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We Don't Know Why Our Students are Autonomous!

Eric M. Skier
**Tokyo University of Pharmacy
and Life Science**

Stacey Vye
**International University of
Health and Welfare**

The authors who teach in Japanese community centers noticed they had been overlooking the influence of their more autonomous adult learners' out-of-class experiences while studying English. Moreover, there appears to be sparse research on how autonomous language learners create their own chances for learning unrelated to teacher influence in the EFL classroom. By getting student feedback from language learning histories (LLHs),

questionnaires, and teacher observations, the authors gained valuable insights into such out-of-class experiences. Most of the adult learners not only highlighted time for studying English according to particular stages in their lives, but also focused on shameful or embarrassing situations that had motivated them to actively pursue their English studies. This, we feel, underlined a certain level of maturity on the learners' part, which also strongly supported their pursuit of English. As the authors presented these findings at JALT Shizuoka 2003, attendees asked insightful questions about the teachers' changes in perception of their respective students that helped to add a layer to the original study. Responses to a particular question will be addressed in this paper.

日本のコミュニティー・センターの教員として、自律的な成人学習者の教室外での経験が英語学習に与えた影響を見落としてきた。実際、EFL教室外の教師の影響を受けないところで、成人学習者がどうやって英語を学んできたかは、殆ど研究されていない。そこで言語学習経験報告、アンケート、また教師による観察を通して学習者からフィードバックを得ることで、成人学習者のクラス外での経験について有意義な見解が得られた。学生の多くが特定の時期における英語学習の時間を強調しただけでなく、屈辱的经验やばつの悪い状況などが彼らの英語学習への意欲に刺激を与えたと指摘した。

これは言い換えれば、彼らの学習者としての成熟度を示し、学習意欲をより高めたということになる。JALT静岡2003での発表においては、この研究を一層深めるのに役立つ興味深い質疑があったので、その点もこの論文で考慮する。

Introduction

Basically in all of the hours of reading we did for our master's degrees, neither of us remembers reading much about motivation or autonomy studies of highly motivated students who create their own chances for learning unrelated to teacher influence in the classroom. Instead, a significant amount of what we read seemed to focus on how teacher-researchers have attempted to motivate or foster autonomy in students who had little interest in English. Nevertheless we both teach adult learners that are in control of their English learning, which appears to occur naturally without much support from us. Eric's mature students he affectionately refers to as "Jijis & Babas" and Stacey's inspirational students she calls "Sempais" create opportunities to learn on their own and collectively in groups. As such, we were naturally curious as to whether our students had certain experiences that might have influenced their drives to learn English.

Using "Jijis, Babas & Sempais" as subjects we collaboratively conducted a research project included in a publication for the JALT Learner Development special interest group (Skier & Vye, 2003). And at our presentation at JALT2003 we focused on the findings of that qualitative study examining our more autonomous adult learners' beliefs and external/internal motivators for studying English. However, after contemplating on an insightful question posed to us by an attendee at our presentation at JALT Shizuoka 2003, we realized through a reflective process that our relationship with our students has changed in different ways for both of us during a six-month period as we analyzed the collected data, particularly their LLHs. How our particular relationships with the students was affected had not been incorporated into our original study and in retrospect this will be an added layer to our study that we'd like to discuss in this paper.

Autonomy in our contexts

Our students showed signs of what Breen and Mann (1997, p. 134) term "a desire to learn", that autonomous language learners appear to possess. We saw evidence these students are autonomous learners that have a desire for, and an authentic relationship to, the language they are learning. On the other hand it seemed to us that most research on learner motivation and autonomy has focused on students who lack the desire to learn, with an emphasis on how teachers can help to increase interest in the subject through various techniques and strategies rather than at the nature of motivation itself (e.g., Dornyei, 2001).

We became interested in the area that Phil Benson (Benson, 2001, 2002b; Head, 2003) is focusing some of his research on: out-of-class learning – where learners make efforts to learn a language outside the classroom by their own initiative and create their own chances for learning unrelated to teacher influence in the classroom. The "Jijis, Babas, & Sempais" were learning autonomously by using the English available to them outside of class, and sharing these resources and ideas for improving English with their classmates. More specifically the "Jijis & Babas" were in control of their studies in terms of Holec's (1981, p. 3) definition of "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Also Benson, 2001). In addition, from what we have observed with these students, the issue of the "capacity to take control of one's learning" raised by Little (1991, p. 3) seemed to be key.

Reading the Murphey and Jacobs (2000) article on critical collaborative autonomy, made us think of the "Sempais." This process can be observed when learners work on guided cooperative learning with their peers to create a support

system which leads to individual critical voices developing autonomously at an accelerated rate. In addition, the “Sempais” understood that they were responsible for improving their English skills as they also often took advantage of sharing various English resources available to them.

Survey procedure

First, we decided to adapt an open-ended questionnaire example cited in Burns (1999) as it would allow for more detailed descriptions of learner perceptions and unpredicted information. Then, we agreed to use LLHs that Murphey (1997, 1998b) created with his English learners to develop comprehensible language materials and near peer role models. As such, we asked the “Jijis, Babas, & Sempais” to provide all written feedback in their native language of Japanese to reduce possible misunderstandings and increase the chance that useful information was not omitted due to language limitations. And finally, there were our observations of the students.

Results

We found two very clear threads in the student data: **time** and **shame**, but felt that there had to be more to explain why the students were so motivated and termed that “maturity.” With the concept of time, a majority of the “Jijis & Babas” reported they positively benefited by studying with people of the same age group and they enjoyed the experience. Two of Eric’s students expressed enjoying spending time with others of a similar generation:

- “同じ年齢の人達でとてもいい友達ができ楽しく勉強できます”

“I made really good friends with people of the same age so I enjoy my lessons.”

- “同じ世代なのでクラス授業を休んだ時など親切に授業内容を教えてくる。”

“My classmates are of the same generation so when I’m absent from class they kindly tell me the content of the lesson.”

Although each participant expressed individual reasons for why they were motivated to study English, about one third of the women described interruptions in time where they stopped studying because they were busy with marriage and childrearing. A ‘Sempai’ and a ‘Baba’ shared their thoughts on the phenomena respectively:

- “専業主婦として生活。英語とは縁がなくなる。”

“Upon becoming a housewife I had no time for English.”

- “...一方で、子育てと仕事の両立に忙殺さ、私の英語は、どんどん遠いちぎりました。”

“Running around like crazy trying to raise kids and work, my English slowly but surely died.”

Time appeared to be a factor for our students’ studies not only in terms of age/generations and class make-up, but also whether they have time to spend on studying English. A few “Jijis & Babas” also mentioned one more aspect relative to time, that of ‘holding back the hands of time’—if you will:

- “老化防止。”

“(I am studying English) to stave off old age.”

- “現在は半分は脳のトレーニング...”
“Presently, half (of my reason for studying English) is ‘brain training’.”

We were surprised to find there were common threads of **shame**, disappointment, and embarrassment at being unable to communicate in English. Some were too personal to be included, but here are three examples:

- “この10年程、毎年1回は海外とのcollaborationです。英語圏の人ばかりではありませんが、共通語はやはり英語です。事務てきなやりとりからお互いの意見交換まで通訳を通して間接的に行うより自分で伝えられたらもっとよい仕事のできたのにと後悔したことがたくさんあります。”

“For the past decade or so, every year I collaborate with people from overseas. The people are not all from English-speaking regions, but we use English as a common language. Paperwork as well as the sharing of opinions is all done indirectly through interpreters. I think I could do a better job (if my English was better) and so I often regret my inability to communicate.”

- (This person replied to the questionnaire in English) *“At dinner parties I had so much I wanted to ask and as the host I wanted everyone to speak, but as I couldn’t communicate, there was often silence and I felt responsible for that.”*

- “大学の工学部の研究所に秘書として務めた私は、半導体の論文や研究所の紹介のパンフレットを英訳したりしていましたがポーランドの研究者と国際電話で話さなければならなかった時やハワイの空港にいる

大学の先生に連絡を取りたい時など。自分の英会話の能力のなさに打ちひしがれる (Felt overwhelmed) 事もありました。読み書きは何とかなったものの、聞いて話すという訓練はとて不足りないと思いました。”

“In my university engineering department’s research facilities I worked as a secretary to translate semi-conductor reports and the facility pamphlet in English. There was a time when I had to speak on the phone to a Polish researcher or I contacted a professor at an airport in Hawaii. I felt overwhelmed by my lack of ability to communicate in English. I was able to read and write in English, but I thought I didn’t have enough training in listening and speaking.”

Responses to a question raised by an attendee: Eric

After presenting our paper, one of the attendees asked whether or not, in light of all that was shared in the LLHs, our relationship with our respective students had changed or not. For some reason, even while continuing to teach the “Jijis & Babas” on a weekly basis, I hadn’t given it much thought. So, I couldn’t really respond. However, in the weeks following JALT2003, after giving the question more time and even doing a little soul-searching, I think I have an answer. But before I give my response, I need to first explain what my relationship/role was in the first place, i.e. before answering the question.

Prior to the project and decision to collect data through LLHs, my role with students has always been slightly precarious. Students are free to stay or leave at anytime. When a student comes to the community center, there is a catalog listing all of the classes and the teachers provide mini-biographies.

Prospective students are allowed to watch a class once to help them decide whether to enter, and then do as they see fit. If the enrollment for any reason drops under a certain number, I am out of a job. With this in the back of my mind at all times (and a substantial mortgage to pay off over the next 34 years) I make an effort to include students in all of the decision-making in the classes; for example, whether to have a text or not, and if so which text. Then there is the teaching method. I will present them with a number of options and leave it to them to decide what they are most comfortable with. For example, one class may prefer dictation and a focus on grammar, while another wants free conversation. Either way, I do not judge and instead find ways to accommodate the learning styles and character of each class. Another issue I have also been keen to follow is how each student gets along (or doesn't) with the others. The group dynamics at work are very important in my mind, and so if one class prefers pair work while another doesn't, I do not push students to do something they don't want to do. But, as we mentioned in our paper (Skier & Vye, 2003), the "Jijis & Babas" are very much social clubs and time spent together among the students out-of-class is generally two to three hours per week. So, before carrying out our research on the "Jijis & Babas", my relationship with them was based on knowledge I gathered from our classroom experiences. I didn't know the students' personal histories that influenced their language learning. I was conscious of the classroom history, but that was all. It is almost like we existed on a desert island or in a vacuum for 70 minutes a week. Since, I hadn't asked or raised the issue; students generally mentioned little about their experiences with English out of class.

Now, after having read the LLHs and reflected on whether or not there have been any changes in our relationship, I can't help

but take into account the fact that there are other influences than mine that students are exposed to. Many of the students mentioned the influence of family on their studies. One student said that she was the only one in her family who couldn't speak English, and this fact continues to motivate her in her studies. On numerous occasions students have attempted to use language they have picked up from TV or radio, only to have me explain that the language was inappropriate for them to use due to differences in gender, age, or social status. In a way, I find myself wondering about my value as a teacher to such autonomous language learners. Then, I see that for all that motivates as well as discourages the students, I am there as counselor, guide, and general support. I am the one they come to when they can't figure out why they weren't understood, or why they couldn't understand someone else. Whether it is introducing them to the role of linguistics: semantics, discourse analysis, language and power, or context, or just sharing a second/third opinion on topics ranging from culture to politics, I was told in the LLHs that I am an integral part of their studies. I guess I am both a guide and counselor on top of which I also strive to provide a non-judgmental environment for students to err and to learn from their errors. The LLHs have helped me become more aware of the place I occupy in their studies and for that I am appreciative.

Responses to a question raised by an attendee: Stacey

To answer the question, had my relationship changed with the "Sempais" during this study? Yes, my relationship changed, however in a different way than Eric's. I feel that using LLHs in research requires degrees of sharing and trust between the researcher and the subjects (Burns, p.136, 1999). This trust is necessary because subjects can reveal a lot about themselves, which can allow the teacher to become closer to students. I held

classes with the “Sempais” for 12 years, and for over a decade we have shared many experiences, language learning practices, and key milestone events in our lives. Visualize if you can, 12 years with the same group of students. Most likely you would be able to consider your students friends, as I do.

I have also worked with them on various research projects during the length of my studies for my master’s degree in TESOL, and I learned relatively little new information from the “Sempais” in their LLHs and questionnaires. And because I could no longer have our classes due to a change in my employment conditions, my relationship with them changed during the study. Doing research for this project and being in contact with their writings without being able to see them on a weekly basis perpetuated the process of missing them intensely. So I’ve really made a point of keeping in contact with them and meeting together about every three months in hopes of meeting on a more regular basis. I don’t know if I would have missed them as much had I not worked on this research project, but I have realized that teachers have a more social role with students than I previously thought.

Conclusions

We are not sure if “unique” is too strong a word, but we believe we have been privileged to have the opportunity to be in contact with such autonomous learners. And then to have them open up to us, and share so much of themselves, has been an added bonus. Looking at the LLHs and other data of this study, we realized that what occurred between student and teacher in the classroom was a small part of a bigger picture of what motivates students to begin their studies, continue them, and improve their communication skills. The implication being that

out-of-class experiences are just as, if not more so, important as what occurs in the classroom—a lesson for one and all trying to foster an autonomous language-learning environment.

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