

# Learner Autonomy among University EFL Learners in Japan

— Defining the Concept and Addressing Cultural Challenges —

by

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## Abstract

Interest in learner autonomy in East Asia is growing as educational institutions become more aware of its potential for supporting learning and seek effective autonomy-promoting strategies. However, autonomy is far from a self-explanatory and uncontested term and there are multiple interpretations and definitions. In addition, autonomy is a Western construct and as such it can become stereotypically and ideologically loaded in English language teaching. In a Confucian heritage culture such as Japan, where dependence on teachers for input has traditionally been emphasised over learner independence, there is a resulting need to conceive and frame definitions in the local context and to find culturally appropriate ways in which to promote it. This article discusses these issues. It problematises autonomy in East Asia and specifically in Japan and attempts to define it in a Japanese university EFL context. It then looks at ways to address cultural challenges and discusses some ideas for how to promote it in that context.

**Key Words:** learner autonomy, independent learning, Japanese EFL learners, self-reflection

## 1. Introduction

The reasons for promoting learner autonomy are numerous. Autonomy is a recognised educational goal and the link between autonomous learning and effective learning is significant as the latter is considered to take place when learners are active in their studies and fully participate in decision-making processes over learning content (e.g. Smith, 2008). With increased levels of autonomy, a learner is able to assume greater responsibility over their learning, and therefore, make more effective decisions over what they learn and the processes involved.

Although learner autonomy is a Western construct, interest has increased in its application to Asian contexts and there is ongoing discussion into how it can be promoted in cultures where classrooms are typically teacher-centred and if indeed it is appropriate or useful in such environments where opportunities to develop the tools for autonomy may be restricted (e.g. Benson, 2001).

However, there is evidence that autonomy is a valued and desirable learning goal for Japan. Littlewood (2000) conducted survey research with over 2,600 students in eleven Asian countries, including Japan, and found that Asian students do not wish to be merely ‘obedient listeners’ or ‘sit in class passively receiving knowledge’ (p.33). A key

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concern, therefore, is how learners in the local context can be supported towards the development of autonomy with cultural sensitivity.

This article looks firstly at varying interpretations of autonomy in order to establish a definition which can be used for further discussion. It then considers problems in how autonomy can be promoted, broadly in East Asia and more specifically in Japan, before looking at the cultural issues in more detail. Finally, it looks at ways of helping Japanese EFL university learners to develop autonomous learning skills.

## 2. Defining autonomy in language learning

Over the last two decades interest in autonomy has seen vast growth in language learning. This interest has seen discourses develop from 'specialist literature' (Benson, 2006, p.21) to ones more 'mainstream' (Pennycook, 1997), presenting issues in defining autonomy as the theoretical frameworks have become increasingly inconsistent (e.g. Oxford, 2003).

From a socio-cognitive perspective, Little (1991), emphasises that autonomy is a psychological capacity which depends on 'detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' as well as learners assuming 'responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes' (p.69), suggesting a necessity for learners to be able to disengage from the learning process and view themselves more objectively.

Benson (2006) proposed three 'versions' of autonomy as 'technical', 'psychological' and 'political' to refer to the skills for autonomous learning, the capacity, and access to it, respectively (p.19). The 'political' version represents an early manifestation of the increasing numbers of

commentators taking a more critical ideological stance (e.g. Pennycook, 1997). Oxford (2003) added a further 'version' of 'sociocultural' reflecting the contributions made by sociocultural theory in the area of socially mediated learning and the development of human capacity through interaction.

From these interpretations, two important points arise. Firstly, autonomy is not seen as simply doing things by oneself, but displaying the capacity to do so. Secondly, autonomy is seen as a characteristic of learners (Benson, 2006, p.22); meaning it is a property of the individual. But, it is also depicted in language learning as co-constructed (e.g. Littlewood, 1999) and that it is interdependence that instigates the most effective and supportive developments in a given interpersonal environment (Littlewood, 1999, p.75).

Finally, autonomy should not be seen as a binary quality that one either possesses or does not. Nunan (1997) portrays this as 'degrees of autonomy' and presents a five level scheme of learner action, that can be plotted on a cline, from 'awareness' at the lower end involving the identification of preferred learning styles and/or strategies, through 'involvement' (making choices), 'intervention' (making-modifications), 'creation' (making tasks), and 'transcendence' at the higher end involving learners becoming teachers and researchers (p.195).

From this it can be seen that the term remains ambiguous. However, the failure to reach a definitive consensus does not mean there is not accordance on its significance in learning. There is broad agreement that learner autonomy can have a considerable impact on personal growth and achievement and that more effective learning can take place if a learner displays aspects of autonomy (Dang, 2010, p.1).

It is also accepted that individual, psychological,

environmental and cultural aspects are important in the facilitation of autonomy among learners. Additionally and significantly, the importance of self-responsibility, self-management and self-reflection as attributes for autonomy are widely accepted (e.g. Benson, 2001; Little, 1991). Such learners can be characterised by showing initiative in their learning and by monitoring their own progress to evaluate the success of the learning. It is also widely established that if a learner is autonomous then it follows that they will have more appreciation for the purpose of their study programme resulting in increased responsibility taken for their learning with more initiative and deliberation (Holec, 1981).

Accordingly, drawing the central themes of these ideas together, autonomy may be seen as a capacity (to act independently and in cooperation with others) belonging to the individual (but one who is not removable from a community), which affords awareness, involvement, reflection, responsibility and control over their learning process and progress, which is the definition used here.

### 3. Problematising autonomy

Autonomy's discursive roots as a Western ideological construct result in the concept becoming ideologically and stereotypically loaded (e.g. Holliday, 2005; Pennycook, 1997). At the more 'mainstream' end of the spectrum, autonomy is homogenised and culturally neutralised. Any value as a notion is lost and it is blindly promoted in non-Western contexts with little understanding of diverse local environments. At the other extreme, some critics argue that autonomy, as a learning approach, is not transferable to East Asian contexts given the traditional emphasis on dependence over independence and collectivism over individualism (Littlewood, 1999, p.72).

Three aspects that affect autonomy in the extent

and effectiveness of its development across cultures are access, power and ideology, elements which are inherently intertwined (Oxford, 2003). Considering ideology first, the main issue centres on autonomy being a 'Western ideal' (Benson, 2006, p.25). Pennycook (1997) develops this stance through the discussion on 'mainstream autonomy' citing that as its discourses move into a central position in the theory and practice of English language teaching (ELT), these discourses tend to take the 'moral high ground' and become the dominant ideology (p.39). As a result, autonomy becomes perceived through this ideological discourse of ELT as universally essential for students (Pennycook, 1997, p.43).

With discourse and ideology, issues of power are raised. If an ideology is understood as stemming from sustained power inequalities, subsequent ELT ideology will be perceived with increased legitimacy and its views of learner autonomy may more likely be favoured (Palfreyman, 2003, p.185). Locally, the problem is that teachers who try to foster autonomy are not encouraging their students to challenge the status quo but are instead treating the complex relationship of power as something 'that can simply be handed over' to the learners (Pennycook, 1997, p.46) and thus reinforcing the power relation in question. Discourses surrounding access are again most problematic when located in dominant ideologies. Perhaps the most fundamental argument here is that not all learners around the world have the same access to resources, especially regarding technology and self-access centres. As highlighted from studies in African settings, approaches to learning that emphasise individualised and technology-based autonomous learning are inappropriate due to a lack of access in certain areas (Sonayia, 2002, cited by Benson, 2006, p.25). If learner-centred approaches to teaching, pragmatically designed to encourage autonomy, are perceived as more legitimate, then such approaches may be favoured.

It is unclear whether such approaches are universally appropriate to all cultures (e.g. Holliday, 2005), and therefore, whether promoting autonomy is equally inappropriate. Such judgement forces practitioners to consider the power relations involved (Oxford, 2003). The general principles of autonomy are not being questioned as learner autonomy is, in principle, an 'unquestionably desirable goal' (Pennycook, 1997, p.39) but the problem is connected to the methods and approaches of its development. Autonomy needs to be relevant to the learners, from whichever culture, and for that culture to be viewed positively as a resource.

#### **4. Cultural issues in fostering autonomy in East Asia**

Benson (2001) stated that the cultural stereotypes of East Asian learners coupled with the acceptance of teacher-student relationships based on authority may invalidate efforts to encourage autonomy. Riley (1988), whose concerns were based on non-European students in a European educational context but whose concerns have gained renewed significance regarding the relevance and validity of autonomy to Asian learners in Asian settings, was one of the first to question the cultural appropriateness of autonomy by inquiring as to whether the principles and practice on which the concept is based are ethnocentric (p.13).

However, Littlewood's (2000) study of autonomy in Asia uncovered a general feeling among the Asian student participants that they do not want to be 'spoon-fed with facts from an all-knowing fount of knowledge' but instead want to explore knowledge and find their own answers (p.34).

Others identify a need for examining more

thoroughly how Asian cultural backgrounds condition learners and how these can be modified by continued study and dealings with English (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003, p.24). It nonetheless remains unclear the extent to which autonomy, as a foreign construct, can be attained in this context where the cultural traditions of Confucianism emphasise dependency rather than independence; hierarchy rather than equality; and there is more of an emphasis on mutual obligation of a group than on individualism.

Wenger (1999), discussing the psychological factors of learner autonomy as developing from the cultural context and how individuals within that context interact, states that autonomy is internally produced from these interactions and that an individual's engagement reflects both personal characteristics and the social context. For example, if a person changes position from outsider to insider in an interaction they are required to move from a passive to a more active member of those interactions which demonstrates that autonomy may be socially-bound. Such thinking challenges views of autonomy as individualistic.

#### **5. Japanese university EFL context**

In Japan, learners are often described as passive and accustomed to teaching practices traditionally associated with absorbing and memorising information with teachers dictating and a lack of opportunity for self-expression (e.g., Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2005; Oxford, 2003). In English language learning in Japanese secondary classrooms, teachers typically provide knowledge and emphasise language structure over actual use. Teachers are also required to give immediate feedback, which includes interrupting students when mistakes, errors or slips occur. Furthermore, English teaching in Japanese secondary schools is flavoured by a washback effect as it is often assessment driven and lesson content is often

determined by the content of assessments and not individual learning needs. This process of learning by memorising over practical skills is the context from which the majority of Japanese EFL university learners are derived (Littlewood, 1999).

Furthermore, there is an expectation to learn the knowledge from their teachers and take it as the one correct source. With autonomy, many options are suddenly available which can result in confusion among learners who are unfamiliar with or unsure about autonomy. It is also possible that learners may not benefit academically from some courses where they are asked to seek out their own content and knowledge resources as they may make ineffective learning decisions.

EFL teachers and institutions need to take into account the educational background and sociocultural characteristics to provide suitable facilitations for such learners. However, while there is a need to consider the cultural conditioning of learning behaviour, there is convincing evidence that autonomy is a psychological phenomenon that can overcome cultural differences (e.g. Wenger, 1999). So, while there is a need to be culturally sensitive to a society's learning preferences there is no reason why attempts to promote autonomy should not take place (Aoki, 1994; Littlewood, 1999).

## **6. Promoting learner autonomy in Japan**

For learner autonomy to develop in Japan, the majority of learners need clear input from teachers in specific autonomous skills in order to manage their own learning. Cotterall (2004) identifies self-reflection as essential as it can lead to insights and action. However, as reflective activities are not always a familiar, or comfortable, experience for all learners, activities should be introduced slowly and demonstrated extensively (Cotterall, 2004).

When there is an opportunity to experiment with new skills integrated with opportunities to receive feedback and self-reflect on how that experience modifies learner understanding of the task, there is real potential to foster independence of thought and action. The first of these centres on the relationship between the learners' learning goals and the existence of opportunities to apply their new learning and the second relates to the availability of reflective opportunities (Cotterall, 2004).

Maximising such opportunities for self-reflection in the classroom should be stressed as frequently as possible. Explicit instruction may be necessary in developing the initial capacity for autonomous learning and therefore enhancing learning performance. Reflective training models appear to be more effective in fostering autonomy due to the integration of aspects of control which allow the learners to develop an awareness of the appropriateness of strategies to the overall self-direction of their learning. Approaches combining explicit instruction and learner reflection may be more effective if they are integrated with opportunities to exercise control in the context of the learner's ongoing experience of learning a language both outside and inside the classroom (Benson, 2001, p.150).

To achieve this, Wenden (1998) puts forward a useful suggestion with learners collecting information on how tasks are carried out with teachers assisting them to become aware of their own strategies by assigning tasks and asking them to report what they think while they are doing it. This type of self-report is referred to as introspective as it requires learners to introspect on their learning and the rationale behind this is to provide learners with information on learning strategies in use at the time of a task. Diaries and evaluation sheets offering opportunities to plan, monitor and evaluate can help.

Hue (2008) puts forward an approach where learners set goals and self-monitor following teacher instruction on strategies such as problem-definition, planning, self-evaluation, and self-correction. The teacher may be required to scaffold at this stage with some learners and introduce more self-regulation strategies. Teachers monitor and assist with individual goals and work with the learners to maintain these strategies. After this, it is hoped that learners can employ these strategies independently although the teachers should still continue to work with the learners in order to evaluate to effectiveness of the process and adaptations can be made where necessary (p.249).

A further example of this comes from Smith (2003). He attempted to bring together out-of-class experience and classroom practices among his Japanese university learners by asking them firstly to share their learning objectives in *writing*, as Smith's understanding of the cultural context helped him realize they would be "much more willing to express personal opinions and feelings via writing or private discussion than in open class" (133). After evaluating levels of autonomy (they had greater awareness than he had expected), he asked them to consider and suggest self-directed classroom activities, again through writing. Smith utilised many of their ideas in his reorganised teaching approach. While they were engaged in autonomous practices, he scaffolded their work carefully, and assisted them in implementing their plans, and monitored their feedback, noting that as learners' levels of autonomy rose, many expressed appreciation of this.

However, significant cultural challenges remain to the promotion of autonomy in Japan as learners often struggle to develop strong incentives to take responsibility for their learning. Little (1991) considers this and argues that the social-interactive dimensions of the learning process must be emphasised. To achieve this, a learning

environment must be established where learners can be more autonomous as a result of the clarification of language learning strategies, cognitive and metacognitive procedures, motivation and attitudes.

Collaborative work in a learner-centred class would reinforce the sense of community and further support learning efforts. Providing learners with scaffolding in adopting strategies that they were unable to previously employ without deliberate assistance and the capacity to self-regulate are vital in this context since the lack of self-regulation skills seems to be an important cause of the generally low levels of autonomy among these learners.

Therefore, in the Japanese university EFL context, where learners need to make the transition from relatively passive styles of learning towards more active participation in order to become autonomous, social mediation involving psychological support, explicit instruction and scaffolding, underpinned by an understanding of the learners' prior educational experiences, appears crucial (Dang, 2010).

## Conclusion

This article has looked at how the concept of learner autonomy may be more fully understood by viewing it in the local context. It is seen here as a socially mediated capacity belonging to an individual rather than as an intrinsic capacity of the individual to be developed (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). On the one hand, autonomy is conducive to language learning as learners seek out and act on environmental affordances while on the other, their language learning may be conducive to greater personal autonomy by affording further options to control and direct their lives, not only aspects of their learning.

This perspective represents a shift from autonomy as a Western ideological construct to one essentially human as it develops within a social structure. The implication this has for language learning and teaching is that autonomy becomes seen as a capacity to get things done which can enable a learner to self-manage and self-direct more successfully through their own learning. It seems significant then for learners and educators and educational institutions to be in touch with those learners and their lives.

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