfolios arise from the data.

Q13, which asked how often the students used the digital portfolio for digital note-taking, saw the highest percentage reply that they write their notes digitally “sometimes” (58%), with the next largest group replying “half of the time” (28%), only 8% responding “frequently” and the final group (16%) reporting that they write their notes into the portfolio “most of the time”. While no survey participant answered at the extremes—“never” and “always”—there is a clear tendency towards the lower end of the spectrum. Together with the previous question, the responses to Q13 could suggest a degree of hesitancy to using the digital portfolios in a productive manner (i.e., writing and taking notes in the portfolio itself) as opposed to purely receptive (i.e., using links to listen to digital audio) functions.

These responses, along with the open answers to the Q15, will be explored in more detail in the discussion section.

Discussion

As specified, the first research question explores the extent of autonomous behavior as evidenced by interaction and effort devoted to the listening activity by focusing on the reported time spent and the frequency of content sourcing. The second research question, somewhat more limited in scope, focuses on the ease of use of the digital learning portfolios. These areas of discussion will center on the trends drawn from the survey data, as shown in the results section, and will be paired with relevant comments from the open-ended questions Q10 and Q15 for each research question respectively.

Time Spent on Self-Directed Listening

The averages and range calculated from the students' self-reported time logs show that there is considerable variability in the amount of time spent on self-directed listening tasks (Table 1). Primarily, this wide range in totals might mostly be explained by the distinction in the concept of autonomy between learners' ability to work autonomously and providing opportunities for self-directed learning described in earlier parts of the paper (Smith, 2008). The study-portfolios gave students an opportunity to exercise autonomous decision-making about their learning, including the amount of time spent out of class, but that does not assure that students are able or willing to do so. Like the saying, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," students' engagement with listening materials and the digital portfolios will only extend to the limits of their capacity for autonomy. In addition, while the portfolios certainly offer an environment for autonomous behavior on the part of the students, the portfolios themselves do not require interdependent behavior from the learners thus potentially limiting the need for interaction with the technology (Blin, 2004). Another important reason to consider in explaining the variability in total time spent on listening is the availability of time afforded to students enrolled in the course. Undergraduate students, both generally when referring to Japan as a nation (Benesse, 2017) and within Kyoto University itself (Ito, 2018; ILAS, 2018), report themselves as being very busy with a high credit-bearing class-load alongside club activities, part-time jobs, and long-distance commutes, potentially leaving little time for regular homework (Lees, 2015; Landsberry, 2018). Not surprisingly, averages calculated for graduate students were generally higher than those of undergraduate students. This difference may highlight the idea that experience and practice of self-regulating skills are needed for effective use of autonomous learning opportunities (Iimuro & Berger, 2010). In a study comparing academic motivation and self-regulation of undergraduates and graduates in an online course, Artino and Stephens (2009) found that graduate students showed better application of critical thinking skills and lower tendencies for procrastination, two factors associated with successful academic self-regulation.

Although most students were dutiful in reporting their out-of-class activity, the time logs for the self-directed listening should be met with some skepticism. Some students may have been nonchalant

in using the study-portfolios to keep track of time spent on listening. For example, one student did not log any listening activity in their portfolio, bringing their semester total to 0, yet that student's teacher did observe them summarizing ideas from online videos in class discussions. Thus, it is possible that some students neglected to log the time spent on listening though they did partake in self-directed listening tasks. On the other hand, it is equally likely that some students may have over reported their total listening time in an attempt to increase their potential grade. Finally, when comparing the tallied time spent listening to the self-reported time in the survey, while they are broadly similar at the higher end of the ranges (i.e., students who spent more than an hour each week on their listening activities), the tallied averages at the lower end of the spectrum suggest that more students commonly spent less time on their listening homework than they reported in the survey. One would tend to assume that a weekly log entry would be more reliable than self-reporting on a survey; certainly, it is noted that survey respondents have a tendency to give more correct-seeming answers (Dörnyei & Taniguchi, 2010). Thus, while the discrepancy here is not a complete surprise, in future iterations of the digital listening portfolio it might be a good idea to include a summation function to automatically tally the amount of time that students spent on listening throughout the course to provide a more concrete point of reference for self-reflection on their own engagement and learning.

Content Sourcing

With regards to autonomy in content sourcing, the survey data suggests that the majority (75%) of students regularly sought out listening pieces on their own. In this, as covered in the literature, the use of online blended-learning principles could be said to have helped create a space where such a range of individual choice and agency is possible. Certainly, alongside the generally positive responses to the survey questions, several respondents commented on the freedom that the system allowed:

“It’s good, since students can find listening materials by themselves.”

The survey did not explicitly investigate reasons for seeking alternative sources, yet with most students having answered that the materials were useful for preparation for class discussion (Q3) and improving their listening (Q4) and considered them at an appropriate level (Q5), it appears that personal interest in the topics would explain autonomous content sourcing, as highlighted by the split-results for Q6. Moreover, surprisingly some participants proclaimed that the listening materials were too short:

“I think TED is a very helpful material for us to learn English but a little short, so I strongly recommend other materials, such as speeches, interviews or even longer news provided by CNN, Bloomberg or BBC.”

“Because TED is very short (sic), so maybe students cannot get enough information about the topics delivered by the speakers, so providing some longer ones, like talks or interviews could help!”

As exemplified by these comments, by offering the opportunity to seek their own materials, students can begin to reflect on their needs and wants in terms of interest, level, and learning goals, hence aiding the process of increasing personal engagement and developing metacognitive skills (Chau & Cheng, 2010; Kemp, 2010).

Continuing the spectrum of opinion on a single issue, some suggested reducing the list of curated materials to allow for more direct choice on behalf of the students, while others recommended including more listening pieces from specific fields of study:

学生バックグラウンドがそれぞれ違うことから、興味にもっている内容はかなり違ってくると
 思います。なので、おすすめのリストを一部減らして、自分が興味をもっているものを自ら
 選び、リストアップしたほうがよいかと思いました。[*Since the students' backgrounds are
 different, the content they are interested in will be quite different. So I think it would be better
 to reduce some of the recommended lists and to have more space to choose what they are inter-
 ested in themselves.*]

“More topics about humanities and social sciences could be included.”

Interestingly, the former suggestion is already a central feature of the current arrangement of the digital listening portfolio; not only is there already provision for students to source and select listening pieces themselves in the existing system, but the exact reason—individual interest and autonomy—is referred to in this comment. The participants' response to the perceived 'overly free' nature of the autonomous listening homework is a concern raised in the literature (Little, 2004; Smith, 2008), and has been observed in research in a similar learning context (Iimuro & Berger, 2010). Dore and Seko (1989) argue that traditional approaches in Japanese education often lead to students becoming “dependent on teachers” (as in Iimuro & Berger, 2010, p. 127). Thus, some students in the course may have benefitted from teachers providing explicit guidance (Lander & Kuramoto, 2012) to facilitate goal-setting and material selection. The self-sourcing aspect of the digital listening portfolio appears, then, to be relatively successful, though there appear to be differing opinions regarding the degree to which certain aspects of it could be better tailored.

Students' General Experience with the Digital Portfolio

Results from the survey confirm that students in the E3-SP/AD course were quite satisfied with their experience in interacting with materials from the listening list. Moreover, the use of the digital portfolio generated mostly positive responses, although some design improvements could further enhance technical accessibility and make the portfolios more user-friendly. Perhaps due to survey-fatigue, there were only two responses from the participants which relevantly addressed the open-ended question in the survey and thus the research question at hand:

何回も聞ける機会がほしい。[*I would like to have the chance to listen (to a listening passage)
 several times.*]

This response is particularly interesting. It is seemingly concerned with either the technological functionality of the digital portfolio or the details of the listening activity, and it assumes that there was a limit on the number of times that a listening passage could be heard. This is not the case for the technology itself (Kozma, 1991)—which, linking to publically-available, free-use videos and podcasts, is not technologically restricted—nor the homework activity, which specified students were free to do as much listening as they desired. Furthermore, regarding the ease of use one participant wrote:

“It was hard to write into the digital portfolio. It is easy to import picture of notes.”

The digital portfolio’s notes section was admittedly small and not explicitly marked, rendering it difficult to access cognitively and to actually use. Furthermore, the participant points out that it was easier to “import a picture of notes”, implying that they would prefer to write notes with a pen and paper rather than type notes directly into the digital portfolio. As detailed in the results section, responses to Q13 do demonstrate a degree of hesitation to use the digital portfolio for this part of its intended purpose; this could be due to the relatively lack of experience (Bax, 2006) and cognitive familiarity (Alter, 2009) with this aspect of digital technology, as well as general preference built up from prior learning experiences. Both Chau and Cheng (2010) and Toyoda (2001) stress computer literacy as a main hindrance in implementing blended learning technology in the classroom. Toyoda emphasizes that achieving autonomy may be dependent on a technology threshold level that one must overcome. The threshold is not measurable, but rather imagined by the learner and rooted in their perceived ability in using the technology (p. 13). Regardless, from a design perspective, the layout and arrangement of the notes sections could be remedied in subsequent iterations.

Limitations

As an initial investigation into the current flipped-classroom blended learning approach to E3-SP/AD, there are of course several limitations with the study design and the concept itself which need to be considered. To begin with, as an exploratory inquiry seeking general perspectives on the existing course arrangement and materials—a key step before changes are made in educational contexts (Hanks, 2018)—much of the data is drawn from answers to self-reported survey questions and self-reported entries from the digital listening portfolio. Self-reporting is noted as being potentially unreliable, particularly among less motivated, lower achieving students (Rosen, Porter, & Rogers, 2017), and studies into similar learning situations suggest that such students may focus purely on meeting a quota to get a suitable grade and thus self-report strategically (Iimuro & Berger, 2010) rather than spend effort on the learning that is signified by engaging with the learning process openly and honestly. While it is necessary to incorporate opportunities for learners to develop their autonomy in the course, it is hoped that a somewhat more focused, procedurally equitable yet flexible system can be introduced as the development of E3-SP/AD progresses in the forthcoming semesters.

Second, there remains the issue concerning whether or not digital listening portfolios actually help foster students’ capacity for autonomy and not merely require the practice of autonomous-like

behaviour. While it is the case that (a) the time spent on out-of-class listening activities, (b) the amount of students' self-sourcing of listening pieces, and (c) the comments from the open questions and interviews all point towards a positive, flexible, and novel learning experience, as Smith (2008) suggests, it would certainly be worth considering a pre-post inquiry method in subsequent studies into learning autonomy within the E3-SP/AD course.

Finally, while some interesting insight into the students' perception of the existing learning system employed within E3-SP/AD were gathered, many of the responses highlight personal issues with the style of learning and not issues with the system itself. Imuro and Berger (2010), investigating a similar course of study, commented on the phenomenon of globalization of autonomy as a European concept and whether it is relevant to other educational context (Schmenk, 2005; Smith, Kuchah, & Lamb, 2018). The development of autonomous learning has been willingly imported into the area of foreign language education; however, the same may not be true for other scholastic areas in varying cultural contexts, particularly in Japanese school settings. Therefore, further research and reflection-on-practice should consolidate alternative ideas on autonomy for learners of E3-SP/AD.

Future Research and Implications

The use of digital, online listening portfolios provided under the principles of blended learning's flipped classroom approach can be reasonably held to have expanded the scope for learners to develop their autonomy and to gain experience in academic listening and discussion. Building upon the previous comments, which have shown that the majority of students regularly sourced listening pieces on their own, further comments add to the discussion, both in support of the current approach to the course and offering points for improvement. One major part for improvement would be the need for explicit awareness raising on two distinct aspects of the E3-SP/AD course: chiefly, (a) the notion of autonomy in learning itself, and (b) a more guided approach to the design and use of digital listening portfolios. Initially, then, autonomy needs to be expressly focused on as a key concept in the E3-SP/AD course for several reasons. The first reason is, as literature frequently highlights, that not only is it difficult to inculcate a future-self mindset within the busy walls of contemporary higher education institutions (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) but that Japanese students are generally less motivated by expanded learning autonomy (Todo, Sun, & Inoue, 2016) relative to other nations (Sakurai, Parpala, Pyhalto, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2016). As such, while the potential for autonomy is certainly raised through flipped-classroom style blended learning approaches as in this case, it is important that the teacher provides guidance (Little, 2004; Sharma & Barrett, 2007) suitable to the situation. In E3-SP/AD, then, this could entail providing concrete examples and procedures at the start of the course. While this might in some ways restrict the overall freedom of students to approach the learning opportunity as they choose (Benson, 2013), existing literature strongly suggests that awareness-raising and guidance of this sort puts purpose front and center and could be a crucial step towards accessing the wealth of resources available (Imura & Berger, 2010).

Second, and subsequent to this point, is the need for learners to orient themselves in an actionable and achievable direction—i.e., towards goals that they themselves can reasonably accomplish in the

given timeframe—and to hold this purpose in mind while engaging with the in-class and out-of-class areas of the course. Orientation is necessary in any endeavor, to avoid simply going through the motions, and the best sort of orientation is one personalized to each individual student. Both Murase (2012) and Iimuro and Berger (2010) highlight this in their studies into similar learning contexts, and though it might not always be in the best interests of the students to leave them ultimately responsible for creating their own learning agenda, creating a goal or objective based on a foundation framework ought to help provide a sufficient balance of power to control their own purpose and responsibility for carrying it out.

Third, more consideration needs to be given to the digital literacy of students so that they are able to engage with the digital learning portfolios and learning materials. While it is often assumed that contemporary learners are digital natives, this does not automatically mean that they are inherently able to adeptly utilize digital devices and their attendant software to the level presupposed by the teacher, as evidenced in other research (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Chau & Cheng, 2010; Toyoda, 2001). Any device or software has technology (i.e., functions that it can achieve) and processing capabilities (i.e., how it can manipulate the information parsed through it) (Kozma, 1991) which may change depending on device, system, and version, so it is likely that without demonstration and worked examples students may not sufficiently know how to use, engage with, and manipulate the GoogleSheets technology upon which the listening portfolios are created. In fact, as seen by both teachers and evidenced by several comments on the survey, while space was provided for the writing or copy-paste uploading of notes for the selected listening piece, rarely were they used by the students from either class. This may well have been due to several factors; chiefly (a) the size and emphasis of the space provided, (b) the difficulty inherent in typing in directly or copy-pasting text into said space, and (c) the students' prior (and perhaps preferred) experiences of writing notes with pen and paper. In future iterations of the E3-SP/AD course, improvements to the digital portfolios should be made to take these points into account.

Finally, stronger emphasis on the conceptual and procedural bridging of the out-of-class and in-class learning sections could be required. While a flipped-classroom blended learning approach does not structurally alter the traditional homework out-of-class and classwork in-class dynamic, the function of it changes from an independent homework review of in-class material to a more linked, interdependent prepare-during-homework and interact-in-class arrangement, making the autonomous learning experience less isolated (Blin, 2004). As this style of learning is notably different from students' prior experiences, it may be necessary to focus on raising awareness of this procedure as the course commences and to build explicit references into the digital listening portfolio so as to ease the conceptual buy-in by the students.

Based on these exploratory points, work upon improving the design of the digital listening portfolios will be conducted in tandem with a renewed focus on awareness-raising activities regarding autonomous learning, as well as guidance as to suggested methods for using the portfolios.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while primarily a general exploration of the current E3-SP/AD course's facilitation of learner autonomy via considered use of blended learning, this study has highlighted several benefits of utilizing listening portfolios to provide autonomous learning opportunities for learners. Overall, undergraduate and graduate students reported satisfaction in engaging with the curated listening list and portfolios, and were particularly keen on self-selecting materials to match their level of comprehension and interests. As part of reflection-on-practice, findings from the research will inform adaptations of the digital portfolios for future cohorts to better align with the course objectives and with the expectations of students.

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