Entering the courtyard of freedom: Facilitating autonomy for young learners

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Is autonomy possible in a primary school English class? This paper constitutes our progress report on how we have taught in our own classrooms. We enjoyed working together, discussing activities for young learners. We hope this paper will encourage you to be a reflective teacher and experiment with new activities.

For seven years Miki Kohyama taught fourth to sixth graders in an elective English class held on a college campus in Tokyo. It was such a delight to teach those bright students. She was able to learn along with her students in her years of struggle. Each student unfolded a different tale of success, agony, and growth. She would like to dedicate this paper to her students, especially to Chikako, Yasushi, and Naoko.

Miori Shimada has been teaching English to preschoolers and elementary school students for nearly eight years. She first thought it impossible to foster "autonomy" particularly among preschoolers, because every one of them behaved and reacted quite differently to each activity. However, she gradually understood the way to motivate those young learners to do something intrinsically. It can be a very small step. For instance, students choose the books they want to read in the class, or the teacher uses Japanese books to stimulate students' interests. As Nanci Graves, a lecturer of Teachers College, Columbia University, suggests: "autonomy lies in how we choose to work with whatever we encounter (private correspondence)."

In this paper, Miori demonstrates three activities to make students more autonomous. Before describing each activity, she shows "less" autonomous way to use the same materials (picture books or flash cards). In this way, the reader can compare the changes in students' attitudes between the first and the second activities.

Finally, she will introduce the definition of autonomy she desires to achieve in her class: autonomy should be carried out under the direction of both learners and others.

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Definition of Autonomy

> It's great that we can enjoy learning English. In other classes I feel like I am learning passively, but in this class I'm learning actively. It's a perfect class for me (H.A.).

This is a quote from a reflective journal written by a college student. This message seems to capture the essence of autonomous language learning. Introduction of autonomy changes passive learning to active learning. Instead of being forced by teachers or parents, learners choose to learn, and make efforts accordingly. Autonomy can be facilitated in any class or school, or with students of any age.

There are many definitions of autonomy. Here is one useful for our paper:

> *Essentially, autonomy is a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little, 1991 p.4).*

There are two common difficulties in implementing learner autonomy. The first is teachers being the obstacle against change. Over the years, teachers develop teaching routines. These may be productive or counterproductive. It takes courage to move out of the comfort zone and transform one's own class. Another obstacle originating with the teacher is the fact that, for some, it is difficult to accept innovative

teachers as colleagues. Even if you are brave enough to try out autonomy in your class, your colleagues may complain that students are not studying properly. The school principal may come to check on your class having heard that class time is spent on singing English songs, instead of preparing students for the tests. The second problem is the question of how much autonomy to give students. What happens when teachers give too little or too much autonomy to their students? Sheerin summarized it succinctly:

> Whatever the cause, if teachers take all the decisions for the learners and do not attempt to wean them, however gradually, away from teacher dependence, then learners may be working unsupervised (on material selected by teachers) but not independently in any other respect. In this case, there is a danger that learning will be very limited, since effective language learning has to involve learning about oneself as language learner and learning to function as a language user independently of a teacher. If, on the other hand, in the interests of promoting greater autonomy, a teacher withholds support and advice from a learner who is as yet ill-equipped to assume the mantle of independent learning, there is great danger that learners may lack direction or may waste time heading in the wrong direction (Sheerin, 1997).

As teachers, we have to give enough autonomy that students can handle, and exert their ability to the maximum.

Levels of Autonomy

In order to remedy the problems in facilitating autonomy, Levels of Implementation (Nunan, 1997) is a useful theoretical base. Nunan divided these into five categories: 1. awareness; 2. involvement; 3. intervention; 4. creation; to 5. transcendence. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Teachers should follow step by step from level one to familiarize students with the concept of autonomy. Some of the primary school students Miki taught reached level 4. However, it did not happen overnight. It was the same in Miori's class. A few of the classes she taught in the past had several students within the age range of 3-8. It was very difficult to handle such classes despite some rules and regulations. The main problem was that each student was at a different developmental stage, both physically and cognitively. There was always chaos, and Miori could not see enough respect among those students. How could she make such classes more autonomous? She conducted a few activities to build a more supportive atmosphere among those students. The activities she introduced were: "Can you copy my funny action?" and "making a class-flag with the students' handprints". By doing both activities in English, students not only learned English words and expressions (e.g. "Can you do it?" "I can do it!" "right hand", "left hand" "fingers", etc.), but also developed the sense of respect and sharing. As a result, they became more cooperative towards their learning after a few months. Autonomy is not laissez-faire freedom. If a class loses all rules and regulation suddenly, students will not know what to do. There will be complete chaos and it is not a very efficient learning environment. Colleagues will be surprised to see the radical change and will not be able to comprehend the reasons behind it. Students and teachers should gradually be introduced to the new idea of autonomy.

At level one, awareness, learners are made aware of the goals and contents of the materials. At the same time, they are encouraged to identify their preferred language learning strategies and styles.

The second level is involvement. Here students make choices of activities from a range of alternatives. Every primary school student Miki taught was able to reach this level. What she did in the first lesson was to give students a list of different English learning activities to tick as many selections as they wanted. The list contained such activities as playing games and puzzles, reading children's books, memorizing vocabulary, and singing songs. Students were also encouraged to suggest unique and creative activities. A student suggested *Chinese Whispers* in English. Another suggested learning the names of countries and capitals around the world in English.

Understanding student interests is effective in motivating students to get more involved. In one class Miki taught, as a result of the questionnaire (See appendix), she learned that half the students wanted to memorize vocabulary and practice writing sentences in notebooks, while half wanted to move their bodies and play games. In the second lesson, Miki reported the results to the students and told them that half of the class time will be spent on quiet learning, with the other half being active learning to satisfy both groups. Even when students were not doing their favourite activities, they happily accepted them, because somebody in the class chose them. This understanding of the purpose of each activity is important for class management and motivation to learn.

The third level is intervention. Learners modify the tasks or goals of the course according to their needs and interests. It requires more reflection and experience on the part of students.

Level four is creation. Students create their own objectives and tasks. In one summer class Miki taught, students decided to write their play and act it out. They selected the story "The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats" from a book, and rewrote it into a play in their own words in Japanese. Then Miki translated it into simple English. The work was mostly done by the teacher, as many other primary school classes are. However, allowing students to decide their own goals is meaningful. Miki will not forget the play students made and how much effort they put into their practice. In another class, a student created her own word search game. Sample student reflections from this level will be introduced at the end of the paper.

Level five is transcendence. Learners become teachers and researchers beyond classrooms. They do project work, and teach each other.

Taking Numan's (1997) levels into consideration, Miori suggests three activities for young learners of English. Each activity is designed to start with a very basic activity and develop into a more complicated one. Finally, it is again modified to be a much more creative task.

Because of the limited demonstration time during the session, Miori was unable to cover all the activities listed here; however, those young participants reacted quite positively to each activity.

Activity 1

Materials: Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Carle, 1995), large pieces of paper, markers or crayons

First reading

Read the book slowly. If possible, chant the phrase while swinging the book. Before turning to the next page, the teacher will quickly show part of the picture or make the sound of the next animal to be encountered in the story. In this way, students will have a chance to guess the colours and the name of the animal appearing on the following page.

Second reading

The whole class sings the repeated phrases "(Brown Bear), (Brown Bear), what do you see? / I see a (red bird) looking at me" to the tune of the first two lines of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. Next, the teacher sings the questions, and students sing the answers, guessing which animal comes next. Finally, the teacher divides students into two groups, for example, boys and girls, the front rows and the back rows. One group sings the questions, and the other responds with the answers. Swap roles. Finally, each student sings one page and then chooses the next person.

Third reading

Students create their own "Brown Bear" books. This would be an interesting large group activity, with each group in charge of drawing one colourful animal on a large sheet of paper. After the teacher collects all the drawings, the whole

class undertakes the same process as described in the *Second reading* section.

Activity 2

Materials: Flash cards, a bag that students cannot see through, realia such as vegetables and utensils.

Flash cards

After reviewing all the vocabulary, teacher and students decide an action or gesture to represent each flash card. Next, the teacher will act out the card to encourage students to guess the answer before giving it directly. After students have mastered the vocabulary items, they try to arrange cards in alphabetical order. Students will create a story based on this arrangement, and then try to explain in English to the entire class. Next, each student will rearrange the cards according to his/her categorization and present it in front of the class. Teacher is available to give students individual guidance at this stage.

Realia

Students review the names of things while observing them. The teacher prepares a bag, puts one "real" thing into it and has students touch and feel the bag. Students will guess what is inside and try to give a correct answer. Next, students will give a quiz in turn, and the rest will answer.

Activity 3

Materials: Hello, Red Fox (Carle, 1998), markers or crayons, white A3 or B4 size paper

Students read the book and try to see the "complementary coloured" animal on the right side of each blank page. After they understand the story, teacher explains about complementary colours. Next, each student draws a large picture with one bright colour on the left side and puts a black dot in the centre on the other side of the piece of white paper. Students show the "image" of the picture he/she drew to the other students. Each student then creates a "mini-story" based on the picture and the image they drew on the paper. Have them present their stories in front the class.

Interestingly enough, this capacity of autonomy does not depend on age. There are variations among the same age group. Miki saw many young learners more creative and reflective than adult learners. It seems to her that the capacity for critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action needs constant training. Autonomy demands intellectual curiosity and a spirit of adventure. Any learners who avoid risk-taking tend to regard autonomy as dangerous and unpredictable.

This is obvious in Miori's case. She desired to foster autonomy among her students, therefore, tried to introduce some simple global education activities to raise student motivation towards their learning. She gave a questionnaire to the caregivers in order to obtain their consensus and discover their children's favorite global issues. Although their answers looked positive on the questionnaire sheets, caregivers soon showed concern and suspicion when she was about to begin conducting

such activities. The caregivers emphasized the importance of fluency in English-learning, and that was mainly what they wanted for their children at that point. Consequently, the class had to be closed due to misunderstanding on both sides. This is a good example, as Miki points out, of people who understand autonomy to be dangerous and unpredictable.

Learning how to learn is an important skill in life. Setting a goal and choosing the method to achieve it is a necessary component of human growth. Miki heard students saying how effective it was for them to identify their learning strategies and learning styles. They were able to use them in different classes for effective and efficient learning.

Change in Teachers

Unless teachers change, students cannot practice autonomy. Teachers need to yield their absolute power and become one of the learners in class. As Miki's teacher once told her, "I am a teacher, but I am a student at the same time." Of course teachers have more knowledge and experience learning languages. However, teachers are still developing themselves professionally, and they can learn from their students as well.

> The teacher who is committed to a learner-centred mode of teaching needs … to be open to change, and be able to react flexibly to the needs of her students and of the educational context within which she is working (Tudor, 1996, p. 231).

As mentioned earlier, it is often teachers who interfere with the implementation of autonomy. It is difficult to change teaching routines and try out something different. Teachers need peer support. When autonomy is not working, they need someone to consult, and discuss issues with honesty and sincerity. For Miki, her classmates from graduate school played this role. She believes that a teacher support network is key in successful implementation of autonomy.

Student Goals and Final Reflections

On the last day of the course Miki's students were asked to write self-assessments in Japanese. They reviewed the goals they set on the first day of class, reflected on what they did in class, and decided whether they achieved their goals or not, and why. In addition, they were encouraged to decide on new goals to continue learning English by themselves.

Here are three students' goals and self-assessments. Two of them thought they reached their goals, but one did not. It was not important whether they achieved the goals or not. The reflective process and management of learning was more important to students.

Student 1

Goal: "I want to remember everything by heart (days of the week, etc.). I will memorize more vocabulary, and will use them in English class."

Final Reflection: "I learned to say and write everything I learned so far (days of the week, etc). I made vocabulary cards and memorized them. Now I want to write and pronounce more vocabulary and sentences. I will listen to the radio English program to achieve the new goal" (K.F.).

Student 2

Goal: "I only know roman letters, so I want to learn to write in English."

Final Reflection: "I can almost write every alphabet now. I am still not sure about small "d", but I manage most of the time. There are words I can't spell, but I can write ones I learned in this class. I still want to learn more vocabulary that I don't know" (B.K.).

Student 3

Goal: "I want to read an English book on my own."

Final Reflection: "The goal was very difficult for me, so I couldn't achieve it. I had to memorize more words and vocabulary. But I learned spelling a little, and now I can say number 1 to 40. I think I learned a lot" (S.O.).

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed why learner autonomy is essential to young learners along with some practical examples of teaching English to them. Although the levels of autonomy reached by each student differed, autonomy encouraged children to reflect on learning and be responsible for it. By personalizing the learning activities and goals, students became more motivated to learn, and made exerted efforts to the best of their abilities.

In the title of this paper we used the metaphor from Peters (1959). We believe that introducing autonomous language learning is equivalent to giving each young learner a key to the courtyard of freedom that lasts for a lifetime. From our experience of teaching children, we believe that it is never too early to introduce autonomy. The levels of autonomy achieved by students depended on their experience dealing with it, not their age. With enough guidance and support, primary school students will learn how to learn and manage their own learning. This skill will be useful in any learning situations taking place anywhere, anytime. Responsible learners are more likely to continue learning for life. By reading this paper, we hope that you will also consider giving your students a key for autonomy, freedom, and life-long learning.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

アンケート　　　　　　　　氏名＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

1. 英語は好きですか。

好き　　　　　　　　嫌い

2. 家に英語の本や、テープ、CD、ビデオなどがありますか。それは何ですか。

ある　　　　　　　　ない

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

3. 学校以外で英語を習ったことがありますか。

ある　　　　　　　　ない

週　　回　　　　期間　　　年

4. このクラスでやりたいことについて、選んでください。

★　　　絵本を読む
★　　　劇をする
★　　　テープを聞いて、歌を歌う
★　　　パズルやゲームをする
★　　　ノートに書いて単語や文を練習する
★　　　会話のテープを聞く
★　　　単語を覚える
★　　　会話の練習をする
★　　　＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

5. このクラスでの自分の目標は何ですか。具体的に書いてください。

例　英語で時間が言えるようになる

Questionnaire　　　　　　　　Name ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

1. Do you like English?

YES　　　　　　SO-SO　　　　　　NO

2. Do you have any English books, tapes, CDs, videos or DVDs at home? If yes, what are the titles?

YES　　　　　　NO

Titles ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

3. Have you ever learned English outside school? If yes, how often?

YES　　　　　　NO

＿＿＿＿ times a week for ＿＿ years

4. What would you like to do in this class? Choose as many as you want. There's a free space to add your idea.

- Read children's books
- Role-play/drama
- Listen to songs and sing
- Do puzzles and games
- Write vocabulary and sentences in notebooks
- Listen to conversation tapes
- Memorize vocabulary
- Practice dialogue
- ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

5. What is the final English learning goal you want to achieve by the end of this course? Please include specific skills.

Ex. I'd like to be able to tell time in English.

_____

_____