

Learner Autonomy In Japanese University English Classrooms

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Abstract

This essay attempts to explore concepts of learner autonomy and their relevance to the Japanese university English classroom. Part One briefly outlines the emergence and development of autonomy as a pedagogical construct and examines theories, concepts and definitions of learner autonomy. Part Two explores the relevance of autonomy as a goal and educational ideal in Japanese university classrooms with analysis of the cultural context. Part Three examines examples of recent studies into promotion of learner autonomy in English language learners that might be implemented or adapted to assist in the development of learner autonomy among students at Keiwa College.

1. What Is Learner Autonomy?

Unlike many other fields of research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition, on the surface there seems to be little debate and contention in the study of learner autonomy. The word itself has positive connotations. As a learner, of course we want to be autonomous, as teachers we would love all of our students to be motivated and independent. More difficult though, is to pin down exactly what learner autonomy is, where it comes from and how it may change in differing cultural contexts. As many EFL teachers can attest, even more complicated is trying to foster it in the classroom.

In the context of second language acquisition and more specifically in the field of EFL, how is autonomy identified and defined? Is learner autonomy the ability to learn what one is told to learn on one's own, or is it the right to choose what one learns and doesn't learn from the beginning? Is it both of these things or much more than this?

The complication of numerous concepts, aspects and synonyms of learner autonomy are highlighted by Thanasoulas (2000), "The relevant literature is riddled with innumerable definitions of autonomy and other synonyms for

it... which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars” (para. 2).

Benson (2011, p. 9) observes that independent second language learning actually predates the formal learning of foreign languages at institutions by many centuries. It is also true that many people continue to learn languages on their own today. However, the concept of autonomy and language learning today is, “essentially concerned with the organization of formal education” (Benson 2011, p. 9). Autonomy as an educational construct is not simply about learning something, in this case a language, on one’s own but how one can be autonomous as part of an institutionalised educational system.

Learner autonomy in foreign language learning as discussed in this essay and many others is traced to the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project which started in 1971. This project had earlier roots which can be traced back to 1949.

In 1961, at a conference of Ministers of Education in Europe, resolution number 6 was adopted. This included the measure that, “Each country should stimulate linguistic and psychological research, the object of which would be the improvement and expansion of modern-language teaching” (Trim, 2007, p. 7).

This and similar measures promoted a great deal of research into relevant and effective second language education in a rapidly changing world. Influenced by the social and political ideologies of the times, ideas promulgated by the Council of Europe at the time at the time included phrases such as, “promote the personal development of the individual” and “make the process of learning itself more democratic” (Trim, 2007, p. 18). These laid the foundation for the named concept of autonomy which grew out of the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the university of Nancy in France. The Founder of the centre, Yves Chalon, and his successor, Henri Holec, are generally considered to be the progenitors of autonomy in language learning.

Autonomy, as we discuss it in the field of second language acquisition, was born from the meeting of the lofty ideas of the Council of Europe and language learning realities. “Though seemingly abstract, the notion

of learner autonomy was first developed out of practice” (Smith, 2008 p. 397). At CRAPEL, adults were offered English education in a combination of instruction and an early form of self access learning. Autonomy was born from Holec’s and his colleagues’ need to define the concept of how the learners at the centre could take roles in directing and administrating their own learning with the resources made available to them at the centre.

Holec, writing in 1981, ten years after the founding of CRAPEL defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (cited in Benson, 2011 p.59) Holec elaborates and describes this as:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time place etc)
- evaluating what has been acquired (cited in Benson, 2011 p.59).

Since its emergence into the collective educational consciousness, learner autonomy has been debated, adapted and advanced. Holec’s definition focuses on the organisation of learning. While not in opposition to Holec’s definition, Little (1991) moves autonomy to a paradigm; a capacity which must first be present for the autonomy as proposed by Holec to take place. To become autonomous, learners must, “develop a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action”, (Little, 2007, p. 4). The key word here is “capacity”. He highlights that it is also a way of thinking about language learning, rather than only an approach to the second language acquisition process.

Phil Benson, who has been active in the field of autonomy research for some decades provides a well considered definition of Autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 58). To unpack that concise definition, he goes on to observe that a description of autonomy should include three aspects which are, “learning management, cognitive processes and learning content” (Benson, 2011 p.58).

Over the years, other versions of autonomy that emphasise certain aspects have emerged. These include O'Rourke and Schwienhorst's (2003) "individual-cognitive" and "social interactive" and Littlewood's (1999) distinction of "proactive" and "reactive" autonomies which will be discussed in more detail below.

2. Is Learner Autonomy a Worthwhile Goal in Japanese Universities?

As outlined above, autonomy in language learning is a concept that grew from social, political, ideological and finally educational concepts of 1960s and 1970s Europe. How relevant is learner Autonomy in Japanese universities in 2012?

In comparisons of cultures the concepts of individualism and collectivism are pervasive. Within this framework, anglophone cultures are presented in direct opposition to Confucius influenced cultures in Eastern Asia. Teachers of EFL find themselves on the front line of this apparent cultural contrast. In teaching a foreign language, how much cultural baggage, or preconceptions are brought to the classroom by both teachers and students? On the surface, cultural precepts in East Asian societies seem not to promote autonomy.

In an investigation into the influences of collectivist cultures on argumentative writing by Chinese students, Wu and Rubin (2000) acknowledge the claim that, Chinese are expected to act and behave as determined by their role within the society and not to oppose, challenge, or question prevailing ways (p. 151) and found that this had an effect on their writing. While this particular study focused on cultural aspects as expressed in writing, it is not a leap of faith to assume these cultural norms would also influence classroom behaviour. The study does however find that not only cultural influences but also individual differences are an important factor in influencing student outlook.

Another study conducted at a university in Turkey showed that while students demonstrated some degree of autonomy and a positive attitude to learning practices that necessitated some autonomy, "the findings show a

reluctance to take up roles as decision-makers on students' part" (İçmez, 2007, p. 150). The author notes that this reluctance is most like the influence of cultural conditioning in a society where teachers' and students' roles are clearly defined.

There are numerous studies that explore the relationship between culture and autonomy outside of the European and Anglophone context in second language learners such as Dang (2010) writing about the Vietnamese context, Yıldırım (2012) who investigated the attitudes towards autonomy of Indian ESL students in the USA, Rao (2006) who reported limited success in promoting autonomy through portfolios and Kuchah and Smith (2011) whose fascinating study into "engaging with learners' autonomy in (very) *difficult circumstances*" (p. 14) in Africa adds a north/south twist to the usual east/west cultural debate.

In a thought provoking essay regarding the effects of globalisation on language education in Japan, Kubota (2001) writes that the indirect effect of the Japanese Ministry of Education's emphasis on English as a tool for international communication is reinforcing the perceived differences between Japanese and other cultures. Writing of a handbook for teachers, Kubota states, "Cultural dichotomies such as an emphasis on social hierarchy versus egalitarianism, collectivism versus individualism, and high context versus low context cultures are presented as differences between Japanese and Anglophone cultures and incorporated into communicative activities and assessment" (2001, pp. 22-23). In this way, the author sees the English classroom in Japanese high schools as a place where cultural stereotypes are enforced and perpetuated rather than challenged.

On the surface, this collectivism, whether real or merely projected onto East Asian learners may seem to be anathema to autonomy.

Writing about the educational context in Japan, Nozaki asserts, "Traditionally, the Japanese view of a good student tended to value those who are "quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform well on tests" (as cited in Hammond, 1993). The key word used is "passive," an almost direct antonym for autonomous.

Most English language education in Japanese high schools and junior high schools still relies on a teacher centred approach where accuracy is emphasised. Known as the *yakudoku* method, teaching English as a foreign language through grammar translation is very much the norm in Japan and often the first exposure that Japanese students receive to foreign language education. Other characteristics of typical *yakudoku* classes include unstated learning goals, highly structured lessons, fossilized teacher and student roles, and Japanese as the language of instruction (Fine and Collins, 2011 p. 53).

Nishino and Watanabe's (2008) study into communicative teaching practices in Japanese junior high school and high school classes lists reasons why grammar translation method is still the dominant educational style in English classrooms in Japan. These include teachers lack of training in communicative teaching styles, lack of confidence in their own speaking ability and the need to prepare students for university entrance exams. While the focus of this study was not focused on autonomy, it does provide insight into the educational experience that Japanese students have studying English and the modes of study to which they are accustomed.

Although one cannot generalise every teacher and every school, overwhelmingly, the research suggests and anecdotal evidence gathered from individual students indicates that Japanese university students have not come from an education background that fosters autonomous learning. How helpful are stereotypes and generalisations? More importantly, how does the perception of Japan as a collectivist culture influence classroom practice and more specifically, the autonomy of English learners in Japan? Does the implementation of autonomy to Japanese university students present a shock or emancipation? The answer to this question returns to how one defines autonomy and how this is implemented in the classroom context.

Littlewood (1999) proposes two types of autonomy. The first is proactive. He describes this as "the form of autonomy that is usually intended when the concept is discussed in the west." (1999, p.75). This involves learners taking a leading role in their own education, setting

goals, deciding on the best way to reach those goals and as Littlewood goes on to say, "affirms their individuality ...in a world which they themselves have partially created" (1999, p. 75). This kind of autonomy places learners firmly in control of the direction of their own education.

The second type of autonomy is reactive autonomy, "This is the kind of autonomy that does not create its own directions but once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (1999, p. 75). This does not imply the complete control over ones learning outlined in Holec's definition but can be seen as pertaining to the cognitive capacity for autonomy described by Little.

While warning against generalisations, and emphasising the effect of individual differences across all cultural groups, Littlewood suggests that although reactive autonomy does seem more suited to the East Asian cultural context, learners can be expected to develop autonomy, both proactive and reactive, when engaged in tasks such as group and collaborative learning.

He concludes that cultural groups are neither more or less autonomous than each other based on cultural and educational background and rather, that all groups are equally apt at developing forms of autonomy appropriate to language learning. Differences in education and culture will be factors in determining what is considered appropriate and easily accepted by learners but should not be seen as an ultimate impediment to the development of autonomy.

In conclusion, the majority of scholars see autonomy, if implemented suitably, as an overwhelmingly positive thing for effective language learning and a goal that is both achievable and desirable in all learning contexts including east Asia and Japan. "...the demands of a changing world will impose on learners of all cultures the need to learn without the help of teachers" (Littlewood, 1999, p.74). As language teachers of course we want our students to develop language ability that may be used outside of the controlled context of the classroom, and without being supported by a teacher or textbook, to improve in their own time and to continue to improve after

graduation. Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to attempt to develop autonomy in their students as well as the responsibility of learners to, in some degree, “take control of their own learning” (Benson 2001. P.58). After all, by definition, learning is done by the learner and a teacher’s job is to ensure that each learner learns as well as he or she possibly can.

3. Developing autonomy in Japanese University English Classrooms

The development of autonomy in Japanese English classrooms is long established and a plethora of studies into these practices exist. Common inclusions focus on self access learning, often technology assisted. Studies and action research in the area often include project work, individual or group (Khan, Suzuki & Oku 2010) or provide opportunities for self-reflection and evaluation by students Nachi, 2003). Generally, the researchers have reached a positive verdict regarding learner autonomy. Summarised below are some studies into encouraging learner autonomy in Japanese universities containing ideas and methods that may be adapted and incorporated into lessons at Keiwa College and elsewhere.

The study of Stephenson and Kohyama (2003) investigates the use of language learning projects, referred to as LLPs in promoting autonomy among first year university students. The LLPs were initiated as a way to promote learner autonomy in English Listening and Reading courses which continued for one year. In the first lesson, 50 students were introduced to the concept and encouraged to set their own language learning goals and to select activities and materials that matched these goals. Students chose a total of 17 different activities, such as reading newspapers, translating Japanese comics and watching movies.

The freedoms and responsibilities given to the students match very closely Holec’s (1976) descriptions of autonomy, as students can define their own objectives, select their own materials and even had the opportunity to assess their learning through regular journal reflections and final self evaluations.

The nature of this project places it closer to Littlewood’s (1999) proactive autonomy than to reactive.

Although most students did not report an increase in confidence to use English, many students reported an increase in motivation and “wanted to continue working on their projects, or they wanted to start new projects” (Stephenson and Kohyama (2003, p. 108). Some students noted that they had been disappointed by their performance in the LLPs and had “a more acute awareness of their linguistic weaknesses” (Stephenson and Kohyama (2003, p. 108). This could be seen in a positive light too, that students now had a better idea of what they should concentrate on improving.

Overall, this is an activity that could feasibly be replicated and adapted anywhere. Importantly, these first year students’ journeys toward autonomous learning were supported by the teachers and reinforced by class activities based around the individual projects.

As opposed to the LLPS previously discussed, which took one year to complete, the research of Kusanagi (2007) took place in two lessons. Kusanagi used the artistic form of montage, defined by the author as “making new images by pasting pieces of coloured paper, photographs (and possibly other materials) on a poster to form a picture or a theme” (Kusanagi, 2007, p. 3). Kusanagi based English communicative activities around producing a montage in the hope of increasing autonomy and motivation while counteracting the, “negative attitude of learners toward interacting with classmates” (Kusanagi, 2007, p. 2), which had created a classroom atmosphere in which it was difficult to conduct communicative activities.

Also in contrast to the previously discussed study, where learners mostly pursued their language learning projects as individuals, the communicative portions of the montage project were done in groups. In the rationale of the study, the author emphasises the social aspects of autonomy and concurs with other researchers such as Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011), who observe that, “...our ability to learn is dependent on our participation in social life and membership of learning communities” (p. 122). Autonomy is closely related to motivation

and is strongly influenced by social contexts and interdependence rather than individualism.

After constructing their individual montages, students were placed into groups to explain their montage to the other members of the group who were encouraged to ask questions to create a dialogue about the montage. Students then selected one member of their group to present their montage, for a second time, to the rest of the class.

The author cites the primary success of the montage activity as “increased enthusiasm and performance of the students” (Kusanagi, 2007, p.5) observed during the presentations. Questionnaires completed by the students revealed that students displayed a positive reaction to viewing their peers’ presentations. Finally the author concluded that “encouraging a sense of relatedness to others in learners affects motivation, autonomy and competence” (Kusanagi, 2007, p. 9). The author also hoped that this kind of activity could help foster class cohesion that will provide a more supportive environment for communicative activities essential to language learning in the future.

The studies of both Kusanagi and Stephenson and Kohyama shared the goal of implicitly guiding their students towards becoming autonomous through activities designed based on theories of autonomy. The study of Lyddon (2011) is based upon a full semester course which explicitly taught concepts of autonomy alongside having students participate in activities designed to foster it.

Using data collected from TOEIC results in Japan and personal observation of students at Aizu University’s general unpreparedness for writing and defending a thesis in English, the author concludes that for the majority of students, classroom study time in English during their time at university was not sufficient for them to become competent at using English for academic discourse. He comments that, “clearly they will have to supplement their in-class instruction with other learning opportunities, but to do this they first need to be autonomous in this regard” (Lyddon, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, the writer designed a course to attempt to directly teach concepts of autonomy to

language learners and have them introduce it into their own language learning practice.

The course was based on Scharle & Szabó’s (2000) constructs of autonomy, which consist of four major themes, “motivation, learning strategies, community building, and self-monitoring” (Lyddon, 2011, p. 2). The 15 week course was divided into 3 phases, namely raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles.

Generally, the lesson introduced a theme, based some class activities around that theme and included a homework task designed to have students explore this further. An interesting aspect of this course was that the class work and homework often involved computer assisted learning such as downloading and completing the *Lingua Pholio Passport*, joining discussions on a Moodle Forum and downloading, running and studying with computerised modules such as one in week 8 described as an “agency tutorial”, (Lyddon, 2011, p. 5) designed to teach passive voice.

The culmination of the course, which had been explained to the students in the first week, was to prepare both a written and oral response to the questions, “How have you become a more autonomous learner over the course of this semester?”

The author saw some positive learner outcomes from the course. All students had in either oral or written response, “reported new strategy use and/or independent study activities” (Lyddon, 2011, p. 7). Also, the majority of students had changed their attitudes regarding their role of learners and the importance of autonomy.

As for shortcomings of the course, the author notes that only 12 of an original 27 completed and received credit for the course and that only low numbers mentioned the concepts of community building and self-monitoring in their final reflections. Furthermore, he laments that this course was conducted with third year students and above, rather than first year students who would perhaps stand to benefit more from the course by taking it at

the beginning of their time at university. Furthermore, as it was only a one semester course, there was not scope for follow up assessment into changes of the students' study habits.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here indicates that autonomy is an important aspect of successful second language acquisition. While the previously discussed studies differed significantly in their natures and approaches, the authors all concluded, and the evidence suggests, that they bestowed some benefits on the learners involved. Furthermore, in the context of Japanese universities, a degree of learner autonomy is a worthwhile and realistic goal. As much as possible, we should try to provide opportunities for students to become autonomous and begin to take some degree of control of their English learning. Reflecting upon my own classes here at Keiwa College, I must admit that both my students' levels of autonomy and my attempts to cultivate it amongst my students have not been satisfactory so far. In the future, I hope to incorporate and adapt some of the concepts and activities discussed in this paper into my classes to develop capacity for autonomous learning that will be beneficial to students during their time at university and beyond.

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小笠原登とハンセン病患者 1941年—1942年 —圓周寺所蔵「小笠原登関係文書」の分析 (2)—

藤野 豊

はじめに

小稿は、前稿「第15回日本癩学会総会における小笠原登」⁽¹⁾を引き継ぐものである。前稿では、1941年の第15回日本癩学会総会の間を中心として、絶対隔離を推進した医師たちによる小笠原の学説への批判がなぜなされたのかということについて論じたが、小稿では、ハンセン病患者に対する絶対隔離という国策のなか、京都帝国大学医学部附属医院皮膚科特別研究室（以下、「皮膚科特研」と略す）において、あえて、通常の入院や通院により患者を診療した小笠原登の実践について、前稿同様、小笠原の実家である圓周寺所蔵の「日記」をはじめとする小笠原登関係文書の分析を通して明らかにする。小稿の課題は、小笠原の医療実践が絶対隔離という国策とどのように対立し、また、どのように共存したかということの解明である。対象時期は「日記」の分析作業の進行に合わせて1941年～1942年を中心とする。

この課題を解明するうえで、近年の廣川和花の研究について言及しておく。廣川は、1907年の法律「癩予防二関スル件」によりハンセン病患者への国家の隔離政策は開始され、患者は社会防衛の国策の下、国家により迫害され、社会から排除され、そして1931年の「癩予防法」により全患者を生涯にわたり強制隔離するという絶対隔離が完成されたという、これまでの先行研究により確立された認識を、克服すべき「糾弾の歴史」としてきびしく批判する。

例えば、廣川は、1990年代以降のハンセン病研究について、「きわめて現実的な政策課題やアクティヴィズムと密接にかかわりを持ちながら進展してきた」ため、「療養所における入所者の差別的待遇や人権侵害に関心が集中し、国と「無癩県運動」に加担した諸団体を断罪して事足りりとする、ハンセン病の単純化という弊害も招いている」と述べ、⁽²⁾「糾弾の歴史」の克服を力説している。廣川の論は、1907年の法律「癩予防二関スル件」は患者の救護法であった、1931年の「癩予防法」は絶対隔離を可能にする法律ではあるが、現実には群馬県草津温泉にあったハンセン病患者の集落湯之沢やそこで患者を治療した私立の聖バルナバミッションの存