Learner Autonomy in Japanese Classrooms: An Exchange of Views

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Introduction

At the end of each presentation by Leni Dam and David Little at JALT98 (including their joint opening plenary: See Dam and Little, this volume), participants were invited to give anonymous feedback in the form of written comments and/or questions (in either English or Japanese). This feedback formed the basis for a "Special Exchange Session" moderated by Haruko Katsura and Richard Smith on the final day of the conference.

A question from one participant was: "What exactly is a 'Special Exchange Session'?" David and Leni had posed the same question when first asked to take part. They were told: "This is a new, experimental format...allowing participants to converse with/'get to know' main speakers in a relatively informal manner." This article attempts to mirror the interactive nature of the Special Exchange Session, as originally conceived and as realized in practice. Thus, just as they did at the session itself, David and Leni offer below their interpretations of, and overall responses to, the written feedback received; representative questions and comments are reproduced verbatim (set off from the text in boxes), in order for the voices of conference participants also to be heard.

Feedback and responses are divided under two main headings: (a) Theoretical and cultural considerations (addressed by David Little), and (b) Practical concerns (addressed by Leni Dam). In both sections specific reference is made to the implementation and development of learner autonomy in the Japanese context.

By foregrounding and presenting responses to some of the concerns of conference participants, we hope to help motivate further cycles of reflection, teacher-research and discussion among teachers working in the Japanese context.

Theoretical and cultural consideration (David Little)

Learner autonomy and learning strategies

> * What role does the development of cognitive, metacognitive and language stud strategies play in the autonomy developmen process? When, if at all, should strategies be taught? [University teacher]

In his plenary lecture Mark Clarke defined learning as "change through time." If we accept this definition, our role as teachers is to create a framework within which our learners can change. If in addition we believe in the central importance of learner autonomy, our role is also to help our learners to give conscious shape and direction to that change. This means findin ways of enabling them to develop the metacognitive skills they need if they are effectively to plan, manage, monitor and evaluate their learning.

At the same time, I should like to cautior against putting too much trust in what has come to be called "strategy training," for fou reasons:

1. There is no evidence that the most successful communicators are those who use the widest range of strategies (this point is made by McDonough, 1995).
2. Any strategy can be used either consciously or unconsciously. It is thus possible that strategy training simply makes learners conscious of things they were already doing without being aware (it.
3. There are limits beyond which we do not have introspective access to our mental processes: We must be cautious about

saying what we are doing on the basis of what we think we are doing.

4. Forms of strategy training that resemble drill and practice have nothing whatsoever to do with the development of learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy and Japanese culture

> ** I felt that the concept of learner autonomy is basically argued from a Western Prejudice of Learning. The Asian (Eastern) concept of learning, in my opinion, is quite different. What do you think about the cultural aspect as a factor in autonomous learning? [Junior college/University teacher] [Note: Many other participants provided similar feedback]*

> ** [Translated from Japanese] I'm currently practising getting feedback ... from my students via writing (in Japanese) after each lesson. The reason I started doing this is that Japanese students are not accustomed to expressing their opinions about the lesson to the teacher verbally. After [David Little's] presentation, one of the participants claimed that Japanese people "think less," but I don't believe that's the case. I think students are educated in such a way that they don't find any meaning in expressing their opinions within this teacher-centred culture. So I've started the practice of getting feedback since April, and by now students have begun to express their opinions. Now I'm thinking of asking them to write their comments in English. [University teacher]*

Human beings all belong to the same biological species and thus have certain fundamental attributes and experiences in common. It is inconceivable, for example, that the phenomenon of consciousness is subject to cultural variation, though the way in which individuals interpret it may be. In my view, another human universal is the autonomy of the individual as a "self-producing" organism (Maturana and Varela, 1992). In contexts of formal learning, where a central concern is (or is usually declared to be) the growth of critical self-awareness, we exercise and develop our autonomy, or "produce ourselves," through the reflective processes that are usually labelled metacognition. According to this line of argument, although human societies and cultures differ from one another in ways we are familiar with, we should not be asking ourselves: "Is learner autonomy appropriate to Japan?," since to do so implies that Japanese learners have no capacity for critically aware "self-production." We should rather ask: "What forms can learner autonomy appropriately take when it develops within the Japanese cultural tradition?"

Questions about the cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy often seem to presuppose that cultures are monolithic and unchanging. But they are not; they are constantly evolving, and the new perceptions that effective education gives rise to are among the most important factors shaping this evolution. If education is about critical enquiry, it is also about questioning received values, institutions, social norms, and so on, including traditional notions about how teachers should teach and learners learn. To the extent that it is worth anything, education always runs the risk of setting us at odds with the society and culture of which we are part.

> ** Secondary level pupils in Japan ... have very deeply ingrained notions of what study, class, and teaching entail (learner participation is not part of their concept of education or learning). [Junior/Senior high school teacher].*
> **Japanese, who learn under a very Confucian, vertical system, are quite unused to taking any autonomy at all in class. [University teacher]*

At this conference, there has been frequent mention of "the typical Japanese learner." But the characteristics attributed to this learner (and specified in some of the comments and questions reproduced in this article) are the same characteristics I have heard teachers attribute to "typical learners" in Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Mexico, Italy and many other places. This stereotypical learner is not the product of any one particular culture, but of the teacher-centred pedagogies that seem to be fundamental to educational traditions around the world.

Practical concerns (Leni Dam)

> * How do you get the reluctant learners to do some work? What do you do with the "lazy" students? [Senior high school teacher]
> * Given the perception by many people that Japanese learners are "shy" or "passive," what practical ways are there in which we can foster learner autonomy with such "passive," "shy" learners? [Junior college teacher]
> * I have to deal with...learners with very little motivation—so little that I think that if they could really do what they want, they wouldn't even turn up for class. How do you think I can give these students more autonomy? [University teacher]

Many of the comments/questions we received touch upon problems that do not necessarily have to do only with the implementation of learner autonomy, but which are problems generally experienced by (language) teachers. The questions and comments about lack of motivation and reluctant learners are good examples. I can tell you that Danish teachers say the same of their learners. I would claim that in many cases learners have learned to be lazy and reluctant during 12–15 years of education. In other words, it's not their fault.

Why, then, are learners lazy or reluctant to learn? Perhaps, because teachers don't make use of what learners bring into the

classroom? Because we ask learners to do things that are not authentic or relevant to them? Because we ask our learners to do things without explaining why we want them done?

> * Our students here have spent years in the most structured, teacher-centred of contexts ... Using language has played no real role. My question: How to respect/honour/value what the learners bring to the classroom when what they bring is inimical to real communication in a foreign language? [University teacher]

In general, but especially with regard to learner autonomy, it is essential that we get learners involved in their own learning. A starting point could be to ask them about their previous experiences—to show respect for what they bring to the classroom. We should ask them what they do know, what they can do and what they're good at. Let's take "communication" as an example. Japanese learners certainly have knowledge of communication, but many of the questions and comments suggest that this knowledge isn't being made use of. Textbook dialogues, for example, are not authentic and do not ask learners to behave authentically. One suggestion is to use pictures of people talking in various situations around which learners can build their own dialogues. The teacher can then work from the learners' dialogues.

> * How to start introducing student autonomy with classes who don't want to be in the English classroom, and believe that they do not need to participate in any way? [Teaching context unspecified]
> * How to get the students motivated and used to a different style of learning when education in Japan is considered to be "how much one has memorized"? [Junior college/ Language school teacher]
> * How do you deal with classes who want the teacher to be a dictator? [University teacher]

It is essential, whenever we ask our learners to do things we find important, that we are prepared to explain to them *why* we want these things done—and the way we want them done. Examples: doing homework, work in groups, writing diaries. If and when the teacher specifies his/her views and intentions, it is then easier for the learners to get involved and to respond with their own ideas. The final decisions for the organization of the learning environment might then be made in co-operation and negotiation between teacher and learners—a prerequisite for learner involvement.

Teachers can be more worried than learners about the change of teacher role in the classroom, the change of role when moving from a teacher-directed teaching environment to a potentially learner-centred and -directed learning environment. Again it is my experience that this worry is shared by most teachers around the world who want to change their practice. The problem has two sides: "How is it done?" and "Will the learners accept the change?" Here the same principles apply as to all teaching and learning. You have to start from what you know already, taking small steps and making changes appropriate to your own environment. First and foremost, bring your ideas, your problems, and concerns into the classroom to share with your learners in formats of negotiation and evaluation. In this way, the process will be a shared concern and thus an authentic step towards learner autonomy. Secondly, a good idea will be to share the process with colleagues. Last but not least, you have to accept the fact that learning to "let go" takes a long time—even longer than it takes for learners to "take hold"!

Conclusion

At the Special Exchange Session itself, after the above responses, participants were asked what issues they would like to continue to see addressed in the remaining time. Groups were formed around the following concerns:

1. How teachers can take the first steps towards enhancing learner autonomy;
2. Sharing experiences for teachers already involved in developing learner autonomy;
3. Learner autonomy in content classes;
4. The use of L1 in awareness-raising.

These, then, appear to be areas of remaining concern which could repay further discussion and investigation by teacher-researchers in the Japanese context. (Some additional areas are suggested in the Appendix.)

All groups became so involved in their discussions that the time was extended and only a short period of feedback followed. However, there were some concluding words of encouragement at the Session itself, with which we also conclude this article:

> *I feel that self-esteem—for teachers and learners alike—is the pre-requisite for moving into autonomy. On both sides, it is a matter of taking the steps that you feel comfortable and confident about. At the same time, it is of the utmost importance that these steps are respected accepted, and supported by others.* (Leni Dam)

> *You can't develop autonomous learners without autonomous teachers. By this I mean that teaching, like learning, must come from within, and that as teachers we should cultivate the same reflective, critical stance that we want to encourage in our learners. Individual human beings are no less subject to change than human cultures; change is one of the signs that we are alive. Pursuit of the ideal of learner and teacher autonomy means submitting ourselves to a process of constant self-questioning and self-renewal. This is not always easy or comfortable, but it is intellectually challenging and immensely satisfying.* (David Little)

References

Maturana, H. R., and F. J. Varela, (1992). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding.* Boston

and London: Shambhala. (Revised edition; first published 1987.)

McDonough, S. H., (1995). *Strategy and skill in learning a foreign language.* London: Arnold.

Appendix: Further questions for teacher-research and discussion among teachers in Japan

For reasons of space, only a sample of the written feedback received from conference participants could be reproduced above, and responses—although based on *all* of the feedback received—could only be of a general nature. Below we therefore present some more comments and questions from participants, believing that, while these have mostly been addressed in a general way above, they might form a good basis for more detailed discussion and research by teachers interested in learner autonomy in the Japanese context:

1. What can be done about students' being "bored with listening to material presented by other students—at the end of group projects etc.?" [Senior high school teacher]

2. If it is true that "when students are mixed up with strangers ... they become very nervous to express something" and that "When students make groups with their favourite friends, some groups are all lazy students and they don't do anything." [Senior high school teacher], how can groups be formed effectively?

3. Are Japanese students "reluctant to peer criticise but more peer-consolation oriented?" [Junior college teacher] If so, what are the implications for practice?

4. Is it true that "if [students] could really do what **they** want, they wouldn't even turn up for class?" [University teacher] If so, how can this problem be addressed?

5. How can teachers respond to the following challenge?: There is "huge peer pressure on pupils to conform, [which is] reinforced by demands to conform outside the classroom. Stating a preference or making a choice can be very risky for them socially." [Junior/senior high school teacher]

6. What are some "possible approaches to managing 'learning diaries'" in a situation where a teacher sees "12 classes of 50 students—once a week for 12 weeks?" [University teacher]

7. "How can you have carry-over when the class meets once a week or once every other week?" [Senior high school teacher]

8. How can Japanese teachers of English and students be encouraged to speak in English when (a) "Our English is not so good;" and (b) "the students always want to speak Japanese to us (because they know we understand)?" [(Japanese) Senior high school teacher]