

## **Promoting Autonomy in the Language Class**

### **- How Autonomy Can Be Applied in the Language Class-**

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#### **Introduction**

The importance of autonomy has been discussed not only in the school setting, but also in other situations such as in business or in the community. Dörnyei (2001) mentioned, “‘Autonomy’ is currently a buzzword in educational psychology” (p. 102). Benson (2001) also states, “To its advocates, autonomy is a precondition for effective learning; when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities in which they live” (p. 1). People are required to learn from time to time by themselves in order to survive in society; for example, some people who live in a foreign country need to learn the language, or some desire to learn something that they are interested in to enjoy their life after retirement.

One of the main goals for a teacher is to help learners become autonomous so that they will be able to deal with learning on their own. William & Burden (1997) define an autonomous learner as one who is equipped with the appropriate skills and strategies to learn a language in a self-directed way (p. 147). In language learning, autonomy has also drawn attention as learner characteristics, and individual differences are focused on. Cohen & Dörnyei (2002) claim that success in learning a foreign or second language depends on various factors, and the characteristics of the language learner are especially important (p. 170). Those characteristics may vary, according to researchers; however, motivation is an invariable factor among them, and autonomy is thought to be associated with intrinsic motivation. If that is the case, the question is how or what we teachers can do to foster this. There is a variety of research and literature about autonomy; nevertheless, there still does not seem to be enough to reach a solid conclusion.

It is said that autonomy is closely related to motivation, which is always the biggest concern for teachers. Motivation now seems to be a key if the class or the teacher is to be successful. Autonomy is, therefore, worth investigating as a great tool to motivate learners.

It seems, however, that autonomy in language learning is not often discussed or

used in classrooms in Japan now as it was several years ago. At that time, teachers and schools aimed to develop an autonomous study attitude in their learners because it was considered so powerful that educational circles expected it to work wonders for Japanese learners. Most teachers including me, however, tend to take a narrow view on autonomy, understanding that autonomy means giving freedom to decide what they do, and expecting, students to improve both their attitudes toward studying and their learning as a result. For example, teachers expect that the learners will do their homework precisely, ask questions in classrooms, and study by their own free will. Is this, however, all as a result of autonomy?

This paper attempts to investigate these questions about autonomy by reviewing the literature, and discussing the effectiveness of utilizing it in the language classroom. The discussion stems from observing the connections with other learning concepts or approaches. Understanding what autonomy is, the benefits of it, the disadvantages of it, and how to implement it in a real classroom will help not only learners become better learners, but will also help teachers improve their teaching.

## **1. What is Autonomy?**

### **1-1 The History of Autonomy**

It was not until the beginning of the 1970's that the word autonomy, meaning law in Greek, started to be used in the field of language learning. Despite the fact that autonomy has been around for only centuries in the field of education or learning, it has been long used in other fields such as Philosophy, Religion, and Medicine. According to Benson (2001), Galileo affirmed the importance of autonomy saying "You cannot teach a man anything; you can help him find it within himself." The idea of autonomy dates back to ideas of personal autonomy in contemporary western political philosophy (p. 23). Then in the early 1970's, the idea of autonomy first appeared in language learning along with the establishment of the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en langue (CRAPEL), which was aimed at adult education (Benson, 2001, p. 8).

### **1-2 The Definition of Autonomy**

Defining autonomy can be demanding because of its broad and abstract nature. Benson quotes Helec, who coined the term autonomy, and describes it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", although Helec does not relate autonomy to language learning in particular (as cited in Benson, 2001). Autonomy is for the most part regarded as the capacity to control one's own learning. Researchers and scholars, however, add their own views to this general definition, or alter it as they argue. Nunan

(2000) states, “Principally, autonomous learners are able to self-determine the overall direction of their learning, become actively involved in the management of the learning process, exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.” Benson (2001) says, “I prefer to define autonomy as the capacity to take control of one’s learning, largely because the contrast of ‘control’ appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of ‘charge’ or ‘responsibility’” (p. 47). Ur (1996) regards autonomy as one of the three stages of the process of learning a skill. She defines the process of learning a skill by means of a three-stage course of instruction: verbalization, automation and autonomy, and explains briefly that at the last stage, learners continue to use the skill on their own, becoming proficient and creative. This means that the learners are ‘autonomous’ (p. 19).

Little (1994) points out that ‘learner autonomy is the product of interdependence rather than independence’ (as cited by Littlewood, 1999, pp. 74-75). Furthermore, Littlewood (1999), emphasizing the mutually supportive relationship that can exist between autonomy and relatedness, introduces the two levels of autonomy: ‘proactive autonomy’ and ‘reactive autonomy’. ‘Proactive’ autonomy regulates the direction of activity as well as the activity itself. That is, according to Holec (1981), learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired (as cited by Littlewood, p. 75). This is the only concept of autonomy discussed in the West. ‘Reactive’ autonomy, on the other hand, regulates the activity once the direction has been set. After the direction has been set, ‘reactive’ autonomy enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal. It is this form of autonomy that stimulates the learner to do their learning (p. 75).

In Japan, autonomy has been regarded as important, and has been incorporated into the educational setting. Aoki (1998, p. 10) recognizes that autonomy is the capacity to control one’s own learning, but points out that autonomy is the capacity to select and plan what and how one is going to learn, and evaluate the effect of the learning when he or she desires to learn something. [Onozawa Trans.] In addition to Aoki’s definition, Umeda (2004) argues that autonomous learning means not only merely studying alone nor selecting, deciding, and planning all by oneself, but also having the capacity to ask others for assistance and make good use of other resources is crucial in order to select and plan the learners’ own learning. [Onozawa Trans.]

The idea of autonomy has been seen as connected with the concept of self-directed learning, learner training, independence, interdependence and individualization, all of which leads us to confusion over what exactly autonomy is.

Thus, autonomy often goes under several different names, such as self-regulatory learning, self-directed learning, the learner-centered approach and independent learning. With such a confusing identity, defining autonomy is so complex that there have been various interpretations depending on how autonomy is looked at.

### **1-3 Autonomy and Responsibility**

Agota and Szabo (2000) cite an example of the complexity of defining autonomy in terms of a connection with the word, *responsibility*.

In theory, we may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one's own actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement, and they are apparently very much interrelated. In practice, the two concepts are more difficult to distinguish. (p. 4)

Autonomy may be equivalent in meaning to responsibility on the part of each learner, which is particularly apparent when learners are learning in groups because the learners need to fulfill their responsibility, actively involving themselves in learning without being influenced by others.

## **2. The Benefits of Autonomy in Language Learning**

Now, it seems that autonomy is being watched with keen interest in educational areas. One of the Japanese educational themes emphasizes the necessity of the ability to learn and think of one's own accord. This ability, which bears a close resemblance to autonomy, has always been a matter of great importance in the Japanese society because we really need autonomy, cooperativeness and creativeness to survive and succeed in every area of our society. Umeda (2000, pp. 61-69) specifies three reasons for the significance of autonomy from the general educational perspective; fostering a survival capacity to cope with rapid social changes, developing the learner's individuality, and improving the diversity of the learner's cultural and educational background [Onozawa Trans.]. Benson (2001) states more straightforwardly that it was argued that the development of such a capacity [to take control over one's own learning] is beneficial to leaning. Knowles (2001) says, "One of our main aims in education is 'helping individuals to develop the attitude that learning is a life long process and to acquire the skills of self-directed learning'" (as cited by William & Burden, 1997, p. 147).

In ESL and EFL, researchers and scholars express the importance of autonomy from various points of view including the relevance to language learning strategies,

motivation, the communicative approach, and cooperative learning. Scharle and Szabó (2000) contend that success in learning language very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude (p. 4). Some degree of autonomy is also essential to successful language learning. Takauchi (2003, p. 113) investigated more effective language learning, and reported that the high achieving students and highly skilled people in English, whom he interviewed, devote themselves to learning more independently and have their own way to learn. [Onozawa Trans.] Although he does not utilize the word ‘autonomy’ in particular, he implies that those learners try to find ways to learn by themselves which are more effective and appropriate to their own styles.

### **2-1 Autonomy and Learning Strategies**

Learning strategies have similarly been attracting a great deal of attention in the language learning field since they have been found to be very influential in learning languages. Oxford (2001) indicates that effective use of learning strategies can evidently facilitate language learning, and goes on to say “All language learning strategies are related to the features of control, goal-orientedness, autonomy and self-efficacy. . . . Learning strategies help learners become more autonomous.” Oxford (1990) also points out the importance of autonomy as one of the twelve key features of language learning strategies, where she refers to autonomy as “self-directed learning”.

Self-direction is particularly important for language learners, because they will not always have the teacher around to guide them as they use the language outside the classroom. Moreover, self-direction is essential to the active development of ability in a new language.

### **2-2 Autonomy and Motivation**

Motivation has been perceived as one of the key factors affecting how successful a language learner becomes in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), despite diverse ways of approaching motivation. With regard to the relevance of autonomy to motivation, some researchers consider that motivation reinforces autonomy, for instance, Benson (2001) claims, “By taking control over their learning, learners develop motivational patterns that lead to more effective learning,” whilst others believe that autonomy matures motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Dörnyei also emphasizes the important role of motivation as one of the most basic aspects of the human mind in determining success or failure in any learning situation:

My personal experience is that 99 percent of language learners who want to learn a foreign language (i.e. who are really motivated) will be able to master a

reasonable working knowledge of it as a minimum, regardless of their language aptitude. (p. 2)

In addition, Dörnyei (2001) notes that a number of recent reviews and discussions provide evidence that L2 motivation and learner autonomy go hand in hand, and also Ushioda (1996) states that autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners (as cited by Dörnyei, 2001). Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001) argues that motivation needs to be maintained, and protected, otherwise the initial motivation will gradually peter out, and that creating learner autonomy is one of the most powerful ingredients for doing so:

The relevance of autonomy to motivation in psychology has been best highlighted by the influential ‘self-determination theory’, according to which the freedom to choose and to have choices, rather than being forced or coerced to behave according to someone else’s desire, is prerequisite to motivation. (p. 71)

### **2-3 Autonomy and Cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning, attracting a great deal of attention in language learning now, is often defined as an approach in which students learn together in pairs or small groups, pursuing goals or objectives. The teacher is also involved in this approach as a facilitator or aid. As often as not, however, my type of group work is regarded as cooperative learning by many teachers. However, Richards (2006) affirms more precisely that not all group work constitutes cooperative learning. Instead of an ongoing investigation based on theory, research, and practice, cooperative learning presents how to maximize the benefits of student-student interactions.

As a number of studies of second language learning have demonstrated, cooperative learning provides students with benefit, and eventually leads them to better achievements in learning. Brown (2001) points out several advantages that cooperative group work brings about: it generates interactive language, offers more security and a less competitive environment, resulting in an increase in student motivation, serving more individualizing instruction, and promoting learner responsibility and autonomy.

As much as autonomy is connected with motivation, cooperative learning is also linked strongly with autonomy. Dörnyei & Murphy (2003) clearly state that a group conscious teaching style involves an increased reliance on the group’s own resources and the active facilitation of autonomous learning. They also say that one of the central issues in a group-sensitive teaching practice is the delegation of power and the gradual promotion of learner autonomy. In addition, Richards (2006) states that hand in hand with this increased autonomy comes the responsibility for the learning of those with

whom one interacts. He also concludes, in connection with the work on the scholarly process of successful scientists by Scardamalia & Bereiter (1996), that certain cooperative learning approaches foster a high degree of learner autonomy because they provide students with the freedom to explore their own interests and to organize group activities.

#### **2-4 Autonomy and the Communicative Approach**

In conducting research into the connection between autonomy and the communicative approaches, Nunan (2000) found that for language learners themselves, the development of autonomy is often closely associated with the development of a communicative orientation towards the target language, although he admits that there is a lack of strong empirical evidence regarding that association.

As Benson (2001) points out, several prominent researchers in the field of communicative language teaching and learner-centered practice have incorporated the idea of autonomy into their work since communicative teaching, learner-centeredness and autonomy share a focus on the learner as the key agent in the learning process (p. 17).

### **3. Issues with Regards to Implementing Autonomous Learning**

Benson (2001) notes that the idea of autonomy often provokes strong reactions. To its critics, autonomy is an idealistic goal, and its promotion is a distraction from the real business of teaching and learning languages (p. 1). It is certain that the concept of autonomy is not new in language learning, and even in Japan, we have come to see various publications and reports about autonomy and about the results of implementing autonomous learning. Yet, teachers as well as learners seem to have a set picture in their mind that autonomous learning is difficult to carry out. Some people prefer traditional teaching and learning, where a teacher is centered, while the students do what they are told to do. Additionally, Scharle & Szabó (2000) argue that personal traits, preferred learning styles, and cultural attitudes set limits to the development of autonomy, we need to observe what makes autonomy look complicated not only from the viewpoint of the ability of both teachers and learners, but also from other factors such as the culture and education system.

Furthermore, Oxford (1990) emphasizes that students begin to want greater responsibility for their own learning:

Owing to the conditioning by the culture and the education system, however, many language students (even adults) are passive and accustomed to being

spoon-fed. . . Attitudes and behaviors like these make learning more difficult and must be changed, or else any effort to train learners to rely more on themselves and use better strategies is bound to fail. (p. 10)

On the teachers' side, leaving some responsibility or control in the classroom to the students may make them feel disgraced and uncomfortable because the teacher is not as much a central figure as he or she used to be in a traditional classroom. While exploring seven problems, we may encounter in practice, Dörnyei (2001) claims the following:

Of course, the raising of learner autonomy is not always pure joy and fun. It involves *risks*. . . . It is at times like that we teachers may panic, believe everything was a mistake, blame ourselves for our 'leniency', feel angry and resentful towards the students for not understanding the wonderful opportunity they have been offered, and thus resort to traditional authoritarian methods and procedures to 'get order'. (pp. 107-108)

In his research paper on defining and developing autonomy in East Asia contexts, Littlewood (1999) suggests that we need to match the different aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts. At the same time, however, Littlewood, warns against setting stereotypic notions of East Asian learner's which if misused, may make teachers less, rather than more sensitive to the dispositions and needs of individual students (p. 71). Littlewood admits that there are limitations of such stereotypes and the hypotheses and predictions are *not* always true. It may be more challenging to take differences in attitudes and behaviors of individual learners or groups of learners into consideration than cultural attitudes and behaviors.

#### **4. How to Help Autonomy in Language Learning Develop**

If autonomy is of great value in language learning, cultivating autonomy in learners will be something that every teacher would like to do. Benson (2001) treats autonomy as a capacity belonging to the learner:

It [Autonomy] is an attribute of the learner rather than the learning situation. Most researchers agree that autonomy cannot be 'taught' or 'learned', he therefore uses the term 'fostering autonomy' to refer to process initiated by teachers or institutions and 'developing autonomy' to refer to process within the learner. (p. 110)

Aoki (2008) points out that not every learner is born with autonomy; therefore, fostering autonomy in learners is the task of the teacher. The role that is needed here is for the teacher to be an adviser who instructs and helps the learners set their goals, lays



out a practical and effective plan, carries out the plan and evaluates the outcome through dialogue with them. [Onozawa Trans.] Similarly, Nunan (2000) contends that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept, that all learners could be trained to develop a degree of autonomy, but that this is gradual, piecemeal, and we often only see the benefit of such a thing towards the end of the learning process. He summarizes five levels of autonomy that integrate learn-to-learn tasks with learning content tasks (as cited by Benson, 2001) as shown in Table 1, and introduces examples of these types of activities.

Table 1. Autonomy: Levels of Implementation (Nunan, 2000)

Level	Leaner Action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical and content of the materials that they are using.	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles /strategies
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer	Learners make choices among a range of options
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning programme	Learners modify/adapt tasks
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives	Learners create their own tasks
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond	Learners become teachers and researchers

Benson (2001), in the meantime, identifying autonomy with certain practices, specifies six approaches that support the goal of autonomy or are intrinsically supportive of autonomy:

- 1) Resource-based approaches emphasize independent interaction with learning materials.
- 2) Technology-based approaches emphasize independent interaction with educational technologies.
- 3) Learner-based approaches emphasize the direct production of behavioral and

psychological changes in the learner.

- 4) Classroom-based approaches emphasize learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning.
- 5) Curriculum-based approaches extend the idea of learner control to the curriculum as a whole.
- 6) Teacher-based approaches emphasize the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners.

To foster autonomy, Dörnyei (2001) specifies two crucial and practical classroom changes: increase learner involvement in organizing the learning process, and make a change in the teacher's role. He also emphasizes that the key issue in increasing learner involvement is to share responsibility with learners in their learning process, recommending several ways to achieve this. Among these are to give learners *choices* about as many aspects of the learning process as possible, to give students positions of *genuine authority*, to encourage *student contributions* and *peer teaching*, to encourage *project work*, and to allow learners to use *self-assessment* procedures when appropriate. Regarding the teacher's role, there is a need to adapt a somewhat non-traditional teaching style, often described as the 'facilitating style'. In the autonomous mode, the facilitator respects the total autonomy of the group in finding their own way and exercising their own judgment (pp. 104-105).

## 5. How to Incorporate Autonomous Learning in the Language Classroom

As mentioned above, there are certainly some risks or problems that teachers may encounter when they try to adopt autonomous learning. In the final analysis, whether autonomous learning is possible in the classroom is a question of the teachers' and the learners' psychology: teachers would like to take a new path leaving some responsibilities behind, and learners would like to take an active role in learning. If autonomous learning, not only helps learners' learning, but also helps them become motivated learners, then it is valuable, since motivation is one of the most essential factors that create the circumstances where learners can learn effectively.

Considering the reality in the classroom, it does not sound practical to incorporate the entire process of autonomous learning, but combining autonomous learning with other approaches and or strategies, such as cooperative learning, may work well. Besides, it seems that teachers actually practice autonomous learning in every day teaching; for instance, they give the freedom to choose, decide, and plan project work to the students during cooperative learning, or let the students plan how to complete their reading assignments, and so forth. To complete this section, recall that in

the previous section Dörnyei (2001) specifies two classroom changes for autonomy-supporting teaching: one is to increase learner involvement, and the other is to change the teacher's role. In order to increase learner involvement in the learning process, there are a number of things you can include:

Allow learners choices about as many aspects of the learning process as possible.

Give students positions of genuine authority.

Encourage student contributions and peer teaching.

Encourage project work.

When appropriate, allow learners to use self-assessment procedures.

To foster autonomy, there is a need to adopt a somewhat non-traditional teaching style, often described as the facilitating style. The teacher as a facilitator leads learners to discover and create their own meanings about the world (pp. 104-106).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper explores autonomy in the language class by examining its definition, followed by a discussion of how to foster it, and what the effects of it are. Lastly, several factors that we should bear in mind about implementing it in the classroom are discussed. No one has an inborn ability to learn autonomously, but people can develop autonomy through experience with the teacher's help as an adviser. Autonomy may be effective in improving the learner's motivation, increasing the learner's learning by giving them learning strategies and improving the learner's confidence to work independently. Nevertheless, it might be advisable to give consideration to various factors such as an individual learner's traits, affinity for a particular leaning style, and cultural attitudes or behaviors, since every learner is different, and the fruit of one's learning is likewise.

Learning styles also vary depending on the individual. It is commonly believed that the individual differences in learning are derived from all sorts of factors including the learning strategies used by each learner, and psychological traits such as attitude, personality, learning style, self-confidence, and motivation. Motivating learners appears to be one of the top priorities for any teacher; therefore, it will be beneficial to us as English teachers to practice autonomous learning if autonomy goes hand in hand with motivation. Moreover, in Japan, where English is learned not as second language, but as a foreign language, learners need to be more autonomous because their environment provides few opportunities to actually use English in daily life.

At the college level, incorporating the processes of autonomous learning into

English classes for students, particularly those who feel an aversion to English, does not sound effortless. This is partly because they have already, to some extent, established their way of learning at school, and partly because there is a time limit in the curriculum. From the studies and research mentioned above, nevertheless, it seems to be considerably helpful for those students to be autonomous particularly with regard to motivation. There may be numerous ways to implement autonomous learning, yet it might be valuable to utilize part of the process; for example, giving some responsibility to them for a particular task, or giving an assignment as an outside activity for which they make a plan at their own discretion. Although this may not sound like complete autonomy, those approaches have in fact shown positive outcomes in real classrooms. Fostering autonomy is not as simple as it may sound since autonomy is associated with the psychological aspects of learning. What might be needed, therefore, is that autonomy should be introduced in early education more systematically, although there is no clear evidence that young children can handle autonomous learning better than older children or adults.

Currently, various case studies and reports of experimental teaching techniques regarding autonomy have been published, but most of the cases are usually tested on already highly-motivated learners. Therefore, it might not be fair to say that autonomous learning is effective for everyone. For better learning and teaching, more research should be conducted, particularly on those less motivated learners.

As often as not, we have seen many people from the young to the elderly engaging themselves in learning of their own free will after finishing school. Some do it just for pleasure without specific plans, while some people have a clear purpose and a plan. No matter what or how, they do their learning voluntarily. This can be called autonomous learning in a sense, and if that is the case, autonomous learning may be in the process of establishing itself as a matter of course.

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## 要旨

### 言語学習におけるオートノミーの奨励

#### 言語学習にオートノミーをどのように組み入れるか

小野澤 千恵子

オートノミーは、日本語では自律学習や学習者自立性、自主学習などの言葉として認知され、また「自ら学び、自ら考える力」という日本教育界のトピックにかなり近いと思われる。理想としては、学習者が自身で、自分の学習に対し、計画し、内容と進度を決め、指導法と指導技術を選択し、習得過程を点検し、習得したことを評価できる学習者を意味する。現実的に不可能でないにしろ非常に難しい。

しかし、「選択」や「責任」という広い意味で理解し、学習活動に取り入れることは有効なものと考えられる。例えば、オートノミーは学習者の動機付け、及び *cooperative language learning* のなかでもその有効性が認められている。

本研究の目的は、オートノミーを総合的にとらえ、この分野の過去の文献から、歴史、定義、また言語指導、学習の他の分野との関係を調査し、またオートノミーの有効性とその問題を知り、学習指導にどのように取り入れていくかを考察した。

オートノミーは段階を追って行われるものであろうが、大学中の授業の一環として行うには、様々な難しさも存在する。しかしオートノミーの意味やその有効性を知り、実際の学習指導にどのように組み入れていくかを知ることは、学習者の利益となるのではないかと考える。

学習者が学習したことを教室外で発展させ、自分の意志で学習を続けていくような有効かつ具体的な学習活動研究事例がより求められる。