

Learner Autonomy in English Major
and Business Major Students
in Matsuyama University : Is Autonomy
an Effective Theory for all levels of students ?

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1. Introduction

People learn and are taught in many different ways. Innovations in how we learn and how we are taught are paramount to provide for the ever-changing world around us. There is a continuous search in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) trade to find the best way to learn. Traditionally, it is the teacher's responsibility to initiate interest in their students to learn, but research is now suggesting that there must be a shift in traditions in order to compensate for the increased levels of unmotivated students in recent years (Little, 1995).

The teacher's role has now shifted from the traditional sense of the teacher trying to gain a student's interest in learning to the more modern approach of the teacher encouraging students to find their own interests and set their own learning goals. Learner autonomy is a possible solution to the challenge of increasing motivation levels in students as it takes the focus off the teacher and onto the learner.

For many years the teacher, particularly in the Asian context, has been the

centre of the class and the director of knowledge who educates students with facts he or she, and the curriculum planners, deem fit. No matter how disguised, traditional teaching is based essentially on the mug and jug theory (Rogers, 1983 in Benson, 2001) where the flow of knowledge is one-way, from the teacher as the jug to the student as the mug. Autonomy does not adopt this strategy and instead suggests that the teacher should act as a facilitator of learning. Knowledge should not flow from one source to another for authentic learning to take place and knowledge cannot be taught, but must be constructed by the learner (Candy, 1991). The facilitator must create a psychological climate by making the learner curious, creating enthusiasm, encouraging where possible, and producing the correct environment in which to learn (Benson, 2001).

Once the correct environment has been demonstrated, and the transition of teacher roles established, the question is not how teachers can motivate learners but how teachers can help learners to motivate themselves, (Ushioda, 1996). A prerequisite of creating autonomous students in the foreign language classroom requires students first to be motivated.

Research so far suggests that those who study a language because they have to, are not as autonomy-conscious as those who do it of their own free will, (Noels, Clement and Pelletier, 1999). This indicates a gap in the research of autonomy, suggesting that only students who have initial interests in English can become autonomous learners. This gives rise to the question ; can traditionally unmotivated students become autonomous learners with the correct support and guidance ?

Rather than focusing on the attributes that autonomy has on the motivated learner, this paper will attempt to prove autonomy is a valid theory in students of all

abilities. If students are supported in a way that can adopt self-confidence, self-learning and independence in the form of valuable projects and goals to aim towards, every student has the potential of becoming an autonomous learner.

1.1 Aims

This study aims to measure levels of motivation before and after a project-based syllabus, with the intention of promoting learner autonomy in two opposing classes. A project based syllabus was designed and adapted from the author's previous experience in the field and used in an English major writing class and in a business major communication class here at Matsuyama University. Levels of motivation and interest in English will be obtained through a detailed questionnaire before and after the commencement of two projects.

The aim of this study is to cultivate the ability, reduce anxiety, increase motivation and performance in students of all levels after the introduction of authentic materials. After the successful completion of a project based syllabus, this study showed that meaningful learning appeared in students of all abilities and signs of autonomous behaviour were evident in all learners.

2. Literature Review

People live to learn. We learn through necessity. The necessity to learn comes from our motivation and our attitude to learn. Without motivation and a suitable attitude, meaningful learning will not take place. Consciously or subconsciously, as people we are continuously and effortlessly learning every moment of our lives, whether it is learning to dislike something or that we lack the ability or aptitude to learn something (Smith 1998).

In this literature review several concepts of learning will be introduced according to various authors, educators and linguists. These ideas will be related to the main topic of this paper, learner autonomy. This paper attempts to provide evidence that learner autonomy is a justified and valid theory in EFL and should be considered throughout the industry. In reviewing what is available on the topic of learner autonomy a connection will be made to the main objectives of this paper. The literature review will give the reader an outlook into the materials available and how they have been interpreted by the author.

2.1 The official and classic theories of learning

Smith (1998) illustrates that there are two theories of learning, the official theory and the classical theory. The official theory is the more universally understood concept that we learn in educational institutions from kindergarten to university in environments that promote ‘learning’ where effort is the key. We have to learn something first in such an environment before it can be understood. The classical theory alternatively is the view that we are constantly and effortlessly learning from the people around us with whom we identify, *“We learn from the company we keep, we can’t help learning from them and we learn without knowing that we are learning.”* (Smith, 1998 : 35). This view was classic in the sense that it was the way in which lords would teach their apprentices, fathers their sons and the elderly the young in the days before schools, tests and teachers existed.

Smith (1998) declares that each theory is contradictory to the other in that the official theory is learning that leads to forgetting whereas the classical theory is learning that is never forgotten. Smith continues by declaring that if we have to make sense of something before we can learn from it, then the official learning theory is bogus and most of what we learn in the traditional sense of learning in a

classroom under appropriate circumstances will most certainly be forgotten. Remarks such as these are compelling as Smith (1998) suggests that the majority of learning as we know it is meaningless.

2.1.1 Other theories of learning

Holt (1985) suggests that we should abolish the school altogether, as children don't need coerced into learning ; they would do so naturally if given the freedom to follow their own interests (Holt 1985a 1985b). Holt was fundamental in introducing the principles of 'home-schooling' in the 1970's and 80's. Dörnyei (2001a, 2001b) believes that motivation is a key element in learning and without it all learning is meaningless. Ushioda (2008), Wenden (1991) and Cotterall (1995, 1999) amongst others, believe that learning comes from the powers within, that all goals must be set by the learner themselves with the teacher taking the role of facilitator, guide or tutor. While Gladwell (2002) acknowledges that people do not learn if they are confused, that comprehension is key. Most of the authors here run on the philosophy that the three key elements to learning are comprehension, motivation and confidence (Smith 1998).

2.2 Comprehension

For communication of any kind to take place, comprehension is vital. One, particularly relevant to comprehension is the comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 2006). According to Krashen, we only acquire language when we receive comprehensible input. For learning to occur listeners or learners must be able to comprehend the utterances they are trying to understand. If the level of input is slightly above the comprehensible level of the listener acquisition will occur and the listener will learn naturally. A key component of Krashen's stems from the idea that learning is a subconscious act, we learn by doing.

Brown (2000a) too, agrees that comprehension is a key element in learning. Brown insists that in child language, most observational and research evidence points to the general superiority of comprehension over production, “children understand more language than they can produce.” (Brown, 2000a: 33). The same can be said for second language learners, who may be able to understand a lot more than what they can utter themselves. Gladwell (2002) also adds to this point in saying “there is nothing to learn from what confuses us as it is confusing and we are not learning” (Gladwell 2002).

2.2.1 Motivation

Motivation is an essential ingredient in the success of anything we do. Without motivation for what we do, effort will be low, and without effort success will be minimal. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process (Dörnyei, 2001a). Teachers must be motivated to teach while learners must be motivated to learn. Simply put, even individuals with remarkable ability may not accomplish long-term goals without sufficient motivation. With motivation being such an imperative factor in learning new languages, it is no wonder there is a long list of authors who base their research around the topic.

2.2.2 Confidence

The third key element to learning is confidence. Without confidence in your learning ability you cannot progress, Smith (1998) points out that “*Lack of confidence raises anxiety, induces inappropriate approaches to learning and makes confusing what we might otherwise understand*” (Smith, 1998: 35).

Gaining trust and respect from the students is one way to ease the process of

learning for them. Holt (1995ab) is a pioneer in the field of education wrote two very successful books, "How Children Learn" and "How Children Fail" both of which were first published in 1963. Holt is explicit in viewing his opinions on the way people learn, he states "*The most important thing any teacher has to learn, not to be learned in any school of education I ever heard of, can be expressed in seven words : Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners*" (Holt, 1995 : 125). Many researchers assert that second language development is governed primarily by the student's internal mechanisms and cannot be controlled by teaching (Hato, 2005). Both Holt (1995) and Hato (2000) suggest that learning must originate from within the student if it is to be meaningful. This can be done by letting the students work at their own pace, or in other words, to give students responsibility for their learning, the basics of learner autonomy.

2.3 Autonomy

Autonomous learning is increasingly becoming a modern approach to English language education which many teachers, usually of European or North American origin, strive to develop in their learners. Learner autonomy gives more responsibility to the student and their own learning, and if successful, has the potential to aid learners in their future learning careers.

Defining autonomy can be a difficult task as meanings may be interpreted in different ways by different people. Autonomy in learning is about people taking more control over their learning in and out of their classrooms. Autonomy in language learning conversely is the notion of people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them (Benson, 2006). One important component behind 'learner autonomy' is that

“language learning is a lifelong endeavour” (Lee 1998 : 282) and that students learn more outside of class than they do in class. The process however, of making students ‘autonomous’ is a lengthy and complicated one. In order to promote the idea that more learning is done outside the classroom in student’s own time than during classes, students must be directed in how to learn by themselves.

The control that each student has over their learning differs, and the methods each person uses to learn are unique. Benson (2001) explains that autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. The autonomous learner is recognised by specific behaviour, but this behaviour can take many different forms depending on the student’s age, their progress so far and what they perceive learning to be (Little, 1991). One thing is clear, that the autonomous learner must be interested and motivated in what they are doing enabling them to become responsible for their own learning. It is the teacher’s job to make to initiate the step to learning independence.

2.3.1 Misconceptions

There are several misconceptions involved with the term autonomy. The first of which is that autonomy may be viewed as the process and teaching style. Another is that teachers “teach” autonomy. Autonomy is a product not a process. Autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners (Little, 1990). Teachers should first understand the meaning of the word, and the product involved in being autonomous. Autonomous language learning does not mean learning by oneself (Iida, 2009). Autonomy is not teacher independence, but teacher-learner interdependence (Little 1995, Iida 2009). As teachers we have to facilitate and motivate our students in a way so that our students become autonomous someday, not just say, ‘OK, starting today you are autonomous’. With time and guidance

from teachers, students should gradually learn the benefits of autonomy and the potential for the future endeavours that it can offer.

2.4 Learner beliefs

Knowing what students expect of their teacher or how a lesson should flow can help make the process of innovative techniques much smoother. However, Dörnyei (2001a) has reason to believe that the beliefs most learners have about language learning are most likely to be incorrect. Some may believe that languages can be learned in a matter of months, or perhaps never even after years of suffering while others may believe that languages may only be learned in the classroom under the official theory of learning (Smith, 1998). There is a common conception that ‘starting early’ will help in the process of learning, however, there are varying ideas of at what age ‘early’ is. Many people think that they may not have the aptitude for languages and may give up altogether. Some people, particularly in Japan, may never utter a sentence for fear of making a mistake, while others may communicate simply with words and gestures. The list of alternative learner beliefs, as Dörnyei remarks, “*is endless*” (2001a : 67).

Learner beliefs are ingrained in learner’s minds from a young age. People will only believe what they know and may be confused or apprehensive of the unknown (Dörnyei 2001b). In Japan, the majority of educational institutions use the teacher-centred approach where the teacher gives orders, students listen and very little interaction occurs. This approach is very different to the student-centred approach of ‘learner autonomy’ where the learner takes more responsibility in their own learning while the teacher acts more as a facilitator or guide to their learning. Dörnyei (2001a) believes that incorrect learner beliefs in how to learn can hinder the learning experience of a learner and become a real barrier in mastering the L2.

Dörnyei suggests that teachers should talk to their students before the introduction of a new theory. By doing this the teacher will gain an insight into how students think, what they view as the best way to learn and their opinions on the new approach the teacher desires to adopt.

2.5 Connotations in the context of this paper

The role of any teacher in education should be to motivate their students and to influence them in a way that creates enthusiasm in the subject they are trying to teach. This can be difficult in language education, particularly in Japan where all students are required to learn English for six years up to high school and a further two years in tertiary education. English education in high schools in Japan is primarily taught in preparation for rigorous university entrances examinations, and has an emphasis on grammar and translation. O'Donnell (2003) stated that once students have successfully passed exams and entered university their purpose for studying English may be fulfilled hence a loss of interest in English, (O'Donnell 2003). The situation that this paper focuses on involves combating this predicament by creating enthusiasm towards English, by encouraging students in every way and by introducing materials that promote self-motivation in all levels of learners. If motivation levels are increased and students become autonomous creating more motivation, ability will only improve.

2.6 Applying autonomy to language learning

The justifications for the application of autonomy in language learning and general education are plentiful. Dickinson provides evidence that “*autonomous learners become more highly motivated and that autonomy leads to better, more effective work*” (Dickinson 1995: 165). People who take the initiative in learning, whether learning languages or just learning in general, learn more effectively than

do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught. If motivation is the output of autonomy, then autonomous learners will keep learning, aiding them in their future endeavours to further successes. There is an important link between autonomy and motivation. Dickinson (1995) investigated just that link, to prove the claim that ‘autonomous learners become more motivated learners’.

2.6.1 The link between Autonomy and Motivation

Evidence continually suggests that the link between autonomy and motivation is valid. Without motivation there is no autonomy and vice versa. We have so far looked at the qualities autonomy can bring the learner, but what is it that makes a student autonomous? Does autonomy lead to motivation? Or is motivation a precondition for autonomy? Ushioda (1996, 2002, 2008), has written several papers on the connection of autonomy and motivation. She acknowledges that the two key aspects are self-motivation and intrinsic motivation. *“Intrinsic motivation is especially valued as a desirable outcome for autonomy. It promotes spontaneous learning behaviour and the perception that learning is motivating in itself”* Ushioda (1996 : 39). If a learner is intrinsically motivated their desire to learn and improve comes from within, and this ‘self-motivation’ plays an “active functional role in promoting and sustaining autonomous learning” (Ushioda, 1996).

2.7 How to encourage learning autonomy

Every teacher in a classroom has the opportunity to positively influence the minds of many young individuals. It is the job of a teacher to unleash the potential from within every student and encourage them in every way. Students in Japan have the reputation of being passive, dependent and lacking in initiative. This makes the process necessary to succeed in autonomy more difficult. However, if the teacher is willing to alter his or her teaching style to fit the culture of his / her

students, the innovation of change may become clearer (Sarwar, 2001). In order to promote learning autonomy to a group where it may be a foreign idea the teacher must first acquire relevant background knowledge of their students and the institution they will be working for.

In order to promote autonomy in the classroom teachers could “*help students become aware of the value of independent learning, so that they acquire the habit of learning continuously, and maintain it after they have completed their formal studies*” (Lee, 1998 : 282). To attain this level teachers need to realise the four Rs of individualization. Altman (1980) in Sarwar (2001) states that there are four factors (the four Rs) that can aid in promoting autonomy and realizing the potential of each student as *re-education*, *responsibility*, *relevance* and *rapport*.

Re-education means replacing the role of the teacher as ‘*facilitator with the learner as the active agent in the process of learning*’ (Sarwar, 2001 : 128). Students must take on more *responsibility* for their own learning and teachers must realize what is *relevant* to them and provide for their needs by supplying a learning experience which motivates and encourages students to learn by themselves. In order to accomplish these simple goals in class, teachers must build a *rapport* with their students which creates enthusiasm in class, and in turn promotes autonomy (Sarwar, 2001).

2.8 Implications for teaching

The research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), learner motivation, and pedagogy shows there is a cyclic process of motivation affecting effort which in turn affects ability which motivates more. This motivation must come internally. Internal motivation comes from competence, relatedness, and most importantly

autonomy. This must mean autonomy in its true connotation of students doing what they want and when they want. Students must be trained and guided before they are told to just “learn by themselves”. A student cannot just become autonomous without any guidance, they must be taught how to learn, and this initial step requires a lot of encouragement and guidance from the teacher.

3. Research Methods

3.1 The study

The aim of this study is to compare the autonomy levels of two sets of students, a group of English major students and a group of non English major students using identical projects to determine if learner autonomy is enhanced. The objectives are to increase student motivation, lower anxiety and improve student attitude towards English through the introduction of a project-based syllabus in both groups.

3.2 Participants

The participants of two classes were used for this study, one first year group of undergraduate students and the other a group of second year full time students at Matsuyama University. The first year group were non English major students, with an average age of 18, while the second year group were English major students, with an average age of 19. For practical reasons, the English major students are referred to as “group A” and the non English majors as “group B”. Group A comprised of 23 students while group B comprised of 27, meaning a total of 50 students were involved in the study.

The major difference between the two groups of students was that “group A” had chosen to study English out of choice while “group B” had not. The study was

carried out from April 2008 to January 2009. Before starting the study it was predicted that motivation levels would be high with “group A” and low with “group B”.

3.3 Materials

The majority of data was gathered through the use of questionnaires given before and after the completion of a project-based syllabus, with the aim of initiating autonomy in all learners. There were two projects that made up a part of the syllabus, the first of which is a project which was developed solely by the author, and has been used and improved upon in other classes for the past 3 years called “*the Picture Book project*”. The other project was used in conjunction with the text “*Travel Abroad Project*” published by Nan’un-do and written by Richard McMahon (2005). Both projects are evaluated through self and peer assessment, with testing absent from the curriculum to enable students to become intrinsically motivated.

3.3.1 The Picture Book project

The picture book project involves a picture story book with characters, a scenario, a suitable ending and a message. The goal for this project is to produce a picture book from scratch using individual effort, original ideas and initiative before students present their book to their groups in class. Evaluation for the books comes from peer-assessment, self-assessment and comments from their instructor. Students were guided and advised over an 8-10 week period before they had to construct their own picture books and present them to the class in the final class of term. There is a series of procedures that gives students suggestions, ideas and advice on how to make their own picture book.

3.3.2 Travel Project

This project is based on the text by Nan'un-do, written by Richard McMahon (2005) called the "Travel Abroad Project". The objective is for every student to choose a different country in the world, to research about different aspects of that country including culture, history, the arts and present their findings on three chosen topics in groups then conclude by introducing a 2 week trip to their chosen country. The idea behind the project is to learn more about a 'target' country, while learning more about the world from classmates. The project, gives complete responsibility of learning to the student while using all available resources to learn, including the internet, the library and local bookstores. The project incorporates reading, writing, listening and presenting skills as students collate data by themselves outside of class, using any resources they please, and then presenting their findings with presentations. The project culminates with all students presenting a 2 week travel itinerary to their class using Power Point. In theory students should learn from each other when presenting to the class. Class time is used to present findings to the class, or to introduce new topics for following weeks.

3.4 Rationale

The reasons these projects are being utilized is to introduce the concept of learner autonomy to the subjects. Both projects give almost complete responsibility to the student, with class time alone kept solely for teacher-student guidance, facilitation and lessons in how to obtain the information from the resources available. The project provides ample opportunity to increase self-confidence, to sustain curiosity, to encourage students to set their own goals to introduce tasks students may never have done before, (Dörnyei, 1994a) and most of all to increase motivation. All of these elements are crucial to the process of becoming an autonomous learner.

4. Results

The following is a small selection of results obtained from one qualitative and two quantitative questionnaires used for this study. Both groups of students were given the same quantitative questionnaire before and after the completion of the 2 projects used in this study, set during a 15 week semester. The quantitative results below were gathered using a 4 point likert scale as follows

1 – Strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – agree, 4 – strongly agree.

4.1 Quantitative and Qualitative results

Table 1.
A selection of Quantitative results

<i>Feelings of achievement and satisfaction</i>	before		after		change	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
My English skills have improved	3.15	2.52	3.67	3.25	+0.52	+0.73
I feel confident using English now	2.80	2.28	3.20	2.79	+0.40	+0.51

Table 2.
A selection of Qualitative results

Comments on the Picture book Project	Comments on the travel project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Very exciting, I enjoy to make my book · This project is very nice, fantastic !! · A very fun activity. Drawing pictures and thinking of a good story was all very difficult but I learned a lot making my book. · I don't like to draw pictures, but I like the picture book project ! · It was a very interesting project !! I could enjoy making PB. · Drawing picture and making story is not easy, but I became happy when I completed my PB project. · It was fun to think of story and draw a picture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · I feel fun, I enjoy research. · Nice idea, now I'm interesting in foreign country ! · I can get the knowledge of abroad. I can have a wide vision ! Thank you ! · Very difficult, but as I began to research about my country I became very interested in travelling and learning more. Now I really want to go to Switzerland. · I can learn many things about many countries, its good for me, and I'm interested in some foreign countries · I'm interested to research about my foreign country. · Thanks to this project, I can be interested in Laos, and I can get much information about

	Laos, and other countries from my classmates. · Travel project is the interesting and exciting idea. I research always on websites in English. If I didn't have your class, I wouldn't know such websites.
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All of the above comments were kept as is and were not altered in any way.

The introduction of a project-based learning syllabus in both classes showed increased results in internal motivational orientations, with comments obtained from qualitative constructs confirming that autonomous behaviour was evident. Data provided evidence that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation was high in English major students before the onset of the course, while it was significantly lower in the business major class. There was a remarkable increase in confidence and satisfaction in student's English ability in both groups. Results after the course indicated that the improvement in attitude, increased awareness and motivation levels was higher with the business major students.

5 . Conclusions

This signifies the value that a project-based syllabus, like the one used here, has for all levels of English learners. If the goals of educational institutions are to foster the autonomous individual, a project based syllabus like this one, should be recommended. Teachers, instructors and educators should trust their students by adopting an autonomy-centred methodology. If project work like this is utilised, it can motivate the students, confidence will rise, and gains in ability will follow.

Teachers need to accept the heterogeneity of learners and worry less about their capabilities. Smith (1998), when asked how to cope with students who are unmotivated and uninterested in subjects at school they are forced to take, he

replies : “it may be better to regard your job not as the instructor who organizes the learning, that students are supposed to do but as the guide who makes what we would like students to learn interesting, comprehensible and accessible,” (Smith 1998 : 80). If instructors of English can develop authentic materials that enhance the concept of autonomy by building rapport with their students, creating a positive atmosphere to learn in, and by providing constant support where possible, motivation levels should increase.

Some students may not be used to the changes they may encounter in an autonomy-centred class, and some may even react negatively to it. To avoid confusion and aid in the transition to becoming the complete autonomous learner, students should be given time to adjust to the new learning strategies involved. Autonomy should start in larger groups, then lead to smaller groups and eventually individuals. The transition is from interdependence to independence.

This research has realised that a wide range of learner ability types can be motivated and show signs of becoming autonomous learners if the correct procedures are applied. Teachers and institutions must stop being insecure and let authentic learning take place. This leads to the question, how will becoming autonomous help the world? Business and the workforce, today, are looking for creative thinkers that can adapt to their status-quo, possessing skills which require the foundations of motivation, curiosity and the capability to learn in our rapidly changing information society. Supporting the learner in ways, as shown in this study will not only help them to improve their English by becoming autonomous, but will also give them a valuable skill for later life ventures.

For Discussion

In the university setting students of all abilities should be given the opportunity to learn at their will. Although many students have personal access to the internet at home, to English movies in local rental stores, books and newspapers in their university library and magazines in their local shops the preference to opt for the Japanese in each of these situations may be just too strong for some when deciding whether to chose the English or Japanese option. In my opinion every university with an English department needs a resources room where English is the lingua franca where students can freely speak in English, where students can read, listen to and learn language independently of the classroom environment. Such facilities already exist at various locations in Japan and abroad in the form of a Student Access Centre where students can access all types of materials at their own free will. It is one of my goals to set up just such a facility here in Matsuyama University, the students deserve it.

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