Fostering Independent Learning through the Use of Edmodo and a Self-Access Learning Center

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Abstract

Web 2.0 technologies have become a ubiquitous component of our daily lives (McBride, 2009), and their immediate exploitation in the field of second/ foreign language education came as no surprise. The present study aims at examining students' comprehension of independent learning and their views on whether using online tools combined with the use of a self-access learning center (SALC) helps in some way with their learning process. The participants are all freshman students at Hirosaki University, Japan, enrolled in compulsory or elective English courses ranging from elementary to advanced levels. Over a period of one year, Edmodo, a free online learning platform, is used in EFL classes in order to enhance students' learning. In addition, in order to foster independent learning, students are also encouraged to use a semi-guided SALC at Hirosaki University, Japan. In order to gather as much insight as possible on students' perceptions about using a SALC in addition to online tools, data is collected through informal group interviews and questionnaires. The results show that (1) some students are not comfortable using a SALC or Edmodo for various reasons, and (2) are not used to take responsibility for their own learning. The presenter will argue the relevancy and need of independent learning and learner autonomy in the Japanese context.

Keywords: SALC, Edmodo, independent learning, Japan, technology-enhanced learning

Introduction

In a world where globalization and internationalization are omnipresent at many levels in the society, foreign language education is constantly redefining itself, searching for new ways to respond to the new generations of students' needs. The language educator is faced with the great challenge to build on the great body of existing literature while carefully assessing his or her own students' needs and goals. Therefore, although neither the use of technology nor the use of self-access learning centers are new when it comes to independent learning, my belief is that learners could benefit greatly from being directed towards such an approach.

The well-renowned definition of autonomy as a capacity of the learner to take charge of his or her own learning (Holec, 1981:3) offers a glimpse into what this type of learning is all about. I would further argue that the skills learners acquire by becoming autonomous learners benefit them later in life when they must function as individuals capable of working by themselves even in societies where collectivism is highly regarded. Much has been debated on the issue of learner autonomy being ethnocentric (Riley, 1988; Jones, 1995; Littlewood, 1999). Riley's (1988) question "Are the principles and practice on which 'autonomous' and 'self-directed' learning schemes are based *ethnocentric*?" is what started the concerns about cultural appropriateness in relation to autonomy in language education. However, there has been a visible shift of focus in the recent years on the Japanese scene. As cited in Nakata (2011) "now in Japan the importance of autonomy is valued more than ever (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT hereafter), MEXT, 2003, 2008, 2009)." Nakata (2011:908) concludes in his study that "many Japanese EFL high school teachers, while understanding the importance of autonomy, are not as yet fully ready for promoting it in their learners". These results make us assume the fact that university students are not much acquainted to other styles of learning than the traditional one where the student is passive and the teacher holds the authority.

Hence, under this context, the present study emerged in the attempt to shed some light on how Japanese students react when introduced to different teaching and learning styles than they are used to. It aimed at examining (1) students' views on whether using online tools combined with the use of a SALC helps with their learning process, as well as (2) students' comprehension of independent learning.

Independent and autonomous learning

Benson (2001:7) reports the concept of autonomy in language education has originated in Europe in the late 1960s. However, he further points out that the concepts of independent and autonomous learning have their roots deep in the Western ideologies, beyond the field of language education. Among others, he uses Galileo Galilei's view on teaching and learning as a direct exemplification: "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself (Benson, 2001:23)." The following sections briefly address the relationship of independent learning with technology and self-access centers, as well as the role the learner should hold in the development of his or her own life-long autonomy.

Independent learning, technology, and self-access

Gardner and Miller (1999) state, "Self-access is probably the most widely used and recognised term for an approach to encouraging autonomy". Moreover, whenever in question, the interdependence of independent learning, technology-enhanced learning, and self-access is undeniable, being widely assumed and somewhat acknowledged. Lazaro and Reinders (2006) even refer to SALCs as being "'technology-rich' environments". Benson (2001:10) writes, "Because self-access centres have been enthusiastic consumers of educational technologies, self-access learning has also tended to become synonymous with technology-based learning." Exploring the relationship between self-access and independent learning, Sheerin (1997:55) gives two main reasons for setting up self-access centers. One reason is individualization and the other one the promotion of independent learning. Though much can be said about this interdependence, what past literature emphasized is "that there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy" (Benson, 2001:9) and "self-access does not necessarily ensure learner independence" (Sheerin, 1997).

Self-access centers (SACs) have been around for more than three decades now and enjoyed a high popularity around the world, especially in Europe. Fouser (2003:62) explains that "the development of SACs in Japanese universities has lagged behind other advanced countries", the reason being that "foreign languages are integrated deeply into the general education curriculum that has its origins in the pre-war upper high school." He further clarifies "the curriculum of the pre-war upper high school viewed foreign languages as part of a well-rounded "cultural" education, or kyōyō in Japanese, that marked membership in the ruling elite, rather than a practical skill (Takeuchi, 2001). "However, under the pressure to shift the focus of English language education toward a communicative approach, Japanese universities also started to build self-access centers or make use of old language laboratory transforming them into foreign language centers. The range of what a SALC contains is rather wide and highly dependent on the size and budget of the university in question. Some of these centers are state-of-art buildings with the latest technology available, whilst others are one big room that crams together everything that a SALC entails. Benson (2001:114) defines it as "any purpose-designed facility in which learning resources are made directly available to learners. These resources include audio, video and computer workstations, audiotapes, videotapes and computer software, and a variety of printed materials."

On the other hand, when it comes to the use of technology in the field of general education, a great deal of research has been conducted. As the focus of this paper is not the use of technology in a SALC but in an EFL class, the emphasis of the brief literature review will be on the educational use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) to complement the traditional classroom setting. Much has been written about the use of social-networking sites (SNSs) for educational purposes. McBride (2009:35) defines SNSs as "websites built to allow people to express themselves and to interact socially with others." She further argues "self-expression and social interaction are some of the most important contexts for language use that we try to create, or at least imitate, in our foreign language (FL) classrooms to encourage language acquisition." The literature provides a myriad of examples in which SNSs, such as Facebook, Ning, Mixi, and others, can be used to benefit the students whether

it is throughout an entire course or for one task at a time (Pinkman, 2005; Fellner and Apple, 2006; McBride, 2009; McCarty, 2009; Kabilan et al, 2010; Hitosugi, 2011; Prichard, 2013 among others).

Although the previous literature reported on the positive effects the use of a SNS has on students in a foreign language class, the Japanese context remains somewhat unaccounted for. Investigating student willingness to use SNSs in EFL classes, Hooper's (2014) study results show us that a high number of 44 students are unwilling to do so in comparison to 51 students who are willing to use them. Some of the reasons provided by the 44 students unwilling to use them were "that SNS use would make the course difficult. Another concern was that they wished to use SNSs for social purposes only. Also, some believed that using SNSs in an English course would lead to distractions or to a reduction in the quality of the course" (Hooper, 2014:244).

Autonomy and the learner

Nunan (1997:194) maintains that "most learners, at the beginning of the learning process, do *not* know what is best." Based on Nunan's model, Benson (2001) concludes "autonomy develops alongside proficiency". On the other hand, Littlewood (1997:82) argues that autonomy is possible only when "students possess both the *willingness* and the *ability* to act independently". He further explains that willingness depends on students' levels of motivation and confidence, whilst ability depends on their levels of knowledge and skills.

As Nunan (1997:195) sees autonomy not as something students posses but as a process that needs to be developed, he proposes five levels of implementation for increasing the degree of learners' autonomy. These levels are: (1) awareness, (2) involvement, (3) intervention, (4) creation, and (5) transcendence. Later on, in Nunan (2003) he introduces nine steps to learner autonomy: (1) Make instruction goals clear to learners, (2) Allow learners to create their own goals, (3) Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom, (4) Raise awareness of learning processes, (5) Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies, (6) Encourage learner choice, (7) Allow learners to generate their own tasks, (8) Encourage learners to become teachers, and (9) Encourage learners to become researchers.

Although in this study the steps abovementioned were not followed as such, they were implemented to some extent but with no direct explanations of strategies for independent learning. The study was based on the prediction that students will start develop themselves as autonomous learners only through the types of tasks specifically designed with this goal in mind, as well as the requirement of visiting the SALC. Thus, learners were encouraged to develop autonomy indirectly, only through various tasks the teacher designed, assuming they will find the motivation within to "take charge of their own learning".

Methodology

This section briefly addresses the methods used in this study. First section introduces the participants who took part in the study and the course settings. The second section discusses the procedure, offering a brief description of Edmodo and the SALC at

Hirosaki University. Finally, the rationale behind administering the students' feedback questionnaire is considered.

Participants and course settings

A group of 76 undergraduate students from Hirosaki University, a national university in northern Japan, took part in this study. The majority of these participants are first year students who were enrolled in a required or elective English course in year 2014. 39 of the students were enrolled in compulsory Basic English courses during the first term, though the remaining 37 were enrolled in a compulsory and an elective Advanced English course during the second term.

Procedure

As part of the course requirements students had to use Edmodo and visit the English Lounge (EL), a semi-guided Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) easily accessible and free of charge for Hirosaki University students. In order to assess students' perceptions of using a VLE in combination with a SALC to encourage independent learning, at the end of each term, a questionnaire was administered to the participants. In the following sections each step of the procedure will be described in detail to offer a clear explanation of the rationale behind the procedure.

Edmodo

The selected SNS for this study is Edmodo, a free online learning platform, very similar to Facebook in its interface and regarded as user-friendly. The platform is secure in the sense that students require a certain code to sign up and only the teacher can determine who can join the group. It was introduced to complement the traditional classroom, by encouraging more communication and collaborative work among students, but it was mainly used for creating assignments and quizzes, sharing various types of files (documents, audio, and video), giving feedback, and keeping track of students' progress. During the second term, collaborative work and communication among students was encouraged through the 'Small groups' function on Edmodo.

Both the students enrolled in the Basic English and Advanced English courses had to review the class material by themselves and take a quiz created on Edmodo, which provided a score immediately allowing them to view the correct answers. The quizzes were meant to develop the habit of reviewing the material, as well as confirming their understanding of the material. The other task was writing the original text of their assignment and then rewriting it after they had it checked by a teacher at the EL. The rationale behind this task was that learners would benefit from rewriting the task, by reflecting on their own mistakes and avoid making them again.

For the students enrolled in the Advanced English course, more freedom of choice was allowed in terms of topic selection for final projects. In addition, students were asked to write what their goals at the beginning of the course as expectations they have from the course. They were not asked though to track their progress and the efforts they have made towards achieving those goals.

The English Lounge

Each center is unique not only in what it has to offer but also in its managerial approach, and the SALC available at Hirosaki University, the English Lounge (EL), is a rather small one in comparison to others, such as the SACs at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages or Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University. It includes various types of resources, a conversation area, and a multi-purpose room where 60 minutes classes are regularly offered, and occasionally events, seminars, and workshops are held. It has five faculty members who work on a shift basis, giving classes and offering advice for the interested students, as well as participating and facilitating the conversations held in the conversation area. In order to provide a more relaxing atmosphere at the conversation area, a number of international students from various countries, native and non-native speakers, are hired every term to assist the teachers and to encourage intercultural exchange. It also provides counseling for students who are interested in exchange or volunteer programs abroad.

As abovementioned, students had to go to the EL for checking their writings or presentations, in order to acquire a more natural like English. They were encouraged to interact to any of the other teachers available. This type of activity was assumed it would raise their interest about the EL and its activities, and encourage them to use the EL on a regular basis.

Students' feedback questionnaires

The questionnaires administered were typical student feedback questionnaires asking general questions about the course, classroom activities, the teacher's performance, and more specifically, questions about the use of Edmodo and the SALC at Hirosaki University. The following are the main parts of the questionnaire used at the end of the first term: (1) questions associated with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' regarding classroom activities, Edmodo virtual classroom activities, the teacher's and the student's performance, The English Lounge, and (2) open-ended questions regarding things they most liked and disliked in this course, Edmodo's most convenient aspects, and ways of improvement for the course itself and for the teacher's teaching methods.

Since it was rather difficult to interpret the results of the questions associated with the 5-point Likert scale due to neutral answers, the questionnaire used during the second term was slightly modified. By doing so, the researcher expected to obtain more reliable results in terms of objectivity. Hence, similarly to the abovementioned one, this questionnaire was also comprised of two parts, the only difference being that the questions in the first part of the questionnaire were associated with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' instead of a 5-point Likert scale. In addition, one more question was added to the 'Edmodo virtual classroom activities' sub-section of the questionnaire.

Therefore, the data was divided into two: (1) First term data and (2) Second term data to avoid any alteration of the results. In accordance with the purpose of this paper, the following questions were selected for analysis:

Table 1: Student Feedback Questionnaire Items

First term data set (5-point Likert scale)	Second term data set (4-point Likert scale)
Edmodo virtual classroom activities	**_Edmodo virtual classroom activities_**
Edmodo is difficult to use and troublesome.	Edmodo is difficult to use and troublesome.
Submitting my assignments/ quizzes via Edmodo is meaningless.	Submitting my assignments/ quizzes via Edmodo is meaningless.
The use of Edmodo is effective and useful in my learning.	The use of Edmodo is effective and useful in my learning.
	*It was convenient to send files and video files via Edmodo.
The English Lounge	**_The English Lounge_**
I hate going to the English Lounge.	I hate going to the English Lounge.
I love the opportunity to interact with other English teachers.	I love the opportunity to interact with other English teachers.
It was troublesome and meaningless.	It was troublesome and meaningless.

Additionally, the open-ended questions selected to facilitate the analysis are:

(1) What did you like least about this course? Why?
(2) What was the most convenient aspect of Edmodo?
(3) What do you feel I need to work on to become a better teacher?

The open-ended questions were used only when needed to provide further explanation as some of the students' answers also provide valuable insights of their perceptions and attitudes towards the use of Edmodo and the SALC. Moreover, short informal classroom interviews were conducted to gain more insight in what students regarded as difficult or troublesome in using Edmodo and the SALC. Students' answers were recorded by the teacher and the meaningful information used for complementing the analysis where needed.

Results and discussion

Each of the following sections discusses the results of the data analysis, first considering students' attitudes toward using the online learning platform, and second, considering students' attitudes toward using the self-access learning center.

Students' reactions to using Edmodo

First term data set

Students' answers to Statement 1 (henceforth S1): "Edmodo is difficult to use and troublesome." were interpreted in terms of difficulty towards the use of Edmodo. As it can be seen from Fig. 1, the fact that the majority (53.8%) of the students disagreed and strongly disagreed to S1, and the rather high percentage of students who either remained neutral (23.07%) or agreed and strongly agreed (23.07%) to S1, could lead us to believe that the use of Edmodo did pose some challenges.

In order to gain more insight about what sort of difficulties students encountered while using Edmodo, the open-ended questions were analyzed. Some of the

challenges students reported on the use of Edmodo were (1) it takes a long time to get used to its interface, (2) technical problems, such as Internet connection or web site access problems, and (3) no computer at home so difficult to submit weekly assignments (See Sandu (2015) for more details). Although the teacher offered a thorough explanation and even explained step-by-step to small groups how to sign up for Edmodo, special time for a walkthrough session should have probably be considered to guide low-tech students. Regarding technical problems and similar issues, the teacher encouraged students to submit their assignments in a timely manner to avoid this happening, and to give them enough time to try again.
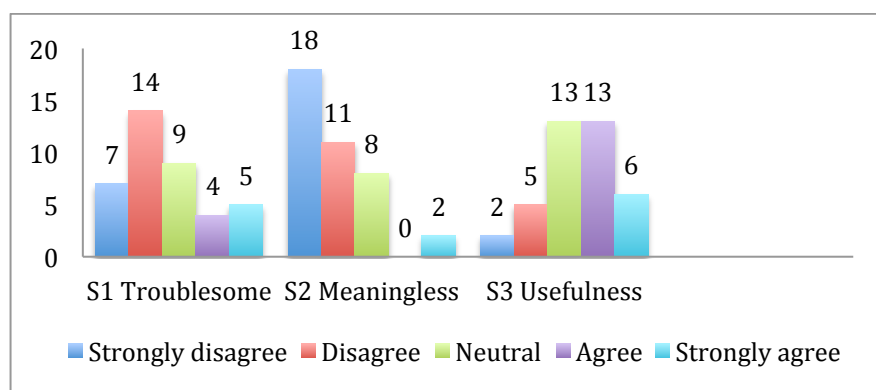

Figure 1: Students' answers regarding Edmodo

Students' answers to Statement 2 (henceforth S2): "Submitting my assignments/ quizzes via Edmodo is meaningless." were interpreted in terms of its significance. The high percentage of students who agreed and strongly agreed to S2 (74.3%) show us students regarded the use of Edmodo as a platform for submitting regular assignments and taking occasional quizzes highly beneficial. In addition, students' answers to the open-ended questions stressed the fact that they enjoyed taking the quizzes and submitting assignments via Edmodo. "Most students wrote they liked the fact they could submit their homework from their own home at any time. This allowed them to work at their own pace, without being constrained to go and hand it in directly to the teacher." (Sandu, 2015).

Students' answers to Statement 3 (henceforth S3): "The use of Edmodo is effective and useful in my learning." were interpreted in terms of its effectiveness. This statement aimed especially at the use of Edmodo as a platform for receiving direct feedback from the teacher. The teacher occasionally commented on students' assignments by pointing out reoccurring grammar mistakes and misuse of words or idioms. Since only 48.7% of the students agreed or strongly agreed to S3, it could be inferred that the remaining 33.3% (accounts for neutral answers) and 17.9% (accounts for the percentage of students who disagreed and strongly disagreed to S3) were not sure of or did not believe that the use of Edmodo helped with their learning process.

As Sandu (2015:0223) mentioned, the fact that a high number of students reported on Edmodo's ineffectiveness could be attributed to two things:

(1) Students were unsure of the (dis)advantages of using online tools in language learning and they could not understand how Edmodo supplements the physical classroom in this respect.

(2) Teacher's explanations of the rationale behind using Edmodo in her class were not explicit enough to justify its use.

Second term data set

Students' answers to S1, S2, and S3 were interpreted in terms of difficulty, significance, and effectiveness of Edmodo's use similarly to the first term data set in the previous section. In addition, students' answers to Statement 4 (henceforth S4): "It was convenient to send files and video files via Edmodo." were interpreted in terms of convenience. As shown in Fig. 2, in comparison to 32.4% of the students agreeing and strongly agreeing to S1, more students (67.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with S1, allowing us to assume that for the majority the use of Edmodo did not pose much challenge. The impressive percentage (91.8%) of students who disagreed and strongly disagreed to S2 reinforces the idea that Edmodo is a valuable tool when it comes to submitting assignments and taking quizzes. Similarly, the rather high percentage (72.9%) of students who agreed and strongly agreed to S3 could be interpreted as a sign of Edmodo having a positive effect on their learning. In terms of its convenience regarding the function that allows the upload of various types of files, 67.5% found it helpful.
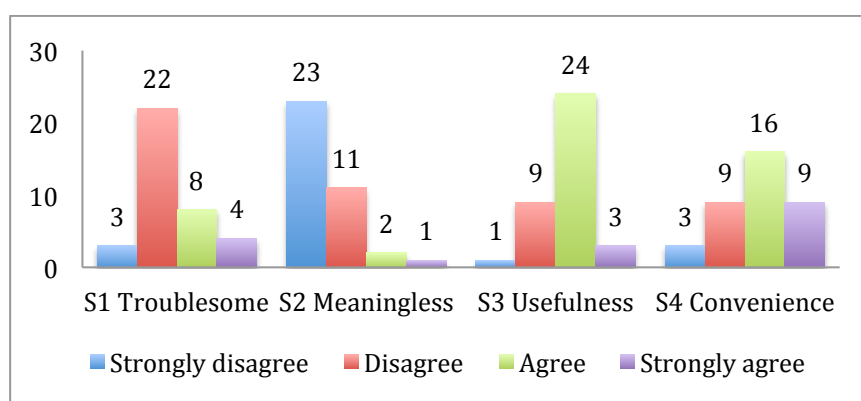

Figure 2: Students' answers regarding Edmodo

Similarly to the first term data set, students' answers to the open-ended questions reinforce the same points:
(1) Some students would have preferred a walkthrough class especially designed to get them accustomed to Edmodo's interface and its functions.
(2) Submitting assignments via Edmodo, sending files, and communicating with group members, were some of the functions students found useful.
(3) Few students would have preferred an alternative option to submitting assignments, as they either did not have a computer at home, or occasionally encountered technical problems when using Edmodo mobile application.

Students' reactions to using a SALC

First term data set

Students' answers to Statement 1 (S1): "I hate going to the English Lounge." were interpreted in terms of their level of comfort and dislike regarding using the EL. In addition to 33.3% who remained neutral to S1, the high percentage (46.1%) of students who agreed and strongly agreed to S1, lead us to an undeniable conclusion: students did not enjoy using the EL. Interestingly, despite the fact that they did not like going to the EL, 56.4% agreed and strongly agreed to Statement 2 (S2): "I love the opportunity to interact with other English teachers.", allowing us to assume they valued the experience itself although they felt uncomfortable going there.

Moreover, as shown in Fig. 3 below, students' answers to Statement 3 (S3): "It was troublesome and meaningless." were interpreted in terms of significance regarding their learning. With a percentage of 56.4% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing to S3 we could assume the majority of the students found the use of the EL meaningful. However, the 25.6% who remained neutral to S3 show us that a rather large number of students were not convinced the use of the EL was meaningful enough for their learning.

Considering the high percentage of students showing reservations or even discomfort regarding visiting the EL, the teacher engaged them in an informal discussion about the reasons why they dislike visiting the EL. Some of the main reasons they mentioned are: (1) lack of confidence in their English skills, (2) lack of time due to their busy course schedules, and (3) related to (1), anxiety of entering a space where only English is spoken. Other reasons mentioned were the difficulty to interrupt a teacher if he or she is already engaged in a conversation with other students, being at the conversation area with students who have a good command of English. Therefore, although few of the students who participated in this study continued coming to the EL occasionally none continued coming on a regular basis. Most of those who did visit the EL after the course ended, sought for a teacher's advise on their writing assignments or grammar use.
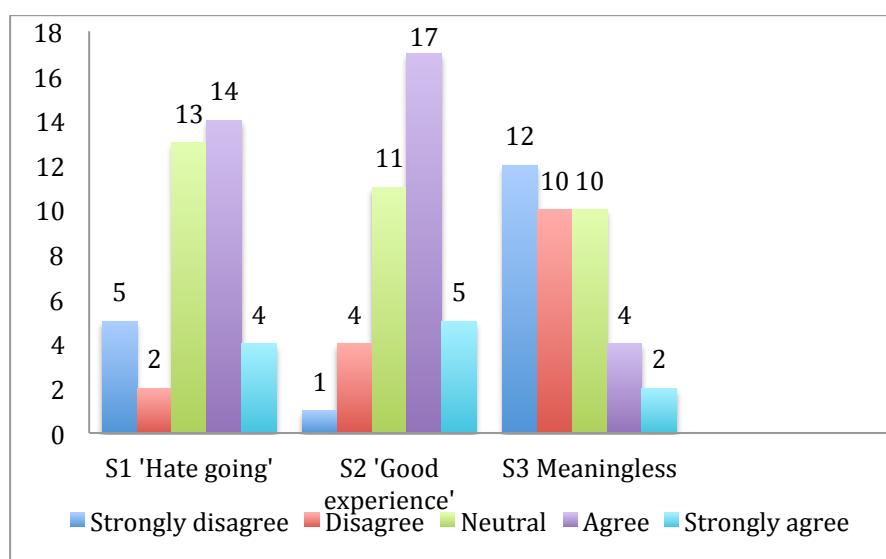

Figure 3: Students' answers regarding the EL

Second term data set

Students' answers to S1, S2, and S3, were interpreted similarly to the first term data set in the section 4.2.3. As shown in Fig. 3 below, the fact that 59.4% agreed and strongly agreed to S1, while 40.5% disagreed and strongly disagreed, could lead us to the same conclusion that students did not enjoy using the EL. In spite of them not feeling comfortable using the EL, the vast majority of 81.08% considered it a good experience as it offered them the opportunity to interact with other English teachers. Moreover, 83.7% disagreed and strongly disagreed to S3, which stresses the fact that students found the use of the EL meaningful.
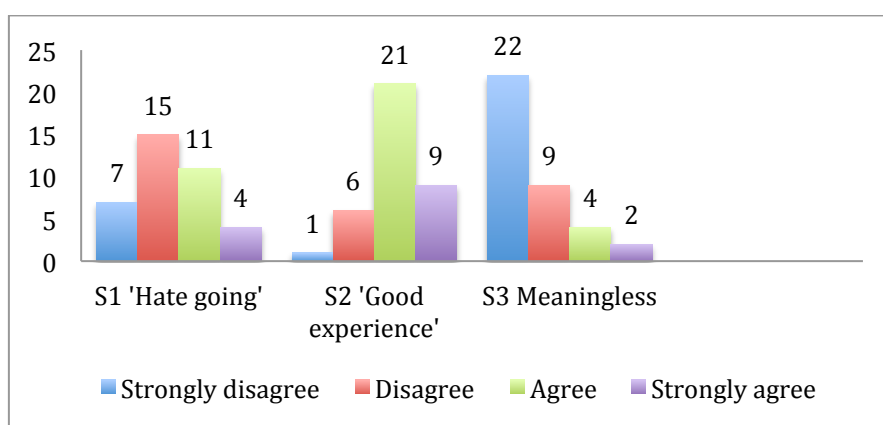

Figure 4: Students' answers regarding the EL

In addition, the analysis of the open-ended questions revealed that the students enrolled in the second term had slightly different reasons for not liking going to the EL. Whilst this is understandable since they were enrolled in an Advanced English course, none of them mentioned the lack of confidence in their own English skills. What most of them answered was that they did not have the spare time to go to the EL due to very busy course schedules.

Conclusions

This study aimed at examining (1) students' views on whether using Edmodo and a SALC would help with their learning process, and also (2) students' comprehension of independent learning. In terms of using Edmodo in an EFL class, some of the functions students found useful were submitting assignments, sending files, and communicating with group members. Some students would have preferred a walkthrough class especially designed to get them accustomed to Edmodo's interface and its functions. And few other students would have preferred an alternative option to submitting assignments, as they either did not have a computer at home, or occasionally encountered technical problems when using the mobile application.

On the other hand, in terms of using a SALC, the results clearly show that students did not feel comfortable visiting it. Although few of the students who participated in this study continued coming to the EL occasionally none continued coming on a regular basis. Most of those who did visit the EL after the course ended, sought for a teacher's advice on their writing assignments or English grammar use. The study also shows students were not familiar with independent learning or what it entails,

therefore it can be can easily assumed that in order to guide them towards autonomy a more direct, structured, and explicit approach is needed.

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