LEARNER AUTONOMY IN CULTURAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF JAPAN

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Introduction

Although learner autonomy is not yet widely discussed among Japanese teachers of second languages, the concept will probably become a focus of interest in the decade to come, in the same way other "fashionable" Western ideas have been imported in the past (the "communicative approach" being the most current example). Mirroring the response to other imported buzz words, there are likely to be teachers who claim that because autonomy is "Western" in inspiration it is inappropriate in the Japanese context. Indeed, the possibility that autonomy may be incompatible with certain cultures has begun to be raised in relation to other Asian contexts (cf. Riley 1988a, Farmer 1994, Ho and Crookall 1995, Jones 1995). We agree that the questioning involved here is in itself healthy. Too often in the past, assumptions have been made that what is valid in one context should be equally valid in all, and have subsequently been shown to be misguided. However, when the validity of learner autonomy in a particular cultural context is questioned, we would suggest that definitions of both "culture" and "autonomy" need to be carefully considered. In this article we discuss a number of possible misconceptions with regard to these terms, state our own points of view, and argue on this basis that autonomy can be seen as a valid educational goal in the Japanese context. We conclude this argument with testimonials from Japanese university students, who support in their own words the "pedagogies for learner autonomy" in which we have been engaging them.

Misconceptions about "culture"

When doubts are raised or claims made about the validity of learner autonomy in a particular cultural context, the following qualifications would appear to be

In his attempt to develop a framework for achievement of appropriate methodologies in social context, Holliday (1994) suggests that cultures can be of any size, ranging from national (and international) to family cultures. He also points out that there can be temporary cultures for specific activities, as well as relatively permanent ones, such as religious, class, or gender-related cultures. He then goes on to say that "the classroom is part of a complex of interrelated and overlapping cultures of different dimensions within the host educational environment." (ibid:28). He argues that national cultures are, "if indeed they are identifiable, so complex and vast that they are no longer useful devices for investigating what is happening in the classroom between people" (ibid:21). When claims are made about cultural inappropriacy (or for that matter, appropriacy), it is important to be particularly wary with regard to the simplistic equation often drawn between nation and culture.

Misconception 2: Culture is static and given.

Triandis (1995:4) argues that "culture is to society what memory is to individuals. It includes the things that have 'worked' in the past." However, as social, economic, and political situations change, what worked in the past will not necessarily work in the present or future. Culture is susceptible to change, although this change, especially of "subjective culture", may tend to be slow (cf. Azuma 1994). Change is, however, inevitable, and not always unfavourable. By claiming that such and such a people have such and such a culture, we may run the risk of disempowering them, as this kind of positioning denies their potential to be active agents of change, i.e. participants in the creation of cultures. If we agree that it is part of our job as language teachers to "help our students become authors of their own worlds," as Pennycook suggests it is (Pennycook 1997), we should be careful not to limit their potential through cultural stereotyping.

Misconception 3: Influence of one culture on another is necessarily unfavourable.

As Funabiki (1988) suggests, cultures do not have clear-cut boundaries. They overlap where they meet, and inevitably influence each other. This influence is certainly problematic when participants in one culture attempt to impose their values on participants in another. When this is not the case, the favourability or unfavourability judgements involved are more complex, and more bound up with social, ideological, or idiosyncratic differences. Indeed, it might be impossible to achieve successful interaction without participants mutually adapting themselves to their interlocutor's norms of thinking and behaviour (Calhoun 1995). In our view,

then, a classroom or educational institution is inevitably a meeting place of cultures. Although teachers do need to be aware and wary of the danger of imposing their values on learners, since "language learning and teaching are intimately bound up with issues of power" (Benson 1996:31), they cannot avoid influencing learners' cultures, while their own patterns of thinking and behaviour can be influenced in turn by those of their learners. Indeed, as joint members of a learning community, learners and teachers can together create a new culture of their own, and it is the resulting "negotiated culture" which might need to be most considered in evaluations of appropriacy or inappropriacy, with evaluation taking full account of the views of the participants in question.

Misconceptions about autonomy

Little (1991:3) indicates five misconceptions about autonomy which have formed the basis of "strong hostility in some quarters": 1) autonomy is synonymous with self-instruction, 2) autonomous learners make the teacher redundant, 3) autonomy is a new methodology, 4) autonomy is a single easily described behaviour, and 5) autonomy is a steady state achieved by certain learners. On the basis of Little's subsequent theoretical work in autonomy (in particular, Little 1997, 1996a, 1996b), we would like to elaborate on the third of these misconceptions and refer to two additional misconceptions relating to the alleged cultural incompatibility of autonomy.

Misconception 1: Autonomy is a (new) methodology

It is important to recognize that autonomy is not an approach enforcing a particular way of learning. It is, rather, an educational goal, as Holec (1981) explicitly states. Objections to autonomy based on students' current incapacity to learn in a wholly self-directed manner therefore lack validity in any context. As Little (1991:4) makes clear, "autonomy is likely to be hard-won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed, and the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another". The nurturing of autonomy does, we would agree, need to be appropriate to the current strengths and weaknesses of learners, but accepting this methodological proposition does not necessarily entail a "retreat from autonomy" (Jones 1995), if autonomy is seen as an educational goal and not as a methodology.

Misconception 2: Autonomy entails individualism

Concepts of autonomy began to be developed in the philosophical context of eighteenth century rationalism and have tended to be associated with individualism. Claims have been made in various fields, however, that autonomy does not entail total independence (see, for example, Ryan, 1991 on the connection between autonomy and relatedness in personality development, and Nedelsky, 1989 for a reconception of autonomy in legal theory). In the context of second language education, also, Little takes pains to emphasize that: "because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence. Total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism." (Little 1991:5)

> ...in formal educational contexts as elsewhere learning can proceed only via interaction, so that the freedoms by which we recognize learner autonomy are always constrained by the learner's dependence on the support and cooperation of others. (Little 1997:204).

As Holec (1985:175) suggests, assuming responsibility for one's own learning "can be done together with other learners .... or with outside help". Indeed, Little (1996a:4) refers to work by Leni Dam with Danish secondary school learners in suggesting that, in a classroom context, "the development of a capacity for independent thought and action arises *most effectively* from pedagogical processes that emphasize interdependence and collaboration in learning." (emphasis added). Arguments that learner autonomy is individualistic and therefore does not suit a "group-oriented society" do not appear to reflect emerging social views of autonomy, according to which group-orientedness can be seen as a basis for autonomy, no less than individualism might be. In other words, neither independence nor interdependence is in itself sufficient for autonomy, but either could constitute a basis on which the other may be developed.

Misconception 3: Validity of autonomy depends on psychological/cultural considerations

Ultimately, decisions for or against the pursuit of learner autonomy - in any context - may rest on political rather than "cultural" or "psychological" considerations, even when objections are phrased in terms of "cultural" or "psychological" inappropriacy. As Benson (1996) argues, taking control of one's own learning involves change in the power structures in which learners and teachers are involved, while Little (1997) argues that: "....the challenge of learner autonomy is essentially and inescapably political, and ..... its unique value is to pose this

challenge at every level and every stage of our educational systems" (ibid:7) Since the concept of learner autonomy has political dimensions, involving as it does notions of freedom to reflect critically and to learn/speak for oneself in negotiation with others (cf. Little 1997), it is to be expected that there will be objections to it for political reasons. Thus, the legitimacy of autonomy may be contested on the grounds that it is inappropriate in terms of current learning styles or that it is an imported or imposed Western/liberal-democratic ideal, but we should be aware that arguments against the aspirations of people and/or for the political status quo in a particular context can easily be masked by stereotyping or arguments against cultural imperialism.

Autonomy in Japan

On the basis of the points made above, we would like to argue the following in connection with learner autonomy in Japan:

a) As we have already suggested, cultures are not necessarily co-extensive with "nations", nor are cultures static. Although usually characterized as "collectivist" (Triandis 1995) or, at least, "semicollectivist" (Hofstede 1983:89), Japan has not always been a group-oriented, or collectivist society. Nor is it entirely collectivist within its various sub-cultures. Schooler (1990) claims that Japan had an "individualistic period" in the sixteenth century, and attributes the cause to economic and technological development at that time. Naoi & Schooler (1990) have found that self-directed work increases contemporary Japanese women's self-directive orientation, while Moeran's (1986) analysis of cliches in Japanese shows that the language reflects ways in which individualism has acquired a place in present-day Japanese society. Indeed, in her introduction to a collection of papers on the Japanese sense of self, Rosenberger (1994:13) claims that "Japanese self emerges as neither entirely collective nor completely individualistic," and argues that research needs to focus on "what shifts occur as Japanese people make .... concepts of individuality part of their own processes of self and social relationship." In sum, as a number of recent publications make clear, blanket definitions of "the Japanese" as collectivist may have a tendency to over-simplify reality, obliterate real differences between individuals, and discourage attempts by those individuals to "author their own worlds."

b) In fact we do find that many of our Japanese students respond well to group work intended to foster learner autonomy. This may well be related to their

"group-oriented" nature or may relate to the fact that they welcome the chance to give expression to their "individualistic" side, usually denied in more "top-down" educational arrangements. In any case, as we have already argued, there is no contradiction between interdependence and the development of autonomy, nor - as we have suggested in the previous paragraph - should it be viewed as surprising if Japanese students do show an ability to take independent decisions. In the same way as Pierson (1996) casts doubt on the determining role of Chinese culture in influencing Hong Kong students, who are often characterised as "passive", or "other-directed" in stereotypical terms similar to those often applied to Japanese learners, we suspect that, to a large extent, it is authoritarian transmission modes of teaching which (re)produce dependence on and deference to the teacher in Japan (cf. Yoshida, 1996:96, Fujimura-Fanselow 1996:38-9). In our experience with Japanese university students, if the "rules of engagement" are renegotiated, many respond eagerly in a more active, self-directed manner.

c) Learner autonomy can be seen as a legitimate goal in Japan, as in any other society, in the same way as (different conceptions of) human rights may be, even though, as goals, both human rights and autonomy may be perceived as threatening by stakeholders in the status quo. Indeed, for socially aware educators, autonomy may be a particularly important goal to pursue with Japanese students at the present time, given the uncertain economic situation and the wide range of unresolved social and political problems affecting their lives. As one of the present authors has argued elsewhere (Aoki 1994b), the description of contemporary (Western) civilisation as "a vast marketplace of competing ideologies, images and slogans from advertising and politics, and in general, as an environment of relentless change" (Nicoll 1994:11) would appear to apply also to present-day Japanese society. From this point of view, autonomy, conceived of as entailing "an increasing sense of awareness and liberation" (Janne 1977; cit. Holec 1981:1), may be considered to be equally worthy of pursuit in the Japanese context as in other areas of the world.

Evidence from two classrooms

Our argument so far has reflected our views as teachers, but has not shown how these views have developed out of our experience with Japanese students. We believe, however, that judgements relating to the concerns of this article may be

most appropriately made by those most immediately concerned, that is students (as well as teachers) actually engaged in pedagogies for learner autonomy in particular contexts. In this section we shall therefore contextualize and present some of our students' views on our practice, not in the belief that these statements will be sufficient to persuade all parties, but rather to indicate that the voices of students (as well as teachers) should be heard in any discussion of the appropriacy of autonomy in cultural context.

An example of practice

Smith (1996) has described his current approach to weekly English classes for Japanese university students as involving negotiation and facilitation of arrangements for self-directed (usually group-based) language learning during class time, combined with individual counselling in relation to outside-class learning. Students determine their personal learning goals, then plan, engage in and reflect on self-directed learning activities (both inside and outside class) over periods lasting about 4 weeks. A recurring whole class session every fifth week is the main focus for re-negotiation via writing and private discussion of overall learning arrangements, including consideration of whether to continue with self-directed classroom learning or engage in whole class instruction; over the last three years, students - with very few exceptions - have always expressed a preference for continuing with and improving on the former. These consistent votes of overall support for self-directed learning arrangements in class have tended to renew the teacher's belief in the appropriacy of his approach in this particular context. A few of the more positive end-of-year evaluations from students will have to suffice here to indicate possible reasons students themselves may find the approach both valid and useful:

> Usually, it is teacher who decides what to teach according his/her own aim of the class. Students tend to be passive in that kind of class and won't think of what are they taught for. ... I haven't even noticed this boring system of English classes clearly until I took this class and got chance to think of my aim of learning English. It was a great experience for me to find that there are much more ways to brush up my English than I had expected. By working in groups, we could get other students' ideas for that issue.

> . ...this type of class needs students' responsibility to study voluntarily and willingly. Therefore, this class has become my stimulus of working harder and reminded me of the necessity of studying more.

I think that to ask students, "What do you want to do to improve your English?" is an effective way because it makes students consider what they want to do and should do, why and how it is effective, and they will do it more actively than what is forced to do by teacher.

This type of class is very unique. Though looking for activities on our own is difficult and a bit idealistic, this is what we would have to do in our future after we graduate.

You respect our independence, and we can not only improve English .... but also learn to think up by ourselves how we should do to improve. The latter is the more important, I think. Once we learn how to study, we can improve after this class comes to an end. If we are lazy, we can't improve any, but if we really want to improve, we study hard. This is how university education should be.

Another example of practice

Aoki (1994a, 1995, 1996, in press) has reported on her efforts to promote learner autonomy in teacher in preparation in Japanese as a second language methodology courses. In a nut shell her approach can be summarized as involving students in decision making processes concerning what, why, how to learn and how to monitor and evaluate the learning while trying to create a psychologically secure environment where students would not feel threatened to voice their wishes and needs of their own. This approach is intended to invite students to reconsider their beliefs and attitudes about formal learning. Following are some students' comments on a course which operated on the idea of learners' rights. Although only a few comments can be included in this section for the reason of space, they show how students might meet and learn about the concept of learner autonomy. The first student describes how she has learned about taking responsibilities.

In the beginning I was simply very happy that our learners' rights were very much respected in this course. As the course progresses, however, I realised exercising one's rights entails taking responsibilities. We'd chosen to work in groups on a topic of our choice. I felt we had to carry on even in difficult moments. I thought a teacher-centred course would have been a lot easier. But this doesn't mean I didn't like the group work.

The second student expresses her initial confusion about a new way of learning.

It was a form of class I'd never experienced. I didn't trust you in the beginning. I kept wondering 'Is it really OK to do this?', 'Is she really going to be true to her words?' etc etc. Now I understand this way of learning has a lot of merits, but it's so different from the teacher-learner relationship we know. I often didn't know what to do...

The last student's comment is on self-evaluation.

I appreciate this way of evaluation very much because our effort is recognised. I couldn't think of any better way for me. I think everyone in this group has a clear conscience about this. I believe this evaluation satisfactorily represents our achievement.

Conclusion

In this article we have suggested that - while the appropriacy of autonomy as educational goal in non-western cultural contexts should not be taken for granted - a number of clarifications need to accompany any questioning of its validity. With regard to "culture," we advised caution regarding potential misconceptions that (1) a culture is coextensive with a political unit, i.e. a nation, (2) culture is static and given, and (3) influence of one culture on another is necessarily unfavourable. Regarding "autonomy," we drew attention to the following possible misconceptions: (1) autonomy is a (new) methodology, (2) autonomy entails individualism, and (3) the validity of autonomy depends wholly on psychological/cultural (as opposed to political) considerations. On the basis of these clarifications, we argued that autonomy can be seen as a valid educational goal in the Japanese context: (1) Japan is not, and has never been a homogeneously "collectivist" society; (2) in our experience, Japanese students respond positively to arrangements intended to foster learner autonomy; and (3) given the uncertain economic, social and political future they face, autonomy may be seen as a particularly appropriate goal to pursue with Japanese students at the present time. We concluded this argument "for more autonomy" (cf. Kenny 1993) with anecdotal evidence from two classrooms, including testimonials from Japanese university students who support the "pedagogies for learner autonomy" in which we have been engaging them. While further investigation is needed of the appropriacy of autonomy as educational goal in non-western cultural contexts, and much work remains to be done, also, concerning appropriate *methodologies* in this area, we hope we have at least shown in this article why we believe the continuing pursuit of such research is legitimate in present-day Japanese contexts.