

# Self-Access Language Learning: Japanese Autonomy

Adam Serag  
Hirosaki University

## Reference Data:

Serag, A. (2013). Self-access language learning: Japanese autonomy. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Students and teachers in Japan have difficulties adapting and integrating autonomy effectively in self-access language learning (SALL) centers. Many Japanese students are not accustomed to working independently due to their inherited cultural values of collectivism, creating the need for teachers to provide guidance as to the use of SALL centers. In this paper I focus on the factors influencing the autonomous practice of 16 self-access language learners at a Japanese university. Data were collected, coded, and analyzed recursively through in-depth semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Three factors were identified: the interpretations of learner autonomy and SALL concepts, the Japanese learners' beliefs about the purpose of SALL centers, and the implementation methods of SALL in Japan. Results showed that adapting learner autonomy and SALL concepts is a complex process that differs dramatically across cultures.

日本の学生と教師は、セルフアクセス言語学習センターで効果的に自主性 (autonomy) を適応し融合させることに苦労する。多くの日本の学生は、集団行動思考という文化的価値観を受け継いでいるため、自主的に動くことに慣れておらず、セルフアクセス言語学習センターの利用にガイダンスを備える必要がある。この論文では、日本の大学のセルフアクセス言語学習者16人の、自主的な練習への影響の要因に焦点をあてている。綿密で半構造的なインタビューとアンケートを通してデータを集め、コード化し、帰納的に分析した。そこで3つの要因が明らかになった。まず、学習者の自主性とセルフアクセス学習の概念の解釈、次に、日本人学習者のセルフアクセス言語センターの目的についての確信、最後にセルフアクセス学習の実施方法。更に結果は、学習者の自主性とセルフアクセス学習の概念を適応させる(なじませる)ことが、異なる文化では、劇的に異なる複雑な過程であることが示された。

**T**HE ABILITY of self-direction in learning is one of the most necessary factors that learners must have to survive, succeed, and improve on their own (Cross, 1981; Guglielmino & Roberts, 1992). Educators who seek to practice self-directed learning strategies with adult learners need to be concerned about cultural differences among learners; however, little is known about the relationship between self-directed learning readiness and cultural dimension constructs (Braman, 1998).

Self-direction in learning is defined as the learner taking responsibility internally for the learning process (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Tough, 1979). Self-directed learning requires investigation of learning needs, developing learning goals, identifying resources, selecting appropriate learning strategies, and evaluation of learning outcomes (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Cross (1981) noted that self-directed learning was a concept of deliberate learning in which the individual's main goal is to obtain certain definite knowledge or skills. However, the cul-



tural context shapes the individuals' motivations and strategies to reproduce and transform meanings and resources in order to pursue their goals in society (Cleaver, 2007). Since values are informed by culture, autonomous actions that are value-laden decisions also depend on culture (Kabeer, 2000).

Self-access language learning centers (SALLC) are educational facilities designed for student learning that is at least partially, if not fully, self-directed. These centers are an outgrowth of a style of learning that can go by several names: learner-centered approach, learner autonomy, or self-directed learning. Language practitioners in Japan teach learners who, when faced with the aims, goals, and practices of SALLC, are restricted by the cultural values of collectivism.

This paper identifies three factors that influence the autonomous practice of Japanese students in Japan: the interpretations of learner autonomy and self-access language learning concepts, the Japanese learners' beliefs about the purpose of SALLC, and the implementation methods of self-access language learning.

## Literature Review

Triandis (1995) defined culture as a memory of the past that influences others and societies, generally from period to period. The memory was considered as a component of the culture, called subjective culture, such as attitudes, beliefs, roles, norms, and values that exist in societies. That is, it is the shared awareness of the social environment (Triandis, 1972). Adult educators should consider culture for developing programs effectively for adult learners. Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002) stated that culture refers to a body of knowledge, concepts, values, and skills that is produced by a social grouping over a long span of time and has been passed on from one generation to the next. Culture is an all-inclusive phenomenon, consisting of all aspects of the social grouping's environment. It includes language, beliefs, and

attitudes, modern or primitive methods of production, the educational system, and all belongings. Culture doesn't consist only of artifacts and material types of possessions. It also includes sets of patterns of behaviors and attitudes that are taught by one generation and are modified by life experiences of each succeeding generation.

Research indicates the effectiveness of moving towards student decision making rather than teacher decision making (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Kember & Gow, 1994; Little, 1995; Victori & Lockhart, 1995). In the SALL mode, students make important decisions regarding the level, speed, and content of their work. Students also have an opportunity to work in their preferred mode, which encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning, thereby helping them to move towards autonomy. Research also suggests that students have distinct learning strategies and learn best when individual differences are taken into consideration (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). Given that collectivistic cultures promote harmony and interdependence with a high level of conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996), researchers have not applied their theories into actual practice with all foreign language learners, especially in Japan, where groups or a large number of people may act simultaneously to achieve a goal that differs from what individuals would do acting alone.

## Self-Access Language Learning (SALL)

SALL contributes to the development of students as independent thinkers and lifelong learners (Morrison, 2008; Mozzon-McPherson, 2002). Cotterall and Reinders (2001) argued that SALL has the potential to promote learner autonomy in a number of ways. Firstly, it provides equipment and services that allow learners to pursue their own goals and interests while accommodating individual differences in learning style,

level, and pace of learning. Secondly, the resources have the capacity to raise learners' awareness of the learning process by emphasizing aspects of the management of learning, such as goal setting and monitoring progress. Thirdly, SALL can act as a bridge between the teacher-directed learning situation, where the target language is studied and practiced, and the real world, where the target language is used as a means of communication. Finally, SALL can promote the learning autonomy of learners who prefer or are obliged to learn without a teacher, by supporting their learning in the absence of an organized language course. In different contexts, "SALL offers degrees of guidance but encourages students to move towards autonomy" (Gardner & Miller, 1997, p. xvii).

Crabbe (1993) stated, "Autonomous learning needs to become a reference point for all classroom procedure." In other words, tasks that are carried out in class need to demonstrate principles about managing learning that can be exploited by learners when they are learning independently. Crabbe argued that there must be a "bridge" between *public domain* learning, which is based on shared classroom activities, and *private domain* learning, which is personal individual learning behavior.

In Japanese SALL contexts, Crabbe's (1993) concept of bridging is particularly important due to cultural and educational experiences of learners. Japanese students tend to be self-critical, blaming themselves for their failures more than admiring themselves for their successes (Kurman, Tanaka, & Elkoshi, 2003). A self-effacing attributional style in turn is known to be negatively related to a number of personality traits, such as self-esteem, and positively related to others, including trait social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Kurman (2001) stated that one who displays one's knowledge is regarded in Japan as immodest. Thus, autonomy in foreign language learning has been presented by researchers in western contexts in a way that is inapplicable to Japanese learners in Japan.

Collectivism refers to a perception of self that is embedded within social roles and social relationships; separate selves are deemphasized with an orientation toward others and the welfare of the group or community. In collectivistic cultures, the person's identity is closely related to his or her social group. The primary goal of the person is not to maintain independence from others, but to promote the interests of the group (Davidson, Jaccard, Triandis, Morales, & Diaz-Guerrero, 1976). Self-esteem is not derived from idiosyncratic behavior or from calling attention to one's own unique abilities. There is greater emphasis on meeting a shared standard so as to maintain harmony in one's relationship to the group (Wink, 1997). People in collectivistic cultures are therefore not motivated to stand out from their group by competitive acts of achievement or even making positive statements about themselves (Kitayama, Markus, & Lieberman, 1995).

Helgesen (1993) reported that his learners in Japanese universities rarely initiated conversation, avoided bringing up new topics, did not challenge the teacher, seldom asked for clarification, and did not volunteer answers. Townsend & Danling (1998), among others, attributed this type of behavior to the anxiety Japanese learners experience when using their L2. Nevertheless, this may have had more to do with the learners' social and cultural codes for speaking. Japanese learners are likely to experience language anxiety in oral EFL classes because they are simply not prepared to deal with the social components of Western-style teaching practices, where a great emphasis is put on individualism, challenging the teacher, and providing original opinions and ideas. In contrast, according to Nozaki (1993), the Japanese think of quietness, obedience, and passivity as good traits for a learner to possess. Traditionally, the method of teaching in Japan is teacher-fronted and unlike western classrooms, little (if any) input is solicited from the student. Students often relate closely with their classroom teacher, and many are unwilling to engage in interactive communication with other foreign teachers.

## Research Questions

This paper will answer the following questions:

1. How do Japanese learners perceive learner autonomy and SALL?
2. What are the Japanese learners' beliefs about the purpose of SALLC?
3. What are the Japanese learners' beliefs about the implementation methods of SALL in Japan?

## Methodology

Answers to the study's research questions were sought by a number of different means. Data were collected from 16 randomly selected self-access language learners who were willing to participate in this study using two instruments:

1. an electronically administered questionnaire with closed- and open-ended items, and
2. face-to-face semi-structured interviews to allow an in-depth exploration of relevant issues emerging from the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were distributed and returned as email attachments in Japanese and English. The interviews were conducted in Japanese and recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Three factors were identified: the interpretations of learner autonomy and SALL concepts, the Japanese learners' beliefs about the purpose of SALLC, and the implementation methods of SALL in Japan.

## Results

### Three Factors Identified

#### 1. The interpretations of learner autonomy and SALL concepts

I created summary definitions for the concepts of SALL and independent language learning by summarizing comments in the students' questionnaire responses. Then, during the interviews, I showed the students the summary definitions A and B and asked them to comment on the extent to which they agreed with the definitions (see Table 1). The summary definitions used were:

- Definition A: "Self-access language learning is about facilities; the focus is on providing materials, location, and support."
- Definition B: "Independent language learning is learners taking responsibility."

Students 11 and 15 disagreed with definition A, but overall, there was an agreement on the summary definitions of SALL and independent language learning. Students 3, 6, 9, and 13 disagreed with definition B, stating that teachers should be taking responsibility for the process. However, the overall high level of agreement with the summary definitions is not surprising because they were summarized from students' own initial questionnaire responses. All students believed that the summary definition of SALL represented their own perception of autonomous learning. However, other comments made by students during the interviews suggested that their concepts of learner autonomy were less precisely defined, as some students also linked autonomous learning to the need for guidance. Some examples of student comments are:

- » S3 [interview]: Without guidance, we can't be autonomous learners. We need resources and help.

- » S6 [interview]: Resources and teachers' support are crucial **to** the student's success in his or her autonomous learning.

## 2. The Japanese learners' beliefs about the purpose of SALLC

Students were asked to express their beliefs about the purpose of SALLC by agreeing or disagreeing with comments. Student responses are summarized in Table 2.

- Comment summary A: I don't know what the purpose is.
- Comment summary B: A good place to relax in my free time.
- Comment summary C: A good place to meet my friends.

Eighty percent of respondents stated that they don't know the purpose of SALLC, despite the initial orientation to the Centre and the presence of staff throughout opening hours. A total of 56.2% disagreed with comment summary B while 68.7% dis-

agreed with comment summary C. Other comments made by students during the interviews suggested that many students were unsure about the interpretation and purpose of SALLC. Some examples from students include:

- » S1 [interview]: This is a very difficult question for me.
- » S9 [interview]: Probably the Ministry of Education and teachers know about the purpose.

## 3. The implementation methods of SALL in Japan

Students were asked to provide their views about the implementation methods of SALL in Japan by agreeing or disagreeing with comments. Student responses are summarized in Table 3.

- Comment summary A: SALLC should improve students' English and TOEIC test scores.
- Comment summary B: SALLC should be integrated with some courses.

Table 1. Student Agreement With Definitions of Self-Access and Independent Language Learning

Summary definition	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
A	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	X	O
B	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	O	X	O	O	O

Note. O = agreement, X = disagreement.

Table 2. Student Agreement With Comments About the Purpose of SALLC

Comment summary	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
A	O	O	O	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	X	O
B	X	X	X	X	O	X	O	O	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	X
C	O	X	X	X	X	X	O	O	O	X	O	X	X	X	X	X

Note. O = agreement, X = disagreement.

- Comment summary C: SALLC teachers should help students with proofreading their English assignments.

The total percentage of students agreeing with comment summary C was 93.7%, 62.5% agreed with comment summary A, while 62.5% disagreed with comment summary B. Other comments made by students during the interviews suggest that many students were unsure about the link between university classes and SALLC. Some examples taken from the student interviews include:

- » S3 [interview]: SALLC is a separate place for English education in a particular time.
- » S16 [interview]: SALLC is a place for learning about western culture and not to be linked to the university formal English Education.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Perfect autonomous learning in the western sense is difficult to achieve in Japan, where the exercise of autonomy is faced with opposition from powerful actors. In this paper, autonomy is not merely a reflection capacity that guides value-oriented decisions; it is about being able to enact those decisions and change one's circumstances in a particular context. The questionnaire and interviews identified obstacles to the use of the SALLC, since 80% of the Japanese respondents stated that they don't know the purpose of SALLC, despite the initial orientation to

the Centre and the presence of staff throughout opening hours. In addition, many students were unsure about the link between university classes and SALLC.

Finally, this study showed that adapting learner autonomy and SALL concepts is a complex process that differs dramatically across cultures. Japanese learners independently lacked a sound understanding of the rationale behind this approach to learning and of what it involves in practice. In short, there is plenty of work still to be done in enhancing learners' understanding and experience of SALL in Japan.

## Bio Data

**Adam Serag** is an associate professor at Hirosaki University. He received his PhD in philosophy from Kagoshima University in Japan and a Master's degree in TESOL from UTS in Australia. His research interests include learner autonomy, applied linguistics, EAP, FL Education, CALL, and e-learning. <tangaloma2000@yahoo.co.jp>

## References

- Bond, R., & Smith, P. B. (1996). Culture and conformity: A meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1952b, 1956) line judgment task. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 111-137.

**Table 3. Student Agreement With Comments About the Implementation of SALL**

Comment summary	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
A	X	O	X	O	X	O	O	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	X	X
B	X	X	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	X	X	X	O	X	X
C	O	O	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Note. O = agreement, X = disagreement.



- Boone, E. J., Safrit, R. D., & Jones, J. (2002). *Developing programs in adult education: A conceptual programming model* (2nd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Braman, O. R. (1998). *The cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism as a factor in adult self-directed learning readiness* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Dissertation Abstracts International. (UMI No. 9840817)
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (1991). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Cleaver, F. (2007). Understanding agency in collective action. *Journal of Human Development, 8*, 223-244.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System, 23*, 195-205.
- Cotterall, S., & Reinders, H. (2001). Fortress or bridge? Learners' perceptions and practice in self-access language learning. *Tesolanz 8*, 23-38.
- Crabbe, D. (1993). Fostering autonomy from within the classroom: The teacher's responsibility. *System 21*, 443-452.
- Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, A. R., Jaccard, J. J., Triandis, H. C., Morales, M. L., & Diaz-Guerrero, R. (1976). Cross-cultural model testing: Toward the solution of the etic-emic dilemma. *International Journal of Psychology, 11*, 1-13.
- Dickinson, L. (1995). Autonomy and motivation: A literature review. *System, 23*, 165-174.
- Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1997). *A study of tertiary level self-access facilities in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: ESEP, City University of Hong Kong.
- Gremmo, M. J., & Riley, P. (1995). Autonomy, self-direction and self-access in language teaching and learning: The history of an idea. *System, 23*, 151-163.
- Guglielmino, P. J., & Roberts, D. G. (1992). A comparison of self-directed learning readiness in U.S. and Hong Kong samples and the implications for job performance. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 3*, 261-271.
- Helgesen, M. (1993). Dismantling a wall of silence: The "English conversation" class. In P. Wadden (Ed.), *A handbook for teaching English at Japanese colleges and universities* (pp. 37-49). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kabeer, N. (2000). *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour market decisions in London and Dhaka*. London: Verso.
- Kember, D., & Gow, L. (1994). Orientations to teaching and their effect on the quality of student learning. *Journal of Higher Education, 65*, 59-74.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H. R., & Lieberman, C. (1995). The collective construction of self-esteem: Implications for culture, self, and emotion. In J. Russell, J. Fernandez-Dols, T. Manstead, & J. Wellenkamp (Eds.), *Everyday conceptions of emotion: An introduction to the psychology, anthropology and linguistics of emotion* (pp. 523-550). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Kurman, J., Tanaka, Y., & Elkoshi, T. (2003). Is self-enhancement negatively related to constructive self-criticism? *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 34*, 24-37.
- Kurman, J. (2001). Self-enhancement: Is it restricted to individualistic cultures? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 1705-1716.
- Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1995). *Social anxiety*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System, 23*, 175-181.
- O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies*. New York: Newbury House.
- Morrison, B. (2008). The role of the self-access centre in the tertiary language learning process. *System 36*, 123-140.
- Mozzon-McPherson, M. (2002). *Language advising*. Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Guide to Good Practice. Retrieved from <https://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/93>

- Nozaki, K. (1993). The Japanese student and the foreign teacher. In Wadden, P. (Ed.), *A handbook for teaching English at Japanese colleges and universities* (pp. 27-33). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tough, A. M. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Learning Concepts.
- Townsend, J., & Danling, F. (1998). Quiet students across cultures and continents. *English Education*, 31, 4-25.
- Triandis, H. C. (1972). *The analysis of subjective culture*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Wenden, A. L. (1991). *Learner strategies for learner autonomy*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- Wink, P. (1997). Beyond ethnic differences: Contextualizing the influence of ethnicity on individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53, 329-349.
- Victori, M., & Lockhart, W. (1995). Enhancing metacognition in self-directed language learning. *System*, 23, 223-234.