

Operationalising the Construct of Learner Autonomy: A Preliminary Study for Developing a New Measure of Language Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary stages of an ongoing project which aims to develop an instrument to quantitatively measure the degree of learner autonomy of Japanese university students as English learners. Despite a growing interest in learner autonomy in language education, there are still many areas in which further research is needed. Among those key areas, the issue of measuring learner autonomy is a controversial but important area. Based on an inter-disciplinary literature review, this paper discusses the possibility of developing a valid and reliable instrument for measuring learner autonomy and presents an operationalisation of the construct in the context of learning English at Japanese universities. It is hoped that this study could add a new insight to the field and contribute to the further development of the theory and practice of learner autonomy in Japan.

本稿では、英語学習における日本人大学生の学習者オートノミーを測定する尺度を開発するプロジェクトの予備的段階について述べる。言語教育において学習者オートノミーへの関心が高まる一方、さらに研究が必要な分野もまだ数多く残されており、学習者オートノミーの測定もそのうちの一つである。本稿は、複数の分野にまたがる先行研究に基づき学習者オートノミーを測定する妥当性・信頼性の高い尺度開発の可能性について論じ、日本の大学での英語学習というコンテキストにおいて、学習者オートノミーという概念の操作化を試みる。本研究が、日本における学習者オートノミーの理論と実践のさらなる発展に貢献することを期待する。

Introduction

Despite the increase in the number of studies conducted to promote learner autonomy, the issue of measuring learner autonomy as a way of showing the effectiveness of those approaches remains an area in need of further research. Although the measurability of the construct is controversial, research in and about measuring learner autonomy is an important area for the further development of both theory and practice of learner autonomy since it is essential to assess the effectiveness of whatever approaches are taken in order to improve both researching and teaching in the future.

This paper forms part of a project which aims to develop a quantitative measure of learner autonomy and focuses on the particular context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at Japanese universities.

Measuring Learner Autonomy

Measurability of Learner Autonomy

The issue of measuring learner autonomy is controversial. However, the fact that the construct of learner autonomy is widely considered as a matter of 'degree' (e.g., Nunan, 1997), rather than absolutes, may indicate that autonomy has a sort of developmental level, where the learner develops his/her autonomy through a lower level to a higher level. If that is the case, it would be possible to measure where in the continuum of the developmental level the learner is at a certain point of time. Indeed, Benson (2001) admits that 'the measurement of autonomy is problematic' but it 'does not necessarily mean that we should not attempt to measure it' (p. 54). He implies the necessity of further research in measuring learner autonomy as follows:

If we aim to help learners to become more autonomous, we should at least have some ways of judging whether we have been successful or not.

(Benson, 2001, p. 54)

This statement gives the motivation and justification to this study. On this basis, the study assumes that there is the possibility of measuring learner autonomy.

Multidimensional Nature of Learner Autonomy

Difficulties in the measurement of learner autonomy can be attributed to the construct itself. When a quantitative measurement is to be designed, it is necessary to operationalise the construct to be measured. However, learner autonomy is considered to be 'multidimensional' (Benson, 2001, p. 13) and '**not** a single, easily described behaviour' (Little, 1991, p. 7). Therefore, it can be said that measuring learner autonomy is difficult because the task of defining and operationalising the construct is difficult.

This point has been marked in the literature. For example, Field (1989), who criticised Guglielmino's (1978) Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), argues that the fundamental problem underlying the scale is that 'the conceptual foundations which underpin the scale are weak' (p. 139). This can be applied to the development of any sort of quantitative measurement. This may imply that it would be possible to develop a valid and reliable instrument if a strong conceptual framework of the construct to be measured could be established.

Previous Studies

There are some instruments which have been used in previous studies to report the effectiveness of the approaches to promoting learner autonomy in both general and language education. In general adult education, for example, Guglielmino (1978) developed the SDLRS which has been frequently used in the field. This scale was designed to measure learner skills and attitudes relevant to self-directed learning. Similarly, researchers in the field of language education have also devised some instruments, which can be found in the literature on learner autonomy. For example, Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) was designed to assess learner beliefs about language learning in general, not specifically about learner autonomy in language learning, but nevertheless has been used in studies on learner autonomy. Cotterall (1995) also developed an instrument to investigate learner beliefs, which are likely to reflect the learner's readiness for autonomy. Finally, Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL), which measures learner use of learning strategies, has been widely used. Although it is considered that learner strategy use plays an important role in autonomy, it is only a part of the construct and cannot cover all the aspects of learner autonomy.

Although these instruments may prove valid and reliable in measuring what they intend to measure, they do not seem to measure the construct of learner autonomy itself. This may be attributed to the different conceptions about the construct and the different approaches taken to promote learner autonomy by the users of each instrument.

Reconceptualising Learner Autonomy

The construct of *learner autonomy* has been defined in a variety of ways. In seeking to develop a measuring instrument for the construct, this paper aims to *reconceptualise* the construct, rather than to create a brand-new definition of it, on the basis of the definitions that previous researchers have created. In so doing, our views of the construct and of the relationship between its components and sub-components will be outlined, and this will help to build a rigorous theoretical framework of the construct within the context of this study. For that purpose, the literature of learner autonomy will be briefly reviewed in four inter-disciplinary areas: philosophy, psychology, autonomy in general education, and autonomy in applied linguistics.

Autonomy in Philosophy

The term *autonomy* has frequently appeared in the philosophy literature and has been discussed by philosophers and educational philosophers such as Rousseau, Kant, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Freire and Illich. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the most influential philosophers in 18th century Europe, emphasises in his well-known work *Emile* (Boyd, 1956) the learner's responsibility for his/her own learning and the teacher's role as a facilitator who helps the learner learn by him/herself. These ideas have been often discussed in the present literature on learner autonomy (e.g., Little, 1990; Voller, 1997). In the United States, Dewey's (1966) *problem-solving method* and Kilpatrick's (1921) *project method* have served as the base of *problem-based learning* (PBL), which is considered to be 'well suited to helping the students become active learners' (Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p. 236). The significant influence from these philosophers can be seen in the literature on psychology as well as in the present theories and practices of learner autonomy.

Autonomy in Psychology

The *constructivist* approach in cognitive psychology, for example, is concerned with 'the ways in which individuals seek to bring a sense of personal meaning to their worlds' (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 21) and is considered to be relevant to learner autonomy in language learning. In this approach, Kelly's (1955) *personal construct theory* has been influential in theories of learner autonomy (e.g., Schwienhorst, 2003), whereas Bruner's (1960) *discovery learning* has put the learner-centredness of the constructivist approach into practice in promoting learner autonomy.

Unlike cognitive psychology whose primary concern is the mental processes of individual learners, socio-cultural psychology is concerned with the learners' social interaction with others through which learning occurs and has influenced the social aspect of learner autonomy. It can be said that its main contribution to the construct has been made by the Russian developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. In his theory, often referred to as *socio-cultural theory*, it is assumed that 'the only "good learning" is that which is in advance of development' because 'learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached [...] does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process but rather lags behind this process' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89) and that it is important to 'ensure that they [children] work in their ZPD' (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2005, p. 73). The *zone of proximal development* or ZPD can be seen as the developmental stage which lies on the continuum towards self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978) and the children in the process of learning in their ZPD are provided with support or guidance in the form of *scaffolding*.

By gradually removing this scaffolding, the children's self-regulation can be encouraged. These concepts by Vygotsky can be found in the social perspective of learner autonomy in theory (e.g., O'Rourke & Schwienhorst, 2003; Oxford, 2003) whereas the application of these concepts can be seen in a number of studies which attempt to promote learner autonomy by using group work (e.g., Little, 1996).

In addition to cognitive and socio-cultural psychology, humanistic psychology has also been influential. A humanistic approach to learning focuses on affective aspects of learning and recognises the importance of providing the learners with a learning environment which would help them 'overcome the threatening affective factors' (Brown, 2000, p. 104) and enhance learning. Reflecting his professional background as a clinical psychologist, Rogers (1969) has applied the humanistic approach to the therapy called *person-centered therapy* to education. His view of the teacher's role as a facilitator of his/her students' learning has greatly influenced the practice of promoting learner autonomy.

Autonomy in General Education

It can be assumed that both philosophy and psychology have served to establish the theoretical base of the construct of learner autonomy, and then it has been applied in the context of education, both general and language education. In the field of general education, a great amount of work has been conducted by researchers in North America with a focus on adult *self-directed learning* (e.g., Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1975). They have studied how adult learners manage their own learning and also devised instruments such as the SDLRS (Guglielmino, 1978). Their theories and practices in self-directed learning have greatly influenced learner autonomy in language education. However, one should be aware that, as can be seen in Candy's (1991) description of the self-directed learner and Knowles's (1975) definition of self-directed learning, the two concepts of self-directed learning and of learner autonomy share some common features and therefore they have been often used interchangeably, but inconsistently. Oxford (2003), for example, points out that Dickinson (1987) and Holec (1979, 1980) 'used different (and reversed) meanings for autonomy and self-direction' (p. 75).

Autonomy in Applied Linguistics

In the field of applied linguistics, it can be said that research on learner autonomy started with Holec's (1981) definition of the construct: 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3), which is probably the most oft-quoted in the literature. Although autonomy in this field may share some features with self-directed learning in general education, it is important to consider the issues specifically related to language learning if one intends to reconceptualise the construct of *language learner autonomy*. Having reviewed the literature on learner autonomy in applied linguistics, there have been found many possible ways of classifying the construct (e.g., Benson, 1997; Holliday, 2003; Oxford, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2003; Smith, 2003). For the purpose of this study, the construct can be reconceptualised as one consisting of four main categories: *technical*, *psychological*, *political-philosophical* and *socio-cultural autonomy*. Considering the importance of 'combin[ing] as many perspectives as possible in any given study' (Oxford, 2003, p. 96), these four categories intend to incorporate what have been discussed as important in recent literature on learner autonomy. Each of these four categories will be elaborated on in the following section.

Operationalising Learner Autonomy

The reconceptualised construct of autonomy next needs to be *operationalised* in the context of this study since psychological constructs such as learner autonomy cannot be directly observed nor measured. Recognising the construct as 'multidimensional' as mentioned in 2.2, this operationalising process involves

classifying different dimensions of the construct into categories to break it into smaller units which will act as variables in the proposed instrument. This will be done on the basis of the four main categories mentioned in 3.4 above.

Technical Autonomy

The technical aspect of learner autonomy can be, for example, found in Benson's work (1997) as one of his three versions of autonomy. On the basis of his descriptions, technical autonomy can be classified into two sub-categories: *behavioural* and *situational autonomy*.

Behavioural autonomy is concerned with the learners' *ability* to take control of their own learning, which can be typically seen as the learner's act of learning a language on their own outside the classrooms without a teacher's intervention. This type of autonomy is often linked to the learner's use of learning strategies. These strategies, sometimes referred to in other terms such as 'tactics' (Cotterall, 1995), 'skills' (Littlewood, 1996) or 'skills and techniques' (Benson, 1997), have been recognised as important in promoting learner autonomy. Situational autonomy, on the other hand, concerns what Benson (1997) refers to as 'situations in which learners are obliged to take charge of their own learning' (p. 19). This may include both physical settings, such as self-access centres, and the specific context and circumstances of the learner, such as being apart from formal schooling after graduation.

Having higher degrees of both behavioural and situational autonomy is important because it enables the learners to take better control of their own learning even in the situation where they need to learn on their own. However, it is possible that the learners show their ability to use learning strategies just because they were told by their teacher to use those strategies. Therefore, it is crucial to develop the psychological aspect of autonomy which should underlie one's demonstration of the ability in order for him/her to become genuinely autonomous.

Psychological Autonomy

Psychological autonomy is what is often referred to as the learner's internal *capacity* (e.g., Little, 1991). This capacity can be classified into the following sub-categories: *motivational*, *metacognitive* and *affective dimensions*.

The motivational dimension focuses on the cognitive psychological approach to motivation, which is considered by some as more relevant to learner autonomy than the social-psychological approach (Dickinson, 1995). In this approach, Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguish two types of motivation: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic motivation*. Although they argue that intrinsic motivation tends to be seen as preferable for effective learning, some researchers assume that autonomous learners have 'a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation' (Oxford, 2003, p. 83).

Secondly, the metacognitive dimension here refers to the learner's *metacognitive knowledge* and *reflection*. Studies show that effective use of metacognitive strategies plays a crucial role in promoting learner autonomy because they are used to direct the learning processes by planning, monitoring and evaluating (e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Metacognitive knowledge is important as it is 'a prerequisite for the self-regulation of learning' (Wenden, 1998, p. 223) which involves the use of those metacognitive strategies. An effective way of raising the learner's awareness of this metacognitive knowledge is reflection (Wenden, 1998). Indeed, Breen and Mann (1997) recognise the importance of reflection and describe the autonomous person as one who 'is able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon this in order to make decisions about what they next need to do and experience' (p. 19).

Thirdly, the affective dimension concerns a variety of affective factors, such as *anxiety*, *self-esteem* and all the other emotions, which may affect language learning either positively or negatively. It is necessary to control these factors for effective

language learning to take place. Besides, in the case of promoting learner autonomy, it should be the learners who control these factors by using their ability to control them, which is underpinned by their capacity to do so.

Political-philosophical Autonomy

Political-philosophical autonomy is related to what Benson (1997) describes as the 'political version of autonomy' (p. 25). This aspect of autonomy is labelled here as *political-philosophical* since it is closely related to the learner's perceptions of him/herself in relation to the world and how the world is/should be organised.

It seems that political-philosophical autonomy is manifested at two levels: *group* and *individual* (e.g., Pennycook, 1997, p. 36). At its higher level, group autonomy concerns autonomy of the groups which the individual learner belongs to. It is considered as a higher level since the polity or ideology of the groups has some degree of power over the individual members of the group. At its lower level, on the other hand, individual autonomy concerns what Benson (1997) refers to as the 'control over the content and processes of one's own learning' (p. 25).

From another point of view, this aspect of autonomy is often linked to the notion of *freedom* and there has been much philosophical discussion around two kinds of freedom: *positive* and *negative freedom* (e.g., Berlin, 1969; Carter, 2007). Relating these concepts of freedom to the classroom situation, negative freedom refers to the situation where the learners have total freedom in their learning and can learn whatever they want to because there are no constraints, whereas positive freedom refers to the situation where they have the freedom to control their own learning under a consensus with teachers or other authorities as a result of their active pursuit of freedom. In other words, positive freedom sees the individuals in a social context.

Considering these two levels of autonomy and two kinds of freedom, this study focuses on individual autonomy where the learners have positive freedom in their own learning context. However, the learners' view of group autonomy should not be neglected as it may influence their learning.

Socio-cultural Autonomy

Finally, our fourth category sees the social aspect of learner autonomy, which is labelled here as socio-cultural autonomy. This can be classified into the following sub-categories: *social-interactive* and *cultural dimensions*.

The social-interactive dimension is heavily influenced by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and is concerned with the role of social interaction in developing learner autonomy. From this perspective, some researchers argue that autonomy involves the learner's interdependence, rather than total independence (e.g., Little, 1990). This concept of interdependence refers to the situation where the learners are responsible for their own learning with or without the help of others and are expected to cooperate with others, such as teachers or other learners.

The cultural dimension, on the other hand, concerns the social aspects of autonomy in a broader context of culture. In the context of this study, the key issues may include discussions about learning in Western/non-Western cultures or the learner's beliefs about Japanese EFL learners. The important thing is that autonomy is not entirely a Western concept and that anyone has some degree of autonomy and can develop greater autonomy. When it comes to language learner autonomy, however, the culture of the context should not be neglected because language 'cannot be isolated from the particular context in which it is used' (Pennycook, 1997, p. 47).

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the issue of measurability of learner autonomy and described the process of reconceptualising and operationalising the construct within the Japanese EFL context. The link between the operationalised construct and the

context may be not explicit at this stage of study; however, the context should and will be reflected in the items in the proposed instrument. Although the operationalisation presented here may be just a starting-point, it is hoped that this study, and more importantly the proposed instrument which is being developed on the basis of this operationalisation, will contribute to the development of both the theory and practice of learner autonomy in Japan and elsewhere.

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