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# Researching Learner Autonomy

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*This paper reports on four research projects investigating different approaches to developing learner autonomy in Japanese universities. Using a variety of research methods, these projects address the facilitation of autonomy for individuals and groups of learners, within the classroom and at the institutional level. Emika Abe describes a project that aims to raise learners' awareness, motivation and fluency for speaking English. Chris Bradley investigates ways to provide greater individual choice over learning in classes of English students with widely different needs, interests and motivation levels. Approaches for developing critical, collaborative autonomy in group project work are considered by Mike Nix. Michael Carroll and Ellen Head explore the possibilities for, and constraints on, developing autonomy in a university-wide English communication curriculum based on an in-house coursebook. Finally, Phil Benson discusses some of the common issues raised by the four research projects about the development of learner autonomy.*

本論は、4つのリサーチプロジェクト報告である。各プロジェクトは、日本の大学における学習者自律を促すための多様な方法を研究している。これらは、様々なリサーチの手法を用い、教室内や学校単位での学習者個人やグループの自律の促進に取り組んでいる。Emika Abeは英語のスピーキングに対する学習者の意識、動機づけを高め、流暢さの向上を目指している。Chris Bradleyはニーズ、興味、動機づけの差が大きい学習者に対する英語の授業で学習者に自らの学習を選択する多くの機会を提供している。Mike Nixはグループプロジェクトを通してクリティカルな協調的自律を発展させる方法を考察している。

Michael CarrollとEllen Headは大学のカリキュラム改革に伴い、学内で作成した統一教材を使用し、自律を発展させようとする際の制限や可能性を探求している。最後に、Phil Bensonが学習者自律を発展させる4つのリサーチプロジェクトによって提起された重要課題を論議する。

## Overview

This paper reports on four research projects covering a spectrum of approaches to developing learner autonomy in Japanese universities. The issues investigated here range from raising learners' awareness and motivation in the specific area of speaking fluency to establishing multiple learning paths for students with diverse interests and needs, and from expanding individual choices over learning to facilitating collaboration in group work. The reports address the development of autonomy both by individual teachers in particular classroom contexts and across the curriculum within a complex web of institutional constraints and agendas.

These diverse interpretations of autonomy are paralleled in the different ways in which the individual projects are organized and reported. These include a focused study of a specific fluency-building activity, more open-ended action research projects exploring autonomy in whole courses, and a dialogue between two teachers with different perspectives on how to develop autonomy in their institutional teaching context.

## Raising awareness: Fluency-focused speaking practice

**Emika Abe**

### Introduction

In my EFL listening and speaking class at Daito Bunka University, my students seemed reluctant to engage in pair work or to speak in English. I noticed some students started speaking Japanese as soon as they were assigned pair work. Others just remained quiet. They told me that they could not speak English to each other because they did not know how to describe certain things in English and they did not have anything to say to their peers, even in Japanese.

My observation told me that they were not ready for pair work yet. I felt raising awareness might be necessary to help them develop speaking abilities for better interpersonal communication in English. This study aimed to make students get used to speaking English, to raise their awareness of learning processes and to facilitate their motivation to speak.

### The speaking practice activity

Twenty-five first-year English-major students participated in this study, conducted over a nine-week period. Each speaking practice took 25-30 minutes of the 90-minute class, with the students following four steps:

- i. viewing a video,
- ii. speaking about the video,
- iii. reflecting on their own performances, and
- iv. getting feedback from the teacher.

English children's videos were chosen for this activity because the stories are not complicated and everyday words are used often.

First, students watched a five-minute video twice. After the first viewing, they talked about the video in pairs in either Japanese or English. They could exchange information about what they understood and what they did not. For the second viewing they tried to catch words or phrases they could utilize for their own speaking.

Second, students told the story in their words for a minute and recorded their speech on tape. Then they listened to their own tape and dictated exactly what they had said. After the dictation, they counted the number of the words they had spoken and recorded this number.

Third, students reflected in Japanese on their performances. Student reflections focused on two questions: (i) What prevented you from speaking more? (ii) What should you do next to speak more? In the process of self-reflection, students had to notice problems with their speaking habits. In order to change their actions, they were encouraged to set an attainable goal for their next practice.

Finally, the following week, students were given feedback from the teacher. The feedback consisted of two parts. The first part was reflection-focused. The comments from the teacher were added to individual reflections in order to enhance students' reflection processes. The second was motivation-focused. Students were informed about the average number of words used by the students in class and the most number of words. This information enabled them to compare their performances with their peers.

## Discussion

The number of words spoken by individual students increased. In this practice, students could easily see their progress from these numbers. Using this simple measurement of their performance, they could evaluate their own performances. Through the teacher's feedback, students could check their peers' progress as well. This sense of self-evaluation and peer-evaluation assured them that they were on the right track and enhanced students' self-motivation.

This 9-week practice gave students the opportunity to try various actions consciously. These included describing small parts of the story in detail instead of summarizing the whole story, skipping the parts that they could not describe immediately, and speaking faster than before. In the process of self-reflection, students recalled what they did in the last practice, judged whether their actions were appropriate and planned what they would do for the next practice. Therefore, immediately after experiencing the success or failure of one action, they were able to choose and try a different one. If this action worked for them, students could practice it over and over until they internalized it. This process raised students' awareness of their own learning.

## Multiple paths: Learner autonomy in EFL contexts

Chris Bradley

### Introduction

Dickenson (1995, p. 165) holds that “learners’ active and independent involvement in their own learning (autonomy) increases motivation to learn and consequently increases learning effectiveness”. A logical corollary to this assertion would seem to be that offering learners choices in the syllabus, as well as in the classroom activities themselves, should enhance learner autonomy and motivation. In other words, in the very act of making curriculum or classroom choices, students can conceivably become more actively involved in the process of their own learning.

Between October, 2001 and February, 2002, I conducted a study with a class of thirty-two third-year English Literature (EL) and English Communication (EC) majors at a small university for women in western Japan. These learners were taking an intermediate-level course in English listening skills. The class was taught thirteen times in weekly ninety-minute sessions. At the beginning of the course, I perceived an extremely wide range of general English language ability among these learners. This perception was borne out by their TOEIC scores, which ranged from the low-300s to the mid-600s. Motivational levels among these learners, too, were highly varied. Moreover, the EC majors had just returned to Japan from 10 months of intensive ESL study in the United States, while the EL majors (with two exceptions) had studied all of their English in Japan.

Thus, because of the wide range of language learning experiences, skills, and motivational levels of the learners in this class, I was in a quandary at the beginning of the semester as to how to design lesson plans that would meet the extremely varied needs and interests of such a diverse group of learners. However, I reflected that this lofty goal might, at least in part, be achieved if I were to offer choices to these learners.

### Classroom tools promoting learner choices

One way in which I endeavored to promote learner choice was within the structure of the syllabus itself. Specifically, I proposed to the learners a “Student/Teacher Contract”, in which I outlined specific criteria required of them to earn grades of “A”, “B”, “C”, or “F”. The learners appeared to receive my initiative in this regard fairly well, as most of them tried eagerly throughout the semester to meet the criteria necessary to obtain an “A.”

Additionally, the learners also chose, through a classroom vote, which topics of study from the course textbook they wished to pursue. I noticed during succeeding classes that learner motivation seemed to be highest when we were studying the topics that scored highest on this vote.

The students were also asked to submit a report on an English pop song. For this project, they were free to choose which pop song they wanted to write about. Most of them put a concerted effort into this report. I believe that this commendable effort was brought about in part because learners could choose to write about their favorite pop songs, rather than having to report on a pop song chosen by the teacher.

Another tool for promoting choice was the “Participation/Learning Journal”, whereby I asked the learners to report on how they studied English outside of class, as well as to evaluate

themselves on their in-class participation. For this journal, the learners were free to choose methods of out-of-class English study, and to negotiate with each other, as well as with me, criteria denoting good classroom participation. This activity received mixed responses from the learners. Some reflected in rich detail on their studies of English outside of class and on their participation in class, while others wrote the bare minimum required. Perhaps there would not have been such a disparity in the quality of the students' work if I had checked these journals on a weekly basis, as well as responded to the learners' comments regularly with reflections or suggestions of my own, which I could have written in their journals.

## Evaluation and reflections

In order to try to evaluate the effect of the classroom choices I offered to this group of learners on their autonomy and motivation, I asked them at the end of the course to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with four statements. The results of this modest survey were, admittedly, somewhat inconclusive. For example, the learners as a whole indicated that the fact that they had a choice of pop songs on which they were required to write a report increased only slightly their motivation to work hard on this report. In spite of the paucity and inconclusiveness of such quantitative data, though, I was able to engage in some useful qualitative observations. For example, the learners seemed more attentive and hard-working in this particular course than they were when they took other courses from me that had fewer choices in the curriculum.

If given the opportunity to teach these learners again in the future, I would offer them more choices. For example, I would have various activity centers set up within the classroom. Students could then choose at which of these activity centers they wished to work. Moreover, I would provide these learners with more opportunities for self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, as well as offering them my own constructive feedback on a regular basis.



## Developing critical, collaborative autonomy in group project work

Mike Nix

### Introduction

Group project work is a major part of my English Speaking and Listening classes in the Law Faculty at Chuo University. In these classes, learners work together in small groups to research, discuss and prepare presentations on social, political and legal issues. Although they report that these projects are enjoyable and motivating, these learners do not find this kind of autonomous group work easy. Their comments, and my own observations, suggest that taking collective control of learning — deciding together, for example, how to prioritize tasks, make use of time, and allocate roles — is central to successful group work, but presents them with particular challenges.

This action research was conducted with two third-year Speaking and Listening classes. The students were of intermediate level and above, and already had experience of doing academic research, discussion and presentations in English in their first and second years. In my third-year classes, they worked in groups of between four and six on 5-week projects to gather, summarize, share and discuss information on a current affairs topic chosen by the group. The challenge for them was to co-operate effectively to organize their research into a 15-minute presentation given in the final week of the project that explained the key issues of their topic. The research sought to help the learners to improve their project work and better develop their critical, collaborative autonomy (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000) by (i) using project logs for making and recording group decisions, and (ii) developing critical individual reflection on the effectiveness of their project work.

## Developing collaboration with project logs

The project logs were designed to increase learner awareness of decisions they could make to more effectively organize their project work. Groups completed one log during every class of the project cycle. In the initial version, for example, learners used the project log to set goals for their group work, allocate roles such as discussion co-ordinator or note-taker, plan their use of class time, and decide preparation for the next class. The log provided a framework for this decision-making, but also acted as a record of choices taken and of the development of the project that the learners could refer to when reflecting on their group work. Before starting the logging, I briefly discussed potentially useful roles and ways of organizing project work with the students. However, most of our understanding of how to collaborate more effectively came through experimenting with and adapting the logging process over the next three project cycles.

At the end of each project, learner evaluations were used to improve the log. Learners suggested, for example, including new roles such as commentator, adding a section for deciding tasks for the next class and simplifying the time plan to make the log quicker to complete. Feedback was generally positive and often emphasized a growing awareness of the importance of collaboration between individuals in the group, as these extracts show:

- *It gave us a guiding principle and chance to think the work we need to do at that moment. It helped us to stick to the plan and kept us motivated.*
- *It is important to integrate goals as a group. Each person could know what should they do today.*
- *I didn't do anything as a group before [using the log]. But this time we sent faxes or met out of class.*

## Developing critical reflection on group work

Another suggestion from learners was to integrate their individual learning diaries into the logging process by discussing them at the start of each class. To make this dairy-sharing a more critical tool for reflective development of project work, we discussed the usefulness of five different ways of thinking about learning:

- i. Descriptive - What did we do today?
- ii. Evaluative - What was successful/unsuccessful?
- iii. Affective - How do I feel about our work?
- iv. Analytical - Why were we successful/unsuccessful?
- v. Pro-active - What action do we need to take to improve our learning?

After one project cycle of sharing their diaries, learners commented on the value of this critical reflection for their project work:

- *I could find our group's problem well. And I tried to improve. Good reflections should contain solution to problem and should be concrete.*
- *By writing reflection, things which are vague and unclear become so clear.*
- *It is important to hear other person's reflection. Because there is a new reflection which I didn't notice.*

## Learning together about critical, collaborative autonomy

Different understandings of critical, collaborative autonomy have emerged from this research, often challenging my initial assumptions about the kinds of decision-making required. For example, some groups give members fixed roles for the whole project, some rotate them weekly, whereas others have all members contribute to each role. In recognition of this diversity, in the latest project cycle, each group has negotiated its own individual project log. This research has not, therefore, provided any definitive answers about how to develop critical, collaborative autonomy. The cycles of practice and reflection have, however, made the exploration of this question an integral, ongoing feature of the project work itself — a process in which the learners and myself can develop together our understanding of the possibilities for this kind of autonomy.

## Institutional pressures and learner autonomy

**Michael Carroll & Ellen Head**

### Introduction

Momoyama Gakuin University is implementing a new English communication curriculum for 1,500 first-year non-English majors, centred around an in-house coursebook. The program involves more than 40 Japanese and native English speaker teachers. Trying to foster learner autonomy on this large scale, and within institutional constraints such as compulsory testing and large class sizes, raises issues additional to those encountered by individual teachers.

At the program level there are many more actors, with a range of different agendas. There is the potential for conflict between institutional demands and the needs and wants of individual students and teachers. Imposing any curriculum, even one aiming to foster learner autonomy, inevitably compromises the autonomy of the teacher. Moreover seeking institution-wide consistencies may also compromise the teachers' ability to respond adequately to the particular needs of their own students. Since the negotiation of needs between teachers and students is at the heart of autonomous learning, such an imposed curriculum may thus compromise the potential for learner autonomy as well.

This leads to the question: Should a curriculum prescribe autonomous practice, or is autonomy something which necessarily resides within individual classrooms? Here, as curriculum developers and part of the coursebook writing team, we set out two perspectives on this question.

## Integrating autonomy into the curriculum and text: two views

**Ellen:** I feel that our role as curriculum developers gives us a great opportunity to raise the issue of learner development with our colleagues and hopefully with students. I think that materials can play a role in promoting autonomy by asking students to think about their learning and giving some ideas about the psychology of learning, in Japanese if necessary. I would like to include learner histories in the book, as a reading and writing task. But this requires teachers who are committed to developing learner autonomy, so we also need to discuss learner development with the staff — and 'push' it a bit.

**Michael:** Autonomy involves free choice, so I feel there's a contradiction involved in 'pushing' it too strongly. It's my view that we should have started with a pilot project, with teachers who wanted to try out ways of improving their practice, giving their students greater control over their learning. This would have allowed us to see what could be done, and then we would have been able to give the wider group of teachers some models of how a new curriculum might work in practice.

**Ellen:** Regarding whether autonomy can be imposed, Kathleen Graves 'Learning to learn' project at Tokyo Jogakuin University involved large numbers of teachers implementing measures to encourage autonomous learning. Since there is a danger of tokenism if teachers feel these measures to be imposing on their own autonomy, Graves took care to involve teachers in the planning process to avoid this sense of imposition.



**Michael:** I think the disagreement is not about whether we include, say, a self-evaluation page, but how it will work in practice. My feeling is that if we do it poorly, it can turn out worse than if we don't do it at all. For example, the section, 'What did I learn this week?' in our first book had the potential to encourage students to reflect on their learning. Many teachers saw it as a closed question to which we should have provided the answer. So we changed this to 'What should I learn this week?', and gave answers in a concrete list of chapter objectives.

## The on-going process

We revised our approach between each installment of the coursebooks. In response to the feedback and our experiences while teaching the course, we reduced the variety of task types and made the format more consistent. Perhaps the format of a textbook cannot in itself do anything to encourage autonomy. However clarity makes the materials approachable, and pictures and large print may attract the unmotivated. As for the development of learner autonomy within the curriculum as a whole, we are still at the beginning of a process involving discussion, learning from our colleagues and students and feeding some of their ideas and practices back into the curriculum.

## Conclusion

### Phil Benson

The four projects presented in this paper are of great interest to me for two reasons. First they exemplify what I have described as an action research approach to issues involved in the implementation of learner autonomy (Benson, 2001). Second they highlight the importance of a key issue in autonomy in the classroom: the relationship between learner choice and curriculum constraints (Benson, 2003).

For me, the action research approach to autonomy means a little more than simply researching a problem in our teaching with the aim of improving our practice. It also represents a way of building up the knowledge base on autonomy by asking 'smaller' questions before we try to answer the 'bigger' ones. The problem with research that attempts to assess gains in autonomy is often simply the fact that autonomy can mean different things in this context. For this reason, I feel that it is often more productive to assess gains in the particular capacities or skills associated with autonomy that we are really trying to develop. And this, I feel, is exactly what the contributors to this paper are working towards.

Having said this, the four contributions do, in fact, share a particular context — the university classroom in Japan. I also see an interlinking theme of choice and constraint across the four projects. In Emika's project, for example, we see learners being offered choices related to the content of what they say within a task constrained by the teacher's planning, while in Chris's project we see there are choices offered within a contractual framework. Mike's project describes choices constrained in a different way by a framework of learner

collaboration while Michael and Ellen's project highlights teachers exploring options for learner choice within the much larger constraints of a curriculum delivered on a large scale. The shared problem we have here is one of determining the levels of the system at which we can offer choices and what will happen to the rest of the system when we do offer choices at one level or another. This is a problem that I think is well worth pursuing collaboratively.

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