

# **Fostering Autonomous Learners in English Education in Japan**

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## **1. Introduction**

The University Reform Action Plan announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in June 2012, identified those who pursue lifelong learning and can think and act proactively as essential to cultivate the English abilities required to respond to a dramatically changing society. Today, Japanese universities are required to respond to this reform by fostering those who can respond to globalization. In recent years, various reforms in English education have recognized the importance of autonomy in language learning in achieving these aims (e.g., Nakatake & Sakurai, 2016; Sato, Nakatake, Satake & Hug, 2015) and consequently, fostering autonomous learners is now required across the whole of Japanese university education. However, how learner autonomy is developed and fostered in English education is not yet clear. To achieve this ambition it is essential to first understand the concept of autonomy and autonomous learners. This paper provides a brief overview of the concept of autonomy and autonomous learners and discusses the importance of helping students become autonomous in language learning. This paper also reports on two approaches to fostering autonomous learners in university English education in a liberal arts course.

## **2. Autonomy and autonomous learners**

Autonomy has been defined by many researchers to date. One of the most representative definitions of autonomy in language learning is provided by Holec, who defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981, p.3). Holec elaborates this definition as follows:

To take charge of one’s own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning,

i.e.:

- determining the objectives;
- defining the concepts and progressions;
- selecting methods and techniques to be used;
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
- evaluating what has been acquired.

The autonomous learner is himself capable of making all these decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved.

(Holec, 1981, p.3)

Benson (2001) defines autonomy in the context of language learning as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p.47) based on his idea that “the construct of ‘control’ appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of ‘charge’ of ‘responsibility’”(p.47) and lists three levels of control: learning management (learning behavior), cognitive processes (psychology of learning) and learning content (learning situations). These three levels of control are not independent but interdependent. Little (1991) describes the concept of autonomy by complementing Holec’s definition of autonomy from the psychological perspective as follows:

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

Little (2002) mentioned that autonomous learners can be interpreted as those who “explicitly accept responsibility for their own learning and exercise that responsibility in a continuous effort to understand what, why and how they are

learning, and with what degree of success” (p.186). Little (1991) also argues that autonomy takes different forms for different individuals or even for the same individual in different contexts of learning or at different times as follows:

It is true, of course, that we recognize autonomous learners by their behavior; but that can take numerous different forms, depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on. Autonomy, in other words, can manifest itself in very different ways (p.4).

Although the definition of autonomy in language learning differs according to the researchers, the following are common features.

- (1) Learners should take responsibility for their own language learning.  
The reason for this is that all learning, in all cases, is something that can only be done by the learner themselves, and that even when school education is over, the learner is required to develop the ability to continue studying.
- (2) Taking responsibility means taking personal ownership of part or all of the many processes that have hitherto traditionally been performed by a teacher, including deciding the purpose of learning, selecting the methods of learning, and evaluating achievement.

(Littlewood, 1999, p.71)

To comprehensively describe the concept of autonomy, Sinclair (2000) subdivided the characteristics of autonomy into 13 aspects.

- (1) Autonomy is a construct of capacity
- (2) Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning

- (3) The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate
- (4) Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal
- (5) There are degrees of autonomy
- (6) The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable
- (7) Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent
- (8) Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e. conscious reflection and decision making
- (9) Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies
- (10) Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom
- (11) Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension
- (12) The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension
- (13) Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures

These characteristics of autonomy advocated by Sinclair (2000) offer a very important viewpoint in correctly understanding the concept of autonomy. One point that must be noted in understanding the concept of autonomy is that autonomy does not mean self-instruction completely independent of a teacher, or individual learning without considering relationships with others (Aoki & Tanaka, 2011; Little, 1990; Ozeki, 2010). Therefore fostering autonomy is not simply a matter of leaving learners alone without instruction. As noted in (3) above, autonomy is not an inherited trait. Rather, “it can be acquired through the intervention of education” (Kojima, 2010, p.136). Therefore, an important point for fostering autonomy is how the instructor interacts with the learner. The instructor is required to understand the various aspects of the autonomy concept, and instead of the role of a conventional ‘instructor’, they must play the role of a facilitator or supporter, providing scaffolding to enable the learner to engage proactively with English learning both in and outside the classroom.

Ozeki (2010) mentions that “the definition of the autonomy defined by Holec and Benson is very similar to the definition of metacognition (metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive behavior) in cognitive psychology” (p. 91) and she defines an autonomous learner as “a learner with metacognition” (p. 93). In fact, metacognition is considered as an essential factor for becoming an autonomous learner (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Wenden, 1998). Furthermore, Ozeki also considers that autonomy includes “autonomy as a language user”, and she offers the view that an autonomous learner as a language user is one who “has a strong consciousness of adopting the ability and attitude required for language use, proactively seeking opportunities to use the target language and put it into action” (p. 129). Autonomous learners must take responsibility for their own learning, actively engage in selecting and deciding learning content and methods, and strive to develop autonomy while reflecting on and evaluating the processes and outcome of their learning.

### **3. The Importance of Fostering Autonomous Learners**

In English education in Japan, fostering autonomous learners is considered to be important for the following reasons. Japanese university students who learn English vary widely in their interest and curiosity, their attitudes toward learning English, their objectives, the English ability they want to obtain, and the required English ability for the future. In order for each learner to achieve their goals and to undertake English learning that meets their needs both in and outside the classroom, it is essential to foster autonomous learners. It is also necessary to respond to the social requirement for universities to cultivate Japanese who can use English. In the Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) environment, it takes quite a long time for Japanese learners to gain the high-level of English proficiency required to use English for work which was advocated in the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” announced by the MEXT in 2003. However, the time devoted to English lessons at university is limited, so it will be very important to foster people who can proactively learn both in and outside the class, and who can independently

continue to learn even after their school education ends. It is necessary for Japanese English learners to engage autonomously in order to achieve the maximum results in the limited learning time available in the Japanese EFL context. In addition, as Ozeki (2010) points out, “Learners who use a simple approach to learning (a strategy of translating and memorizing) regard their own role in learning as passive, and frequently they can only achieve a low level in academic fields”, and “When learners take responsibility for their own learning, their motivation improves” (p. 94). These cognitive and psychological reasons are also important for fostering autonomous learners.

#### **4. Approaches to Fostering Autonomous Learners**

This section will introduce my attempts to foster autonomous learners in English education in a liberal arts course: learning portfolio and the use of ICT. In addition, the students’ responses to each approach will be briefly reported based on the questionnaire results.

##### **4.1 Learning portfolio**

This section presents the findings of the approach using learning portfolios in English reading classes in university liberal arts course as a means of fostering autonomous learners (see Nakatake & Sakurai, 2016, for more details). In this example, learning portfolios were introduced on a pilot basis in four reading classes for first-year university students at different levels of proficiency.

The design of the portfolios made reference to previous studies such as the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment) (2001), an autonomous learner development program developed as secondary language acquisition research, and the earlier research of Smolen, Newman, Wathen and Lee (1995), Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), and Mineishi (2002) who introduced portfolios for developing English learners’ reading skills. The learning portfolios incorporated the elements of both working portfolios and assessment portfolios discussed by Danielson and Abrutyn (1997). The working portfolio involves the element of keeping materials collected by the learner.

Specifically, it enables the entry before class of preparatory learning records, records of joint learning in classes, and records of tests after classes. The assessment portfolio is a record of what the learner studied themselves in the subject, including self-reflection on whether the targets for the subject were achieved, and what the learner understood or did not understand.

The structure of the portfolio used in this example has the following three parts.

#### Part 1

- Statement of goals
- Evaluation of whether the goals set before the course have been achieved (5-point Likert scales)
- Free format for writing the goals for English learning (“What is your goal for English learning for in this class?”)
- Free format for writing English learning strategies (“How will you study to achieve the goal?”)
- Free format for writing how to solve English learning problems (“What will you do if your learning does not go as planned?”)

#### Part 2

- Record of learning in classes (answers to questions, scores in short tests, cooperative learning worksheets)
- Achievement of goals for each class (including free format for writing what was and was not understood)
- Planning for self-study after classes
- Report on self-study from the previous class

#### Part 3

- Restatement of goals
- Evaluation of whether the goals set were achieved by the end of the

course (5-point Likert scales)

- Free format for writing the goals for English learning (“Have you achieved your goals for English learning?”)
- Free format for writing English learning strategies (“How did you study to achieve the goal?”)
- Free format for writing how to solve English learning problems (“What did you do if your learning did not go as planned?”)

Part 1 is completed after explaining the outline of the subject, the goals, evaluation, class plan, how to make a portfolio and so on in the first lesson. Part 2 is used in all of the classes, and Part 3 is filled in after a general review of the subject in the last lesson.

To analyze the effects of this approach, the content of the learning portfolio itself and its effectiveness can be examined from various perspectives. However, in this paper, I focus on how the learners perceived the effectiveness of the learning portfolio from the perspectives of (1) learning in class, (2) learning outside the class, and (3) learning after the course.

The questionnaire revealed that many learners valued learning portfolios for learning in class, whereas they were not viewed so favorably for learning outside class. Furthermore, their effectiveness for general English learning after the course was largely viewed favorably, and there were cases where the free format responses suggested that learners were motivated toward autonomous growth.

Regarding the effectiveness of learning portfolios for English learning, using the learning portfolio after the course was considered more favorable than learning outside class. Learners who answered “Yes” and “Yes, somewhat” in the free format responses gave diverse reasons, but many wrote that they could look back at their own efforts during the course and set targets for future English learning. Examples include “I think that I can now read English texts that are written for learning, so now I want to be able to understand natural English”, “I think I understand how to study now, so I want to read English in genres that I enjoy” and so on. In addition,



the textbook aimed to foster reading skills through understanding different cultures to stimulate their interest. Many targets were set including; “This class made me interested in other countries, so one day I want to go there and try communicating in English”. Learners setting new goals themselves can be considered to be related to the pedagogical, cognitive and psychological importance of this aspect of developing autonomous learners identified by Ozeki (2010). Ozeki (2010) identified the following as important from a pedagogical viewpoint in fostering autonomous learners; “Adult learners have diverse needs, which cannot be satisfied with school education alone” (p.94), and “It is also necessary for learners to study English by themselves outside class, according to their own needs” (p.94). Another factor identified by Ozeki (2010) as important from a cognitive and psychological perspective is “when learners take responsibility for their own learning, it raises their motivation” (p.94). The questionnaire indicated that when the learners themselves set new English learning targets based on their learning portfolios, it can be assumed that the learning portfolios motivated them to undertake new learning through self-reflection during the course, representing their first step towards becoming autonomous learners.

There was also a tendency for the learning portfolio to affect different aspects of the learner depending on their proficiency. More proficient learners wrote more precise and specific free format responses concerning learning methods and problem solving within learning portfolios. This suggests that learners with high proficiency who have already mastered learning strategies are able to clearly define problems with English learning in their portfolio can identifying solutions, or in other words, determine how best to study. However, learners with low proficiency can self-reflect on if they have achieved their targets in each class in the free format response to whether or not they understood the material. If this elicits motivation to learn by solving the problem, since they have yet to learn how to study in order to overcome the problem, the teacher needs to instruct the learner on the specific problem. Portfolios are effective from the point of view of both the learner and teacher in recognizing that learners have diverse proficiency and problems that need to be

addressed.

#### **4.2 The Use of ICT –TED Talks–**

In English education, the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is expected to promote autonomous learning outside the classroom (Yoshida, Matsuda, Uemura, & Nozawa, 2008). In this section, the approach using TED Talks will be presented as a means of promoting autonomous learning outside the classroom.

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design and started in 1984 as a conference under the slogan “Ideas worth spreading”. In TED conferences, expert speakers with varied backgrounds give a presentation on various topics. TED conferences cover a wide range of topics from science to business to global issues. TED Talks deliver more than 2000 videos to the world for free.

Before describing the details of this approach, the reasons for adopting TED Talks as a means of promoting students’ autonomous learning are presented. One advantage of TED Talks is accessibility. TED Talks are available not only on the website but also on the smartphone or tablet by downloading a TED application from the Internet. Therefore, students can watch a TED Talk from anywhere and at anytime. The second point is that students can learn authentic English. In the TED conference, expert speakers with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in various fields including non-native-English-speakers give a presentation in a variety of English. Taking the importance of learning EIL (English as an international language) for communication among people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds into consideration, TED Talks are useful materials that can provide authentic English for students. The third point is that TED Talks are available in multilingual subtitles and transcripts and students can learn English in the multilingual and multicultural context. Learning English in the multilingual and multicultural context is important to cultivate students’ multiple perspectives and develop their attitudes to understand and respect diversity. The last point is that TED Talks share influential and cutting-edge ideas from various disciplines. Presentation

on what is going on in society now can evoke students' interest and increase the willingness to learn more.

Next, the details of this approach are provided. In this approach, students are required to watch at least one TED Talk, keep a TED conference diary, and submit the diary to the instructor in class every week. Expecting students to take their own initiative, no detailed directions for watching TED are provided in advance. Regarding a TED conference diary, students are required to write about the content of the TED Talk and their opinions on it. In addition to this, students are asked to take notes for words or expressions to remember in the TED Talk so that they can pay more attention to English in the environment in which they watch. The diary can be written in either English or Japanese according to the students' choice. After the students' diaries are submitted, detailed comments and feedback on their writing are provided with each student's diary. Besides responding to the students' comments, detailed comments on the students' writing is also provided pointing out areas where they lacked clarity or coherence or needed more explanation. When the diary is written in English, the student's grammatical errors are corrected. The TED conference diary functions as a learning portfolio for each student.

The informal questionnaire conducted at the end of the semester indicated that students on average responded positively to English learning with TED Talks. One effect of this approach is to develop students' learning strategies. In the written comments section of the questionnaire, some students remarked that "Watching a TED video everyday become standard habit", other students commented that "I watch a TED video with Japanese subtitle at first, the second time with English subtitle, and the last time without subtitle, which enables me to check my understanding step by step."

These comments indicated that this approach can encourage students' use of metacognitive strategy (i.e. knowledge about learning) in particular. Another effect of learning with TED Talks is students' active involvement in English learning. Their sense of achievement in English learning were observed in students' written comments of the questionnaire as follows: "Because I choose a TED Talk I want to

watch based on my interest and curiosity, I strongly feel that I am proactive in studying English, instead of being forced to study.” “I feel that not only my English has improved but also expanded my view about the world.” “This is my first time that I could enjoy learning English. Through watching TED Talks, I realized that I could broaden my perspectives. I want to learn English more and want to have proficiency in English.” Some students reported their English writing development. Their comments reveal positive learning experiences and positive attitudes towards future English learning. As mentioned above, TED Talks in which expert speakers from various cultural backgrounds give a presentation on diverse topics in English enables the students to be exposed to various cultures, values, and ideas. In addition, through writing a TED conference diary in English every week, students can develop their ability to express their opinions by understanding and respecting diversity as well. Therefore, learning with TED Talks can develop students’ understanding of different cultures, values, and ideas while improving their English. Furthermore, teacher feedback on the students’ TED conference diary can contribute to improvement not only in students’ English but also in their motivation for continuous autonomous learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

Autonomy is one of the key learner factors for successful language learning and learner development in English education. Because the approach to learning varies considerably by individual, there ought to be a variety of options for learning. There is no one size fits all for language learning and autonomy may prove the difference between success and failure in language learning. In addition, autonomy in language learning is vital in that language, whether it is their native or foreign language, should be learned for a lifetime. Even the native speakers do not know all the words in their language and sometimes fail to use their native language appropriately, to say nothing of foreign language with different culture and society. For lifelong autonomous learning, as mentioned earlier, learners need to develop skills related to self-management, self-monitoring and self-assessment, actively being involved in

their learning process. In learners' learning process, an important role of teachers is to provide appropriate scaffolding so that learners can develop their autonomy. In this sense, it is important to cultivate teachers' ability and willingness to foster autonomy among their students and support the development of the autonomy of their students. In addition, teachers are required to evaluate not only the outcome of students' learning but also their learning process by incorporating their voices in the process of language teaching.

Needless to say, autonomy is of great importance not only in English education but also in education in general. As Benson (2001) argues, "when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners but also develop into more reasonable and critical members of the communities in which they live" (p.1). Fostering autonomous learners can be regarded as a legitimate and desirable goal of education as a whole.

#### Notes

All the quotations from Japanese literature in this paper were translated into English by the author.

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