

A CARL Approach to Promoting EFL Teacher Trainees' Autonomy in Pre-Service Teacher Education at a Japanese University

Hideo Kojima
Hirosaki University, Japan

Abstract

There has been hardly any substantial amount of longitudinal research conducted to uncover collaborative, autonomous, and reflective learning (CARL) processes in EFL teacher education in Japan. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of CARL in pre-service teacher education. A CARL approach was implemented in my ELT methodology classes. I divided 56 trainees into small groups. Each group was given a different research topic, presented their research results collaboratively, and led a whole-class discussion. For half-term review, I administered a questionnaire to reflect how the group was working. Moreover, I implemented summative evaluation to assess CARL and analysed the trainees' and my reflection on CARL. The feedback indicated that although I needed to improve my instruction, CARL could be effective in promoting the trainees' professional competence and autonomy. CARL approaches may have some potential to enhance pre-service EFL teachers' autonomous learning in Japan.

Introduction

Today, a paradigm shift in university teaching from teaching-centered to learning-centered seems to be taking place in Japan. With regard to English language teaching (ELT) in universities, as an EFL teacher trainer, I need to help my trainees to develop their autonomy in language learning/teaching and communicative competence in English at university level. This case study is concerned with collaborative, autonomous, and reflective learning (CARL) in pre-service EFL teacher education. For approximately five years, I have been using CARL with my second year students, who have just started to learn about teaching English as a foreign language. I emphasise the integration of the three concepts of collaboration, autonomy, and reflection. Such integration is necessary if trainees' professional competence and autonomy are to be promoted. In the CARL programme, I encourage the trainees a) to internalise the skills and ethos of learning collaboratively, autonomously, and reflectively; b) to be more likely to be successful in developing their autonomy through human interdependence; and c) to be able to enhance group dynamics in the future school classroom.

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, which is stressed in educational reform in Japan, seems to be expected to have a social as well as an individual dimension. Interestingly enough, more attention has recently been paid to the social aspect of autonomy in the West. Ryan (1991) sees the achievement of a sense of autonomy as one of the most fundamental needs and purposes of human beings. Another fundamental need is for what he calls "relatedness", that is, for "contact, support and community with others." If this contact with others is felt to be "instrumental or controlling," it can lead us to lose our sense of autonomy. However, if the contact is supportive, it does not interfere with

autonomy but facilitates it. Ryan uses a term that is especially significant for my study: "autonomous interdependence".

Autonomous learning within an institutional context in Japanese higher education is the means as well as the aim for the development of learner autonomy. Setting up an autonomous learning environment, which is not teaching-centered but learning-centered, puts certain demands on university teachers as well as students. Autonomous learning may be described as what takes place in situations in which the teacher provides a learning environment where the learners are given the possibility to be consciously involved in their own learning.

Collaborative and Reflective Learning

Today, Japanese university students are increasingly being asked by faculty to learn co-operatively and reflectively. The reasons include a) an increasingly diverse student population who need to develop ways of learning together in order to make progress; b) the increased use of teaching and learning that emphasise learner-driven approaches such as peer-learning; c) the growth of online courses that may include a computer-mediated conferencing component requiring online dialogue; d) and student projects that often require a team approach because of their scope and depth.

While there are differences among the models of co-operative learning (CL), Johnson and Johnson (1999) and other researchers point out five key elements of CL: a) positive interdependence; b) individual accountability; c) face-to-face interaction; d) social skills; and e) group processing. In this study students were required to work together in such a way as to include each of these elements.

The assumption that the primary aim of teaching is to make student learning possible leads to an argument for a reflective and inquiring approach as a necessary condition for improving university teaching in Japan. Reflection is not just about self-improvement and self-development but also about understanding and questioning the contexts in which teaching and learning take place. One of the fundamental purposes of reflecting-on-practice is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. My teacher trainees are expected to be reflective practitioners and researchers in EFL education settings in Japan.

Japanese teachers are likely to face many instructional and institutional challenges when they implement CARL in their classrooms. These include a) the changing role from lecturer to facilitator, b) the shift in authority from the individual instructor to shared authority with the group of learners, c) careful planning of the instructional setting such as timing and efficiency concerns, and d) assessment issues such as group versus individual grades. CARL might be evaluated as a culture-sensitive approach to pre-service EFL teacher education.

Method

Purpose of the Study

In order to have an opportunity of future implementation, CARL needs to be modelled for the pre-service teachers and experienced by them as learners. As a teacher educator, I need to make a special commitment to teaching both the rationale and technique of CARL to my trainees. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of CARL in developing teacher trainees' autonomy at a Japanese university. My research question was: To what extent can CARL be effective in promoting the pre-service teachers' autonomy?

Participants

The CARL programme involved 56 second-year university students who attended the class of *English Teaching Methodology* in 2004, with low intermediate to high intermediate levels of English. The compulsory class for the second-year students,

who had already decided to obtain a teaching license, met for 90 minutes every week during the semester. Most of the teacher trainees would like to be an EFL teacher in primary or secondary schools after graduation.

Procedures

At the beginning of the semester I tested Littlewood's (1999) cooperative learning (CL) predictions in my class in order to determine what kind of approach I could introduce into the trainee-centered classroom at my university. In order to analyse the effectiveness of the CARL programme, I collected quantitative and qualitative data: questionnaires to survey how the group work was working and the teacher trainees' summative evaluation of CARL experience; and the trainees' reflection on CARL; and my class observation and reflection on CARL. Regarding the reasonable extent of agreement with the importance of relationships within the group or socially-oriented motivation, the response pattern of my trainees looked almost the same as that of Littlewood's Hong Kong students. However, the trainees were more likely to have negative attitudes towards discussion within a group and hesitation in voicing their opinions or questions in the open classroom. The trainees had studied in the traditional, teacher-centered curriculum for a long time. I discussed with the trainees the results of the data analysis and we decided to implement a CARL approach. Although the trainees had not experienced CARL at university level before, they showed a great interest in the new approach.

The trainees were divided into small groups (four students in one group). Each group was given a research topic on ELT, such as the Grammar Translation Method, Total Physical Response, the Natural Approach, and Communicative Language Teaching. After investigating the topic in collaborative group work, every group gave a presentation on the topic (including micro-teaching) in front of the classroom, and then led a whole-class discussion. For the half-term review of CARL, I administered a questionnaire to examine how the group was working. After all the groups had finished their presentations, I gave some comments on their activities, implemented a questionnaire for summative evaluation, and asked them to write their opinions about CARL experience in an open-ended questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Taking the philosophy of CARL instruction into consideration, I integrated the concepts of collaboration, autonomy, and reflection. The teacher trainees practiced CARL throughout the programme, and I expected them to understand its relationship to dependent variables such as social and academic outcomes, and finally to value CARL as a lifelong learning strategy. It might be important for them to experience CARL frequently throughout the teacher preparation. In particular, I needed to encourage them a) to appreciate the value of CARL, b) to confront their own learning histories and resistances to CARL, c) to experience the differences that the CARL process would make in their own learning, and d) to study the principles guiding the application of CARL (Brody 2004:188). Thus, this study is an exploratory case-study that helps us understand the effectiveness of CARL within a particular local context.

Review of How the Group Is Working

In order to build in time for reflection on CARL activities and to facilitate the trainees in discussing the issues that had emerged for individuals, Questionnaire 1 was administered when the trainees appeared to have become used to collaborative group work. Table 1 shows the mean responses to Questionnaire 1, which was designed to review how the group was working. The trainees were asked to individually read each item carefully and to circle the appropriate number for each response. They then were asked to compare and discuss the issues that had emerged for them with the rest of the group.

Table 1: Questionnaire 1 - Review of How the Group Is Working

Item	5 (%)	4 (%)	3 (%)	2 (%)	1 (%)	MA
1. The climate is friendly, individuals are relaxed and all members are on task.	36	48	14	2	0	4.2
2. Everyone is working. Everyone has a role.	64	32	4	0	0	4.6
3. Everyone understands what they have to do and is clear about their role and responsibilities.	45	50	5	0	0	4.4
4. Everyone listens to each other. All ideas are given a hearing.	41	52	7	0	0	4.3
5. Conflict and disagreement arise. The group manages this and finds solutions. Everyone agrees to keep to the decisions made.	27	52	19	2	0	4.0
6. People are open and honest. They make constructive suggestions for change. Complaints are accepted and solutions are found in the group.	23	52	25	0	0	4.0
7. People can share their feelings in the group.	29	45	23	3	0	4.0
8. The role of leader in the group changes from week to week or alternates in any one week.	11	21	48	16	4	3.2
9. When action needs to be taken all participants are clear what the group has decided to do. Individuals understand and take responsibility for the action they have agreed to take.	28	59	11	2	0	4.1
10. There are regular group reviews. Attention is paid to how the group is working. The group looks after itself.	23	43	23	11	0	3.8

5—strongly agree 4—agree 3—neutral 2—disagree 1—strongly disagree
 Teacher trainees N=56 MA=Mean Agreement

(Questionnaire taken from Askew & Carnell 1998)

This questionnaire was administered for the half-term review of CARL. Involving the trainees in assessment could lead to a sense of shared responsibility for the learning in groups. My role was that of learning counsellor and facilitator. Most groups seemed to be enjoying CARL, but the lower average response to item 8 (3.2) indicated that the trainees were not alternating group leaders. Generally, it may not have been very easy for the trainees to take it in turns to be a group leader. Also, the MA score of item 10 (3.8) was lower than the score for other items, and so I encouraged them to promote their metacognitive awareness and group processing, reminding them of how well they were achieving their goals and maintaining autonomous group work.

Summative Evaluation of the CARL Experience

At the end of the CARL project, I needed to assess the learners in terms of the project's goals and objectives, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching. Every trainee was given another evaluation sheet (Questionnaire 2) and was asked to comment on their CARL experience.

Table 2: Questionnaire 2 - Summative Evaluation of CARL Experience

Item	5(%)	4(%)	3(%)	2(%)	1(%)	MA
1. Collaborative, autonomous, and reflective learning (CARL) in this class was beneficial.	54	41	5	0	0	4.5
2. CARL made mastering the material easier.	28	45	27	0	0	4.0
3. CARL made the experience of doing the out-of-class assignments more worthwhile.	20	50	28	2	0	3.9
4. CARL made the in-class group work more useful.	32	63	5	0	0	4.3
5. CARL made the overall experience of the course more enjoyable.	46	45	7	2	0	4.4
6. The size of my group was just fine.	55	27	14	4	0	4.3
7. The training I received for working in a team was largely appropriate.	18	53	25	4	0	3.9
8. I think my teaching ability has improved.	21	38	32	9	0	3.7
9. I am more interested in teaching English.	34	55	7	4	0	4.2
10. I want to learn how to teach English through CARL.	41	46	13	0	0	4.3

5—strongly agree 4—agree 3—neutral 2—disagree 1—strongly disagree

Teacher trainees n=56

MA=Mean Agreement

(Questionnaire taken from Sturman, 1993)

Judging from the results, many trainees claimed that: CARL in the class was beneficial (item 1; MA=4.5); CARL made the overall experience of the course more enjoyable (item 5; MA=4.4); CARL made the in-class group-work more useful (item 4; MA=4.3); and that the size of their groups was just fine (item 6; MA=4.3). Also, they claimed to want to learn how to teach English through CARL (item 10; MA=4.3). However, it is necessary for me to note that the MA score of item 8 was the lowest (3.7). In order to improve the trainees' teaching ability, I need to develop a more practical approach to ELT in the learner-centered communicative classroom in secondary schools. In addition to the above quantitative data analysis above, I will discuss the qualitative data that I gathered through, the trainees' reflection, my reflection and my observation.

Teacher Trainees' Reflections on CARL

In reflecting on CARL, the trainees had both positive and negative things to say. Nevertheless, the negative comments did not display negativity towards CARL itself, but rather dissatisfaction with their own performance in implementing it.

Positives

- This learner-centered instruction is more meaningful than teacher-centered, knowledge-based instruction that is still popular in universities.
- My positive attitudes towards EFL learning have been fostered in the communicative CARL classroom.
- I like the teaching style that includes group work, group presentation, and discussion in the open classroom. CARL might be one of the best approaches to EFL instruction that I have ever experienced in the classroom.

Negatives

- In CARL, individual members' opinions were sometimes sacrificed for the decision-making as a whole group.

- As a group leader, I was worried about group processing. More attention should have been paid to how the group was working. We could not promote group dynamics fully.
- The climate of our group was not good because some members showed negative attitudes towards CARL. I do not think that every member was on task.
- It was not easy for us to prepare for the group presentation. Although the materials that each group used in the presentation were interesting and easy to understand, understanding is one thing, and teaching is quite another. We need more teaching practice in the real classroom.

Judging from the trainees' comments above, for the CARL approach to be more equitable and productive, I should have encouraged each group to make sure often that all members a) understood the philosophy of CARL; b) took part in the task actively; and c) contributed equally to the success of their group. It would be necessary for the trainees to learn how to engage in the meaningful group discussion and investigation, and how to resolve interpersonal conflicts. If I prepared them only by lecturing about CARL, there would be almost no real impetus for change.

Teacher Educator's Reflection on CARL

The total learner-centeredness of this approach, where the trainees were preparing and presenting their own materials, presented me with a unique opportunity to watch carefully the trainees in action, and I learned a great deal about them: their presentations, their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, their strategies for learning, and other skills and attributes that they possessed (organisational skills, leadership, and group management).

In my observation, it might be said that most groups managed to engage in CARL activities which included investigation, presentation, and discussion in the open classroom. The success of each group's presentation was measured by the responses and feedback of the other groups. I might say that there was a measure of in-built evaluation and a test of how much had been learned. Being an expert on a topic might noticeably increase each trainee's self-esteem, and getting more confident, week by week, could perhaps give a feeling of genuine progress.

On the other hand, most of the individual trainees seemed not to be used to such a learner-centered approach. Some of them were worried about CARL, partly because they did not know how to organise the group work collaboratively and autonomously, and partly because they were not good at collaborative investigation or presentation. Some of the trainees' difficulties that I observed were as follows:

- The trainees' interaction in English was sometimes very simplified due to lack of vocabulary and was not sufficiently specific.
- The number of male trainees was much smaller than that of female trainees. Each mixed-gender groups consisted of four trainees including only one male trainee. He was likely to be a leader during the group work, even if he preferred individual performance.
- The trainees first had to get used to collaborative learning because almost all of them had never experienced CARL before.
- The trainees were used to working under the control of their trainer. It was not easy for them to work out strategies to fulfil their CARL task autonomously.
- Most of the trainees did not know how to contribute effectively to their classes. This undermined the principles of CARL relying on the positive contribution of all the participants.
- It was difficult for most of the trainees to understand the group topic because they had almost no background knowledge.

It might be difficult for the trainees to change their fixed learning styles. I encouraged all the trainees to understand that the “spoon-feed” system no longer exists in tertiary education. As a result, many trainees voluntarily exchanged their opinions or ideas about EFL learning and teaching in the open classroom. I recognised that individual trainees’ characteristics in the same group were different from each other. For each group to be able to manage to follow its own process of development, individual members had to overcome a variety of difficulties mentioned above.

In my teacher education programmes, CARL is the prevailing philosophy from which almost all of my planning operates. I believe that the early part of initial teacher training is the most important in establishing a trainee’s motivation and desire to effectively use CARL in future school classrooms. A problem plaguing Japanese teachers in secondary and tertiary education has been that many teachers tend to teach in only one way; that is, by the lecture method—the same way they were taught. Taking this into consideration, at the beginning of the CARL programme, I instructed the trainees in the philosophy and strategies of CARL, and subsequently modelled these elements throughout the programme.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has attempted to discover to what extent CARL can be effective in promoting the pre-service teachers’ autonomy. Collaboration is originally a social affective learning strategy for learner autonomy. My expectation was that the social-interactive processes that characterised the collaborative and reflective group work in CARL could be useful to develop each trainee’s proactive autonomy as a learner.

Through my CARL practice, I observed that CARL was able to provide a means of working towards the self-directed, autonomous learning. However, in order to provide a rationale for using CARL in pre-service EFL teacher education, I need to improve my instruction so that I may help the teacher trainees a) to have more opportunities to experience CARL constantly in initial teacher education at the university, b) to employ CARL in their teaching practice in the school classroom, c) to develop their communicative competence through content-rich tasks, d) to develop their metacognitive skills for planning, self-reflection, self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and group processing, and e) to promote their individual accountability and social skills through collaborative learning.

The goal of CARL in pre-service EFL teacher education is to help each trainee to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his/her own learning through collaborative, autonomous, and reflective group work. This process might mean a gradual shift of the initiative from the trainer to each trainee, encouraging him/her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the trainer, the trainee would be increasingly in charge of his/her own learning. In the spirit of trainee-centered thinking, careful pedagogical thinking needs to be attached to the trainee’s role in the whole process of learning. The trainee would be expected to be a communicative, collaborative, reflective, and autonomous learner. Increasing trainee-initiated independent work in small collaborative and reflective learning teams may offer pedagogically effective ways of evaluating autonomous learning in pre-service EFL teacher education.

However, trainee-centered learning does not mean leaving the trainee alone and without support. In the communicative trainee-centered classroom, teacher trainers might be expected to clarify their basic educational philosophy, and to welcome their new functions as facilitators, information-gatherers, decision-makers, motivators, input providers, providers of feedback, and co-communicators. New training capacities include identifying trainees’ cognitive and affective factors, and helping trainees to become more autonomous, collaborative, and reflective practitioners and researchers. Ongoing dialogue and trust between trainers and trainees can be considered to be a key factor to success.

The Author

Hideo Kojima has been working in the field of teacher education since 2002 at Hirosaki University, Japan. He received his TESOL Graduate Certificate from Georgetown University and both his MA in TEFL/TESL and PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham. His published work has concerned itself largely with approaches to pre- and in-service EFL teacher education, and notions of learner and teacher autonomy. His other research interests include: learning styles and strategies, cross-cultural communication, grammatical consciousness-raising, ESP, language policy, action research, and innovation in ELT. He is the representative of the JACET SIG on autonomous learning.

References

- Askew, S., & Carnell, E. (1998). *Transforming learning: Individual and global change*. London: Cassell.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). What makes cooperative learning work. In D. Kluge, S. McGuie, D. Johnson, & R. Johnson. (Eds.), *JALT applied materials: Cooperative learning* (pp. 23-36). Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20, 71-94.
- Ryan, R. M. (1991). The nature of the self in autonomy and relatedness. In J. Strauss and G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *The self: interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 208-238). New York: Springer.
- Sturman, P. (1992). Team teaching: A case study from Japan. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching* (pp. 141-161). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.