

## **Fostering Learner Autonomy through the Apprenticeship of Learner Strategies**

Izumi Kanzaka  
*Soka University, Japan*

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a study conducted to explore pedagogies for fostering autonomous learners in the tertiary EFL context in Japan. As a university lecturer teaching English to Japanese students, the author receives students visiting her office to ask for advice on how to study English effectively, especially for preparing for study abroad. The current study was started to seek effective and efficient ways to support these students. The data were collected from those students who visited for advice during office hours. The conversations were recorded and analysed for the purpose of identifying characteristics of autonomous and less autonomous behaviours and exploring pedagogical implications, especially teachers' roles in the fostering of autonomy. The paper concludes with a proposal for a theoretical model of the apprenticeship of learner strategies.

---

### **Introduction**

I am currently teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at a Japanese university with students of a wide range of English proficiency. Students are greatly interested in studying abroad in English-speaking countries, developing English communication skills, using English at work, and working overseas after graduation. For these reasons, their motivation to study English is very high. Some students, however, say that they do not know how to study effectively outside class and seek advice.

Consultation is one way of helping learners to improve their language skills and at the same time to become more autonomous (Voller, 2004). For this reason, language advisory services have been offered in many different educational settings around the world. It also has practical reasons, for example to meet diverse needs of students at a lower cost (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). Students who visit me to ask for advice on how to study are mainly those who are enrolled in my classes, but sometimes I receive enquiries from students whom I have never taught. Types of enquiries vary, but among the main areas students often ask about are how to study outside class independently, especially for developing their listening competence. As the TOEFL has been used as placement tool for all the English-medium courses as well as for study-abroad programmes for exchange students in English-speaking countries, one of the main concerns for students who study seriously outside class is how to raise their TOEFL scores.

In this paper, I will reflect on experiences of providing advisory sessions intended to facilitate autonomy, share stories of two students, and discuss teachers' roles in the fostering of autonomous learners.

### **Definitions of Learner Autonomy**

The notion of learner autonomy originally developed in the Western social context, but it is not a product of a specific culture. Rather, it is a universal human capacity (Littlewood, 1999). Anyone can be autonomous in a different form. Littlewood

(1999) proposed the notion of *proactive* and *reactive* autonomy. Proactive autonomy is a form of autonomy typical in western countries: learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques, and evaluate what has been acquired. Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, does not create its own direction, but once a learner is given a direction, reactive autonomy enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal. In Asian countries, reactive autonomy should be pursued as the first step towards autonomy. However, teachers should not forget that the goal is supporting students to make a turn towards proactive autonomy, as Aoki (2003) claims.

Also, autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept but a matter of degree (Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Nunan, 1997). Students may be more dependent on teachers when they are in the process of developing autonomy, and any point in the transition period from dependence to independence can be considered as a 'semi-autonomy stage' (Little, Ridley & Ushioda, 2002). Generally, autonomous learners are also more independent, but autonomy does not necessarily mean complete independence. Learning presupposes interaction, and therefore, autonomy is considered a product of interdependence (Little, 1994; Voller, 1997). Thus, learners go through the dependence phase in the transition to becoming more independent (Boud, 1988) towards autonomy.

Moreover, motivation has a lot to do with autonomous learning. According to Williams and Burden (1997), motivation has three stages: reasons for doing something, deciding to do something, and sustaining the effort, or persisting. Thus motivation is not only the desire to do something, but also the action taken to accomplish something. Furthermore, it is not only initiating the action but sustaining the effort. One way of motivating learners is to monitor learning process and celebrate success (Dörnyei, 2001). It is crucial to have a sense of satisfaction when success is achieved in reaching a short-term goal. Motivation is so important in order to succeed in achieving a long-term goal, and is indispensable for autonomous learning. Considering that autonomy is a matter of degree, even if a learner is not successful in achieving a goal, autonomy develops through the process of working towards that goal, and if the learner can assess what went well, and what did not go well, this information can be utilised in the next learning experience.

Finally, autonomous learners know when to be dependent on others (Chanock, 2004; Kanzaka, 2007). As Chanock (2004) claims, depending on others who know more so that one can operate on their own later in a new context is certainly considered as responsible learning behaviour. Kanzaka (2007) similarly observes that there are 'actively dependent learners', who choose to be dependent on someone only temporarily, for example by following a study plan made by their teachers, in order to achieve their short-term goals only to reassert their independence later on.

In summary, everyone has the capacity to be autonomous, but some may go through semi-autonomy phases where they would benefit more by being given directions by others before they are able to find their own way. Ideally, fully autonomous learners can set a language learning goal, identify where they are and what to do in order to reach the goal, make a decision to act, take action, sustain motivation, seek support when necessary, reach their immediate goals, and then achieve their long-term goals by using their language proficiency and strategies acquired through prior learning experience.

### **Language Advisory Sessions That Promote Autonomy**

Since 1994, I have been providing language learning consultation sessions during office hours and, when permission is given, keeping records of the conversations in my office diary and on audio-tapes or mini-discs. I receive enquiries regarding learning English from those students currently enrolled in my class, ex-students, and those whom I have never taught. The most frequent enquiry is about how to prepare for the TOEFL, and the most frequently mentioned skill is listening. I usually have two to four students a week on average.

Many of the students who visit me tend to show rather dependent attitudes, in two very different ways. One is to ask for advice because their current way of learning does not seem to be working (= actively dependent). The other is a ‘tell me what to do’ type (= passively dependent). Both believe that they would benefit by receiving advice since they requested a consultation for that purpose, and if they succeed to make progress, it will help them to sustain motivation, and their experience will help them achieve more.

One way of promoting autonomy is to provide explicit instruction of strategies through cognitive apprenticeship and modelling, metacognitive knowledge incorporated in the classroom instruction and materials, and opportunities for critical self-reflection to enhance metacognitive skills (Brookes & Grundy, 1988), and this is what I try to do in my classroom instruction for learner training. For dependent or inefficient learners, providing opportunities for guided participation so that they can see and try out some learning strategies may help them to reflect and evaluate the process and the outcomes of learning, and gradually work towards autonomy through what I call ‘the apprenticeship of learner strategies’ (Kanzaka, 2007). I am also trying to encourage this in my language advisory sessions by giving explicit strategies instruction in the consultation through modelling and learner experimentation, rather than merely talking about strategies.

**Figure 1: A Theoretical Model of the Apprenticeship of Learner Strategies**

**The apprenticeship of learner strategies (Kanzaka, 2007)**

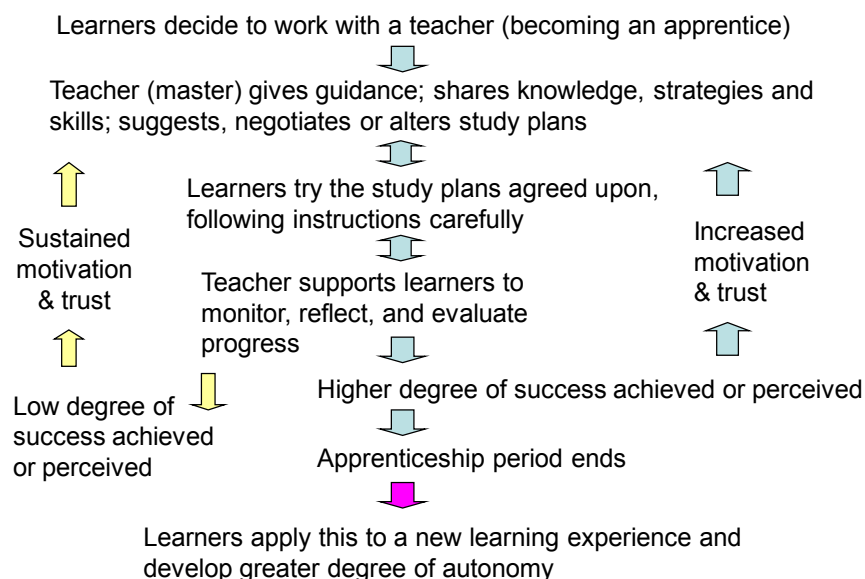


Figure 1 shows the theoretical model of the apprenticeship of learner strategies. In this model, the most important thing is that a learner at a semi-autonomous stage decides to become an apprentice for a certain period of time, however short, by following suggestions made by the teacher. The teacher and the student negotiate and create a study plan by sharing each other’s knowledge, beliefs and experiences. Students are responsible for carrying out the study plan independently, and will hopefully achieve their short-term goal. This experience of achieving a certain level of success will help them move towards the more autonomous end on the continuum. In case the learner can see little or no progress, the teacher helps them reflect and evaluate, and alter the plan, or a learner may want to terminate the apprenticeship period. By meeting my own students outside class, I can monitor their progress more closely and help them handle their diverse needs.

On the other hand, handling enquiries from those whom I never had in my class is challenging because I know so little about their personality, ability and preferred learning styles that giving suitable advice within a limited amount of time is difficult. As Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999) point out, participation in one-shot walk-in types of language advisory sessions can cause problems. Such sessions may lack clear objectives and fail to provide learners with an opportunity to acquire appropriate study techniques; students will come for what the advisor believes is valuable and then the advisor never sees the same student again, which results in no feedback nor report on progress (Fu 1999). With these possible problems in mind, I encourage students to visit again for follow-up or at least to report progress by e-mail.

In the spring semester of 2003, I had a total of 74 visitors including those who came more than once by counting one visit as one student. When students reported something by e-mail, I also included their messages in the data. The consultations were conducted in English, but when students had difficulty in expressing themselves, choices of words or sentences were provided so that the session would not be interrupted because of communication breakdown. From a tremendous amount of consultation record, I selected parts that highlighted the common features of the advisory sessions and transcribed the total of approximately six hours of selected parts of the audio recording and analysed the contents.

### **Common Features of the Advisory Sessions**

During the advisory sessions, students tended to ask questions such as 'what is the best way of developing listening skills?' or 'which book would be most effective?' My answers always started by saying that it depends on the level, purpose, goal of individual learners and that effectiveness depends on how the material is used, rather than which one to use. As one hour a day of self-directed learning was one of the training course assignments during the first term, students who were enrolled in the course who wanted to strengthen their listening skills often asked which self-study materials would be most effective for raising their score in the listening section of the TOEFL. Knowing the level of each student relatively well, since I had them in my own class, I demonstrated different ways of practicing listening that I believed would be suitable for them. Each time I introduced a new way of studying to anyone during these out-of-class consultations, I also introduced the same thing to the whole class the following week. By the end of the first term, I had a list of frequently mentioned strategies which I was able to incorporate in the following term of my class.

Among the three most frequently mentioned strategies regarding listening skills were (1) re-input (from ears) what they already knew (only with eyes) through a substantial amount of comprehensible input, i.e. daily extensive listening with easy audio materials available at the self-access centre on campus or through NHK radio English conversation programmes for junior high school students, (2) intensive listening practice through sentence-level dictation, repeating and shadowing, combined with grammar and vocabulary review, and (3) review of the same set of listening exercises or sample tests at least three times by using the transcript of the CD and dictionary. These suggestions were made based on my own experience as a learner, through observation of other learners as a teacher, and language acquisition theories that I learned through reading the current literature as a researcher.

I also encouraged students to experiment and to come back for a follow-up session if they felt they needed to modify their plan. By offering follow-up sessions, I was able to monitor their progress. Not everyone returned for another consultation, but I was able to follow up by observing those who were in my class, and others reported positive results by e-mail. Only very few were never heard from.

The follow-up sessions reinforced the findings of a previous study (Kanzaka (2007) that choosing appropriate learning environments, methods, materials and resources; making the most of the learning environment and altering goals, methods and materials of learning are particularly relevant to the notion of the apprenticeship of

learner strategies: the participants in the study who consequently succeeded in achieving their language learning goals demonstrated the willingness to alter their learning methods after the consultations, resulting in significant progress.

### Stories of Two Students

I have recently been able to follow up with students who had consultations to see if there were any long-term effects in their language learning. In this section, I will share the stories of the two students who were interviewed three years after their last consultation. Each interview lasted for 40 to 50 minutes.

Akiyo perceived the apprentice period positively, looking back to the time when she was advised to change her methods and materials of extensive listening. The change helped her get out of a slump and as a result, she raised her TOEFL score and was selected to join a 3-month intensive English programme offered on our sister campus in California. After she graduated, she completed her master's degree in the United States. She said in retrospect:

*I chose AFN because I wanted to listen to something in English every day like a shower. I can hear AFN 24 hours a day, so I thought it's good. I tried NPR news because my teacher said she listens to it every night. I was satisfied because I was immersed in English. But when you asked me to talk about the contents of the programme, I couldn't answer. I realised that I wasn't benefiting from it. No wonder my TOEFL score didn't go up at all. So I decided to use easier materials with transcript and as you suggested, I gradually raised the level of the material. I did a lot of listening from the moment I woke up, even while I was changing clothes or cooking, for example, but always with something that I understand more than 80 or 90 %. It's important to choose the right materials. Otherwise it's a waste of time.*

In contrast to Akiyo, Yumika's story does not provide evidence for the original model of the apprenticeship of learner strategies. Yumika came to talk about studying for TOEFL. Over the course of two sessions I made some recommendations for both materials and strategies. We agreed that we meet one more time to monitor progress, but Yumika never returned for another meeting until one year afterwards, when she had just returned from a year abroad. She told me that she had not been able to continue studying for TOEFL in the ways we had discussed, so she decided to make private arrangements for a study abroad year in North America and spent eight months staying with a local family while attending a language school which had no TOEFL requirement. When she returned to Japan her English had improved greatly. In retrospect, she said:

*I wanted to study abroad anyway, so I just went. While I was there I realised that my vocabulary was so small. I couldn't understand what my host family said sometimes. So I started to make notes of new words I learned. Then, I found that those words were in the book you recommended before I studied abroad. Now I understand why you recommended it, but I didn't know how important it was at that time. ... I really feel I should have studied more before I went. But I'm happy now. It was expensive but I feel I could get what I wanted. I am more confident now. I want to study much more. ... I am thinking of visiting Africa next summer.*

She looked confident, assertive, and certain about what she wants. She was able to change her plan and take action that was more suited to her ability and preference. Although the advisory sessions did not seem to have influenced her action directly, she now looks back and appreciates what was suggested, which in turn suggests that she has developed as a learner and moved forward towards autonomy.

Yumika's story does not represent the majority. However, as Cotterall (2004) argues, 'a collective and comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences' can be gained only by 'accumulating a significant number of individual accounts' (2004, p. 101). Her account surely helps understand the developmental process towards autonomy as it offers evidence of the delayed effects of the attempts of fostering autonomy.

### **Teachers' Roles in the Apprenticeship of Learner Strategies**

Some successful language learners may not have had to be taught to be autonomous. As Littlewood reminds us (1999), it is important to recognise that success in learning is achieved in the case of many and probably most successful scholars, not owing it to a certain pedagogy that aims to foster autonomy. They probably sought ways of studying effectively without being told to do so, or they knew intuitively what would work. Their repertoires of learner strategies were probably acquired unconsciously, but when they share the strategies, it should be done explicitly. Nothing should be assumed. In order to diagnose each student's diverse needs accurately, it is necessary to explore their world through observation of and interaction with them. Cognitive apprenticeship requires a certain period of time for building trust between the teacher and the learner, and their relationship should be established on a strong sense of trust. The teacher should start by believing in their students' potential for full autonomy.

In the apprenticeship of learner strategies, sharing not only the way of studying but also knowing the beliefs behind the learner's behaviour is important. As Benson (2001) suggests, studies of beliefs may provide valuable insights into the cognitive aspects of autonomy in language learning. Teachers should know the students' needs and beliefs, and be able to recondition their beliefs that are inimical for autonomy. Metacognitive knowledge that teachers have, or their knowledge concerning their own cognitive processes or anything related to them (Flavell 1976), should be shared with the learner so that students understand more about what is behind what teachers suggest.

Finally, when students are more dependent for a longer period than others during the apprenticeship period, teachers should help them experience a certain degree of success at an early stage in order to be autonomous enough for them to be critically aware of the process of reaching their short-term goals and explicitly encourage them to use the strategies that worked in a new learning situation. EFL courses intended to promote autonomy should be designed so that students' strong desire to master English can be transformed into a driving force in a positive way, and therefore, if students come to ask for advice, even with a very dependent attitude, support should be given. As Chanock maintains (2004), expecting autonomy to be developed by choosing not to teach may not be a suitable option in many cases.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Let me restate that reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) should be promoted when students are rather dependent especially at an early stage of their learning, and that the ultimate goal should be a shift to proactive autonomy. We cannot expect our students to be autonomous from the beginning: learner autonomy needs to be fostered, and it can be done through the apprenticeship of learner strategies. Teachers' metacognitive knowledge and skills for critical reflection should be shared through teacher-student dialogue. Students should be guided in a scaffolded way with explicit instruction in the beginning, and then, the locus of control should be gradually shifted to the side of learners. To conclude, learner autonomy is a universal human capacity to regulate own learning. Everyone has the capacity to be fully autonomous but some may go through phases where teachers' intervention is beneficial before learners are

able to find their own way. Teachers should provide necessary support in the way that allows students to develop autonomy.

### **The Author**

Izumi Kanzaka is a lecturer at Soka University, Tokyo, Japan. She is currently teaching academic foundation courses in the International Program of the Economics Department and a teacher education module in the MA in TESOL program at Soka University. Her research interests include learner autonomy, learner strategies, foreign language anxiety, and various aspects of psychology in foreign language education.

## References

- Aoki, N. (1999). The role of affect in the development of learner autonomy. In J. Arnold, (Ed.). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aoki, N. (2003). Expanding space for reflection and collaboration. In Barfield, A. & Nix, M. (Eds.). *Learner and teacher autonomy in Japan 1: Autonomy you ask!* Tokyo: The Learner Development Special Interest Group of JALT.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education.
- Boud, D. (1988). Moving towards autonomy. In D. Boud, (Ed.), *Developing student learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Brookes, A., & Grundy, P. (Eds.). (1988). *Individualization and autonomy in language learning*. London: Modern English Publications/The British Council.
- Chanock, K. (2004). Autonomy and responsibility: Same or different? Available from [http://independentlearning.org/ILA/ila03/ila03\\_chanock.pdf](http://independentlearning.org/ILA/ila03/ila03_chanock.pdf) In H. Reinders, H. Anderson, M. Hobbs, and J. Jones- Parry (Eds.), *Supporting independent learning in the 21st century. Proceedings of the inaugural conference of the Independent Learning Association, Melbourne AUS, 13-14 September 2003*. Auckland: Independent Learning Association Oceania. Available from <http://independentlearning.org/ILA/>
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *ELT Journal* 49, 219-227.
- Cotterall, S. (2004). 'It's just rules ... that's all it is at this stage ...'. In P. Benson, & D. Nunan, (Eds.), *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fu, G. (1999). Guidelines for productive language counseling: Tools for implementing autonomy. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change* (pp. 107-111). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Flavell, J. H. (1976). Metacognitive aspects of problem-solving. In L. B. Resnick (Ed.), *Perspectives on the development of memory and cognition* (pp. 231-235). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kanzaka, I. (2007, November). *Learner autonomy in the tertiary EFL context in Japan*. A paper presented at JALT Conference. November 23-26, 2007. Tokyo, Japan.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues, and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (1994). Learner autonomy: A theoretical construct and its practical application. *Die Neueren Sprachen*, 93, 430-442.
- Little, D., Ridley, J. & Ushioda, E. (2002). *Towards greater learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*. 20, 71-94.
- Mozzon-McPherson, M. (2001). Language advising: Towards a new discursive world. In M. Mozzon-McPherson, & R. Vismans, (Eds.). *Beyond language teaching towards language advising* (pp. 7-22). London: CILT.
- Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson, & P. Voller, *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 192-203). Harlow: Longman.
- Voller, P. (1997). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? In P. Benson & P. Voller, (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 98-113). London: Longman.

- Voller, P. (2004). *One-to-one consultations: A web guide to language advising*. Retrieved October 12, 2005 from The English Centre, The University of Hong Kong Web site: <http://ec.hku.hk/1to1/>
- Voller, P., Martyn, E., & Pickard, V. (1999). One-to-one counselling for autonomous learning in a self-access centre: Final report on an action learning project. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change* (pp. 111-128). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.