Second Language Self-Instruction: Definitions and Characteristics

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Abstract: This paper examines an under-researched yet important type of second language (L2) learning, L2 self-instruction. L2 self-instruction is a prevalent way of studying an L2, particularly in foreign language contexts, where exposure to the target language outside the classroom is often limited. In past research it was defined in various ways by various researchers, causing, in some cases, confusion as to what it entails.

First, this paper discusses how L2 self-instruction has been defined and how it should be defined, in terms of the following four issues: (a) type of learning; (b) institutional controls; (c) the relationships between self-instruction and learner autonomy; and (d) the contexts in which self-instruction takes place. After discussing each issue in detail I define L2 self-instruction as a type of instructed L2 learning without institutional controls, usually alone but sometimes with others, with a conscious effort to learn the target language.

Second, the paper compares the similarities and differences between L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction. Although L2 self-instruction shares some similarities with L2 classroom instruction in that they both contrast to L2 naturalistic learning, L2 self-instruction differs in some crucial ways from L2 classroom instruction. That is, L2 self-instruction does not usually allow interactions with teachers or peers and lacks institutional controls, which have often led to problems with motivation and persistence in learning. I argue that given these differences, findings from past research in the classroom settings should not be directly applied to L2 self-instruction and that L2 self-instruction should be researched more on its own.

Finally, the paper proposes some directions for future research. Although L2 self-instruction has only received peripheral attention in the field of L2 learning it deserves more attention in the field.
1. Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) is a long, often arduous journey, which takes the form of more than simply attending classes. Thus, the literature emphasizes the importance of out-of-class L2 learning (e.g., Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Hyland, 2004). One way of learning a target language outside the classroom is known as L2 self-instruction. Although L2 self-instruction has been defined in various ways, it is generally agreed that L2 self-instruction offers a way of learning an L2 outside the classroom. This is an important type of instruction particularly in FL contexts, including Japan, where exposure to the target language is often quite limited outside the classroom, except in cases of learning Japanese. By utilizing materials such as books, CDs, podcasts, and broadcast materials, learners can learn the target language on their own even without being at an institution. In Japan many learners initiate their L2 self-instruction by studying with, for example, commercially available books, materials online, and radio and TV materials offered by the country's public broadcasting company, Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK).

Some noticeable characteristics of L2 self-instruction include a lack of institutional controls such as grades, feedback and assessment, mandatory attendance, and prescribed curricula that are in many cases related to language policy or ideology at the national level, nor do they have coursework built around a certain educational framework. Although the topic of L2 self-instruction has received only peripheral attention in the field of L2 learning and pedagogy, considering its role outside the classroom it is important to understand the characteristics of this type of learning and its similarities and differences compared to L2 classroom learning.

In this paper, I will first review how L2 self-instruction has been defined by various researchers and discuss the defining features of L2 self-instruction. I will then supply my own definition. Finally I will discuss some similarities and differences between L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction, proposing some directions for future research.

2. Defining Features of L2 Self-Instruction

Self-instruction has been defined in various ways by different researchers, causing, in some cases, confusion with some related but distinct concepts. First, Dickinson (1987) defined it as “situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 5). Second, Jones (1998) defined self-instruction in a narrower way as “a deliberate long-term learning project instigated, planned, and carried out by the learner alone, without teacher intervention” (Jones, 1998, p. 378). Third, Benson (2001) defined it quite broadly as “any deliberate effort by the learner to acquire or master language content or skills” (Benson, 2001, p. 62). I argue that self-instruction should be conceptualized by taking into account the following four points: (a) type of learning; (b) institutional controls; (c) relationship between self-instruction and learner autonomy; and (d) contexts in which self-instruction takes place. I will explain each
The first defining feature of L2 self-instruction is that it is a type of instructed L2 learning, which involves an attempt to intervene in the learning process. Thus, although self-instruction takes place outside of the regular classroom, it should be differentiated from naturalistic L2 learning, in which L2 learners informally learn the target language without receiving any organized instruction. It should also be contrasted to another type of learning, i.e., classroom instruction, which is distinct from self-instruction in that it involves immediate teacher feedback and interactions with peers and teachers.

Second, although researchers do not seem to agree on the character of institutional controls, I postulate that what makes self-instruction distinct from other types of learning is the lack thereof. In the literature, some have taken an inclusive approach in equating self-instruction with distance education and other types of individualized instruction within an institutional setting (e.g., Brown, 2006, 2009). Indeed, the two definitions by Dickinson (1987) and Benson (2001) do not seem to exclude individualized instruction within an institutional setting. However, I consider it crucial to distinguish self-instruction from distance education because self-instruction does not entail institutional controls, whereas distance education does, although indirect and at a distance.

To illustrate this difference between self-instruction and distance education, further thought should be given to distance education, which does involve institutional controls. According to White (2006), a prominent definition of distance education is that it entails the following four characteristics: “the separation of the teacher and learners, the use of technical media, provision of two-way communication, and the influence of an educational organisation, distinguishing it from private study” (White, 2006, p. 248). Although the two types of learning seem to share certain drawbacks, such as isolation from teachers or peers, problems with motivation and self-discipline, and the difficulty of effective time management (White, 2003, p. 22), self-instruction is distinct from distance education in that it does not necessarily entail the use of technical media or make provision for two-way communication. Furthermore, the critical difference between distance education and self-instruction is whether there are institutional controls (the influence of an educational organization, in White’s terms). This is likely to create important differences in learning because in distance education learners do receive teacher feedback and evaluation. For example, Brown (2006, 2009) investigated what Brown called “self-instruction” that took place at a university. Although students in these studies did not learn the target language in a traditional classroom setting, factors such as teacher feedback and assessment were still relevant. As Umino (2005) rightly argues, “experiencing teacher intervention from a distance appears to be crucially different from not having any teacher intervention at all” (Umino, 2005, p. 17).

The third defining feature of L2 self-instruction is that it is a type of learning, and other related concepts regarding learner autonomy should not be confused with self-instruction. For example, self-direction refers to an attitude, rather than a type of learning, and “the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but
does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions” (Dickinson, 1987, p.11). Autonomous learning is “the upper limit of self-directed learning” (Dickinson, 1979, p.183). In autonomous learning learners take the full responsibility for their learning, such as setting up a learning objective and selecting an appropriate material. Furthermore, whereas L2 self-instruction is a type of learning autonomy in the literature is often defined in terms of attitude or capacity. Thus, learners in self-instruction, just like in other types of L2 learning, are not necessarily self-directed or autonomous, since objectives and techniques are often set by materials designers.

Fourth, contrary to the definition by Jones (1998), self-instruction does not necessarily mean learning alone. Learners could learn an L2 in a group, outside of institutional settings. Nor do we need to exclude self-instruction happening concurrently with classroom instruction. For example, it is common in Japan for junior high school and high school students to learn English in self-instruction while also studying it at school. Taken together, I define L2 self-instruction as a type of instructed L2 learning without institutional controls, usually alone but sometimes with others, with a conscious effort to learn the target language. This is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1  Types of L2 Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intervention in the learning process</th>
<th>Institutional controls</th>
<th>Classroom/ Non-classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-instruction</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom instruction</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalistic learning</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non-classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within self-instruction, a distinction is made between “learner-centered” and “materials-centered” self-instruction, depending on how much control learners have over their studies. In learner-centered self-instruction, the responsibility of learning lies in the learners, whereas in materials-centered self-instruction the teacher’s role is built into the teaching materials (Dickinson, 1987, p.5).

Materials-centered self-instruction has been under criticism by some scholars who suggest that it could actually hinder the development of learner autonomy and that self-instructed learners should be “regarded as a basically passive and supine being, ‘obeying’ a teaching programme” (Holec, 1988, p.8). However, some studies have reported learners’ strategies for controlling their own learning using self-instructional broadcast (SIB) materials, and the processes by which these strategies are developed (Umino, 1999, 2006). These strategies included intentionally looking away from accompanying textbooks while listening, recording programs for later dictation practice, etc. (Umino, 1999, p.324). Thus, there are doubts as to whether materials-centered self-instruction really hinders learner autonomy. More studies on the characteristics of learner-centered and materials-centered
self-instruction are necessary.

3. Similarities Between L2 Self-Instruction and L2 Classroom Instruction

L2 self-instruction has certain similarities and differences in comparison to L2 classroom instruction. First, as mentioned above, L2 self-instruction is a type of instructed L2 learning, which is the same as L2 classroom instruction. This means that unlike naturalistic L2 learning, L2 self-instruction, as well as L2 classroom instruction, entails intervention in the learning process. Thus, issues salient in classroom instruction, such as teaching approach (e.g., Umino, 2005), needs analysis and program development (e.g., Roberts, 1995), and language learning strategies (e.g., Umino, 2005), are all relevant to L2 self-instruction.

Second, both L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction can be either explicit or implicit. For example, when a learner learns an L2 with pre-packaged self-instructional materials such as commercially available books, these materials usually include explicit explanation of a form and some kind of practice materials. In such a case, it is explicit instruction. On the other hand, if a learner learns an L2, for example, by watching authentic TV news in the target language with a conscious effort to learn the language, then it is an implicit type of instruction. This TV news of course does not provide explicit explanation of a language form or form-focused practice opportunities.

Third, just like in L2 classroom instruction, syllabi in L2 self-instruction can be both synthetic and analytic. Synthetic syllabi “involve a focus on specific elements of the language system (such as grammatical structures, or language functions), often serially and in a linear sequence” (Robinson, 2009, p. 295). For example, many program plans of self-instructional radio (SIR) materials that are produced by NHK fall within the range of synthetic course of study. Their program plans are structured around, for example, grammar and communicative functions. On the other hand, self-instruction can take the approach of analytic syllabi, which “involve holistic use of language to perform communicative activities” (Robinson, 2009, p. 296). Thus, some other SIR materials by NHK are analytic in that their syllabi revolve around a story (with a main focus on meaning), and these materials only focus on form when it is considered to be relevant and beneficial to their learners. It should be noted, however, that a brief review of these SIR materials will reveal that syllabi of these materials have tended to be synthetic. Perhaps another similarity between L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction, then, is that the majority of syllabi have been synthetic so far.

4. Differences Between L2 Self-Instruction and L2 Classroom Instruction

Although L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction are both instructed L2 learning, they have important differences resulting from different features of the two types of instruction. To start out with, some self-instructional materials are not created on
firm needs analysis nor go through rigorous evaluation processes. Rather, they are based on what materials designers and writers think are relevant to their target learners, and are sometimes evaluated based on how many copies these materials sell. This is partly because L2 self-instruction lacks institutional controls, which often make needs analysis and evaluation happen. This may also be partly because it is difficult to define the target language learners, who are outside the classroom.

Several studies have been conducted in order to establish criteria for evaluating self-instructional packages. For example, Dickinson (1987) listed the following 12 features that self-instructional materials should have: (a) clear objectives; (b) meaningful language input; (c) exercise materials and activities; (d) flexibility of materials; (e) learning instructions; (f) language learning advice; (g) feedback and tests; (h) advice about record keeping; (i) reference materials; (j) indexing; (k) motivational factors; and (l) advice about progression. Another example is Roberts (1995), in which the researcher offered criteria for evaluation, i.e., (a) composition and technical quality of materials; (b) linguistic analysis; (c) communicative analysis; (d) pedagogical analysis; and (e) summation (Roberts, 1995, pp.514-515). These criteria are useful as a departing point for any materials evaluation in L2 self-instruction. However, each program should negotiate, among its stakeholders, the appropriate and necessary steps for an evaluation process starting from needs analysis. This should include but not limited to materials evaluation.

Second, the lack of institutional controls also means that in L2 self-instruction there is no standard curriculum for self-instructional materials, and the quality of materials tends to vary to a great extent. This has led to a skeptical stance from some researchers and teachers, suggesting that L2 self-instruction is an area “unworthy” of attention (Jones, 1994, p.441). However, on a more positive side, if a learner is dissatisfied with prescribed curricula in classroom instruction that are related to language policy or ideology at the national level, L2 self-instruction offers an alternative way of learning an L2. This is particularly notable in learner-centered self-instruction, in which learner takes the responsibility of learning. This is because, as Umino (1999) describes, learners in learner-centered self-instruction decide for themselves the method of learning, pace, time, place of learning, and materials.

Third, one of the crucial differences between L2 self-instruction and L2 classroom instruction is whether there are opportunities for interaction in the target language. In the majority of cases in self-instruction, where they learn alone, learners do not have opportunities for interaction, because this type of learning is often not interactive. This lack of interaction means that that they do not have opportunities to engage in negotiation of meaning (e.g., Long, 1996). Furthermore, for designers of self-instructional materials, the lack of interaction means that it is extremely difficult to adapt syllabus as learning unfolds, making materials “pre-packaged.” For teacher-figures, the lack of interaction means that they cannot provide feedback in the form of, for example, recasts of learner forms and implicit negative feedback. For learners, the lack of interaction means that they cannot have output practice, cannot receive teacher feedback (Jones, 1994, p.443), and cannot confirm their understanding (Takahashi, 2008). Considering that appropriate teacher
feedback may be beneficial to learners (e.g., Toth, 2008), L2 self-instruction has a major disadvantage compared to L2 classroom instruction. In this regard, much of what has been discussed in the L2 literature needs to be reconsidered when it comes to L2 self-instruction. The learning mechanism in L2 self-instruction remains particularly unclear.

Fourth, the lack of institutional controls and the classroom framework in L2 self-instruction has led to issues of motivation and persistence in learning. In classroom settings, learners receive feedback and encouragement from their teachers and/or peers, which not only offer them opportunities for learning but can be motivating as well. In contrast, learners in self-instruction do not receive feedback or encouragement from teachers or peers. In this regard, L2 self-instruction lacks “classworks’ group dynamic (which) prevents isolation and adds intrinsic motivation” (Jones, 1998, p. 40). Learners in self-instruction, especially when they learn alone, remain “lone language learners” (Jones, 1994), in some cases creating problems with motivation.

However, regarding the relationship between L2 self-instruction and motivation, Dickinson (1987) argued that it is “complex” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 29) and that each needs careful analysis. On the one hand, it might seem that L2 learning in self-instruction requires a high level of motivation to start out with, and learners might find it impossible to maintain this level of motivation because of the lack of immediate interactions with teachers and peers. Indeed, studies have repeatedly reported that the drop-out rate from L2 self-instruction is high (Ohkushi, 1991; Takahashi, 2008; Umino, 1999), pointing to the issue of motivation or a lack thereof. For example, I reported in Takahashi (2008) that one of the biggest reasons for the high drop-out rates from SIR materials seemed to be that learners had to keep motivating themselves in order to persist in this type of learning. In self-instruction, learners do not have encouragement or pressure from teachers or peers, and attendance (or some kind of learning session) is not mandatory. This makes learners free to drop out of these programs at their will. On the other hand, Dickinson (1987) argued that “many characteristics of self-instruction have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation” (Dickinson, 1987, p. 29). For example, Jones (1998) argued that the absence of teacher control leads to personalization of texts and tasks, which may increase intrinsic motivation (Jones, 1998, p. 380). Jones (1994) also noted, from a diary study of a FL by the researcher, that the creation of a regular routine “appeared vital in maintaining momentum” (Jones, 1994, p. 451). Dickinson (1987) also argued that features of self-instruction may have a positive effect on learners’ motivation because learners are likely to have a clear idea of their needs and goals, they are involved in decision making (such as which materials to use, etc.), and because learners have a high degree of freedom to use preferred learning technique (Dickinson, 1987, p. 32). Thus, whether the effect of L2 self-instruction on motivation is positive or negative, findings from past research in L2 motivation in the classroom settings should not be directly applied to L2 self-instruction. The issue of motivation in L2 self-instruction should be researched on its own. The issue of motivation is particularly important in L2 self-instruction because L2 self-instruction does not involve mandatory attendance and learners have the choice of discontinuing with their
studies the moment they wish.

Fifth, perhaps one of the few advantages of L2 self-instruction over classroom instruction is its capacity to provide ample input and many opportunities for practice because it happens outside the classroom without a time limit. Many learners receive ample comprehensible input from materials such as books, videos, etc. (Jones, 1994, p. 443). In fact, one of the advantages of L2 self-instruction reported in the literature is its ample input, “providing a rare opportunity for exposure to the speech behaviour of native speakers” (Umino, 1999, p. 318). L2 self-instruction usually utilizes recorded model dialogues, and SIR and self-instructional TV materials in particular provide sections such as dialogue repetition, role plays, and dialogue shadowing. This is not to imply that classroom instruction lacks these activities. However, whereas classroom instruction has a limited time allocation for these activities, L2 self-instruction usually does not have this limitation and learners can engage in these activities as much as they wish and consider necessary.

5. Conclusion

In sum, L2 self-instruction is one type of instructed L2 learning that takes place outside the classroom without institutional controls. The trend in the L2 studies has been that researchers have almost equated instructed L2 learning with L2 classroom instruction or at best only include distance education (Umino, 2005). However, L2 self-instruction constitutes another area worthy of inquiry within instructed L2 learning because it has such advantages as ample input and the possibility of offering learning opportunities to a wide range of learners. As such, the following areas may be especially important for future research: (a) the possibility of introducing more analytic syllabi; (b) instigating program evaluation projects; and (c) dealing with learners’ motivation in L2 self-instruction, possibly with the aim of enhancing it. Just to give an example, an evaluation project of NHK SIB materials is likely to better meet their stakeholders’ needs, including their learners’. This might have the possibility of enhancing learners’ motivation. Another example may be to conduct an experimental study and compare the mechanisms of learning using materials that are synthetic and analytic. These studies are promising not only for more scholarly knowledge but also for materials designers.

References