

Developing Autonomy Through Japanese Cultural Concepts

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In this paper we discuss interview data from one participant from a larger study to understand the development of autonomy through a content-based English class studying Japanese culture. The participant, part of a larger study of autonomy at a private women's university, agreed to an in-depth semi-structured interview after course completion. Data were examined for factors related to language learning, awareness of the concepts, and learner autonomy. The participant reported strong motivation to learn English but was unsatisfied with the class level, which led to frustration. However, her attitude toward learning and goals for her future career helped her to recover her motivation. The results suggest that providing students with clear steps for becoming independent learners leads to the development of autonomy and contributes to improving English skills. Cooperative learning environments and rapport between teachers and learners are pivotal.

本研究では、日本文化における内容重視型英語授業を通じた、自律性促進に関するある一人の学習者のデータについて論じる。私立女子大学の自律性に関する大規模調査の一環として、参加者は講座終了後、詳細な半構造化インタビューに応じた。データは、言語学習、概念に対する認識、学習者の自律性に関連する要因について検証された。参加者は、英語学習に対する強い動機付けを示したが、授業のレベルに対して不満を持ち、それがフラストレーションへと結びついていた。しかし、学習に対する姿勢と将来のキャリアへの目標が、学習意欲回復のきっかけとなった。調査によれば、自主的な学習者となる明確なステップを提供することで、自律性の育成へと導き、英語習熟度の強化に貢献することを示唆していることが分かった。また、協調的な教育環境と、教員と学習者間の信頼関係が極めて重要である。

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2024), has indicated that the goals for English learning include more than enhancing English proficiency; it is vital that educators (a) help Japanese English language learners (ELLs) identify differences and similarities between both languages' vocabulary, expressions, and logical development, (b) deepen learners' understanding of the underlying history, culture, and customs, and (c) develop their ability express their opinions, and engage in class activities such as discussions and debates that lead to arguments and increase awareness of local and global issues. The last goal, emerging from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent expressions of anomie, has highlighted the importance of communication among students as well as with their teachers (Hofmeyr, 2023; Li & Yang, 2021).

Recognizing the need for developing second language use in communication, researchers have examined Japanese EFL lower proficiency and demotivated students regarding their anxiety (Agawa, 2020; Kikuchi, 2019; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Ostman & Xethakis, 2021). These studies suggest that Japanese ELLs have difficulty expressing their opinions due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and weak interpersonal skills. According to Kitano (2001), language learners have few opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom, which leads to demotivation and anxiety when speaking English. Japanese students learning EFL report lower levels of communicative confidence than students in other Asian EFL countries (Kitano, 2001), which is the reason for their language-learning anxiety, especially regarding oral production.

However, few researchers have focused on motivated students having difficulty improving their English communicative skills. Moreover, despite strong motivation to express their opinions because of anxiety and socio-cultural issues, learners were reluctant to speak English in class. Especially, participants in a number of studies (Agawa, 2020; Kikuchi, 2019; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Ostman & Xethakis, 2021) indicated that they had a hard time making spontaneous speeches in English. Consequently, they were

reluctant to participate in classroom activities. Japanese students' lack of self-confidence related to cultural norms such as modesty might affect classroom atmosphere (Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Egitim, 2024; Maher & King, 2022; Shibata, 2023).

According to Nakagawa and Swenson (2026), observations of students' understanding of cultural concepts suggest that active involvement in classroom activities might contribute to learner autonomy. Participants in this study were asked how they overcame initial hesitations to speak English and became confident users of the L2. The data were qualitatively coded and categorized so that each factor could be explicitly clarified and imply how teachers assist students. While the results were informative, the relationship between participants' knowledge of Japanese cultural concepts and learner autonomy were unclear. Therefore, one participant's views of Japanese cultural concepts such as ambiguity, silence, and modesty were explored in an in-depth interview. This paper presents the results of that interview and elucidates factors that might aid students to become confident and autonomous language learners.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy

Although studies have paid attention to learner autonomy (e.g., Benson, 2016), we specifically cite Little's working definitions (2007, 2020). Learner autonomy can be defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Little, 2007, p. 14). To develop second or foreign language proficiency, it is essential to cultivate learner autonomy (Little, 2007). As Little (2020) explained:

Language learner autonomy is a dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning

- From the beginning they do this as far as possible in the target language, which thus becomes a channel of their individual and collaborative agency
- By exercising agency in the target language, they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative
- They also develop their autonomy as learners and users of their target language, which becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity. (p. 3)

In short, learner autonomy research suggests learners go through three stages. First, learners observe and monitor how different the target language is from their mother tongue and try to express their ideas individually and collaboratively in class. Second,

by using and producing the target language, they gradually enhance proficiency in communication. Finally, they increase learner autonomy as learners and users of the target language and, eventually, integrate their multilingual and multicultural competence into their own identity.

Moreover, making language learner autonomy a reality requires that the curriculum "make sure your learners understand what they are expected to achieve" (Little, 2020, p. 14). Regarding the target language as the medium for teaching/learning, Little indicated that there were three keys for developing autonomy in the classroom. These are (a) clear rules for communication, (b) encouragement of communication, and (c) emphasis on written communication. This suggests that learner autonomy is a must for mastering second or foreign languages (Chong & Reinders, 2025). Autonomous learners must follow explicit rules for successful classroom communication, comprehend their learning goals, engage in language learning through communicative ways with peers in class, and be aware of the significance of literacy in the target language through writing activities (Little, 2020). These are necessary for the learner to achieve autonomy. Furthermore, course activities contribute to learner autonomy. In other words, autonomy-supportive teaching is beneficial for university students' academic success. This suggests that autonomous learning should be promoted through awareness of peer collaboration.

Unfortunately, Asian learners are often described as less autonomous than their western counterparts (Tomita & Sano, 2016). Regarding the Japanese contexts, little research into autonomy has been conducted, especially in content-based English classes (Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Okada (2023) suggested that autonomy-supportive teaching could be beneficial for higher education students' educational success. Similarly, Little (2020, p. 25) discussed the importance of teachers in developing learner autonomy, indicating that "a skilled, attentive and proactive teacher" is necessary for language learner autonomy" (p. 25), regardless of whether learning is "online [rather] than face to face" (p. 26). In short, becoming an independent learner is one of the goals of education aimed at enhancing learner autonomy. Thus, based on this theoretical background, we pose two research questions:

RQ1: What factors develop Japanese students' learner autonomy?

RQ2: What factors inhibit their learner autonomy?

To analyze the elements necessary to become an autonomous learner, we present a case study of one Japanese EFL student.

Methodology

Participant and Procedures

Data for this study come from a 34-minute in-depth interview conducted following qualitative research interview procedures (Roulston, 2010) with one of the participants in our larger study (Nakagawa & Swenson, 2026) on the development of autonomy through the study of Japanese cultural concepts at a private women's university where the authors teach. All participants in this study completed the required informed consent form, which was in Japanese, at the institution.

The interview participant, a 2nd-year Japanese EFL student, entered the school with a TOEIC score of 195 but had obtained one of 535 at the end of her 1st year. She had a high level of Korean language fluency when entering school and indicated that she was more motivated to improve her Korean-language skills rather than study English, which might have contributed to her negative attitude toward learning English.

When the participant became a 2nd-year student, she enrolled in an elective content-based class exploring Japanese culture. The course was held for 90 minutes each week over a 15-week term. All students completed a survey of their current knowledge of Japanese culture (see Appendix A). The lessons were divided into three phases. Before the lesson, she worked on reading assigned chapters and viewing the instructors' lectures online through the school's learning management system. During the lesson, she participated in a group summary and whole class discussions. Finally, she prepared an English summary and completed a Japanese reflection assignment as homework.

Following completion of the course, a semi-structured interview with a L1 Japanese speaker was conducted in Japanese. The research project was explained again, and the participant confirmed her consent to participate. The same questions as those of Nakagawa and Swenson (2026) were used for the interview (see Appendix B).

The interview recording was transcribed and translated into English. The Japanese and English texts were coded following in vivo coding procedures (Saldaña, 2025). The authors were the coders and discussed the codes, revised the codebook, and conducted second-stage coding separately before reviewing the coding and arriving at the central themes related to developing autonomy. These comments showing the participant's attitude were also coded as positive, neutral, and negative. For this paper, comments unrelated to learner autonomy are excluded.

Results

Data collected through the interview indicate that the participant was aware of learning and deepening her knowledge through in-class activities. Table 1 provides a summary of the 221 coded entries from her related to discussion of the impact of the course and whether they were considered negative, neutral, or positive. The discussion of results will focus on the codes of "autonomy," "awareness," "motivation," and "noticing."

Table 1
Coded Participant Comments (N = 221)

Code	Negative (n = 62)	Neutral (n = 58)	Positive (n = 101)
Achievements			2
Autonomy	2	7	15
Awareness	18	19	23
Class activities	2		1
Motivation	14	4	14
Noticing	26	21	33
Peers			4
Preparation		7	5
Support			4

The participant commented, "Ah, when we actually talked and discussed using our own words, we brought out our own thoughts and feelings" (line 7) and showed she had a powerful will in terms of self-learning, stating, "So I can talk about those questions in my own words and be able to speak about them during class" (line 131), and, "I couldn't prepare everything perfectly, but I had a rough idea of what I wanted to say in Japanese" (line 132). One point that emerged during the interview was that she was demotivated to learn English at the beginning of her studies. She was not satisfied with her assigned compulsory program in the first year. She wanted to learn challenging content but felt that most of the lessons were easy and unchallenging, which left her frustrated. These comments were coded as "awareness" of language use, with careful reading indicating that they showed the participant to be frustrated and demotivated toward learning English early in her studies. Later in the interview, one reason for this frustration

appeared: “This D class thing just sounded so awful to me. It wasn’t like I felt left behind, but ... how do I put it? It felt like being at the bottom, and I really hated that” (lines 224-225). (Note: “D class” refers to placement in the lowest-level class in terms of English ability based on results on the institution’s placement test.)

Rather than staying discouraged, she indicated that her negative feelings regarding her assignment to a lower-level class motivated her to study energetically to achieve future career goals. This is clear in her comments later in the interview, which implied a positive attitude toward these goals and growing awareness of English ability to achieve her planned future.

Then I heard about the airline industry too—someone I knew joined the marketing planning department or something like that, and they said someone who was just like you joined, so I figured, well, maybe that path could work for me too. (line 252)

She also said,

Yeah, right. Also. Which companies? There are all kinds of companies out there, but we also need to analyze which ones are a good fit for the industry or which ones might be a good choice. ... But honestly, what I really want to do most—well, I can’t really decide what’s number one—TOEIC, yeah, or rather, studying English itself? Yeah. I just want to keep at it. (lines 288–290)

These changes in attitude toward learning and achieving her future career goals pushed her to develop learner autonomy. The importance of being an independent learner and awareness of her own objectives were also evident, which is a must for developing learner autonomy. In the next section, based on this case study, we discuss suggestions for developing learner autonomy and pedagogical implications.

Discussion and Implications

Data from this case study in a content-based class address the two research questions. RQ1 was “What factors develop Japanese students’ learner autonomy?” As the interviewee explained, changes in attitude and learning goals are necessary. At first, she was demotivated to learn English and motivated to speak Korean. She had not recognized that learning English was of importance for her career goals. Once she discovered that English was crucial in communication and necessary for her future success, she decided to develop a plan of self-study to achieve a higher TOEIC score. In

addition, she started tutoring and consulted a mentor and others to help her. Finding a role model who had fluency in both English and Korean also motivated her.

Furthermore, the results suggest that instructors should pay attention to the socio-cultural aspects of communication as these might be affecting learners in their communication. As described in previous research (Takahashi, 2020), Japaneseness and multicultural education should be taught so that Japanese learners can become culturally responsive (Nakagawa & Swenson, 2026). They also identified their role in communicating about Japanese society in terms of teaching conventional and modern customs to people from other countries. Awareness of cultural biases regarding communication allowed the Japanese learners to become confident in discussing the concepts they were studying. Becoming confident helps develop learner autonomy. If they become confident in their use of the target language, their anxiety might be reduced automatically, supporting Little’s (2007, 2020) calls for providing a pathway for ELLs to build language confidence in order to develop their autonomy.

RQ2 was “What factors inhibit learner autonomy?” The participant in this study had gotten a better TOEIC score than students in advanced level classes. This suggests that entry-level streaming might demotivate students and that steps need to be taken at institutions to help those placed in these classes understand the placement decision and ensure it does not negatively impact the education provided. The participant in this study felt the faculty might have had lower expectations because of the students’ entry-level English skills. However, students learn both from their teachers and other students. Furthermore, the initial placement did not consider her language learning experiences. This suggests that students who might be labeled “experienced L2 learners,” as the participant in this study was, recognize how to apply and improve their skills in the target language. Therefore, to motivate learners, three elements should be considered: (a) demanding courses, (b) rigorous study schedules and faculty requirements, and (c) linguistically and cognitively appropriate materials with university-level content.

This case study has provided insights into the keys to developing learner autonomy. Despite a limited sample size, this case study might indicate how educators can create learner autonomy in classrooms. A key appears to be revising instruction and materials to create classroom environments that challenge students. Furthermore, if possible, sharing students’ views with the university administration, and curriculum change might be suggested. In this way, as learners and users of the target language, students may eventually integrate their multilingual and multicultural competence into their own identity and become able to achieve the goal of developing autonomy.

Conclusion

This case study examined the development of learner autonomy through Japanese socio-culture in an intact content-based class. The interview data from the participant suggest that becoming an autonomous learner requires insights from both learners and teachers. Learners of the target languages should recognize how to become independent and achieve their goals. For teachers, encouraging students, providing challenging materials, and setting a rigorous schedule appear necessary to foster learner autonomy. Moreover, it is important to recognize that lower expectations might inhibit language learners from becoming autonomous. Therefore, positive and dynamic classrooms with challenging materials might be what is necessary to lead learners to independence and success. With this, they might develop communication confidence and the ability to use the target language without hesitation.

Although this study indicates that learner autonomy helped the participant increase her confidence in language learning, it has pedagogical and theoretical limitations. First, this is a case study of one participant, and results might vary for other participants. It is difficult to generalize tendencies and attitudes toward language learning from a single case. Second, the course focused on a content-based approach to cross-cultural development and Japanese cultural concepts, limiting its applicability to other language courses. Finally, as the participant's proficiency level was relatively low when she started the course, it is imperative for researchers to examine how interventions might enable students at other L2 proficiency levels develop learner autonomy.

Furthermore, studies employing mixed methods approaches are needed if researchers are to understand how to develop autonomy with a wider range of students. Moreover, gender should be taken into consideration as these findings highlighted only one case, that of a female learner. In addition, follow-up interviews are needed to see if any interventions have a lasting effect, and further studies are needed to determine if interventions might have a lasting impact on the techniques and strategies employed once participants reach their goals. Finally, the results of this study suggest that course instructors of similar classes in Japan should be aware of the socio-cultural aspects of the course and communicate this information to their students to improve their English learning experiences.

Bio Data

Hiroyo Nakagawa received a MA in applied language studies from Carleton University, Canada, and her PhD in education from Hiroshima University. She is a professor at Osaka Jogakuin University/Osaka Jogakuin College. Her main areas of research include learner autonomy, qualitative research, and project-based language learning.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire: Knowledge Survey for Japanese Culture

このアンケートにご協力していただけますか。

Do you understand and agree to participate in this survey?

1. 日本文化の概念についてよく知っていますか。

- 1 全く知らない; 2 あまり知らない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 知っている; 5 よく知っている;
6 非常に良く知っている

How familiar are you with Japanese culture?

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not well; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Familiar; 6 Very familiar

2. 日本文化を日本語で説明することができますか。

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

How confident are you in explaining Japanese culture in Japanese?

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not well; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Very confident

3. 日本文化を英語で説明することができますか。

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

How confident are you in explaining Japanese culture in English?

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Very confident

4. 以下の日本文化の概念を日本語で説明できますか？

4.1 「謙虚さ」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in Japanese? [「謙虚さ」modesty]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

4.2 「曖昧さ」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in Japanese? [「曖昧さ」ambiguity]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

4.3 「沈黙」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in Japanese? [「沈黙」silence]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

4.4 「武士道」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in Japanese? [「武士道」bushido (honor & morals)]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

5. 以下の日本文化の概念を英語で説明できますか？

5.1 「謙虚さ」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in English? [「謙虚さ」modesty]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

5.2 「曖昧さ」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in English? [「曖昧さ」ambiguity]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

5.3 「沈黙」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in English? [「沈黙」silence]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

5.4 「武士道」

- 1 全くできない; 2 あまりできない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 できる; 5 自信がある;
6 非常に自信がある

Can you explain the following Japanese cultural concepts in English? [「武士道」bushido (honor & morals)]

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Confident; 6 Yes, easily

6. 日本の社会を理解するのに日本文化の概念の知識が役立つと思いますか。

- 1 全く思わない; 2 あまり思わない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 まあそう思う; 5 そう思う;
6 とてもそう思う

Do you need knowledge of Japanese cultural concepts to understand Japanese society?

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Useful; 6 Very useful

7. 日本文化の概念の説明する方法を知っていることが将来の仕事や勉強に役立つと思いますか。

- 1 全く思わない; 2 あまり思わない; 3 どちらともいえない; 4 まあそう思う; 5 そう思う;
6 とてもそう思う

Do you think knowing how to explain Japanese cultural concepts will be useful in your future work or study?

- 1 Not at all; 2 Not so much; 3 Neither; 4 Well; 5 Useful; 6 Very useful

8. なぜこの授業を取りましたか?

Why did you decide to take this course?

- 授業の日時。Time and day of class meeting.
- 日本文化に興味がある。I am interested in Japanese culture.
- 日本文化を説明できるようになりたい。I want to be able to explain Japanese culture.
- 友達が勧めた。Another student recommended the class.
- オフィスに割り当てられた。I was assigned by the school administration.
- その他 Others

9. 以下の日本文化の概念を一つ説明して下さい。(英語か日本語で)

Please explain one of these cultural concepts (in English or Japanese).

- 謙虚さ]modesty / 「曖昧さ」ambiguity / 「沈黙」 silence /
「武士道」bushido (honor & morals)

A short answer is fine. 短い答えで大丈夫です。

10. この授業で、何を学びたいか、英語か日本語で説明して下さい。

Could you explain, in English or Japanese, what you hope to learn in this class?

A short answer is fine. 短い答えで大丈夫です。

11. 日本文化の知識についてインタビューしても良いですか。

Are you willing to be interviewed about your knowledge of Japanese culture?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. 英語で日本文化を学ぶことについてはどう思いましたか?
What did you think about learning about Japanese culture in English?
2. じゃあ、雰囲気どうでした? クラスの。
How was the atmosphere in class?
3. ディスカッションはどうでした?
How was the discussion?
4. そしたら、英語を使うことに関してはどうですか?
How about using English?
5. そしたらええとですね、一番授業の中で、あの、まあ課題も含めて一番つらかった課題、しんどかった課題。あの。まあ、アクティビティも含めて何ですか?
So then, um, what was the most difficult assignment in the class? The one that was really tough, including the activities. What did you do that included all the activities?
6. 最後にね、三年生になって、ずっともう勉強していくと思うけど、これを一番やりたいことってありますか?
Finally, now that you're in your 3rd year, I guess you'll be studying all the time, but is there anything you really want to do most?