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# Tuning in to Learner Autonomy: Learner Development SIG Forum 2003

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*This paper describes the Learner Development Forum and reports on seven different projects linked by the theme of developing learner autonomy. Accounts of each project are followed by a summary of the issues that arose in the plenary discussion following the poster sessions, and reflections from the co-ordinators. The areas explored range from observations on the growth of collaborative autonomy through group projects (Kohyama & Stephenson, Moritomo & Kurahachi), to the development of individual autonomy in a self-access centre (Sakui & Reinders). Three of the projects were team efforts, reflecting a commitment to collegial collaborative autonomy as well as student autonomy. The forum provided a space to learn about very specific processes for raising students' awareness at different stages in the learning process: for example, by using individualised cards to give feedback on strategy use (Lovelock), or using a data-base of common difficulties to guide students in self-study (Sakui & Reinders). Two of the projects dealt with developing students' self-evaluation skills, using portfolios (Davies) and task-based self-assessment (Nachi). Finally Ascough's project dealt with motivating students by expanding their choices through self-access reading. The resonances between papers form a valuable part of the forum.*

学習者ディベロップメント研究部会における7つの発表を報告する。森本と倉八は、プロジェクト・ワークが学生の動機にどのような影響を与えるかについて、MacIntyreらによるWTCの枠組みを用いて分析する。ステーブンソンと香山は、授業時間外の言語学習プロジェクトの効果について論じる。ナチは自己評価についての学生と教師の見解をアンケート調査によって比較する。ラブロックは大学生にマクロな学習ストラテジーの使用を促すための評価用個人カードについて報告する。デイビスはポートフォリオの効用と限界について述べる。作井とリーダースはセルフアクセス・センターの定義と存在理由について解説する。アスコーは多読を通じた読解ストラテジーの育成の試みを報告する。

## Introduction: The forum as a process of collegial development

*I want to try and express something about the feeling that the issues that are raised at the forum somehow continue from one year to the next. I feel like there is a permanent “forum” mental space of learning and renewal. I guess that it’s being in the zone of proximal development of teachers who are currently more effective or more “walking their talk”, than I am myself.*

Ellen’s e-mail to Heidi and Naoko

The term “collegiality” has been used to describe staff groups who talk frequently about teaching and learning, collaborate on curriculum development, observe and learn from each other. Tim Murphey (Murphey 2003, page 8) cites a study by Wheelan and Tilin (1999) which found a strong correlation between “collegial” staff groups and successful learning outcomes for students. Murphey makes the point that “most institutional

groups of teachers are far from collegial and safe” (Murphey 2003, page 8) and suggests the importance of creating spaces where teachers can “dare to explore with flexibility, to establish extraordinary learning cultures.”

It might be extravagant to claim that a meeting lasting less than two hours could satisfy all the criteria for collegiality in the sense intended by Wheelan and Tilin; however, the Forum has great potential as an experimental space for developing collegiality. With this in mind, as one of the facilitators of the 2003 Forum, I (Head) would like to emphasise the “process” aspect of the forum. This paper can be read as a narrative of a social event, as well as a compendium of ideas and projects related to learner autonomy.

The Forum consisted of a poster session followed by small and large group discussions of issues which emerged. After presenters briefly introduced their poster themes, participants viewed posters, discussing content and their own experiences with the presenters. As participants milled about, they were encouraged to look out for themes to discuss more deeply in the discussions which would follow the presentations. Thirty minutes later, participants formed small groups based on selected key words including ‘time,’ ‘awareness,’ and ‘experience,’ among others, and discussed how these ideas related to learner autonomy. Groups later reported back on their discussions in the whole group feedback session. This framework was intended to give the participants a role in shaping the proceedings and provide an opportunity to relate the presentations to their own experience. The rest of this paper consists of summaries of the poster presentations, followed by a brief account of the discussion.

## **“How we got hooked”: An analysis of how university students got extremely motivated to carry out numerous autonomous collaborative projects in English**

**Yoko Morimoto  
Junko Kurahachi**

Yoko Morimoto and Junko Kurahachi analyzed what triggered and helped students get “hooked” into autonomous collaborative projects such as writing and producing a court case play, a movie, and a musical, as well as creating a homepage in English. Initially, collaborative projects were introduced in response to students’ apparent lack of motivation at the end of the first year of English classes. The researchers hoped giving students more choices in their learning would enhance their motivation. The results exceeded all expectations; in all but a few cases, students started to use and enjoy English, and take responsibility for group work.

Morimoto and Kurahachi followed up the project with student interviews and questionnaires to analyse the factors involved in the “transformation” of their students. Following MacIntyre et al (1998), the researchers identified specific emotional qualities which underlie the willingness to communicate in a group, such as compassion, trust, openness to new situations, and communicative competence. They then posed the question “How is a willingness to communicate internalized?” and identified two sets of factors, internal and external. They suggested a model to describe how students come to share some of the teacher’s values and integrate them with their own, in accordance with the following sequence: external regulation, introjection of the value, identification of the value, integration of the value, finally leading to intrinsic motivation.

Relating to “external factors” affecting willingness to communicate, the following factors were suggested: existence of a senior and teaching by a senior, as well as mutual approval; existence of respectful peers, giving a sense of relatedness; a degree of autonomy, realized through an event, such as an English camp activity; the selection of peers and the existence of intimate community between class members. The different stages of the process were linked as follows: the existence of respectful peers facilitated introjection of the value of the project; the activity such as the camp gave a concrete example of an autonomous activity, and facilitated identification of the value; and finally the selection of peers within the group accompanied the integration of the value for each individual.

## **Tuning freshmen into autonomy through language learning projects**

**Miki Kohyama  
Jodie Stephenson**

The purposes of this study were: (i) to introduce freshmen to the concept of learner autonomy, and (ii) to encourage individual reflection on the learning process, and (iii) to expose learners to a variety of language learning strategies. In the language learning project (LLP), students were asked to engage in an English learning activity of their choice, such as watching movies, listening to songs, keeping a diary, or writing letters. At the end of the semester students presented what they had learned to their classmates.

The main aim of the LLP is to give students control over one aspect of their learning, which Benson (2002) says is key to facilitating autonomy. In the LLP, students decide what they

learn, whom they learn with, and how they learn. They set their own goals, select materials and activities, plan their learning, and reflect on and evaluate their progress. Through this process, it is hoped that in addition to improving their linguistic proficiency, students also gain a better understanding of their individual learning styles and learning preferences, as well as a better idea of where their linguistic strengths and weaknesses lie. This should lead to students being better equipped for future language learning, with or without a teacher.

Once students had chosen an activity from a menu given by the teacher, the teacher grouped students with similar projects together to further discuss their language learning goals and plan their course of study. Students who had not yet decided on an activity could move around among the groups until they found something that interested them. For some this process took a few weeks; however, selecting an activity was important, and students were encouraged to ask their teacher for advice, or consult with their classmates.

Next came materials and task selection. Following this, students created study plans, deciding when and how often they would study, and submitted their plans to the teacher for review. Then students brought in their materials and worked on their LLPs during five in-class planning sessions lasting 30 minutes each. Some groups were provided with tapes, videos, and other materials from the teacher, while other groups simply needed support on where and how to obtain resources.

After the in-class planning sessions, students continued to work on their LLPs outside of class. They reflected on their progress in class once a month in self-evaluation journals which were collected and reviewed, and struggling students were offered

additional support. Towards the end of the semester, three 30-minute in-class workshops helped students to prepare for the end-of-semester presentations. Students delivered 5-minute presentations on their LLPs and what they learnt. Presentations aimed to develop effective presentation skills, such as audience involvement, and show how much and what kind of work they did for the LLPs.

At the end of the semester, students completed a self-evaluation of their learning progress in the LLP, and answered final reflection questions about the LLP, focusing on their reasons for choosing their activity, what they learnt and how they thought their confidence and motivation had changed. Student projects areas were varied and creative. Listening to English songs was by far the most popular learning activity (16 students), followed by watching English movies or television programs (9 students). The next most popular activities were translating Japanese folk tales into English (4 students), and reading English children's books (3 students), while another 2 students chose to read English translations of Japanese folk tales. Such variety reflects the diversity in students' abilities, goals and interests, and, as noted earlier, it is impossible to address this kind of diversity in 'traditional' teacher-led classes held once a week.

Students' comments revealed LLPs proved invaluable in terms of goal setting. When students set their language learning goals at the beginning of the semester, students who don't like English or don't feel used to English are advised to choose an enjoyable activity they are likely to complete, which may be something they already enjoy doing in Japanese. Students who are already used to English, or enjoy it, could be challenged to focus on improving a particular skill, again, perhaps using an activity that they already enjoy doing in their first language.

And finally, students who think they will need English in the future, or who want to use English to accomplish some other goal are encouraged to focus develop a concrete plan to achieve those aims.

Students' responses in their final reflections about what they learnt from doing the LLP revealed many different layers of learning. Some students simply got used to the language, and came to like English, even if they felt their English ability hadn't improved very much. In short, LLPs can be an effective way for students to increase their English ability through self-directed learning.

### **Correlation between student self-assessment, student perceptions, language proficiency and gender**

#### **Heidi Evans Nachi**

Heidi Evans Nachi's poster displayed results for an investigation comparing student and teacher attitudes towards self-assessment instruments and procedures at one university in Japan. Students in the final semester of a required four-semester English Language Program (ELP) responded to a survey about self-assessment and teachers answered a similar survey. Self-assessment in the ELP takes many forms, but usually includes choosing a score and writing a justification of the score. The research was motivated by teachers' mixed views towards existing procedures and observations that students seemed to lose interest in self-assessment over their four semesters of required English courses. The results were somewhat surprising, and appeared to contradict some claims teachers had made. A descriptive statistical analysis

of close-ended survey responses and a qualitative analysis of open-ended question responses revealed some individual differences in attitudes among students. For example, nearly all students agreed that writing a justification of their self-assessment score was useful and most students preferred to complete their self-assessments in class, but a small number of students favored completing their self-assessment at home. Another interesting finding was that even though most students stated they chose their scores honestly, more than half claimed their peers inflated their scores. Moreover, while teachers suspected that female students and higher achieving students seemed to value self-assessment more, the inferential statistics found no strong correlations between sex and achievement with attitudes. Ultimately, students were more favorable towards self-assessment than expected, and the results indicated that students do understand the goals of reflecting on their own learning and are motivated by the use of self-assessment.

A comparison between student and teacher responses revealed that teachers regarded the use of self-assessment slightly more positively than students. This comparison also shed some light on attitudes towards current classroom practices. For example, students are sometimes encouraged by teachers to share, compare, and even critique their scores and justifications, but more than half the students indicated they felt uncomfortable with such procedures. Students asked to look at more models in class to further their understanding of writing thoughtful self-assessments than sharing their 'private' reflections.

During the forum, participants who stopped to look at Heidi's poster shared their own successes and challenges using self-assessment. Some issues worth more investigation that were brought up included what kind of instruments work best with

students of different proficiencies and how teachers can provide students with the meta-language support they need to express themselves. Nachi's results affirm the use of self-assessment, but also raise more questions about how classroom procedures can be improved to fit the different contexts of our different learners.

### **Using individual continuous assessment cards to raise awareness of macro-learning strategies for low level students**

**Clive Lovelock**

Training students to adopt efficient learning strategies is a challenge many teachers face. Using individual continuous assessment cards for students, was shown in one university classroom to change student attitudes and motivation about learning English.

This technique was developed in a small liberal arts 4-year women's university. Students are placed in classes according to level, and in the first two years, all classes follow a standard level-graded syllabus, of which basic learner training is an integral part. The decision to devise the card system was affected by the shortage of lesson time and the need to find a method of consciousness-raising suited to low-level students. In this context, focusing on a few very basic strategies, which can be demonstrated and understood easily over just one or two lessons without a great deal of discussion, was the starting point. Such strategies were called "macro-strategies" because they can be applied to a very wide range of activities and are not specific to any particular skill.

In addition to the long-term objective of learner training, an important short-term objective of this system is to support class

management. The system consists of giving each student her own individual assessment card on which she writes her name and student number. She collects her card at the beginning of each lesson, keeps it with her during the lesson, and then returns it at the end of the session. One side of the card is used to record absences or late arrivals, assignment and test grades and comments or advice from the teacher. The other side of the card is used for continuous reinforcement of appropriate learning strategies in class, by giving points each time the student uses a strategy. The card allows each student to see how well, she is progressing at any point in the course. The categories, called "Classwork", are as follows.

#### Macro Learning Strategies ("Classwork")

- (E) Speaking English, not Japanese, for routine classroom communication.
- (C) Using correctly a phrase from a list for classroom communication.\*
- (Q) Asking questions when she doesn't know / doesn't understand something.
- (A) Answering the teacher questions promptly, even if only "I don't know."
- (L) Speaking loudly & clearly, to avoid wasting time with repetitions.
- (P) Participating actively in class (usually pair or group work).
- (H) Helping classmates to understand and enjoy the lesson.
- (I) Following the teacher instructions attentively (especially regarding homework).

The last line (T) is for the total score.  
(see the Learner Development SIG website for a card template)  
Communication strategies and social/affective strategies are indirect aids to learning. Effective strategy use can greatly

increase the chances of learning taking place. Use of feedback cards encourages students to develop social strategies by which they can create opportunities to initiate, or join, a conversation, in English. Communication strategies (CS) enable learners to remain “in the game” as participants in a conversation. CS’s include techniques for compensating for their own lack of knowledge or skills such as paraphrasing, repairing breakdowns in communication, confirming or checking their own understanding. This enables learners to prolong their exposure to English in a communicative situation and learn from what they hear, test their own knowledge by noticing the effects of what they say on other speakers. CS used in class can also have a beneficial effect on group dynamics through sharing “the floor”, and attentive and responsive listening. A survey of students’ reactions to the scheme showed that students tend to respond more positively the more they use the system.

## Learner portfolios poster

**Stephen J. Davies**

This poster illustrated the advantages and disadvantages of using learner portfolios in a content-based instruction programme. The portfolios were initially introduced in response to an in-class evaluation in which learners had indicated a dislike for daily vocabulary quizzes. Subsequently, the instructors decided to use portfolios as an alternative form of assessment.

Learner portfolios have various advantages over more traditional forms of assessment. First, they are a natural medium for learner-teacher interaction. Since portfolios are compiled throughout the semester, students need to discuss their portfolio content with their teacher. For example, if they are required to place material

in specific sub-sections, they often seek advice about how to do this. The best approach is regular face-to-face consultations with students to monitor their progress and deal with any questions they may have. Another advantage is that portfolios provide clear evidence of learner development. Portfolios that include drafts of work, rather than just final versions, reveal the stages of language proficiency development. Moreover, if portfolios include a learning diary section, learners can be taught to critically self-reflect on their own learning. Successful learners of English are known to use a range of metacognitive strategies that include self-reflection (Ellis 1994), and such skills can empower learners by encouraging a sense of personal investment in the learning process. Finally, portfolios can be reviewed by other students and teachers, or even parents, for feedback and as evidence of progress.

Though learner portfolios suffer from some disadvantages, there are some ways to deal with these challenges. Perhaps the biggest drawback is that assessment can be very time-consuming and difficult for both learners and teachers. It seems that combining a holistic assessment with quantifiable assessment of specific parts of the portfolio gives the most balanced results. Moreover, during the Forum, one participant remarked that peer-evaluation of portfolios might be effective because including learners’ assessment of their own work provides teachers with an alternative assessment to their own, and in doing so, makes evaluation more democratic. Another suggestion was for learners to include one example of their worst work in the portfolio, since many things may be learned from mistakes and ‘the man who never made a mistake, never made anything.’

## A self-access centre: What, why, and how?

Keiko Sakui & Hayo Reinders

The authors of this paper work at the English Self-Access Centre (ELSAC) at the University of Auckland. Sakui and Reinders presented an actual case study from their work at the self-access centre in order to introduce self-access practice and discuss some of its fundamental principles. Self-access centres are not widely implemented in Japan, although there is growing interest. Sakui and Reinders are frequently asked “what is a self-access centre anyway?”, or “some of us teachers are interested in setting up a self-access centre, but my colleagues do not know much about it. What kind of information should we give them?” The authors tried to answer some of these questions.

Although there are many different types of self-access centres, they share some common characteristics. One definition puts it as follows:

A Self Access Centre consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and support) usually located in one place, and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests. It aims to develop learner autonomy among its users. (Reinders & Cotterall, 2001, p. 87).

We can see that catering for diversity and the fostering of autonomy are integral elements of self-access.

Self-access supports students in a number of ways. As shown above, the primary aim of a self-access centre is to develop skills for independent learning, such as goal-setting and reference skills. In addition, it has a number of specific practical and pedagogical advantages. For example, from the students’ perspective, a self-

access centre is one of the few places where they can receive language support outside of the classroom. Learners can gain assistance and study in a friendly and quiet place, in their own time and at their own pace. In addition, self-access centres make it possible to serve many students in a brief period of time. Specifically, a self access centre caters to learners of different proficiency levels, different learning styles and strategies, and different goals.

The English Self-Access Centre (ELSAC) in the University of Auckland provides various materials and services in order to help students’ learning. These include language learning materials (such as CD-Roms, audio-tapes, resource books, graded readers, DVDs), language advisory sessions, and language learning activities (e.g. workshops focusing on understanding lectures, discussion/presentation skills, essay writing, and many others). In addition, staff members help students identify language learning needs, recommend resources, and provide feedback and encouragement. Also it is important for staff members to advertise the self access centre throughout the campus so that lecturers and tutors, particularly those whose expertise are not in language education, can see the benefits of the self-access centre.

In establishing a self-access centre or stimulating the interest of our respective institutions, it is desirable to observe and learn from other centres—each centre’s style and their advantages/weaknesses vary greatly. It is important to learn from others so that each institution can cater to their students’ needs, within the many constraints that all of us need to deal with, such as cost, space, and the political support available. To learn more about self-access, readers are recommended to see Gardner and Miller’s *Establishing Self-Access*, or visit ELSAC’s website at <http://www.elsac.auckland.ac.nz>



## Using extensive reading to motivate low-level learners

**Tomoko Ascough**

This project addressed how to motivate low-level students in a writing class. The students needed to progress beyond the stage of “false understanding” based on looking at the illustrations, to actually encountering the text. Students first completed a self-assessment task to determine their level, and then chose a graded reader of an appropriate level, with assistance from the teacher. Techniques such as “slashed reading” (where students divide sentences into phrase groups to facilitate understanding) and repeated reading, were taught in class in order to give students some strategies for approaching their books. Students later wrote a reflective summary about ‘how’ they read, including where, when for long, and whether or not they used a dictionary. They also described their feelings and frustrations, as well as what they had learned from their books and from the reading processes.

Through their reading journals and periodic, individual, in-class counselling sessions with the teacher, students were encouraged to develop a personalised reading strategy. Students also presented their book reports to the class, sharing their reflections on the content of the books and strategies they had used. Students enjoyed choosing their own reader and delivering short book report presentations. Moreover, the social aspects of the project, such as talking to each other and the teacher about books, seemed to make it worthwhile for them. Providing choice and a reason to read can make reading more enjoyable and meaningful for students.

## The forum process: Issues raised in the “key word” discussion groups

The themes selected for discussion by the participants were “experience”, “motivation”, “mediation”, “time”, “control” and “awareness”. “Experience” in this context resonated with the need for students to experience “autonomous” activity in class before they could be asked to make choices about what to study. The “language learning projects” of Kohyama and Stephenson, and the projects described by Moritomo and Kurahachi, both provided good examples of frameworks within which students could be encouraged to make autonomous choices. In connection with LLPs, Stephenson mentioned that she asks students to let each other experience what they did outside of class and links this to self-assessment and peer assessment. Through the LLP, students take small steps which build up their repertoire of learning experiences. In contrast, one teacher described the difficulties experienced in connection with facilitating *Sogoteki Gakushu* (the integral study hour in Junior High and Senior High schools). In *Sogoteki Gakushu*, students are asked to think up their own projects, but the lack of resources and support means that outcomes are often unsatisfactory.

The “motivation” group discussed the need to work with students to clarify their goals, and how to give students a sense of satisfaction or recognition of their own progress. The Forum presentations offered various examples of projects which provide short-term goals by giving students the opportunity to work towards a presentation (Stephenson & Kohyama, Moritomo & Kurahachi) or a final product, such as a portfolio (Davies). A second theme running through the presentations, was the motivating effect of working with students as individuals, whether in the study centre (Sakui and Reinders), or by giving individual tutorials, (Ascough), or by training them in self-evaluation (Nachi).

The discussion of “mediation” focussed on the teacher’s role as mediator between the conflicting wants and needs of different students. It was suggested that respect for learner autonomy implies listening to students, but following the demands of the majority might result in teachers making choices which limit the learning opportunities of all, since students’ wants are often determined by their previous learning experience, which are often limited to lockstep classes. If a teacher wants to encourage learners to develop, she may sometimes have to impose her values for a time. Lovelock’s points scheme is an example of a teacher-devised system which aims to learner development by setting specific behavioural goals, in hopes that the students will come to internalise habits such as initiating conversations and asking questions.

In relation to “control”, some participants suggested a model of control as a continuum, from tightly controlled to completely free. This model applies both to teacher autonomy within an institution and student autonomy within a class. The degree of structure needed depends on many factors including experience (of both teachers and students), time, awareness, and support. In connection with the need for a framework of collegial and institutional support, one participant raised the question of fear, reporting that his colleagues meet to talk about social events but not about teaching. This reflection seemed to highlight the importance of the spaces like the Forum, as a place where teachers can “talk shop” without being forced to create what Aoki, following Clandinin and Connelly, calls ‘cover stories:’

“Cover stories are told by teachers outside their classroom in order to prove their competence and hide any uncertainties.” (Aoki, 2003, p. 192)

110 minutes is a short time to establish trust in a group of 32 members. When the time came to report the small group discussions to the plenary session, some participants said they had needed more guidance, as they felt that they were not discussing what they were “supposed to be”. However, according to the facilitators, the opportunity to explore was more important than any pre-set agenda. The process of the Forum, including the (at times) chaotic nature of the discussion, reflected some of the issues relating to the development of autonomy in any group. In the words of one of the participants:

I was re-aquainted with the idea that there are many dimensions of autonomy ( control – less control, for example) and that a teacher needs to be very sensitive to where a student or fellow teacher may be on these dimensions and that a common factor underlying them is the need to talk and explain very clearly what one wants to achieve and why.

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