Innovations in ELT :
Putting theory to practice in the form of a Student Access Centre

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1． Introduction

In the fast paced world that we live in innovation is paramount to provide for the ever changing world around us． Change and innovation are inseparable, however factors which can affect their progress are plenty． For the survival of any institution whether it be a multi-national conglomerate or a private English language school in Japan， successful management is necessary and an understanding in cultural backgrounds of the managers and their workers compulsory.

The factors involved in change are immense． In the case of ELT， especially in an EFL environment, perhaps the most influential factor of change is the cultural continuity between the students and teachers involved． Autonomous learning, or independent learning is a modern approach which cannot in general be taught in the classroom however many teachers， usually of western origin， strive to accomplish.

One particular way of promoting learning autonomy is the introduction of student support centres, or student self access centres（SAC）where students learn by

themselves in a positive learning environment for the most part without external tuition.　The theory here is that "*language learning, is a life long endeavour*" Lee （1998：282）and in order to promote the idea that more learning is done outside the classroom in students own time than during classes students must be directed in how to learn by themselves.　This concept of autonomous learning may in fact be a cultural trait more attuned to the western teacher and unknown to his or her students in Japan.

This paper will be based around the work done by Jones （1995）on his paper titled '*Self-access and culture : retreating from autonomy*', and the work he did on introducing a self access centre to a language programme at a university in Cambodia.　I will be discussing a percentage of the literature related to the management of cross-cultural change and relating this to my own experiences of the interrelationship between change and culture.　The aim of this paper is to convince the reader that a similar facility should be established here in Matsuyama University.

1.1　A synopsis of the Jones Approach

Jeremy Jones is an EFL teacher who spent the academic year of 1993-94 as an Education Adviser at the Foreign Languages Centre in Phnom Penh University, Cambodia.　During this period Jones （1995）attempted to introduce the concept of 'autonomy' by laying the foundations of a self-access centre, a place of active study where students can learn independently and individually.　He challenges the idea that individual autonomy is a necessary goal in self-access.

Jones states that '*most successful learning takes place outside the classroom*' （1995：228）, in order to accomplish this task students must be taught the positive attributes of 'how to learn' by themselves.　Jones declares that this approach may

be a change to the 'teacher-centred' teaching styles that students are used to and continues that the shift now must have more focus on the learner.   Jones insists that a 'student-centred' class can enhance autonomy and give students the opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning, '*independent of the teacher*', (1995 : 228).

The rationale behind Jones's (1995) approach challenges the idea of learning autonomy and the benefits entailed, in a country like Cambodia where the idea does not conform to the norm.   He claims that there are barriers, which must be crossed, and factors understood before such an approach will succeed.   He outlines an approach to innovation management that should account for the cultural differences between his students in Cambodia and those of the west.   His paper suggests ideas for self-access design and innovative ideas that promote autonomy in places where 'autonomy' may not normally be adopted as a teaching technique.

2 .   Innovation

Innovation is a crucial element for the success of any business however small or large.   More simply put Goldsmith and Clutterbuck (1984) mention in White (1987) "*There seems little doubt that failure to innovate, even in a mature industry, is a recipe for disaster*", (1987 : 211).   Whether we like it or not, ELT is a business that provides a service and like all industries it must change with the times. Depending on the nature of the ELT industry innovations may vary.   A smaller private language school, that relies on student numbers for its survival may exhibit more changes each academic year than for example a larger institution where the language department is only a small part of the institution's existence.   In the former case, innovations in teaching methods would be needed to maintain or

improve on student numbers whereas in the latter case, innovations will be needed to enhance student motivation.

White（1987）suggests that the difference between innovation and change is that *"innovation is planned and deliberate, it is intended to bring about improvement, and it is fundamental in nature",* （1987：211）.　At this stage innovation can bring about a change in goals.

The factors involved in this process can include the goals themselves, teacher's attitudes and practices.　Perhaps more importantly teacher's workloads are increased. It is thought that the introduction of a self-access centre like that described by Jones （1995）is a cheap form of language tuition that replaces the need for and reduces the workload of teachers.　The truth is an SAC may do just the opposite.　"*Self Access Centres do not necessarily reduce staff loads with respect to conventional teaching*", Dickinson（1987：122）.　The concept of learning autonomy in the form of an SAC in Japan may be a new one, and the generally mislead conception is that the introduction of Student Access Centres lets students study by themselves replacing the need for and reducing the workload of teachers.

2.1　Change in ELT

The topic of 'change in ELT' has provided a great deal of literature.　The idea of what constitutes the most appropriate methodology is constantly changing and it is almost certain that this trend will continue.　Therefore an ELT project that initiates no form of change is all but worthless.　Education in general must incorporate change into its syllabus whatever the subject matter due to the constant changing world around us and people's perceptions of the best way to teach and to be taught.

Changes in ELT have been occurring ever since the industry first began.   The first methods of language teaching were very much teacher-centred and involved rote learning styles where students were forced to repeat and '*learn*' everything the teacher presented them.   Then, several decades later, changes were implemented in favour of "*the notional/functional syllabus, the process syllabus, the Natural Approach, the procedural syllabus and task-based language teaching*" Markee （2001：118）.   Many of these proposals have made contributions to the progress of successful innovations made in ELT to date, but more recently the trend in ELT innovations is leaning towards learning autonomy and factors in learning institutions that may aid towards the approach.   The introduction of student-access centres, small rooms with ample materials, including books, and audio-visual facilities foster autonomous learning, or help students to learn by themselves in a positive learning environment are now evident in many learning institutions.

2.2 Cultural aspects of Change

The problems with introducing innovations in ELT that work are plentiful. Markee （2001） asks the questions :

"*Who is responsible for making the changes ?*
Who implements the change ? and
Who benefits from the change ?" Markee （2001：118）

Throughout the world, but especially in Asian cultures as in the case of Jones, unfortunately teachers may not have as much say in the decision making of innovations as they may desire.   Kennedy （1988） in Markee （2001） notes that "*ministry of education officials and heads of department play the roles of adopters ; teachers are implementers : students are clients : curriculum and material designers are suppliers ; and the expatriate curriculum expert act as the change agent*"

Markee（2001：119）．　The expatriate language teacher in Japan, where I work, culturally is in the minority and when he or she suggests some form of change in the curriculum the suggestion must first be discussed with the upper echelons before it can be permitted．　The problem here is that according to Jones（1995）*"no matter what guise autonomy may take, it remains a western idea"*（1995：230）．　To initiate change in the classroom whereby teachers and students are from dissimilar cultural backgrounds the differences must be recognised and an understanding by both parties of either culture must be met before change can be seen．　An imbalance of cultural-continuity between the implementers of change, the teachers the clients : students can hinder the smooth process that should result in positive benefits of change.

2. 3　Cultural continuity

As mentioned earlier, Jones（1995）suggests that the autonomous approach to learning is mostly a western idea, and not all countries incorporate autonomy into their culture．　Adversely when attempted in the EFL classroom in foreign nations where it is not accepted, negative influences may appear, Jones（1995）.

The natural approach to innovation that a teacher might have, may target the classroom, however the classroom alone is insufficient if any effect wishes to be appreciated．　The classroom is part of a far wider cultural element including the culture of the institution, the education system, society of the country where the classes are held and the cultural beliefs of all involved．　All of these factors must be realized before change is implemented．　What can complicate the matter further is if the implementer of change Markee,（2001）is from a different culture altogether, with opposing beliefs of teaching methodologies.

Holliday（1994）describes the cultural differences and expectations that students or teaching institutions may have as technology. Technology, refers not only to the equipment available in the classrooms but to the '*whole range of methodologies, techniques and procedures which make up classroom practice*'（1994：4）. The approach that Jones took in Cambodia by introducing a self-access centre was new 'technology' that may have been unfamiliar to his students.

As students enter a class they come with expectations, it is the teacher's job to provide the 'technology' to initiate change in, but first to maintain a level of trust with the students that their technology actually works. The priority of every foreign teacher working in an EFL environment should be first to research into the local 'technology' available before applying his or her own new ideas. The first hurdle a teacher eager to utilise new technology in a classroom needs to face is to understand the cultural background of their students. This should make the transition to western approaches of 'technology' smoother than by attempting to use new methodologies altogether, Holliday（1994）.

2.4   Change and Culture

Change in an EFL environment must incorporate several factors. Although emphasis on change in ELT is advised, Stephenson（1994）considers that the emphasis should not be on change alone, as "*not all change is necessarily progress*"（1994：225）.

The cultural background of the students and institutions that teachers work for, influence the actions and expectations in the classroom. In this section, instead of focusing on ethnocentric stereotypes, I would like to deal with the broader traits of certain cultures or groups.

White（1987）emphasizes the importance of culture in educational institutions and the influence it can have over innovation.　White, claims that every school has a culture which "*covers such intangibles as personal relationships, habits, unwritten rules of conduct and the practice of educational judgement*",（1987：212）.　To make the process of innovation as smooth as possible it is also important to take account of the prevailing culture, to avoid conflict and promote understanding.

Attempts have been made by various authors to pinpoint the culturally specific cognitive tools affecting the way we interpret change and innovation.　One influential writer in particular, Hofstede（1986）, declares that there are four dimensions of cultural variability and each can determine how different cultures cope with change.　The four dimensions are：*individualism／collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance,* and *masculinity／femininity*.　The first three of these dimensions are most relevant to identifying the relation to culture and change in ELT.　There is also a similarity in the points raised by Jones（1995）who states that the "*concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values*"（1995：228）.　Both state that cultural background can adversely affect the way people act and their expectations in the classroom making innovation all the more complicated.　My understanding of Hofstede's（1986）four dimensions are highly relevant to the outcome of this essay so I will now attempt to give a brief outline of his ideas.

2.4.1　*Individualism*

This dimension concerns the human relationships within a society and determines to what level of importance each individual regards themselves as independent from others.　A collectivist society, the opposite of an individualist society, declares that each individual from birth is part of an in-group from which they cannot become detached Hofstede（1986）.　Individualist cultures regard self

importance of themselves and their immediate family with precedence. According to Hofstede（1986）this in turn makes collectivist societies "tightly integrated and individualist societies loosely integrated"（1986：307）.

2.4.2 *Power Distance*

Here Hofstede（1986）is saying that different people in society have varying levels of power and are given higher or lower levels of respect than in other countries or cultures. Countries with a lower power distance level"*accept inequality in power and consider it as normal*"（1986：307）. More simply put "*All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others*" Hofstede（1980：136）.

2.4.3 *Uncertainty avoidance*

This is possibly the element of a culture that will have the largest influence on how varying cultures incorporate elements of change. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance levels consider what is different as dangerous and view innovation as a hindrance to what already works well. Whereas weak uncertainty avoidance cultures consider difference with curiosity and are far more tolerant to new ideas thus providing an environment where innovation can thrive. According to Hofstede（1986）, the BANA countries of Britain, Australia and North America all have low levels of uncertainty avoidance and most Asian countries including Cambodia and Japan have relatively high levels of uncertainty avoidance.

The relevance that this has to change in ELT is that all of the above dimensions can affect the way students from one culture react in a class given by a teacher of an opposing culture. Therefore culture is of paramount importance to the implementation of innovation in ELT.

3．Self-access centres

There has been a trend in ELT recently that favours the introduction of self access learning centres（SAC）.　Jones did just this, he introduced the new concept of learning autonomy by the creation of a self-access centre in a learning institution in Cambodia.　The rationale for establishing an SAC according to Revell & Miller （1993）could be based on one or more of the following factors.　*Financially* an SAC is seen as a way of cutting costs and setbacks in staffing.　*Pedagogically* they are viewed as a way of helping learners improve their language skills and immersion of language.　*Ideologically* the SAC is the optimal way of introducing learning autonomy, to students, the main objective of Jones（1995）, which in turn should enhance"*learner motivation, independence and enthusiasm to learn*"Miller & Revell （1993：230）.　Finally the *prestigious* element, as introducing SACs to an institution is seen as the '*state of the art*' method of language training, Miller & Revell（1993：230）.

The significance of the SAC in language education is aimed at "*improving students language output as well as encouraging them to become independent learners*" Sarwar（2001：131）.　More will be added on this in following chapters but the SAC learning method passes more responsibility from the teacher to the student as they learn that direct teaching or a lecture is only one form of learning experience, Sarwar（2001）.

3.1　Learning autonomy

There is a notion in the ELT industry that learning autonomy is the correct and modern approach to English education.　There is an endless supply of literature on innovation in EFL, only a fraction of which has been covered in the production of

this paper. There are many authors Lee, Jones, Sarwar, Armanet, Miller & Lindsay to name but a few who are adamant that *"the techniques used in order to direct one's own learning"* can provide students with more responsibility in their own learning, Thomson（1996：30）in Lee（1998）, making them autonomous learners.

The common consensus is that the introduction of self learning access centres helps the student to take more responsibility in what they learn and encourages them to undertake independent learning outside the classroom.

3.2 How to encourage learning autonomy

Every teacher in a classroom has the opportunity to touch the minds of many young individuals. In my opinion, it is their job as a teacher to unleash the potential from within every student and encourage them in every way. Students in Japan, where I teach have the reputation of being passive, dependent and lacking in initiative. This makes the process necessary to succeed in autonomy all that more difficult. However if the teacher is willing to alter their teaching styles to fit the culture of their students, the innovation of change may become more clear. In order to promote learning autonomy to a group where it may be foreign the teacher must first acquire relevant background knowledge of their students and institution they will be working for. What Jones（1995）does not do in his paper is tell the reader how much 'prior cultural knowledge' he has of his students. All we know is that Jones spent one year in Cambodia trying to introduce the idea of 'autonomy' where the concept may have been completely new. At this stage and from my experience so far in EFL I would suggest that all teachers working in a foreign land must first research into the cultural aspects of their students and teaching environment before attempting to 'revolutionize' educational standards.

What teachers can and should do in order to promote autonomy in the classroom is first to "*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 4 Rs of individualization. Altman（1980）in Sarwar（2001）states that there are four factors that can aid in promoting autonomy and realizing the potential of each student, *reeducation, responsibility, relevance* and *rapport*.

Reeducation means replacing the role of the teacher as '*facilitator and the learner as the active agent in the process of learning*' Sarwar（2001：128）. In the context of Jones's study in Cambodia where Jones（1995）introduces self access centres to enhance autonomy and in my teaching experience in Japan, the importance of this change must be emphasized. 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 in turn promoting autonomy, Sarwar（2001）& Jones（1995）.

3.3　Groups working better than individuals

Jones（1995）discovered that the cultural background of his students greatly influenced their actions. In reference to Hofstede's four dimensions, Jones's perception of Cambodia was of a highly collectivist society and a country with a high level of power distance Hofstede（1986）. To promote autonomous learning could in many countries be seen as "*culturally insensitive and promoting the values of the western world*", which may be considered highly inappropriate in some

cultures, Jones（1995：229）. To enhance the smooth transition into a learner autonomous environment, teachers must firstly acknowledge the conventional way Cambodians learn.

Jones（1995：229）cites Chandler（1983）:

"*The teacher's relation to his student, like so many relationships in Cambodian society, is lopsided. The teacher, like the parents, bestows, transmits and commands. The student, like the child, receives, accepts and obeys. Nothing changes in the transmission process, except perhaps the ignorance of the student*". Chandler（1983：88）.

If a teacher introduces innovations that do not conform to this rule, change should not be made in the first place. However if innovations are made in a way that incorporate cultural aspects of society that students are already familiar with, then the transition should be smoother. Jones discovered that changes should not be sudden, and teachers should be more inclined to incorporate cultural aspects into their innovations.

3.3.1 Retreat from Autonomy

A sudden change in any faculty of a learning institution can leave students confused and uninterested. However if innovation accommodates factors that are similar to what students are accustomed to then effects of change will soon be apparent.

In collectivist societies such as Cambodia, students may be more accustomed to working in groups than individually. Group work could be the starting point when initiating autonomy. Jones（1995）suggests that we can introduce the unfamiliar –

the self-access centre − into the familiar − the tendency to work in groups, "*an all important feature of Cambodian student's learning style*"（1995：230）.

Jones（1995）proclaims that the '*learner's participation in the design of a centre is well-worth encouraging*' Jones（1995：232）. Aston（1993）in his paper '*The learner's contribution to the SAC* ' also suggests that learners should be given more responsibility in the planning and running of a self-access centre, Aston（1993）. If learners are given this responsibility they can take greater control of their own learning and also help in the transition to autonomy and help others who come to the centre by directing them in their studies and influencing other learners.

3.4　A Self Access Centre in Japan

The institution I used to work for, a medium sized national university in Japan has a self access centre which can accommodate about 9 or 10 students at a time. The centre was set with the same purpose in mind as Jones's SAC in Cambodia, to promote autonomy and is well equipped with various materials, including 4 notebook computers, newspapers, a TV with DVD, books and test study guides. On choosing this topic to write about I interviewed several teachers on their thoughts of the SAC at our university（see Appendix 1 for questions）.

All teachers I interviewed were in favour of the centre. However the general conclusion was that the SAC alone is inadequate, it only supports students who are already autonomous. To promote autonomy successfully the teacher must first understand the true meaning of the word and its connotations. The teacher has to understand the meaning of autonomy, how authentic learning occurs, and how to motivate students internally before any type of syllabi with autonomy as a goal should be implemented.

For the purpose of this study, I checked the number of students using the room, at 3 times a day, for 5 days during term time that year (Jan/Feb 2008). The results are shown below.

	No. of students			
Day	10 am	2 pm	6 pm	Total each day
Monday	1	2	5	8
Tuesday	2	4	2	10
Wednesday	1	6	2	9
Thursday	0	4	3	7
Friday	2	6	6	14

From this simple study you can see that the SAC was used every day by a differing number of students. Students were seen to be using a range of materials available but for the most part the same students were seen to be using the centre each day, there was little variation in the centres usage.

3.5 Implications in teaching

The research in SLA, learner motivation, 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, students must be taught how to learn, and this initial step requires a lot of encouragement and guidance from the teacher.

3. 6　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, or that teachers 'teach' autonomy, this is not the case.　Autonomy is a product not the process.　Teachers should first understand the meaning of the word, and the product involved in being autonomous.　As teachers we have to facilitate and motivate in a way that our students will 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 future endeavours it has.

In my experience of incorporating 'learning autonomy' into my syllabi I found that students cannot become autonomous without the correct guidance from a teacher.　The process must not be sudden and during class time students must be assigned projects or exercises that require them to research and discover answers in their own time.　To promote autonomy teachers should act as facilitators to their students by providing them with a positive environment that motivates and encourages them to learn for themselves, and be proud of their achievements.

4 .　Conclusion

The view of the western world is that learner autonomy is considered to be a highly desirable requisite of the good language learner and self access centres, like those suggested by Jones have become an authentic way of promoting it.　Jones has provided readers of his paper with the process involved in autonomous learning but it is difficult for the reader to judge the success of his project.

What should have had more emphasis is that autonomy is the product and not the process. An access centre like that introduced by Jones, should have continued the development of autonomy for several years after its initial introduction. No mention was made in his paper of the access centre after his departure, or if students actually became autonomous.

The potential for learning autonomy in future endeavours of language education cannot be over stressed. If the product of creating an autonomous learner is reached students will "*acquire the habit of learning continuously and maintain it after they have completed their studies*", Lee（1998：282）. There are cultural issues involved in learning autonomy. "*Each self-access centre should know its users, their culture and educational background, and allow this knowledge to influence the design of facilities and services*", Jones（1995：233）. In order to attain this level of autonomy and before a self-access centre is introduced students need teacher guidance in how to learn for themselves, after all if you were thrown into a car garage, could you work on your car ?

For discussion

Innovation is paramount for future success, perhaps more so here in the privately run institution of Matsuyama University. The service, （*education*）offered to the clients（*the students*）must change with the times. In my opinion students need a Student Access Centre（SAC）similar to those mentioned in the scope of this essay. To prove the potential that an SAC would have at this university I carried out a simple survey by asking one hundred students if they would go to an SAC if there was one here. The response was very positive with 98 students saying "YES" they would and only 2 saying "NO" they wouldn't. This provides current educators and boards of authority in the humanities and language departments with more

reason to begin the construction and development of the first official SAC in Ehime prefecture.　The benefits that such a facility would bring the university and the students are unlimited.

100 students of random faculties were asked the following question in December 2009 and January 2010.

Would you use a Student Access Centre if there was one here？

YES　98 students

NO　　2 students

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for teachers on "Student Learning Autonomy and Student Access Centres（SAC）"

Part 1, Introducing the concept of Learning Autonomy

1． Do you think the concept of learning autonomy is new to Japanese students ?

2． What problems did you foresee when designing your curriculum ?

3． What problems did you encounter during your classes ?

4． Do you think a curriculum based around autonomous learning is suitable for Japanese students ?

5． What cultural aspects of Japan affected the way your students acted in class ?

6． How who would you change your curriculum to improve the understanding of learner autonomy in the classroom ?

Part 2, on introduction of a Student support room, or Student Access Centre

The following questions are all connected to the Student support Centre or 'Student access centre' at Aidai.

1． Are you in favour of the SAC ?   Why ?

2．　What do you believe are the pros and cons of an SAC？　Or the SAC at Aidai？

Pros

Pros	Cons

3．　Do you think the SAC promotes student learning autonomy？

4．　What are your intentions for introducing this new concept to your students？

5．　What do you think are the qualities of a good autonomous learner？

6．　What advice would you give students who want to improve their English in connection with the SAC？