

Development of Autonomy in the Language Class in Japan

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Abstract

This is an empirical study to investigate the effectiveness of fostering autonomy in formal instruction at Japanese universities, where traditionally instruction has been primarily teacher-centered. Our researcher formed four classes using an experimental design, setting up two classes each in the business and nursing majors. One class of business majors spent much time on online drills and tests for TOEIC preparation, while the other was a presentation skill development class in which students worked on many projects. One of the nursing major classes was a speaking class that emphasised a group project, while the other was a conventionally taught, teacher-fronted and textbook-oriented listening class. Results confirmed that there were significant differences in satisfaction, self-confidence, and learner awareness between the two classes in both groups. It was concluded that project work, which encourages student contributions and peer teaching, plays an important role in autonomy development.

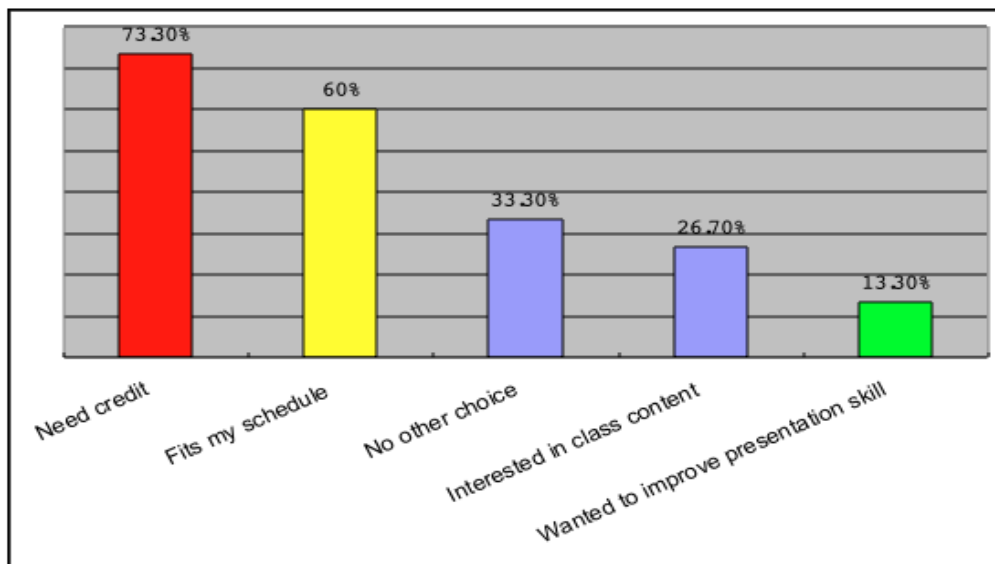
Background

Raffani (1996) says, 'Individuals...have an innate need to feel autonomous and to have control over their lives. This need for self-determination is satisfied when individuals are free to behave of their own volition—to engage in activities because they want to, not because they have to'. Figures 1 and 2 represent responses from two English third-year business major students at a private university in Tokyo, Japan, when asked about their reasons for choosing an elective class, and about whether they prefer a student-centered or a teacher-centered class. A clear purpose or goal in choosing the class was not evident among the students. Their learning attitude was passive, and enthusiasm for the class was lacking. The students indicated a preference for teacher-centered classes as they are used to the type of classes where they are 'spoon-fed' lessons.

Figure 3 shows third-year business students and have low intermediate English proficiency, and freshmen nursing students with high beginner proficiency. These responses, taken on the first day of English class, showed that nursing students, who are full of hope at the start of college life, exhibited a particular interest in studying and working overseas, while business students, who are more realistic about their future jobs, exhibit more diverse reasons for wanting to study English. Regrettably, many nursing students tend to gradually lose their enthusiasm for studying English for several reasons: they realise their English level is too low to study or work as a nurse overseas; English is not essential to their job as long as they work in Japan; it is not needed for the National Nursing Examination; and they are always very busy with studies in their major and nursing practice.

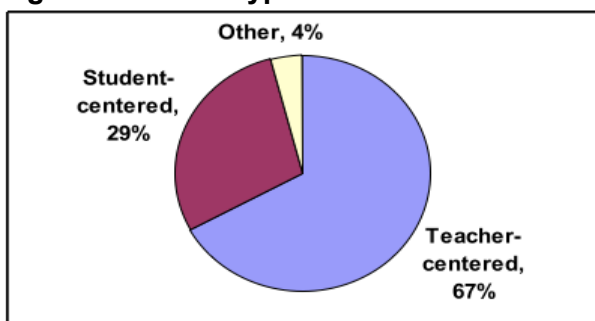
Contemporary language-teaching methodologies make the assumption that taking an active, independent attitude to learning—that is, becoming an autonomous learner—is beneficial to learning (Benson, 2000; Little, 1991; Wenden, 1991). It was up to the researcher to find ways to develop autonomy among Japanese learners given the afore-mentioned circumstances.

Figure 1: Why Did You Choose This Class?



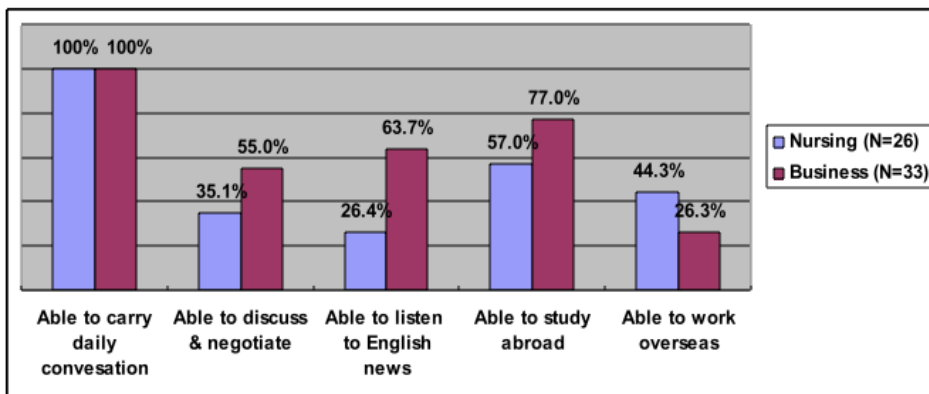
N=64

Figure 2: Which Type of Class Do You Prefer?



N=64

Figure 3: What Level of English Proficiency Do You Want to Achieve at University?



Literature Review

Littlewood (1996) advocates that autonomy involves two components: ability and willingness. Willingness 'depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required' (p. 428). Knowles (1975) states that proactive learners learn more and learn better than those who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught. They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. How then can the teacher help passive people become autonomous learners? Learner development is not something that teachers 'do' to learners. It is something learners must develop themselves. However, there may be ways the process can be encouraged and facilitated (Sheerin, 1997).

Dickinson (1992), for example, views learner training as a resource to help learners engage more actively in classroom learning. Therefore, learning strategy training and motivation are important issues when discussing autonomy. Dörnyei (2001) also emphasises motivational strategy practice in the L2 classroom, focusing on the following three strategies: make the learners more goal-oriented to generate initial motivation, make progress more tangible to increase learner satisfaction and confidence, and promote cooperation among the learners to maintain and enhance motivation.

Holec (1981) and Allwright (1990) say that autonomous learners are willing to learn in collaboration with others, and Boud (1988) introduces three different models of autonomous learning: the individual, the group-centered, and the project-based models. These models place emphasis on the freedom of having some say in how to do an activity, which encourages learners to fully engage in and enjoy the activity (Deci, 1996). Other researchers (Legutke and Thomas, 1991; Kohonen, 1992; Nunan, 1992) also emphasise that concepts of autonomy and independence could be realised by a project-based syllabus, and experiential and collaborative learning.

On the other hand, many other works (Boswood, 1997; Chappelle, 2001; Hanson-Smith, 2000) emphasise the significant role of CALL in developing linguistic proficiency, as well as promoting increased levels of learner autonomy, motivation, satisfaction, and self-confidence. Researchers (Chappelle, 2001; Ellis, 2002; Fotos, 2001; Healy, 1999) state that repeated exposure to drill and testing material promotes language acquisition, and the presentation of materials at the learner's pace with immediate feedback by computer encourages learner autonomy.

Lastly, one of the most important issues is evaluation. Holec (1981) and Allwright (1990) say that autonomous learners are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning. Autonomy is a multidimensional construct, and it is difficult to measure, however, evidence of the ability to learn relies on direct observation of the learners at work, analysis of records of their work and learning outcomes, or their self-reporting (Benson, 2001).

In summary, it would appear that key factors to fostering autonomy are cooperative and collaborative work, CALL, focus on achieving goals, and application of appropriate strategy, with observation of learners at work and learners' self-reporting being important for evaluation.

Method

Based on this background, the researcher formed four different types of classes, summarised in Table 1, in order to investigate the effectiveness of different course types on learning by the students. Although many other researchers emphasised the effectiveness of CALL for developing linguistic proficiency (see the literature review), the researcher decided not to compare the four classes using proficiency test results, because these classes engaged in different tasks and activities. Since different skills were practiced in each class, it would be unfair to compare them using the same proficiency test. Therefore, feed-back from students regarding their

learning was collected to ascertain how motivated, self-confident, and autonomous they had become.

Table 1: Four Classes

Class	Major	Task	Lesson format	Facility used
1	Business	Study for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) on line, and ABC World News by video clip.	Individual	CALL room
2		Project-based work and presentations on general and business issues	Mostly collaborative	CALL room
3	Nursing	(Speaking-oriented) Various types of speaking activities and presentations on general issues	Mostly collaborative	Ordinary classroom and computer room
4		(Listening-oriented) Various textbook listening exercises	Teacher-directed	Ordinary classroom

Classes 1 and 2, the business major classes, used CALL room and web-based campus network self-access facilities, once a week for five months (15 lessons). At the end of the term, self-reports of their activities were collected.

(1) Test Drills and Videos (Class 1)

Twenty-six students used the CALL system and web-based campus network system to study the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and watch videos of 'ABC World News.' They could study and review these materials at any time by accessing the Internet. A total of 1,100 TOEIC questions and 12 lessons of comprehension questions for news videos were on the server. Correct answers and feedback were given immediately after the students completed the questions on the computer.

(2) Project-based Presentations (Class 2)

Thirty business-major students studied how to give presentations using the CALL and campus network systems. They could access the Internet to search for information for their project work, and the network system to study the learning materials. Everyone gave five presentations and conducted self-and peer evaluations of the presentations.

The nursing students programme was one lesson every two weeks for seven months (15 lessons). At the end of the term, self-reports of their activities were collected.

(3) Speaking-oriented Practice (Class 3)

Twenty-six nursing students engaged in various types of speaking activities, such as giving speeches, practicing daily conversation, and creating and telling digital stories in groups. Students mostly used computers to plan the organisation of their stories.

(4) Listening-oriented Study (Class 4)

Twenty-seven nursing students studied to improve their listening skill using a listening-based textbook in a traditional classroom format. They engaged in listening activities concerning various topics, such as personal qualities, job responsibilities, clothes and fashion, advertisements, driving, travel, directions, the Internet, and feelings. Most lessons consisted of doing exercises in the textbook, with teachers providing correct answers and detailed feedback.

Results and Discussion

Comments made by many students about their classes are listed and the main points are summarised below.

Class 1

- a. I found TOEIC study efficient because I could study at my own pace.
- b. I first thought doing the TOEIC drills on the computer was fun, but gradually lost interest because it was a very mechanical way of learning.
- c. I felt a distance between the teacher and us.
- d. I found studying the news to be very interesting but would have liked more discussion of the issues.
- e. I wanted more interaction with my classmates and teachers.

- (1) The drills were useful, fun, efficient, but got boring eventually (a, b).
- (2) The students expressed more desire for interaction (c, d, e).

Class 2:

- a. I have never before been so motivated or enjoyed an English class so much.
- b. I often felt that the time in class was very short.
- c. I learned how to organise my thoughts and appeal to the audience in this class, and I hope to apply this to my other studies and to my future job.
- d. I was always eager to take up the challenge of the next project. This was the first class that the initiative of the students was respected.
- e. I learned how to study in this class, and this experience will be very important for my life.
- f. The discussion board of the campus network system was very convenient for the group project.
- g. I learned a lot from my classmates and was encouraged very much. I think I was able to strengthen a weakness in my personality in this class.

- (1) Classes were motivating and fun (a, b).
- (2) The classes offered the opportunity for skill development (c, d).

- (3) Potential for application to future situations (c, d).
- (4) The importance of challenges in learning (d).
- (5) The respect of the teacher for student initiative (d).
- (6) The convenience of the technology used for the group project (f).
- (7) An expression of potential autonomy development (g)

Class 3:

- a. It was good that our willingness and motivation were taken into consideration in this class.
- b. It was amazing to find how much we could achieve as a group.
- c. We helped each other, and I learned a lot from my group members.
- d. Although the preparation was difficult at first, I felt satisfaction after I gave my presentation.
- e. I worked hard to polish my English sentences in preparation for the presentation.
- f. I enjoyed this class and felt we could aspire to even greater challenges.
- g. I feel confident in speaking English in public now.

- (1) Independence versus interdependence (a, b, c).
- (2) Potential development of autonomous language learning behaviour (e).
- (3) Tipping point for autonomous development (f).
- (4) Confidence is one part of autonomy and autonomous language learning behaviour (g).

Class 4:

- a. It was good that students with the same interests were in the same class, and we could focus on our favourite activities.
- b. Listening activities were enjoyable and our listening ability improved, but it would have been nice to have more interactive activities.
- c. This type of class doesn't really tell me if my English is good enough to communicate with others.
- d. The class was more for learning than practicing communication.

- (1) The students expressed desire for more interaction (b, d).
- (2) Clear indication of lack of self-awareness of ability (c).

We received somewhat negative feedback from Class 1. Using the computerised TOEIC system for studying may simply have given learners more opportunities to answer more questions, and given them more immediate feedback on errors resulting in increased practice opportunities. Although self-instruction seemed to raise motivation of the students at first, they gradually lost interest in the mechanical means of learning, and they expressed a desire for more interaction. Jones (1993, 1994) found that learner autonomy and strategy development rarely occur in this mode. Class 4 was a conventional teacher-oriented class, where there were almost no chances for the students to interact, plan activities, or express their ideas. Like Class 1,

disappointment and dissatisfaction were expressed by the students at the end of the course.

On the other hand, feedback from Classes 2 and 3 expressed heightened motivation, satisfaction, a sense of challenge, and self-confidence. Comment (g) of class 2, made by a student who had personality issues, deserves particular attention. She first refused to give a presentation, saying she got severe headaches when she became very nervous. The researcher noticed this student's problems from the beginning of the class. The student continued to observe her classmates' presentations, and eventually started preparing her own *PowerPoint* slides, although she still didn't give a presentation. Her emotional ups and downs continued throughout the course. Then she expressed her willingness to work on a group presentation and made a very short presentation. For the final presentation, she volunteered to give a presentation by herself, which led her to write the above comment. It is believed her willingness was stimulated by peer observation and she became motivated. Since these classes engaged in many group projects, the group members were encouraged to contribute and conduct peer teaching, and they engaged in learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. The application of motivation strategy by teachers (Dörnyei, 2001) seemed to affect learners greatly. It is also important to realise that project work provided learners with the freedom to express themselves and an opportunity to fully engage in an activity they enjoyed. This could have led to the comments labelled (f) and (g) of class 3.

Conclusion

This empirical study provides some evidence that suggests project-based collaborative work, teacher and learner integration, and peer teaching could help passive students become proactive, and promote self-confidence and independent learning. Classes created in such a way clearly lead to increased motivation, which lays the groundwork for the development of autonomous language learning behaviour.

Whether it is possible to 'teach' learners to be autonomous depends on course design, which includes the use of motivational strategy and training. If teachers become able to design their classes in such a way, they may be able to put learners on the right path towards greater autonomy. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in the development of autonomous language learning behaviour.

The Author

Midori Kimura is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Tokyo Women's Medical University. She received a Master's degree from Teachers College Columbia (TESOL) and a PhD from International Christian University, Japan (TESOL). Her research interests include learning strategies, learning style and computer assisted language learning (CALL). She has co-authored teacher resource books, *Gengogakushu to Gakushu Strategy* (Japanese title) and *Gakushu Strategy Handbook* (Japanese title). She has also published in journals such as *Eibei Bunka*, *JACET Bulletin*, and *Computer & Education*.

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