Five Japanese women: Developing independence through self-directed homework

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The purpose of this paper is to report on the results of a project that explored the effectiveness of self-directed homework as a way in which to foster autonomous learners. I privately tutored five adult women for two years to investigate their emotional development and material selection. The setting was outside of the classroom situation where students studied alone without direct help from the teacher. Students constructed their own studies, choosing material and evaluating their own work. This constructivist approach underlines the importance of the learner's role in controlling, reflecting and acquiring knowledge (Candy, 1991). The results revealed a three-stage developmental process: initial dependency, less dependency, and finally independence from the teacher as they were able to select their homework and evaluate their learning.

　本研究の目的は、宿題の形をとった自主性強化学習法の効用の結果を報告することです。二年間に及ぶ5人の日本人女性の感情進歩と素材選択の分析結果です。教師直接補助なしで課外勉強する環境に於いて、生徒が自己の学習法を各々選び自己評価して積み上げていく過程を明らかにしています。この研究はキャンディーの主題である学習者による"積み上げ方式"、即ち、自己学習法式を自ら作り上げ、統制して、熟考して、知識を習得すると言う考えにもとづいています。結果は教師に対する初期依存期、依存減少期、独立期と言う三段階の成長を示します。

S INCE MAY 2001, I have tutored a group of five women in their thirties and forties in English. Class time is limited and student progress is slow since I meet them only twice a month for two hours each time. Naturally, I think studying outside class plays an important role in achieving higher proficiency, so I assigned a lot of homework, and the students initially agreed to do it. But a complaint by one of my students about the heavy workload made me change my teaching strategy. Drawing from a class on autonomy I took at Teachers College, it seemed to me to be a good opportunity to change from teacher-assigned homework to student self-directed homework. As the proverb says, "You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink."

The purpose of this project was to explore the effectiveness of self-directed homework as a way in which to foster autonomous learners. Self-directed homework happens when students study outside of the classroom by themselves, taking full responsibility for their learning. In order to foster self-awareness, I tried to suggest general ideas to stimulate independence

and self-awareness. I gave them open-ended questions which led them to do more and better homework. I also intentionally let students struggle and find their own solutions in order to increase their self-awareness and independence.

My research questions were as follows:

1. How did students feel while doing their self-directed homework?

2. How did homework selection shift towards more autonomous, self-directed study?

To assess the efficacy of my project, I used questionnaires, student journals, discussions, recorded interviews, informal chats, and a teacher journal. I demonstrate that students developed independent learning through self-directed homework at different rates. Student-directed homework seemed to free students from issues involving their individuality and differences, such as speed of progress and personal preferences. This is significant because teachers are not often aware of how self-directed homework plays an important role in the students' cognitive process of becoming independent learners.

Literature review

This literature review consists of three key areas: (a) self-awareness (b) reflection and (c) flexibility, which are fundamental factors in the success of self-directed homework. Being autonomous learners means that students become responsible for their homework. In order to do so they need to know objectively what they are doing. Then, they need to reflect on it. Hence, it is important for them to begin from the starting point of reconceptualizing the notion of homework.

The three areas previously mentioned are deeply connected to Candy's (1991) concept of constructivism. Constructivism is a form of learning that emphasizes the importance of the learner constructing, controlling, reflecting and acquiring knowledge

in order to become independent. Constructivism is extremely valuable (Candy, 1991; Little, 1991), as it is related to the concept of self-directed practices in doing homework.

Self-awareness of needs

An emphasis on self-awareness as an essential part of the learning process is well established in the literature. Dickinson (1987), emphasizing the role of teachers as counselors, thinks that it is important for learners to take responsibility for their own study. Likewise, Cresswell (2000) and Plain (1991) emphasize how self-awareness and self-monitoring are important for autonomy. In order to become aware of oneself, reflection based on recycling of description, information, confrontation, and reconstruction is important for learners (Benson & Voller, 1997). Students should know their strengths and weaknesses and try to improve accordingly.

Self-directed homework emphasizes the process of challenging students as they set their own goals, assess themselves and evaluate their own performance. If only extrinsic results or rewards, such as earning more money in job situations or getting good grades, are highlighted for a particular activity at the expense of enjoying the experience, the effectiveness of learning dwindles (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Working or studying should not be a duty but should be enlightening.

Reflection

Richards and Lockhart (1999), for example, cite the importance of reflection and the use of questionnaires to enhance students' self-awareness. In addition, keeping a journal facilitates self-awareness serving two purposes: recording events for later reflection and using the writing process to elicit insight into learning (Richards & Lockhart, 1999). Benson and Voller (1997) emphasize the importance of reflection and especially the criti-

cal role of hypothesis testing. Therefore, in the process of selecting and trying their own homework, students should discern what is suitable for themselves in their context. How they use reflecting on their homework to move to the next step is also important.

Flexibility and open mindedness

In order to be flexible, students need to be open-minded, taking responsibility for their own learning. This means choosing and comparing materials (Dickinson, 1987). In this way, students exhibit self-awareness and carry out assessment. Krishnamurti (1972) comments that awareness of one's own behavior and the consequences resulting from that behavior are important elements for students to organize their study. His idea is that awareness of what students are doing and knowing the consequences of these actions are important. Nunan (2000) implements Benson's idea that autonomous learning is self-directed learning carried out by learners. He comments on the importance of a self-directed effort and also states that the ultimate goal is for learners to become teachers of their own study. Therefore, students should study freely without hesitation toward flexible choices such as determining new materials and changing them according to their effectiveness.

Method

Participants

My participants were five adult women in their thirties and forties. Using the textbook *New Interchange 2*, I taught English twice a month, covering speaking, listening, and writing. Most of them had majored in English in college and varied from lower intermediate to intermediate based on their class performance. The women think that they need continuing education, consid-

ering the long life expectancy of women in Japan. Some want to understand movies without captions, while others want to read English newspapers and be able to carry on daily conversation and use practical English when traveling abroad. Each student has been assigned a pseudonym in this study.

Project implementation and data collection

The project was implemented over 24 months from February 2002 to January 2004. The purpose of this project was to facilitate metacognitive awareness, giving students occasions to reflect on their self-directed homework and to think about how to improve it in the future. Students submitted their journals, in which they wrote freely in Japanese about the homework, each time they submitted their homework. I collected student journals about self-directed homework. In order to facilitate student autonomy, I intervened with practical suggestions several times. These suggestions covered a wide range and included points on homework exchange (as seen in Table 1).

Table 1. Project implementation in self-directed homework (February 2002-January 2004)

	Teacher Interventions	Date of Interventions
1	Teacher's explanation of the concept of self-directed homework in class (10 minutes).	February 2002
2	First one-hour interview with all students.	March 2002
3	Peer exchange of self-directed homework (10 minutes).	April 2002
4	An introductory session on how to use a computer and how to get information from Yahoo web sites.	January 2003
5	Second one-hour interview with all students.	February 2003

	Teacher Interventions	Date of Interventions
6	Third 15-minute interview with each student individually. Teacher-led discussion about student-centered homework (30 minutes).	July 2003

I first introduced the concept of self-directed homework when I initiated this research. After a month, I conducted the first interview with each student. In addition, students were given a chance to take a look at the other students' homework in class. I also introduced how to use a computer and how to get information from Yahoo web sites as part of a class activity. Then, I conducted the second interview and the third interview with each student. These two interviews consisted of the same three questions:

1. What kind of homework did you do?
2. What do you think about your homework?
3. What kind of difficulties did you have?

Students wrote about their perceptions and the types of materials they used. Moreover, students shared their homework and opinions and comments.

Data Analysis

I put each student's comments from all sources together and then made a portfolio for each student. I closely investigated each student's emotional development and change in the use of homework materials. I then checked notable traits and recurrent patterns in each student's comments. Then, I grouped the results of the students' emotional development and content development into three stages, which I determined to be *dependence, less dependence,* and *independence*. From this I estimated the approximate time span to be two months for the first stage, nine months for the second stage and thirteen months for the third stage. I checked key emotions and content development that emerged over the course of study and observed the manner in which they selected homework over this period.

Results

This section consists of two sets of results that reveal the students' emotional development and their change in material selection for self-directed homework (as shown in Table 2 below). As Candy (1991) argues that learners acquire knowledge by constructing it by themselves, my students eventually started to select their own homework material and content, becoming autonomous.

Table 2. Changes in student emotions and materials (from dependency to autonomy)

Stage	Emotional development	Material selection
Dependence (beginning) (For two months)	Confusion Low self-esteem Lack of confidence	Used materials easy to access
Less dependence (middle) (For nine months)	Self-awareness Uncertainty Frustration	Peer influence
Independence (final) (For thirteen months)	Confidence Decisiveness	Individual preference

Dependent stage

All the students initially showed confusion, low self-esteem and lack of confidence about the shift from teacher-directed to

self-directed homework. They could not decide what to do for homework and did not have confidence about their choices. As a result, only one student out of five did it at the very beginning. When I took a survey about what the students thought about student-directed homework, all five students expressed the difficulty they felt. Instead of taking responsibility for their homework, they wanted me to decide the material. In the initial stage, Kinako was totally confused about the meaning of self-directed homework and did not understand what it was. Similar to Kinako, Mimi was confused about self-directed homework and asked for my help. She asked me if her homework selection was comprehensive enough. Therefore, in choosing self-directed homework, she used her judgment about material, but she depended on me instead of thinking by herself. Micky was also confused and asked for my help when she was deciding on her homework material, saying that there were too many choices. Lulu also showed confusion about self-directed homework. Lulu was a student who mostly did not do even teacher-directed homework, so I thought that it might have been difficult for her to adapt herself to the new self-directed homework. As I predicted, she did not do self-directed homework at first.

Some students showed low-self esteem while other students showed lack of confidence. They were not familiar with self-evaluation since they had not learned how to evaluate themselves at schools and so they could not evaluate themselves accurately. Their evaluations were unrealistically low.

In an interview, Micky said that she wanted to have equal proficiency with her classmates who were more advanced than she was:

I want to be the same level as other students. …It is difficult achieving my goal. And I cannot achieve my target level. So I marked D for my grade. (Micky, interview, 07/03/2002)

The other three students Emily, Lulu, and Mimi also could not assess themselves well: Lulu commented that she had difficulty with listening when she reviewed our textbook, Mimi just mentioned grammar as her weak point, and Emily stated that she had difficulty doing dictation from her husband's CD which was about useful phrases when traveling abroad.

Less dependent stage

In the middle stage, students were influenced by their peers and the most popular homework activity was using NHK English programs. [NHK is an abbreviation of *Nihon Hoso Kyokai*, a Japanese TV company that broadcasts programs for English learners]. It was a secure choice for them. Learning from peers is part of the process of becoming independent learners (Murphey & Jacobs 2000). As students moved to the second phase from April to December 2002, they showed both self-awareness and uncertainty. There were changes in their attitudes. After struggling with what self-directed homework to choose, all students started to select their own material and content. In this stage, I could see their growing self-awareness, though some students showed more uncertainty while others showed less uncertainty. In other words, they were still not sure whether what they were doing was suitable. In addition, students gradually understood that they would not get direct help from me. In the middle stage of the project, the students adapted to the content of their homework and emotional changes also took place.

As Kinako wrote in her journal, she seemed worried about her result:

I do not know the result of my effort yet. But I am doing my best, watching NHK English programs. (Kinako, journal, 28/04/2002)

Both Mimi and Micky were struggling with gaps between their motivation and performance. Mimi was wondering how to handle the gaps between her motivation and the time she had available to study. Even though she sought efficiency in her study, she could not act as she wanted. Similarly, Micky was worried about the gaps between her motivation and her actions. Neither of them depended on me any more; however, they were not able to take actions as they wished. They were not fully autonomous yet. Just like Mimi and Micky, Lulu was struggling, too. Despite her realization of the importance of doing self-directed homework, she could not continue it because of self- described laziness.

Therefore, in this stage of self-directed home work, almost all the students showed complicated transitional feelings from dependency to independency. Their self-awareness had developed but they could not act as they desired.

Independent stage

At the final stage, however, they shifted away from NHK English programs, taking different and more individual paths. Emily and Lulu followed their preference for authentic material, watching movies and using the Internet. Mimi combined reading and watching NHK English programs, according to her time constraints and work situation. Kinako and Micky's materials were varied at the time of this study. In this stage, the students started to have confidence and became more decisive about what they wanted to do for homework. Moreover, their decision-making became quicker. Micky seemed to become autonomous as is reflected in the way she wrote about her reading. She commented that she borrowed easy stories at a public library and started to read them. Even Lulu started to regularly report on her homework she had done.

Additionally, Kinako seemed to show positive reactions. In an interview she mentioned a new resolution to study English

by watching NHK English programs for at least one year. She wrote about how to improve self-directed homework in her journal.

Emily liked self-directed homework from the beginning though she showed a little confusion about my change from teacher-directed to student-directed homework. Finally, she stated:

> Now I understood teacher's intention and I know how to do self-directed homework. (Emily, journal, 10/10/2003)

In summary, in the beginning stage, the students were confused. In the middle stage of the project, they showed frustration and uncertainty though their levels of self-awareness arose. They showed gradual development as adaptation and adjustment to the realities of the changed learning situation took place. In the final stage, toward the end of my project, the students developed overall autonomy. They became aware of themselves and knew what was the best for themselves as individuals. They showed confidence in guiding their own learning through self-directed homework. I was hoping that the students would become free from mandatory teacher-oriented homework and continue to do self-directed homework after my project. As North and Pillay (2002) comment, autonomous students improve their attitude, taking responsibility, and study routinely according to their preferences.

Discussion
Individual differences

As the results showed, development of autonomy differed according to the students. Students learn differently since their cognitive learning styles and personalities are different (Ehrman, 1996). Also their personal backgrounds have shaped their differences. Some progressed rapidly and some slowly. Those

who progressed slowly needed more assistance than those who progressed quickly. For those who were dependent, doing independent homework was more challenging than for those who already showed independence in their own behaviors and attitudes.

Emily, meticulous and hard working, constructed, reflected and adapted her study steadily. In the process of becoming independent, she tried to depend on the teacher first, and then her son. Finally, she found that she could be independent. Rivers comments that experienced language learners display autonomy; they are able to employ self- learning strategies and adapt themselves more easily to a new environment than novice learners (Rivers, 2001).

Lulu, outgoing but admittedly lazy, constructed, reflected and adapted her study differently from Emily. When she determined that she would not receive direct help from the teacher, she chose the easiest way to adapt. Without researching many alternative materials, she continued watching movie videos. That solution was the best one for her at that time since she found it useful and was able to continue self-directed homework without becoming stressed. Compared to the early stage when she was reluctant to do homework, she showed much progress toward the end of the project.

Mimi, who was raised in a big family, adapted herself to self-directed homework, combining NHK English programs and reading, depending on the immediate situation. Upon realizing that she could not watch NHK English programs as regularly as she wanted, she combined this with reading books.

Kinako and Micky, who had less confidence and lower self-esteem than the others, were a little reluctant to try new materials and their progress was slower than that of their classmates. However, toward the end of this project, they were influenced by the other students and started to try some new materials. Following the others, they gradually increased in confidence.

In this study, I wanted to remain objective as a researcher. However, I sometimes tended to incline toward the teacher's role to help the students whose autonomy development was slower than other students. This means that I had to engage in self-reflection on my own about the extent to which I was following my own plan as a teacher and researcher. I used the teacher journal to monitor my own performance to ensure that my observations were reliable. Since taking a neutral position is difficult for a classroom researcher, there should be a clearly written plan that shows to what extent the researcher can advise the target students.

Conclusion

This study focused on five learners who engaged in a project where they assumed autonomy in self-directed homework over the course of time. I found that self-directed homework was effective in fostering their autonomous learning. Giving freedom by handing over the decision-making about homework made students realize what actions lead to what results, and what the consequences of their actions are. They learned how to organize their study according to their preferences outside of class without a teacher. Their self-awareness developed over the course of time. In the process of development, the students showed a variety of emotions.

While doing this project, I learned that each individual student progresses differently. Also, it takes time for students to acquire autonomy. Though reflection is important, students need a step-by-step process to learn how to reflect and how to utilize these reflections in the next stage. Reflecting on self-directed homework without the teacher's direct guidance is difficult for some students, and these students needed more help than others who are able to manage self-directed homework easily. In other words, understanding each individual student's rate of

progress must be taken into account in adjusting the amount of help according to their degree of autonomy.

All teachers, regardless of their situation, should realize the importance of autonomous learning. In this way, both teachers and students can become aware of independent learning styles. Teachers should allow students to decide their area of interest and acquire the ability to choose activities that support their own learning styles. That strengthens student self-recognition, enhances their critical views, and enables them to be autonomous. In this manner, yielding decision-making to students enriches teachers. As a consequence, both teachers and students shift from conformity to freedom.

Bio data

Teruko Nakajima has an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University. She studied English in ELS in New York including American Language Program (ALP) at Columbia University. She is currently teaching private students and groups. Besides teaching her students, she has conducted presentations in JALT, ELT, and other places. Her research and interests are autonomous learning and teaching, focusing on the impact of students' self-reflective study and teachers' reflective teaching methods on language education. <teruteru117@yahoo.com>

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