

Autonomy in the Japanese Context

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a lot of focus on autonomy in the language classroom. It is believed that if we train our students to be able to work in a self-directed way then they will not only be able to keep learning for their lifetime, but it will also enable them to use the language they have learnt without their teacher's presence. However, many maintain that autonomy is a Western concept not suited to Asian students. It is considered that East Asian students are less independent, not only in their learning but in a deeper cultural way. The desire often attributed to East Asian students is to see themselves in relation to other people, rather than as individuals. The present research was carried out at Kanda University of International Studies to see in what ways and to what extent autonomy is suitable for Japanese students. The study looks at autonomy in the Japanese context, specifically in relation to the idea of individual versus group identity. The research questions for this study are: Do Japanese university students prefer to work in groups or independently? Are Japanese university students able to accurately assess the work of their peers?

The Context

The teaching philosophy within the English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is underpinned by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), one of the central tenets of which is the exclusive use of

the target language inside the classroom. It is because of this teaching philosophy that the need for a Self Access Learning Centre (SALC) became apparent. Language learners invariably see the need for more practice of the target language outside of the classroom. Learners who use the target language exclusively in the classroom could be assumed to notice the gaps more between their current interlanguage and the language input they receive than learners who use both languages during lessons. The noticing of gaps often happens when there is a breakdown in communication. The larger number of communication problems in a target language environment provide a wonderful opportunity for learners to notice those gaps and, in doing so, take the first step towards the acquisition of new forms.

In an SL environment, there are many opportunities for extra practice outside of the classroom. This is exactly what is not readily available in FL situations. Learners frequently ask their teachers for advice on how to improve certain language skills and almost as frequently the answer is 'practice makes perfect'. But how are FL learners to get enough practice when they live surrounded by their L1? How are they to motivate themselves without the need to use the target language outside of the classroom? How are they to become aware of appropriate learning strategies?

The teaching philosophy of the ELI and the existence of the SALC, together, have driven an interest in learner autonomy throughout the university. When considering the teachers at KUIS this manifests itself in two ways. Teachers who hold learner autonomy as an important part of their teaching philosophy are more likely to choose the ELI at KUIS as their place of employment. Correspondingly, after employment at KUIS many teachers become interested in the concept of autonomy because many of the core classes have autonomy as a key focus and because their interest is stoked

by the research carried out by their colleagues.

This paper reports on research carried out in the second-year Media English course in the English department of KUIS. There is no fixed curriculum for the Media English course. As the other compulsory courses are reading and writing, the focus of the Media English course should be more (but not exclusively) on speaking and listening. Because of the focus on speaking and listening in Media English, in the first semester my approach was to include as many group activities as possible as students tend to feel more comfortable in groups and speak more than in whole-class arrangements.

Literature Review

For as long as the concept of learner autonomy has existed, how to define the concept has been an issue. One of the first definitions and one that is still widely used today is Holec's (1981:3): "...the ability to take charge of one's own learning....to hold, the responsibility for the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition....; evaluating what has been acquired." Little (1991:4) suggests that autonomy is not so much about the way learning is organised but more about the capacity of a learner to reflect, make decisions and act independently. Benson (2001:49) states that both Holec's and Little's definitions "...underplay a third vital aspect in autonomous learning: that the content of learning should be freely determined by the learners."

A distinction is drawn by many writers between proactive and reactive autonomy.

Talking about reactive autonomy Littlewood (1999:75) says that it is a “...kind of autonomy which does not create it’s own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.” Benson (2001:100) describes it as “...control over method without control over content.” On the other hand, proactive autonomy is that which is completely self-conceived, self-directed and self-evaluated. It is useful also to consider the distinction made by Flannery (1994) between cooperation and collaboration. He characterises cooperation as a situation in which the teacher determines what is to be done and how it is to be done and the students work in groups to do it. On the other hand, collaboration is where the students have some control over the method and outcome/s. Using these definitions, Littlewood likens cooperative learning to reactive autonomy and collaborative learning to proactive learning.

Regarding the assessment of collaborative learning, Nakamura (2002) says that in addition to peers being reasonably reliable raters, peer assessment of group presentations motivates students to make their presentations as good as they possibly can. Furthermore, it also involves the audience in the presentation in a more meaningful way.

Although few, if any, writers make such disapproving comments about student-centred classrooms, Allwright (1978:105) calls teachers who use overly teacher-led methods “Professionally irresponsible” because “...a serious weakening of the value of the classroom experience for the learners is virtually inevitable”.

In his paper “Defining and Developing autonomy in East Asian contexts” (1999)

Littlewood outlines the main arguments that have been given against encouraging autonomy in East Asian contexts. Many writers have stated that autonomy is not suited to East Asian contexts because of the cultural desire to be part of a group. Littlewood says that being autonomous and being a part of a group are not mutually exclusive. Groups of students can work independently of the teacher in an autonomous way.

In searching for a culture-free definition he says that....

“If we define autonomy in cultural terms as involving students’ capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners everywhere, since....no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout life. Thus, if we are teaching language for communication, it follows from this that the goal is to develop a capacity to communicate autonomously” (1999:73)

In a summary of classroom-based approaches to learner autonomy, Benson (2001:161) explains that when teachers have encouraged their students to manage their own learning in the classroom in terms of both planning and assessment, teachers’ accounts of the results have been positive. From this he concludes that approaches to autonomy inside the classroom are more effective than those outside the classroom. Perhaps this is because a teacher is there to motivate the students when their energy levels sink a bit.

Smith (2003) emphasised the fact that it’s not autonomy itself that is not suited to students in different cultural backgrounds but rather a problem with the particular

approach used to encourage autonomy. He states that there are not ‘particular procedures’ involved in the concept of autonomy. Particular procedures are chosen by a teacher for his/her own students and relate to many different philosophies that that teacher has, among which autonomy may be one.

Method

The participants in the present study were students in a Media English class. Classes in the English department are streamed into four tiers based on proficiency test scores. This was a tier 2 class which is around upper intermediate level. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes. It comprised of 27 students, 24 of whom volunteered to take part in the research.

My perception of needs analysis is that it is something like a test. One can imagine a teacher giving a grammar test on the first day of class in order to find students’ problem areas to work on. In this sense, what was done during the first day of this Media English course was more of a wants analysis. Students were asked what their goals were for the year’s course in terms of listening and speaking, then they were also asked what kinds of activities they wanted to do to try to fulfill those goals. Based on the information from this first day of class, a course outline for the semester was prepared.

The following week, after distributing the course outline to the students they were asked to discuss the outline in small groups and then to give feedback about the activities on the outline. This generated a lot of discussion (a full 90 minute lesson), leading to several votes and some minor alterations to the course outline. In the end it was decided to do six different activities over the course of semester one.

For the activities carried out in semester one the product to come out of each activity was established, the process was somewhat limited by the product and resources available, but still flexible, on the other hand the content of the activity was chosen by the students in groups. Over the course of semester one, the class did one individual activity and five group activities. The individual activity and two of the group activities were assessed wholly by the teacher, three of the group activities were peer assessed by the rest of the class.

The activities

Role play

Students decided on a theme, wrote and performed a role play in small groups.

Poster presentation

Students chose an issue relevant to current events, did research on the issue, prepared a poster and gave a five minute presentation in small groups. After the presentation each group member stood by the poster and answered questions from other members of the class.

Current affairs interview

Students chose an issue relevant to current affairs, wrote interview questions and interviewed a native speaker of English on the topic in small groups. They then transcribed the interview and prepared a listening comprehension activity for the rest of the class.

Newspaper publication

After studying the contents and layout of a newspaper, students wrote an original newspaper article individually. The name of the newspaper and the layout of the articles was done in a whole class situation. The newspaper was photocopied for each member of the class to take home to read.

News presentation

Using the same news article they had written for the newspaper publication activity, students got together in groups of three and presented the news. This entailed each student using a greeting/transition/farewell as well as giving an oral summary of their news article.

Advertisement/Movie

Students chose whether to produce an advertisement or short movie as the final activity. If they wanted to produce an advertisement they invented a product, did market research and produced an advertisement for the product either as a performance or video recording. If they wanted to produce a short movie they prepared a storyboard before recording and editing the movie.

In semester two students were encouraged to do the same kinds of activities they had done in semester one in their own time and over the course of the semester put together a portfolio. Within the portfolio students had complete freedom to choose what, where, when, how, with whom they did the activities and also what resources they would use. They had two 90 minute lessons in which they could spend time working on their portfolios or consult the teacher. The rest of the portfolio was a long-term homework assignment. The idea behind this was that they had done these kinds of activities in semester one with a lot of scaffolding so now they would be able to do the activities to the same standard with little scaffolding.

In addition to this there was one lesson per week which was teacher-led. During this teacher-led lesson, the students self-assessed their participation. Students had experienced peer assessment in the first semester but not self assessment, however, the students didn't appear to be ready to assess the quality of the work they produced

by themselves although by now they certainly knew what was expected of them in terms of participation and would therefore be able to accurately assess their own participation.

In the other weekly class students actually took on the role of teacher and facilitated one session each during the semester. The students had to find a news article which they found interesting and prepare some activities for the rest of the class to do while they facilitated the session. Before the lesson the facilitator had to report to the course teacher, showing the article they would use and either showing or explaining the kinds of activities they had prepared. This gave students control of the content of the course. It also enabled them to study one news article in detail. For that one article they had to understand the meaning of every word and every sentence in case they had questions from other class members. The session facilitation was assessed by the teacher.

The purpose of the design of the Media English course was to enhance the learner autonomy that students had developed in their first year at the university. In addition, there were the general course objectives of increasing listening and speaking skills and broadening students' horizons by discussing current affairs. To find out which activities and what kinds of autonomy suited the students a questionnaire was completed by the students at the end of the academic year. All questions were answered using a 4 point Likert scale where a response of 1 indicated "Not at all", 2 indicated "Not really", 3 indicated "Somewhat" and 4 indicated "Yes, very much".

Results

Assessment

Three of the activities in the first semester were assessed wholly by the teacher and three of them were peer assessed. The three assessed by the teacher constituted 50% of the course grade for the first semester and the three peer assessed ones made up the other 50%. On average, for the three activities assessed wholly by the teacher, students received 40.76 points out of 50. On average for the three activities which were peer assessed, students got 40.13 out of 50. This indicates that with very little in the way of training in peer assessment, these students were able to assess their peers' work in a way which is similar to the teacher's assessment.

Enjoyment

In the end of year questionnaire students were asked to indicate how much they enjoyed each activity they had carried out during the year. The results (on a scale of 1 to 4) can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Enjoyment

Activity	Level of Enjoyment (Median)
Other students' media English lessons	4
Newspaper publication	4
News presentation	4
Advertisement/Movie	4
Current affairs interview	3
Roleplay	3
Poster presentation	3

The three activities which had less collaboration and more independent work; other students' media English lessons, newspaper publication and news presentation, were the ones that were enjoyed the most. On the other hand, the activities which were purely collaborative; current affairs interview, role play and poster presentation, were enjoyed a little less.

Improvement

Students were also asked to indicate which activities they felt helped them to improve their English skills. The results can be seen in table 2.

Table 2: Improvement

Activity	Level of Improvement (Median)
Newspaper publication	4
Other students' media English lessons	4
News presentation	4
Own media English lesson	3
Current affairs interview	3
Poster presentation	3
Portfolio	3
Role play	3
Advertisement/Movie	3

Again the three activities which had less collaboration and more independent work; other students' media English lessons, newspaper publication and news presentation, were the ones that the students felt improved their English the most. On the other hand, the activities which were purely collaborative seemed to benefit

them a little less. Here we have another distinction though, the portfolio (which was carried out completely independently at home) was perceived to be less beneficial than some of the collaborative group activities. Perhaps there is some social element involved in individual work that students carry out in the classroom.

Discussion

This is a very small study, including students from only one class within one educational setting. Furthermore, because learner autonomy is encouraged at KUIS, these students had been encouraged to work in autonomous ways for a full year before they entered this media English class. In fact, right from the beginning of their first year at the university they had been introduced to the concept of autonomy and taught ways to help themselves in their learning. What this study shows is that it is possible to successfully apply concepts of learner autonomy to Japanese students. However, the processes used in this study could by no means be used with any Japanese students in any educational setting.

It is often said that learner autonomy is not suited to Japanese students because of the cultural desire to feel connected with other people, to feel the ‘relatedness’ that comes when one is part of a group. However, the students in this study were found to enjoy individual projects more than group ones and to feel that their English improved more when working alone than in groups. As educators we shouldn’t assume too much about our students. Assuming that all Japanese learners like working in groups and benefit from working in groups is a stereotype. Like with all issues in education, we need to heed the fact that every learner is different and change our teaching practices to accommodate those differences. The students in this study felt that they had a level of motivation which was more than enough to

carry out work in a self-directed way, at home, alone and without pressure from their teacher. This indicates the independent nature of the students in this study.

Furthermore, it is often stated that peer assessment would not be appropriate for Japanese students. These students were able to assess their peers with results quite similar to those generated by the teacher. However, as stated by Shimura (2006) students at higher proficiency levels are much better able to assess their peers than their lower proficiency counterparts. It would be interesting to see whether a lower tier class in the same department would be able to rate their peers as well.

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