I can do Canada: SCL and student autonomy

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This paper reports on student outcomes regarding learning autonomy in a student centered setting. The theory framing the course design as well as its appropriateness for these students preparing learning English at a Japanese university for study abroad in Canada is discussed. Student responses to questionnaires regarding their attitudes towards Student Centered Learning (SCL), learner autonomy, and their changes in confidence were analyzed. The curriculum, for a reading and a writing class, provided students with stepwise experience, including teacher and peer feedback, and tasks with increasing freedom to develop and exercise decision making skills for their own learning. Students progressed through confidence and competence building steps to develop autonomy.

　この論文は、生徒主体の学習のなかでの、生徒の自主性の育成成果について述べたものである。このコースデザインの枠組みを成す理論と、これがカナダに留学する生徒の日本での英語学習に適正であるかどうかについて論じている。生徒主体の学習(SCL)についての態度や、自主性、自信の向上についてのアンケートに生徒が回答したデータについて分析を行った結果、以下のことが明らかになった。Reading　やwritingの授業のカリキュラムは、教師と生徒の間での、また生徒間でのフィードバック、さらに、自分の学習のための意思決定能力を育成し、かつ実践する自由を増大させる役割を含む段階的な経験を、生徒に供給した。生徒は自信と能力の構築を通して、自主性を育成するステップを発展させた。

A body of educational research and theory discusses the benefits of Student Centered Learning (SCL) used by John Dewey in his Laboratory School and developed by countless others since the Progressivist Movement and recently summarized by Sadker and Zittleman (2006). Little discussion however has been devoted to the application of SCL in the Japanese adult English learning classroom. This study attempts to answer the following questions regarding adult learners of English, specifically second and third year Japanese university students of English as a foreign language (EFL):

1.   Can SCL be used in the classroom to generate results satisfactory to the teacher?

2.   Can SCL be used in the classroom to generate results satisfactory to the students?

3.   Will students learn from students?

4. Will SCL/Self Determination Theory (SDT) approaches result in clear examples of learner autonomy?

5. Will students perceive a benefit from increased autonomy?

This article will briefly discuss SCL and related cross-cultural issues. Thereafter the methodology of this study and the structure of the course will be explained and discussed. Finally, the analysis and outcomes will be considered.

Literature review

These questions are particularly important to examine in a Japanese context where many non-Japanese teachers complain of student passivity and communicative approaches do not always fare well (McVeigh, 2002; Usuki, 2007). While SCL seems fruitful in North America and Europe and has become common in those classrooms, it is not clear that it is suitable for Japan. Strong differences exist between the classroom cultures and national cultures of Japan and Canada, the study abroad destination of these students. The cultural differences have been profiled in the cross-cultural literature of recent decades. The first large scale intercultural comparisons among non managerial workers were described in Hofstede's studies of IBM personnel. Hofstede identified five cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation (Hofstede, 1991, 2001). A set of seven dimensions were later proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998). With an eye toward these dimensions, students from Japan can expect a significantly different experience in the classroom

than they may have found in Japan. Some areas of likely difference are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of cross-cultural classroom differences

Japan	Canada
• Teacher centered, large power distance	• Student centered, low power distance
• Low student participation	• High student participation
• Culture does not reward leadership efforts	• Culture rewards leadership
• Students prefer to learn from teacher	• Students willing to learn from students
• Not autodidact culture	• Autodidact culture
• Risk averse	• Less risk averse
• Feeling that one cannot control environment	• Feeling that one can control environment

Based on work by Hofstede, G. (1991; 2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), Gudykunst and Nishida (1994)

In summary, Japanese students may feel uncomfortable in Canadian classrooms because:

• teachers are less distanced from the students and expect students to respond to them as peers or near-peers;

• classroom participation levels are higher than in Japan;

• they may miss out on academic and social rewards that come to students who take a leadership role in classes;

• they may not expect or want to learn from students who are seen as fellow non-experts;

- unwritten rules about self learning are different, requiring somewhat less self-education effort, research and self starting in Japan;

- there is a greater concern about public failure among Japanese students who generally avoid situations such as reporting to the teacher or class without significant preparation time;

- with lower expectations about managing their environment, activities, and learning content, Japanese students may give minimal feedback to the teacher even when directly asked;

- concerns about criticizing a perceived superior, such as a teacher, means students may decline to provide useful feedback in the classroom.

Keeping these differences in mind, it is appropriate to ask if SCL is at all useful or sensible for Japanese university learners. Of the other four teachers preparing students for this study abroad program, one responded to questions about SCL and Japanese students. This teacher has 20 years of experience teaching university level English in Japan. He professed himself cautious about using SCL, largely based on cultural concerns about the receptivity of Japanese students to these approaches. Having moved the teacher out of the center of classroom focus, he wrote, "…my experience tells me that 'most' Japanese students are not that interested in taking control of or being responsible for their learning." It would indeed be important not to use SCL if it were unsuccessful or unworkable. In the minds of students, SCL may appear unworkable according to a survey showing that only 7% of Japanese English learners at university level felt that SCL was suitable as a learning methodology (Servetter, 1999).

Although it is reasonable to ask if SCL is appropriate for Japanese English learners, students headed to Canada for months of immersion should know about SCL for the sake of their own expectations and preparation. Therefore this course undertook to expose these learners to SCL.

Theory behind the course design

The course design was informed by SCL and Self Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is an input to the framework of motivation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and, as demonstrated below, dovetails with SCL regarding learner autonomy. A brief discussion of these terms follows.

SCL seeks to activate the student in the learning process. It is vital for students to make important choices in their learning process. By making key choices, students learn important metacognitive skills, that is, they learn about learning and about how they learn best. In curricula with this structure, students make choices and pursue skills and knowledge on their own with guidance from the teacher (Dewey, 1963). Seen from the educator's point of view, the teacher is not doling out knowledge from the fountain, but is facilitating the student's progress while acting as a skilled coach (Jones, 2008).

SDT holds that learners feel greater motivation to achieve when they are involved in the process of setting the learning agenda (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Learner autonomy increases as the student makes decisions regarding course content,

learning goals, interest areas, and grading standards, for example (Deci & Ryan; Dickinson, 1995).

Further, the motivation of students to be involved with and learn from the course content is, according to SDT, specifically related to competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence refers to developing the skills in question to a satisfactory level. Relatedness refers to connecting the classroom experience with the expected real world experience. Autonomy refers to the ability of the student to set their learning agenda and strategies (Deci & Ryan). As can be seen from the above regarding student participation in setting the learning agenda, SDT dovetails with SCL in the process of working toward student motivation, involvement, achievement, and learning ability.

However, it is important to consider the demands of SCL and SDT on the student. According to Usuki (2001), learner autonomy requires internal flexibility. These students, around 20 years old and still close to their high school "exam hell" experience, appear to have low knowledge of learning strategies and do not expect to actively manage their learning path (Hill, 1996; Uda, 1998; Wakamoto, 2000). Consequently, their "flexibility" may be low. With this cultural background, we start with Usuki's (p. 8) comment that, "Autonomous learning is not a result. It is a process." Accordingly, this course taught steps toward autonomy formally and informally to the students.

Methodology

The students' home university in Japan mandated certain content to appropriately prepare the students with regards to reading, writing, and presentation skills, and content about Canada. The teacher included Canada's classroom culture, student life in Vancouver, expectations and survival skills for Vancouver, plus advanced language content for advanced learners. Each of these content areas was woven into this student centered curriculum.

Course structure

In this course, the curriculum elements were designed and developed in order to maximize relatedness, competence, and learner autonomy while providing opportunities for students to gain learning strategies and make learning choices. Examples from the curriculum are provided below. The course consisted of two 90-minute classes, one for reading, and one for writing which each met once weekly for 15 weeks sharing the same students. The classes met back to back in the afternoon, facilitating continuity of topics and atmosphere. In the 2007 academic year 18 students participated and 24 students took part in the course in 2008.

The processes employed for the reading, writing, and speaking portions of the curriculum all begin with small steps that the students can accomplish to build up confidence and autonomy. According to Bandura, in order to become autonomous, the students must progress into a feeling of self efficacy (as cited in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 325). In the reading section, the students work on reading comprehension by learning the types of questions that support comprehension. Next they learn to answer those questions. Thereafter they learn to write five types of questions during at least nine iterations. Students then write comprehension questions based on texts that they select from a list of offerings all with a close focus on the Vancouver region.

After achieving success in creating questions, the students may choose their own readings from any source, provided the topic area is related to the target region. Through these steps, the students build confidence, competence, and exercise increasing freedom of choice.

Similarly, the writing section of the course has students practice skills used in essay writing in a constructivist progression in which they build up confidence and competence. Guided by the teacher and support materials, the students check and evaluate their progress and that of their peers. Students choose their own topics producing two 500 word essays during the course. The repeated practices, evaluations and completions are intended to build student confidence and competence throughout the holistic writing process from basic idea through checking and submission.

The presentation section of the course as well follows several steps in building confidence up while tearing down the affective barriers that plague most students, and which seem especially strong within the culture of Japan. First the students all deliver a short presentation of two to five minutes. All the students undergo this effort allowing them to collectively generate experience and share tacit knowledge regarding the delivery skills. They also build up a sense of accomplishment with the short presentation, valuable in achieving further successes (Usuki, 2001). As the students turn their attention toward the longer presentations, over seven minutes, they view videos of Japanese university age students, older Japanese, and non-Japanese presenters. The purpose is for students to see similar people successfully presenting. This process creates a positive vicarious experience which builds learner confidence (Bandura, 1977).

Additional training includes peer evaluations, positive teacher input, skills in lowering stress levels such as walking and moving during the presentation, as well as practices before small groups of peers.

The course design builds relatedness into the process at several points. Readings are selected from sources that will directly impact students studying abroad such as Asians living in Vancouver, student life, crime risk, and outdoor activities. Allowing the students to select their topics for essays and presentations allows them choose for relatedness based on their own preferences. Example topics that students select have included local and regional transportation, history, campus conditions, and Japanese culture in Vancouver. The success of these building autonomy processes will be discussed in the findings section.

Study method

This research attempted to quantify student reactions to and benefits from experiencing SCL. Eighteen students completed the survey in 2007 and 23 completed it in 2008. The study employed an anonymous survey titled Questionnaire on Course Content and Student Attitudes capturing basic data points about each participant such as gender, years of English, overseas travel experience, as well as knowledge and experience of SCL. Further, respondents reacted using a five point Likert scale to questions regarding their attitudes towards SCL in general and specific SCL activities used in the curriculum. The survey instructions were bilingual however questions were in English only. No attempt was made to clarify the meaning of the questions to students, though help was offered verbally.

Student responses did not appear unbalanced or otherwise remarkable in ways that indicated low comprehension, for example choosing the same answer for all questions. Additionally, some questions employed reverse phrasing to help identify questionnaires that may have been faulty due to poor comprehension. Finally, the Likert scale responses were bilingual and used emoticons (☺ - ☻ - ☹) to aid student comprehension. The survey instrument is located in Appendix 1.

The survey was administered in the last class of the spring semester in 2007 and 2008. There is a structural limitation in this research in that there was no measurement of attitudes towards SCL prior at the course start and therefore it is not possible to know if and why attitudes changed.

A survey specifically on SCL was administered in the penultimate class of the 2008 class only. In the SCL questionnaire, 24 students answered and commented on five questions about their learning goals. The SCL questionnaire is found in Appendix 2. Responses from the two surveys were numbered and the data entered into a spreadsheet. The tabulated data is presented selectively in Tables 2-4 below.

Results

The following outcomes were related to the five questions this study attempted to investigate.

Question 1. Can SCL be used in the classroom to generate results satisfactory to the teacher?

The teacher saw academic improvement, in terms of student scores, in the reading comprehension exercises, especially after four to six iterations. Writing improved somewhat over the course in the subjective view of the teacher, but no systematic pre and post analysis was made. Presentation skills, in terms of student scores, improved considerably over the course from the delivery of the short presentation through the end of the second presentation. The answer to the first question is therefore yes, the teacher was satisfied with results of the SCL approach.

Question 2. Can SCL be used in the classroom to generate results satisfactory to the students?

The survey results presented in Table 2 indicate that student self confidence, attitudes towards SCL and learner self confidence all grew under the regimen of small initial steps intended to build confidence and competence within the SCL context. In so far as these positive results show student satisfaction, it is reasonable to answer "yes" to the second question.

Question 3. Will students learn from students?

In this course, students overcame, in fact if not in belief, barriers against learning from other students. Examples of students learning from students include the following three quotes taken from anonymous survey comments:

- I acquired knowledge of Canada through … everyone's presentation.

- What students investigated in the presentation is very useful.

Table 2. Student perceptions

Perceptions of increase in confidence, 2008	
Area of confidence	Percent of students indicating improvement
Presentation	100
Reading comprehension	79
Writing	83
Own learner independence	70
Ability to learn in Canada with no teacher	52
Ability to learn about Canada with no teacher	40
Perceptions of suitability of SCL, 2007 and 2008	
Area of suitability	Percent of students with positive response
SCL is suitable for Japanese students (2008 class)	68
SCL is suitable for Japanese students (2007 class)	67
SCL is suitable for me (2008 class)	74
SCL is suitable for me (2007 class)	80
Perceptions of Learner autonomy, 2008	
Statement	Percent of students with positive response
Being independent as a student will be useful at [university name].	83
I think being independent is useful for students in Japan.	91

• Through presentations …, I knew many knowledge than before.

Comments about learning from students were not specifically elicited. The fact that students volunteered these comments indicates their importance to the students.

Additionally, the students learned and were tested on content presented by students, i.e. suffixes, prefixes and roots. In this case, all the students were under pressure of evaluation to learn from other students. The 73% average score of the students on this test suggests that at least some managed to learn course content from other students. Further, certain readings became top hits among students due to their content. Students read these more than any other items. They recommended these readings in conversation in and out of class as well as by email, according to informal student statements and teacher observations.

These results indicate transition of knowledge from student to student in formal class situations and outside of class. Therefore the answer to the third question is yes.

Question 4. Will SCL/SDT approaches result in clear examples of learner autonomy?

After 15 weeks of SCL and autonomy building efforts, students showed concrete signs of autonomous behavior. There is no data on autonomous learning these students may have applied to prior or concurrent studies, nonetheless steadily improving scores were noted in this course. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Learner autonomy, 2008

Autonomous learning	Percent of students
Went to internet (voluntarily and additionally to assignments) to follow up on one or more readings	61
Used internet, other than Wikipedia and similar sites, for research (based on citations in their submissions)	100

These results show that students were able to seek information for their class work and, of their own volition, beyond their immediate class work. Consequently the answer to the fourth question is yes.

Question 5. Will students perceive a benefit from increased autonomy?

Additional to student satisfaction with the class methodology, the SCL approach resulted in most of the students feeling more capable of making learning decisions and more involved in the learning process. The benefits are reflected in comments to these survey items such as "…I can read interested story by myself." and, "I can choose favorite topics." The responses in Table 4 indirectly suggest that students perceived a benefit related to gaining learner autonomy.

However the survey questions did not directly ask whether they saw these changes as beneficial to their learning. In the end, there cannot be a clear yes or no answer to the fifth question, though "probably yes" appears to be a reasonable evaluation.

Table 4. Benefits of learner autonomy, 2008

Benefits of learner autonomy	Percent of students with "yes" answer
Felt choosing reading materials helped in making decisions about learning	87
Felt making reading questions helped in making decisions about learning	87
Felt more involved in learning because of choosing essay and presentation topics	83

Conclusion

In conclusion, students came away from the course with concrete experience of SCL in the classroom and greater learning autonomy as measured by improving class work scores and questionnaires. Additionally, students had more knowledge of and confidence about learning strategies, making decisions about their education and execution of academic tasks such as reading, writing, and presenting than prior to the course.

Despite possible cultural bias against student centered learning and student to student learning, these students were able to benefit from the approach. Autonomy building is process heavy, yet students made progress in all points of the course. In the end, students felt overwhelmingly positive towards SCL and its techniques with regard to themselves and other Japanese learners, as seen in Table 2 above. This last result overturns Servetter's 1997 report showing that only 7% of Japanese English learners at university level gave a positive response to SCL as a learning approach. This result suggests that Japanese university level students are able to appreciate SCL and its potential benefits.

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PAC7 at JALT2008: Shared Identities

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PAC7 at JALT2008: Shared Identities

Appendix 1

Questionnaire on course content and student attitudes

Student Centered Learning (SCL) – [university name]-JP Preparation Course 2008, [university name] This survey is voluntary and anonymous. Please do not use your name or student number.

…この調査は、自由意思の方々に、無記名に行います。お名前や生徒番号は記載しないで下さい。

This questionnaire is optional, completing or not completing this questionnaire will have no effect on your grade.

Student Centered Learning (SCL) aims to make students more independent and autonomous about learning. In SCL, students make many of the decisions about what to learn and how to learn.

PART I

Do you feel more confident about managing study and life in Canada now that you did before the [university name]-JP Reading and Writing course?

Which of the following did you think has been helpful when you make decisions about learning? (Circle one, please write any more comments you like.)

Choosing your own reading material
Yes   No   _____

Making your own reading comprehension questions
Yes   No   _____

Making questions that might be used on the prefix test

Yes   No   _____

1.   I learned to do presentations well.

Firmly negative ☹☹ 全然高まらない	Slightly negative ☹ あまり高まらない	Neutral ☺ どちらとも言えない	Slightly positive ☺ どちらかといえば高まる	Firmly positive ☺☺ とても高まる
1	2	3	4	5

2.   I am more confident about doing presentations.

3.   Choosing my own essay and presentation topics made me feel more involved with learning

4.   In this course I made important choices about my learning.

5.   In this course I did not gain confidence about learning.

6.   Being independent as a student is sensible.

7.   As a student, I feel more independent now than at the start of this semester.

8.   Being independent as a student will be useful at [university name].

9.   I think being independent is useful for students in Japan.

10.   I do not feel confident that I learned about Canada in this course.

11.   I feel confident that I can learn about Canada without help from the teacher.

12.   I feel confident that I can learn about an essay topic when I am in Canada without help from the teacher.

13.   Because we learned about prefixes/roots/suffixes, I think I can manage new vocabulary better.

14. Because we learned about author intent I think I can manage difficult reading better.

15. Because we learned about words in context I think I can manage new vocabulary better
Comment about confidence: コメントがあれば記入してください: _____

Part III Other points about the class…

Check any items that you examined further on the internet because of the course:

___ The Lumberjack Song

___ Ogopogo
___ The Death of Peter Verigin

___ Richmond City

___ Robert Pickton, murderer

Other _____

Any other comments コメントがあれば記入してください:

Appendix 2

Questionnaire on SCL

Student Centered Learning (SCL) – [university name]
Preparation Course 2007, [university name]
Student Centered Learning (SCL) is increasingly common in the US and Europe. In SCL, the teacher guides the students, but the students make many of the decisions about what and how to learn. This questionnaire will help the teacher design the course more effectively in the future – thank you for your responses!   This survey is voluntary and anonymous. Please do not use your name or student number.

…この調査は、自由意思の方々に、無記名に行います。お名前や生徒番号は記載しないで下さい。

Please check if you agree to participate.ご協力に同意いただける場合は、下記にチェックをお願いします。
☐ I agree to participate in this survey. I understand that I will not have any advantage or disadvantage by participating or not participating. I understand that the information will be used for research to better understand student needs and to create better materials for students.

☐ 私は、この調査に参加することに同意します。参加もしくは不参加により、利益や不利益をこうむらないことは理解しています。この調査情報は、生徒が必要とすることをより深く認識し、生徒に役立つ勉強材料を提供することのために使われることを認識しています。

Please circle answers.   答に丸をつけて下さい。

About the student　生徒について

Male　男　　　Female 女　　Year at RU 立命館大学___回生

Department 学部

Business Administration	経営	IT	情報
Economics	経済学	Engineering	理工
International Management	国際管理		

Have you visited an English speaking country? 英語圏に行ったことはありますか

Yes　はい　　No　いいえ　If so, for how long?　ある場合はどのぐらいの期間ですか

Less than one week	1週間未満	1-3 months	1－3ヶ月
1-3 weeks	1－3週間	Up to one year	1年未満
About one month	1ヶ月程度	More than one year	一年以上

How many years have you been learning English? _____

Have you ever heard of SCL or a similar teaching method before?　　　　　Yes　　　　　　　　No

Have you ever learned using SCL or a similar teaching method before?　　Yes　　　　　　　　No

If so, please write the subject, where and when you used SCL. _____

I think SCL can be successful for Japanese students.

Firmly negative ☹☹ 全然高まらない	Slightly negative ☹ あまり高まらない	Neutral ☺ どちらとも言えない	Slightly positive ☺ どちらかといえば高まる	Firmly positive ☺☺ とても高まる
1	2	3	4	5

I think SCL can be successful for me.

I do not think SCL can be successful for students at [university name] University.

I think SCL can be successful for learning reading skills.

I do not think SCL can be successful for learning about a foreign country.

Comments, if anyコメントがあれば記入してください:

_____