Learner Autonomy in Language Education:
A Cross−Cultural Perspective

言語教育におけるラーナー・オートノミー
一異文化間の視点から一

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Abstract

In recent years, the importance of developing learner autonomy in language education has been one of its more prominent themes in Japan as well as in the West. In spite of agreement concerning its importance, there remains a good deal of uncertainty about its meaning in teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This paper aims to consider the concept of learner autonomy amongst different cultures. Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension. The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension. Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures. Japanese teachers of English should play a variety of new roles and promote autonomous interdependence in the learner-centered communicative classroom.

Key words: learner autonomy, cultural differences, language education, ELT in Japan

1．Introduction

Language teachers in the West began to develop a more visible interest in the promotion of autonomy in the early 1970s. According to Benson (1996), the shifts in focus which have taken place since the 1970s, most notably in the field of English language teaching (ELT) are: the move from a "situational" view of autonomy, i.e., one which focused on the structural conditions necessary for autonomy, to one which has emphasized psychological concepts and which focuses on the individual learner's responsibility for their progress; a shift from a "social" to an "individual" view of autonomy; and a concomitant shift from a focus on the purposes and content of learning to a focus on methods, i.e., a shift from "why?" and "what?" to "how?"

With regard to the earlier move toward a focus on the individual, as Sinclair (2000:5) suggests, the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way, as Western language teachers, influenced by a renewed interest in the work of Vygotsky, understand better the relevance of social learning and the social aspects of developing autonomy (Dam 1995, Little 1996, Little and Dam 1998). From a Vygotskian perspective, Little (2000) argues that higher cognitive functions are internalized from social interaction. He begins by exploring what is meant by a social-interactive view of cognition, learning and language, and then considers what implications such a view has for language learning inside and outside the classroom.

Today, in English language teaching (ELT) in Japan, teachers are expected to encourage students to promote not only their communicative competence but also their autonomy in

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language learning. Teachers should understand the concept of learner autonomy and help students develop their autonomy in the learner-centered communicative EFL classroom.

In relation to education in Japan, Little suggests that the growth of learner independence is supported by learner interdependence. Although I am inclined to suppose that the strong attachment of members of Japanese culture to their in-groups and the importance they attach to mutual support might provide ideal interpersonal environments for the development of autonomy, it seems to be rather difficult to promote interdependence in language learning: interdependence of learners, learners and teachers, learners and contexts and goals. We should consider "the value of an interdependent autonomy in language learning, and above all else, in living"(Candlin in Benson and Voller 1997:xii).

In this paper, I will discuss learner autonomy in light of three related tendencies in language education, definitions of autonomy, cultural differences, East Asian countries, and ELT in Japan.

2. Three Related Tendencies in Language Education

Autonomy and independence are keywords of twentieth-century liberal Western thought in the field of philosophy, psychology, politics, and education (Benson and Voller 1997:4). In philosophy and psychology, autonomy has come to be associated with the capacity of the individual to act as a responsible "member of society." A second, and older, sense of autonomy is found in the political field, where autonomy is a right which denotes freedom from external control. With regard to autonomy in language learning, Benson and Voller (1997:6) suggest that autonomous language learning is supported by three related tendencies in language education: individualism, learner-centeredness, and a growing recognition of the political nature of language learning.

First, autonomous language learning has been associated with individualization, and the notion that learners each have their own preferred learning styles, capacities, and needs. In Japan, too, in light of the principle of putting emphasis on individuality, all aspects of our educational system, including curriculum content, methodology, organization, and government policies have been reviewed drastically.

Second is the general trend in language education toward learner-centeredness, which is characterized not by language teaching as the transmission of a body of knowledge, but by language learning as the active production of knowledge. Methods of learning are tended to be focused, and the role of learners as active agents in their learning is stressed in autonomous language learning.

Third is the more recent tendency to emphasize social, cultural, and political elements in language learning in the West. Terms such as "ideology" and "empowerment" have entered the standard vocabulary of language education theory, and in applied linguistics bibliographies. This growing concern of critical approaches to language pedagogy leads renewed interest in theories which link language education to social and political liberation. In addition, recent work which has also begun to look at the culturally invasive nature of much language education, shows the tendency to think of learners not only as individuals but also as members of socially constituted groups. This might mean that in the West the close link between individualization and autonomy is beginning to be broken. At the same time, "autonomy and independence are beginning to tie into fields of language education: language and culture, critical language pedagogy, language inequalities and rights, world Englishes and so on"(Benson and Voller 1997:12).

3. Definitions of Autonomy

At the dawn of the 1990s, notions of learner autonomy and autonomous language learning were generally viewed as belonging to the "lunatic fringe" (Allwright 1988). In the following decade, autonomy moved into mainstream educational thought to the point of becoming a "buzz word" (Little 1991).

Since Holec (1981) introduced the term *autonomy* to the field of second languge pedagogy, definitions of learner autonomy have varied (Wenden 1991; Dickinson 1993; Benson and Voller 1997; Little 1996, 1998; Littlewood 1999), but they have usually included the following features (Littlewood 1999:71):

a) Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education.

b)"Taking responsibility" involves learners in taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating progress.

In the course of a rather rapid spread of the concept, the term autonomy has acquired many different shades of meaning.

The following definition, adapted from Sinclair (2000:7-13), appears to be one of the most comprehensive definitions of learner autonomy:

a) Autonomy is a construct of capacity.

b) Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning.

c) The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate.

d) Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal.

e) There are degrees of autonomy.

f) The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.

g) Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent.

h) Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e., conscious reflection and decision making.

i) Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies.

j) Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom.

k) Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension.

l) The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as a psychological dimension.

m) Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures

It is noted that more attention has recently been paid to a social dimension of autonomy in the West. One of the familiar definitions of leaner autonomy is as follows:

Learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a social responsible person. (1989

"Bergen definition", cited by Dam, 1990:17)

Ryan (1991) sees the achievement of a sense of autonomy as one of the most fundamental needs and purposes of human beings. Another fundamental need is for what he calls "relatedness", that is, for "contact, support and community with others." If this contact with others is felt to be "instrumental or controlling," it can lead us to lose our sense of autonomy. However, if the contact is supportive, it does not interfere with autonomy but facilitates it.

4. Learner Autonomy and Cultural Differences

It seems to be true that none of us can escape entirely from the cultural assumptions and practices that have shaped us, although at the same time we might believe in the existence of human universals. According to Riley (1988:18), on one hand anthropology sets out to account for the variability of human cultures, to describe and explain human nature; on the other hand ethnography sets out to describe and explain what it means to be a member of a particular culture. Regarding the former, I consider Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, and as for the latter, I introduce Riley's ethnography of autonomy.

I refer to Hofstede's two (out of four) dimensions of national culture: individualism versus collectivism and large or small power distance. Sinclair (2000:12) points out:

> Until very recently, the focus of learner autonomy in the West has largely been on the individual. Social views have been more common in what Hofstede (1991) has called collectivist societies or ones which have their roots in Confucian philosophy.

Japan, which is supposed to be a collectivist society, is now putting more stress on *individualization* and *autonomy,* but Hofstede (1994:63) suggests that the purpose of education is perceived differently between the individualist and the collectivist society.

> In the former it aims at preparing the *individual* for a place in a society of other individuals. This means learning to cope with new, unknown, unforeseen situations. There is a basically positive attitude towards what is new. The purpose of learning is less to know how to do, as to know *how to learn....* In the collectivist society there is a stress on adaptation to the skills and virtues necessary to be an acceptable group member. This leads to a premium on the products of *tradition.* Learning is more often seen as a onetime process, reserved for the young only, who have to learn *how to do* things in order to participate in society.

Most collectivist cultures like Japanese culture maintain large power distance. In high power distance countries where the teacher is a figure of authority, "it would be more difficult to change the complementary relationships between teacher and learner since such changes would inevitably imply a change to the socio-political status quo" (Riley 1988:22). In educational reform in Japan, teachers, and notably the more experienced teachers who might resist change should be given the opportunities, in which they experience the innovation, reflect on the possible impact of the innovation on their own teaching, adapt the innovation to their own particular circumstances and teaching style, and evaluate the innovation in light of actual experience.

As Riley (1988:17) suggests, the ideas and practice of autonomy and learner-centeredness

might be ethnocentric, and there might be cultures which are somehow more or less suitable or favorable to these ideas and practices. Through my experience as a teacher, I understand that the exploration of the meaning of learner-centeredness and learner autonomy, of how acceptable they are cross-culturally, and of the extent and nature of their applicability to Japanese education including ELT, leads to reflection on classroom culture. Tudor (1997: 141-42) remarks:

> Classroom culture refers to the complex attitudes and expectations which shape learners' sociocultural personality in the classroom, and thereby their interaction with their language study. The concept certainly incorporates aspects of learners' national or regional cultures, but it is also influenced by the social, economic and ideological climate which prevails in their home culture at any one point in time and by the peer group or sub-culture to which the learners belong.

After all, we might say *the ethnography of autonomy* is the study of the specific cultural variations in attitudes to learning, and, with our professional interests in mind, to language and language learning. Riley states (1988:18):

> The ethnography of autonomy, then, would be one aspect of the ethnography of education. Its tasks would be to describe and interpret cultural and self-directed educational principles. Its main focus would be the *representations (i.e. descriptions plus interpretations) of learning in a given society.*

5. Learner Autonomy in East Asian Countries

Autonomy should be viewed as a concept which accommodates different interpretations and is universally appropriate, rather than based solely on Western, liberal values. In light of this new and broader view of autonomy, I need to survey some of the key studies in East Asian countries.

First, Jones (1995) sees autonomy as laden with cultural values, especially those of the West, but in the same paper, he describes how ready his Combodian students are to work independently of the teacher in their own group contexts.

Second, Ho and Crookall (1995) point out that autonomy appears to contradict the teacher-centered, authority-oriented traditions of Chinese education in Hong Kong, but describes in their article how enthusiastically their students engaged in a group project. Marshall and Torpey (1997) also report similar experiences in Japan.

Third, Aoki and Smith (1996) identify specific forms of autonomy that are supported by Japanese society, and detect desires for autonomy that contradict the stereotype of the passive, teacher-dependent Japanese learner. Their conclusion is that the important issue "is not whether autonomy itself is appropriate, but how negotiated versions of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts, in varying ways, in educative counterbalance to more authoritarian, teacher-dominated arrangements"(Aoki and Smith 1996:3).

Finally, Littlewood (1999) is also interested in defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. He looks at three sources of influence which many teachers and researchers believe to have an important effect on students' approaches to learning in East Asia: "the collectivist orientation of East Asian societies; their acceptance of relationships based on power and authority; and the belief that success may be achieved through effort as much as through innate ability"(Littlewood 1999:71).

The implications from the above seem to be that we teachers in East Asian countries should neither simply accept nor simply reject the outcomes of the discussions about autonomy that have taken place in the West. Rather, we should examine these discussions in relation to our specific contexts and try to match different aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of our learners.

6. Learner Autonomy in ELT in Japan

Autonomous learning within an institutional context in Japanese education is the means as well as the aim for the development of learner autonomy. Setting up an autonomous learning environment, which is not teacher-centered but learner-centered, puts certain demands on teachers as well as students. Autonomous learning may be described as what takes place in situations in which the teacher is expected to provide a learning environment where the learners are given the possibility consciously to be involved in their own learning and thus become autonomous learners.

Each educational institution in Japanese education is expected to conduct its activities by emphasizing the importance of motivating students to learn autonomously and helping them develop abilities to learn how to learn, to discover and solve problems, and to act independently through interdependence in response to social changes. Learner autonomy, which is stressed in educational reform in Japan, seems to be expected to have a social as well as an individual dimension, and interestingly, this aspect of autonomy has recently been paid more attention in the West.Ryan (1991:227) uses a term that is especially significant for my research: "autonomous interdependence." Ryan's ideal "facilitating environment" for autonomy includes the following factors: concrete support through the provision of help and resources, personal concern and involvement from significant others, opportunities for making choices, and freedom from a sense of being controlled by external agents.

Although the development of autonomy through pedagogical practice is mainly a psychological issue, it is also inescapably political because "the psychological argument challenges traditional educational structures and power relationships"(Little 1996:8). Little and Dam (1998:7) remark:

> The learner must take at least some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process, and must share in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning targets are achieved. The pedagogical justification for wanting to foster the development of learner autonomy rests on the claim that in formal educational contexts, reflectivity and self-awareness produce better learning.

I, too, have attempted to introduce the concept of learner autonomy into my teaching under banners such as humanistic language instruction, cooperative/collaborative learning, strategies-based instruction, and learner-centered communicative instruction.

I am inclined to suppose that the strong attachment of members of Japanese culture to their in-groups and the importance they attach to mutual support might provide ideal interpersonal environments for the development of autonomy. Littlewood (1999:87-88) proposes five generalizations about autonomy in the East Asian context and how it might develop in the context of second or foreign language learning:

> Proposal 1: Students will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in

groups.

Proposal 2: Groups of students will develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy.

Proposal 3: Many students will have experienced few learning contexts which encourage them to exercise individual proactive autonomy.

Proposal 4: East Asian students have the same capacity for autonomy as other learners.

Proposal 5: The language classroom can provide a favorable environment for developing the capacity for autonomy.

In the above proposals, Littlewood (1999:75-76) proposes a distinction between two levels of self-regulation: the first regulates the direction of activity as well as the activity itself (*proactive autonomy*) and the second regulates the activity once the direction has been set (*reactive autonomy*). This distinction between *proactive* and *reactive* autonomy is mirrored, in relation to group work, in Flannery's (1994) distinction between *collaborative* and *cooperative* learning strategies. In Flannery's distinction (in Littlewood 1999:76):

a) with collaborative learning strategies, learners have a greater degree of choice and discretion about what and how they should learn. The process of learning is as important as the product.... It is thus, in part at least, the students themselves who set the agenda for learning.

b) with cooperative learning strategies, learners work independently on tasks, but it is still the teacher who sets the agenda for learning. It is the teacher who defines what counts as relevant knowledge, selects learning methods and controls evaluation. Thus, cooperative learning is designed to *complement* rather than *challenge* the traditional structures of knowledge and authority.

If we adopt this terminology, *collaborative* learning is a group-oriented form of *proactive* autonomy; whereas *cooperative* learning is a group-oriented form of *reactive* autonomy. Considering the general educational contexts in Japan, it might be better for me to use "cooperative learning" to avoid confusion, but in higher EFL education I need to develop my own students' proactive autonomy as much as possible.

Judging from the above proposals, we might expect Japanese students to develop high levels of autonomy when they are engaged in group-based forms of learning such as cooperative/ collaborative learning, experiential learning, and problem-based learning. Littlewood suggests that at the individual level there are no intrinsic differences that make students in one group either less, or more, capable of developing whatever forms of autonomy are seen as appropriate to language learning. The crucial factors that underlie whatever differences might be perceived are cultural and educational traditions, past experiences, and the contexts in which learning takes place.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the concept of learner autonomy in relation to cultural differences between the West and the East. Autonomy in most collectivist cultures like Japanese culture accommodates different interpretations and entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in collaboration with others. Learner autonomy, which is stressed in Japan,

seems to be a social as well as an individual dimension. Teachers should promote autonomous interdependence inside and outside the classroom.

In order to develop learner autonomy in the learner-centered EFL classroom, teachers are required to understand learner-centered instruction, which is contrasted with teacher-centered instruction. Learner-centered instruction includes: a) techniques that focus on or account for learners' needs, styles, and goals; b) techniques that give some control to the student (e.g. group work or strategy training); c) curricula that include the consultation and input of students and that do not presuppose objectives in advance; d) techniques that allow for student creativity and innovation; and e) techniques that enhance a student's sense of competence and self-worth.

In the learner-centered classroom, our starting point is not the textbook but the learners. There should be always ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners. Learner autonomy in the learner-centered classroom may be able to be fostered by teaching capacities which include identifying students' needs, interests, and learning styles and strategies, conducting training on learning strategies, helping learners become more independent, and so on. Teachers need to play a variety of new roles such as information gatherers, decision-makers, motivators, facilitators of group dynamics, providers of opportunities for communicative and authentic language use, counselors, and promoters of multicultural perspective. In particular, teachers are expected to be reflective practitioners and researchers. Even if we are given a large number of studies that have established the basic theory of autonomy in the West, there is a need for considerably more research in Japan too.

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