Autonomous learning behaviours: a fulcrum for course design, implementation and evaluation with larger classes

多人数クラスにおける自立学習行動：コースの立案・実施・評価

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Large classes are certainly a worthy testing arena for autonomous language learning programs. Limited possibilities for individual counseling, constraints on content customisation, and issues of classroom management are some of the challenges associated with large numbers of learners in a classroom environment.

Individual options for autonomisation can include the incorporation of self and peer evaluation exercises, learning logs, diaries, project work and portfolios among others. However, the challenge is to move beyond isolated componential strategies to design, implement, and evaluate a program that is informed by a current understanding of second language acquisition and autonomy; a program that is in keeping with current autonomous learning practices and addresses the learners' accountability requirements and holistic needs.

This paper outlines an undertaking that targets autonomous learning behaviours and principles as the key to organizing a language learning program. Methodology refers to Task-Based Language Teaching, the Milestone and Swiss versions of the European Language Portfolio, and CALL/e-learning.

It is hoped that this paper will serve as one example of a bid to extend the limits of what is achievable with larger classes to unlock the potential of autonomous language learning as a natural extension of a learner centered approach.

多人数クラスは、自立学習のプログラムを試す価値のある場である。個人的な指導や授業内容のカスタム化などは、大きなクラスの授業運営に関わる解決の困難な問題である。

自立学習には、自己評価及び相互評価、学習日誌、日記、プロジェクト、ポートフォリオ、などがある。しかし、個々の方策を超えた授業を立案、実行し、現在の第２言語獲得と自立学習の研究による授業プログラムを再評価することは、難しい目標である。すなわち、現在の自立学習プログラムも行いつつ、学習者個々に対する説明義務とクラス全体の必要に対応できる授業方法を立案し、実行することが難しい課題である。

この論文は、言語学習プログラムを作る際に要となる、自立学習行動と原理を実行する１つの方法の概要を示すものである。方法論として課題に基づく言語教授法、ヨーロッパ言語ポートフォリオのマイルストーン及びスイス版、CALL / eラーニングを扱う。

この論文は、自立学習法の潜在能力を高め、学習者中心のアプローチを自然に拡張する授

業法を提示するものである。これにより多人数クラスにおける授業法がもっていた制限を乗り越える方法の１つの提案となることを期待する。

BACKGROUND

LEARNER AUTONOMY

Learner autonomy defies simple definition (Little, 2003) but it entails learners taking charge of their learning (Holec, 1980) through a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action on the part of the learner (Little, 1991). Associated terms in the literature have included self-directed learning, shared control of learning, and independent learning.

Typically, the characteristics of autonomous learners are easily identified.

> *Autonomous learners understand the purpose of learning, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take the initiative in planning and executing learning tasks, and regularly review their learning to evaluate its effectiveness.*
>
> (Little, 2003)

Clearly, the benefits of learner autonomy are manifold and highly desirable. Learner autonomy empowers and motivates learners. It addresses cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of language learning. Autonomous learners play an active role in setting their own learning agendas and selecting learning strategies, which means they are more focused on carrying out their goals more effectively (Little, 2003).

Furthermore, learner autonomy assists in removing the barriers between learning and living (Little, 1991). Accordingly, autonomous learners' goals are more personal and relevant to life outside the classroom. Wider societal and political implications of learner autonomy have been discussed by Little (1991), Littlewood (1996, cited in Finch, 2000) and Lamb (2003) among others.

However learner autonomy is not absolute and may be manifest in varying degrees. Proactive learner behaviour and collaborative learning entail learners creating their own personal learning agendas, while reactive learner behaviour and cooperative learning are more centered on teacher directives (Littlewood, 1999).

AUTONOMISATION

Approaches to autonomisation and governing principles for the indispensable role of the teacher in autonomy often refer to increased learner involvement, critical reflection and the use of the target language for learning and learning management (Little, 2007). The promotion of learner autonomy has been broadly divided into five categories:

1. *Resource-based approaches, which emphasise independent interaction with learning materials*
2. *Technology-based approaches, which emphasise independent interaction with educational technologies*
3. *Learner-based approaches, which emphasise the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner*
4. *Classroom-based approaches, which emphasise changes in the relationship between learners and teachers in the classroom*
5. *Curriculum-based approaches, which extend the idea of learner control over the planning and evaluation of learning to the curriculum as a whole*

(Benson, 2001, p.111)

In his analysis, Benson concludes that no single approach can be deemed best. It can be assumed that these approaches will overlap and that educators must take into consideration ambient cultural and contextual conditions when undertaking autonomisation. While other writers have focused on the effectiveness of curriculum-based approaches (Cotterall, 2000), the need to address issues of autonomy holistically and as an institutional policy has also been stressed (Sinclair, 2002; Benson, 2000). This would undoubtedly seem to be the most sensible approach and in practice, a variety of means for implementation of autonomy in different learning contexts have been employed.

EXAMPLES OF AUTONOMISATION

A number of widely reported and recent examples illustrate how autonomisation is based on an eclectic combination of these approaches featuring both technological and non-technological means.

The Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, n.d.) provides a comprehensive framework for implementing autonomisation based on self-assessment, reflection on learning, and the use of a learning dossier to document proof of progress.

Self-access programs in Helsinki University use extensive learner counseling and advisory services to promote autonomy and self-directed learning (Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 1997

cited in Little, 2003).

Another example entails the gradual development by Danish middle school learners of a repertoire of useful learning activities, ongoing teacher-, peer-, and self-evaluation of the learning process, used with extensive use of learner logbooks and posters (Dam, 1995 cited in Little, 2003).

A plethora of examples based on the Internet, and on information and communication technology (ICT) have been highlighted and discussed in the literature. They are largely based on the Internet as a resource for authentic materials, as a reference, and for synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication (ICT4LT, n.d; Cziko & Park, 2003; Sotillo, 2000; Warschauer, 2001). In a series of papers, Godwin-Jones has elaborated on the tremendous variety and scope of possible activities and resources available. These include blogs, videoblogs, wikis, messaging, Webquests, virtual realities, Skype, podcasting, social networking, m-learning with cellphones, PDA's and iPods, YouTube and flash video, and even gaming and peer-to-peer sharing (Godwin-Jones, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

Given the scope and diversity of autonomisation examples, the obvious question facing educators is how best to approach autonomisation in a manner appropriate to their context. In this regard, autonomous learning behaviours offer some promising solutions.

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING BEHAVIOURS

Holec (1980) described the decisions concerning all aspects of self directed learning and related a number of learning behaviours including determining objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluating what has been acquired. As research progressed over the course of time, these core autonomous learning behaviours have been reviewed and extended.

Fenner and Newby (2000) describe a taxonomy of autonomous learning principles compiled during a workshop entitled "*Establishing Principles and Guidelines for Publishers and Authors of FL Textbooks in the context of the aims of the ECML*" and held under the joint auspices of the European Centre for Modern Languages, Graz and the International Centre in St. Petersburg, Russia in September 1997. This workshop brought together 50 textbook authors and publishers from 25 European countries. Their extended list of principles and examples that illustrate aspects of autonomous learning relate to reflection, objectives, levels, evaluation, learning styles, strategies, materials, classroom activities, and external resources. This list represents a blueprint or framework that heightens awareness and understanding of the concepts

of autonomous language learning in action. These points were taken and adapted (see Appendix 1-1) for application and incorporation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of an autonomous language learning program.

THE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

LANGUAGE COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

This program was incorporated into a variety of courses at a number of universities over the academic year 2006-7. Course objectives in most cased were focused on oral communication with one exception that was based on reading. The learners in different classes consisted of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year university students. Most were at intermediate-mid or intermediate-low levels of communicative competence on the ACTFL guidelines (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001) in class sizes that ranged between 10 and 50 students. The learners' majors in different classes included commerce, economics, engineering technology, law, literature, political science, and sociology.

OBJECTIVES

In addition to the required course objectives and designated guidelines, the purpose of the exercise was to use autonomous learning behaviours as a framework to encourage independent learning by informing course design, implementation, and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology referred to the European Language Portfolio (ELP), Task-Based Language Teaching, CALL and the Internet. The language passport and biography sections were taken from the Milestone version of the ELP (accreditation no: 37.2002-EN, 2003). Task description checklists for the portfolio dossier referred to the common reference levels elaborated in the *Common European Framework* and they were taken from the Swiss version of the ELP developed by the Swiss National Foundation Project (2000).

When incorporating computers and the Internet, learners and the teacher made use of the following resources: Googlepages Website Creator, Google docs and spreadsheets, Gmail, Google chat, blogspot.com, Engrade.com, Google reader, Google analytics, Google video and Youtube among others.

APPROACH

To assist with classroom management, particularly in larger classes, a social constructivism approach was adopted with learners required to work in small groups or pairs and function as independent learning centers within the class. They were free to assign themselves individual roles within the group depending on their requirements. A large proportion of the coursework entailed the learners designing, executing and evaluating their peers based on tasks included in the ELP task description checklists.

DESIGN

This program is built around the package of autonomous learning behaviours adapted from Fenner and Newby (2000), and categorised under reflection, goal setting, planning, evaluating learning, learning styles and strategies, materials and classroom activities and external resources (see Appendix 1-1).

Accordingly, program design refers to five basic phases consisting of orientation, preliminary evaluation, autonomous learning in fundamental, diagnostic, and creative modes, and final evaluation. Learners' awareness and understanding of this framework of autonomous learning behaviours is central to learning and to the process of autonomisation.

IMPLEMENTATION

ORIENTATION

In addition to the course description and objectives, learners are given the questionnaires on the frequency of their use of autonomous language learning behaviours prior to enrolling on the course (Appendix 1-1). Japanese translations and an online version are also made available. The importance of these behaviours as central to autonomous learning and the usefulness of these behaviours during the course of the year are emphasized.

Finally, the roles of student-as-learner and teacher-as-facilitator are reinforced and learners note that final grades are based on attendance, participation, portfolio coursework, homework (reflective journal – see appendix 1-3, 1-4) and tests / quizzes. The questionnaire data is collated; frequency distribution charts are calculated and subsequently presented to assist orientation and to allow for comparison of individual rankings within the class, and for reflection and discussion.

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

To assist with goal setting, learners are given seven short quizzes or communicative exercises based on each of three language elements and four macroskills. The data is collated, class averages are calculated, and learners compare their scores with class average scores on radar charts (see Appendix 1-2).

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN FUNDAMENTAL, DIAGNOSTIC, AND CREATIVE MODES

The focus is on how best to encourage learners to implement target learning behaviours. To allow for differing degrees of familiarity with autonomous language learning and the variation in the learners' chosen goals, the learners may ask for more teacher direction; they might choose to focus on language goals based on preliminary evaluation testing (see above); they could adopt a content approach based on their interests, or they might prefer to undertake longer creative projects based on experiential learning.

Using a task based approach focuses on task selection, planning, execution, reflection and reporting which encourages autonomous learning behaviours and accountability. Using a social constructivist framework of groups enables shared communication on cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning and acquisition.

FINAL EVALUATION

Final portfolio evaluation was based on checklists and by teacher evaluation (appendix 1-5, 1-6) and included in learners' overall assessment grades. The questionnaire was again completed by the learners based on how well they used the target autonomous learning behaviours throughout the duration of the course.

EVALUATION

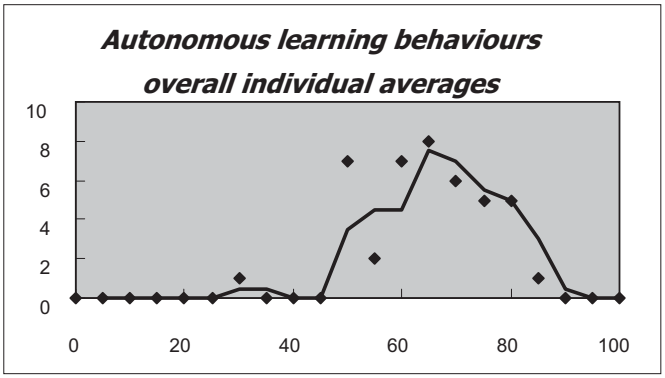
Program assessment can be undertaken in a number of ways. Calculation of individual and then group averages for each category of autonomous learning allows the teacher to identify areas of strength and weakness for each class. Overall average scores for autonomous learning behaviours in the final questionnaire give an indication of autonomisation based on the learners' perceptions and on knowledge of the course structure and content. Although subjective in nature, this assessment provides useful insights for learners and teachers alike.

Inclusion of autonomous learning behaviour data in the learners' final grades and evaluations was not undertaken at this time.

EXEMPLARY DATA

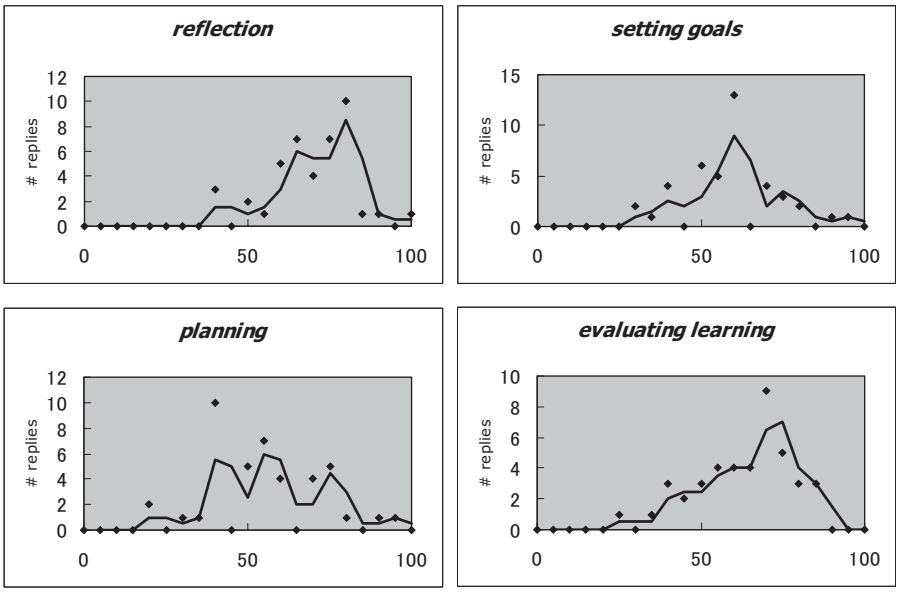
Some examples of program data have been included here to illustrate and clarify what has been outlined above. The frequency distribution charts below illustrate data taken at the end of the academic year from a class of 50 learners.

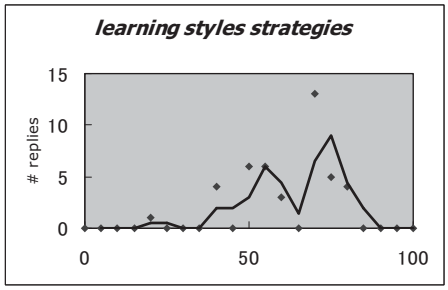
Orientation questionnaire data.

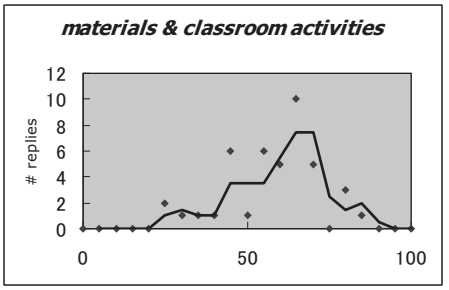


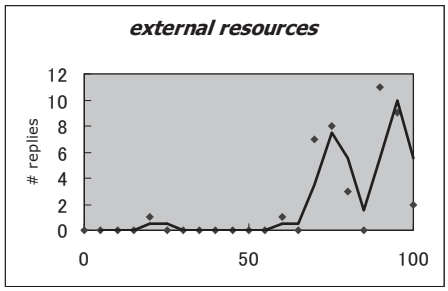
The scatterplot approximates a standard bell curve with an average value of 62 and a standard deviation of 11. This was more or less in line with expectations and anecdotal observations.

At a glance, learning behaviour charts shown below indicate learners' high frequency of usage of external resources and a perceived wide variability of distribution of the usage of planning as a strategy.









Closer examination and ordering of average values for each of the learning behaviour categories gives an indication of the priority in which they need to be addressed. Presumably, these learners would benefit from help with learning behaviours associated with planning and materials and classroom activities, while the use of external resources and reflection is not problematic. Furthermore, learners can calculate their own averages to see their standing within the class and prioritise their own learning behaviours. Preliminary and final scores are shown below.

Autonomous learning behaviours: pre-course usage frequency

external resources	80	learning styles and strategies	60
reflection	67	setting goals	57
overall average	**62**	materials and classroom activities	56
evaluating learning	61	planning	53

Final assessment questionnaire data

Autonomous learning behaviours: in-course usage efficiency

external resources	80	learning styles and strategies	67
reflection	71	setting goals	63
overall average	**67**	materials and classroom activities	59
evaluating learning	59	planning	73

This data is primarily intended for presentation and discussion in class. Pre-program usage frequency promotes understanding, orientation and goal-setting at the start of the course. In-program usage efficiency is a final assessment of performance during the course. Accordingly, direct comparison of the two sets of data should be avoided. It must also be noted that this data is quantitative, context-dependent and based on the learners' subjective impressions, thereby limiting its use in rigorous statistical analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

A categorised set of autonomous learning behaviours was adapted from a prior related study (Fenner and Newby, 2000). They consisted of 34 different learning behaviours related to the following:

– reflection
– setting objectives and levels
– evaluation of learning
– learning styles and strategies
– materials and classroom activities
– external resources

These learning behaviours were regarded as central to the process of autonomisation and used throughout the program as a reference framework to heighten awareness, understanding, and the uptake of autonomous learning for both the learners and the teacher.

Their application informed program design, implementation, and evaluation with large and smaller classes in a number of communicative EFL courses in both classroom settings and in a CALL environment.

Accordingly, program design and implementation referred to the use of the European Language Portfolio with Task-Based Language Teaching, CALL, and the Internet. Program evaluation relied on diagnostic questionnaires and language tests (language elements and macroskills) with comparative analysis based on frequency distribution charts and radar charts. The goals are to enhance reflection, goal setting and understanding of autonomous learning behaviours for each of the learners and improved learner centering for the teacher.

Analysis of data in most courses indicated modest gains in the use of target learning behaviours; however the data is quantitative, context-dependent and based on the learners' subjective impressions, thereby limiting its use in rigorous statistical analysis.

The importance of this program lies in moving beyond reliance on individual autonomisation strategies alone and the establishment and application of a reference framework

of target autonomous learning behaviours to benefit learners and educators.

Future refinements may include increased task customisation and the production of a program textbook compiled from current handouts and class materials with better presentation to meet learners' expectations.

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Appendix 1-1**: Autonomous learning behaviours**

Reflection

1. I thought about my English level	1	2	3	4	5
2. I thought about my strong / weak points in English	1	2	3	4	5
3. I thought about my goals in English	1	2	3	4	5
4. I reflected on my choices	1	2	3	4	5
5. I reflected on my past learning	1	2	3	4	5

Setting goals

6. I am aware of my own short and long-term objectives	1	2	3	4	5
7. I determined my own level	1	2	3	4	5
8. I set my rate of learning	1	2	3	4	5

Planning

9. I planned how to achieve my goals	1	2	3	4	5
10. I decided on how to improve my English	1	2	3	4	5
11. I decided on what I want to study	1	2	3	4	5

Evaluating learning

12. I corrected my errors	1	2	3	4	5
13. I assessed my progress	1	2	3	4	5
14. I regularly monitored my learning	1	2	3	4	5
15. I planned and developed my learning strategies	1	2	3	4	5
16. I reviewed my progress with my partners / the teacher	1	2	3	4	5

Learning styles and strategies

17. I chose my learning strategies	1	2	3	4	5
18. I monitored my learning strategies	1	2	3	4	5
19. I tried new ways of study and practice	1	2	3	4	5

Materials and classroom activities

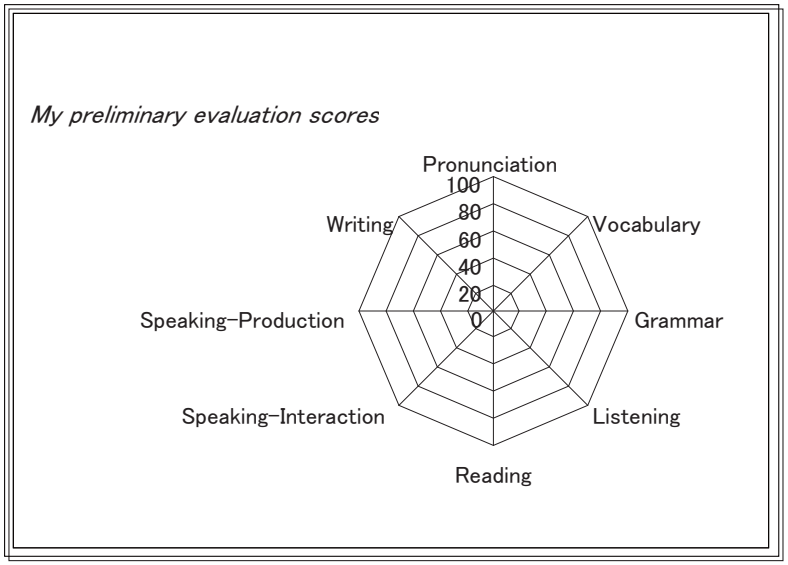
20. I chose my content for learning	1	2	3	4	5
21. I selected materials / tools for learning	1	2	3	4	5
22. I set or chose my own learning tasks	1	2	3	4	5
23. I evaluated my own learning materials	1	2	3	4	5
24. I brought my own materials to class	1	2	3	4	5
25. I am aware of a variety of approaches	1	2	3	4	5
26. I understand the rationale underlying various approaches	1	2	3	4	5
27. I chose my activities, texts, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I decided on the quantity of activities	1	2	3	4	5
29. I used my knowledge of the world	1	2	3	4	5
30. I personalized my activities by using my own English	1	2	3	4	5
31. I developed social aspects of learning by group work etc.	1	2	3	4	5

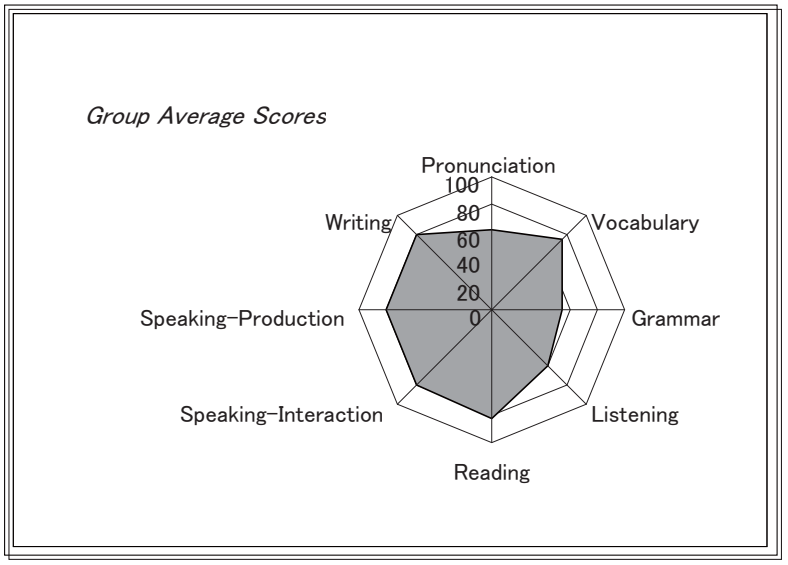
External resources

32. I used dictionaries, reference books, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I used the Internet and information technology	1	2	3	4	5
34. I used other reference materials (specify _____)	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 1-2: Preliminary language testing, comparison and evaluation

Name:_____ Student Number:_____ (　/　/2006)





Appendix 1-3: suggested format for homework class reports & learning diaries

CLASS REPORT

_____ _____ _____ / / 2006-7

student number *full name* *date*

• What did you do?

• What did you learn or practice?

• What will you do differently next time? / How can you improve?

• “So what…”

• “What next…”

Appendix 1-4**: homework class reports & learning diaries - (advanced) suggested format**

CLASS REPORT

_____ _____ _____ / / 2006-7

student number *full name* *date*

Course: *standard* ・ *diagnostic* ・ *creative*

Level: *A1* *A2* *B1* *B2* *C1* *C2*

Language objectives: *listening*・*reading*・*conversation*・*speaking*・*writing*
strategies・*language quality*・*functions*

Tasks I did today…

Preparation (partners, roles, plan of execution and evaluation)・Execution (what did you do?)・Results (report)

Language I learned or practiced today…

pronunciation	*vocabulary*	*grammar*	*listening*	*reading*	*speaking*	*writing*
learning - practice	*learning - practice*	*learning - practice*	*learning - practice*	*learning - practice*	*learning - practice*	*learning - practice*

Conclusions - reflection

What was easy? ・What was difficult? ・Why? ・How can you do better next time?

Appendix 1-5: Portfolio self-evaluation form

_____ _____ ____/____/ 2006-7

student number *full name* *date*

Portfolio self-evaluation

The PORTFOLIO shows your coursework during the past term. The folder should contain good examples of the work done in the lessons. The criteria and points achieved are set out below. Check the list and give your self marks out of 20.

	Maximum Points	Points achieved
Portfolio Makeup:		
The folder is clean and presentable	1	
Your name and student number are on the folder	1	
The contents are listed	1	
Everything is correctly ordered	1	
Writing is easy to read and understand	1	
Portfolio Contents:		
There is an introduction / title page	1	
The portfolio contains a Language Passport	1	
The portfolio contains a Language Biography	1	
The portfolio contains a dossier	1	
Quizzes are included	1	
A reading maze is included	1	
A movie review is included	1	
Other elements (attendance, etc) are included	1	
Task titles are included and complete	1	
Instructions for each task are included	1	
Interview – Presentation:		
You have presented the folder	1	
You can describe things you have done and learnt	2	
You have thought about what you want to do next	2	
Total	20	

Student's Comments and signature:

Appendix 1-6**: Portfolio final evaluation form**

Portfolio – final evaluation

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student number *full name* *date*

	Maximum Points	Points achieved
Student self evaluation:	20	
Portfolio Contents:		
Presentation, binding and ordering.	20	
(a) Quantity of tasks and projects		
(b) Quality of completed tasks and projects (a x b)	40	
Quality of English used	20	
Total	100	

Teacher comments: