

Learner autonomy in Japan:

some assumptions, advantages and disadvantages

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1.0 Introduction

Learner autonomy is not without its merits. In many Western cultures learner autonomy and its assumptions of individual learning strategies and independence are highly valued and considered norms for scholastic achievement. However, in other cultures, such as Japan's, where social dependence is more normal and accepted, questions about the effectiveness of learner autonomy and its assumptions arise and need to be considered and dealt with. This paper looks into learner autonomy, its assumptions, advantages and disadvantages in Japan. More specifically, the purpose of this paper will be to answer the question: "To what degree do students actually desire to be autonomous learners if at all?". This paper will thus offer readers some significant insights as to how instructors may better understand their learners' culture and how to more effectively combine it with the assumptions and goals of learner autonomy to come to some sort of compromise between these two sides, or what I will call "semi-autonomy". By creating this semi-autonomy instructors in Japan will be able to avoid much frustration and discouragement and learn new ways at looking of their teaching situations to produce more positive results and achieve greater satisfaction from both the students and themselves.

2.0 Literature Review

Brown (1994) has given us some guidelines as to how we can motivate learners

into autonomy by suggesting that a) learners need to develop autonomy, not dependence, b) teachers should help learners take charge of their own learning through goal setting and utilizing learning strategies, and c) learner-centered, cooperative teaching is intrinsically motivating. Dickinson (1987) adds that autonomy helps students develop into independent individuals, able to think for themselves. But do the assumptions made by Brown and Dickinson prove to be true of Japan which is seemingly culturally different from the West and its influences? Doi (1974) speaks of *amae*, the psychological construct in which the individual relies on the benevolence of others much like a child would do in the West. Jones (1995) warns us that we must remember that the concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values and to make autonomy an undiluted educational object in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity. Surely no foreign teacher here in Japan wants to be guilty of that. And considering what Doi has said about *amae*, Japan is one such country in which care needs be taken to ensure we do not force-feed what cannot be swallowed. Robinson (1985) states that the assumptions of autonomy come from Western ideas where dependence implies a "lower value" than independence and individual integrity. It should be noted that the Japanese person stresses their position in a social frame rather than their individual attributes (Lebra, 1976) and that *amae*, as mentioned above, underlies the Japanese emphasis on the group over the individual (Reischauer, 1981). So we can see the gaps between the literature and what actually occurs in Japanese society. The assumptions of autonomy are not without their merits and advantages. However, the social and cultural conditions of any region or nation also need to be given strong consideration when instructing a language. Bialystok warns us of the dangers of such neglect in the following statement;

“the human ability to incorporate forms of thought or ideas that are radically different from present experience seems to be severely limited” (Bialystok, 1985, p. 259).

Although it may be desirable to customize instruction by grouping learners

according to individual characteristics, it is also important that the teacher be aware of the individual or group's needs and characteristics based on their culture and then match them with an appropriate methodology. Admittedly, students do need to be helped to adapt to teachers' styles and cope with the demands of the class so that they can continue to learn on their own apart from the class (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). This breeds hope for both sides of the argument. Although Jones has told us that the models of full autonomy are seldom fully realized, he admits they are desirable. However, Jones continues by saying that learners will never be totally independent thus they will have difficulty making informed choices about how to go about becoming autonomous learners. Oxford (1990) has stated that autonomy is not an "all-or-nothing" concept and that it may come by degrees. This statement is significant for Japan given the cultural conditions teachers are faced with here. It could be concluded that there should be some middle ground here where students can slowly develop their autonomy with others' help through a kind of "semi-autonomy". Certainly "semi-autonomy" is better than none. The comments made earlier by Lebra and Reischauer would support Jones' idea that a tendency to work collectively may be an inspiration for ideas in cultural-friendly autonomy. Ideally, autonomy should allow for various degrees of personal control and guidance based on the aptitude of the student and their degree of desire for independence. Nevertheless, students at some point will need to become somewhat autonomous since it is assumed that most of them desire to be able to function outside the classroom in some sort of social context. Nunan (1988) admits that not everything a learner needs to know can be learned in class and Illich (1971) boldly claims that it is outside the classroom that most successful learning takes place. The "semi-autonomy" I mentioned above makes the assumption that McDonough and Shaw (1993) have given us in that autonomy does not necessarily mean that the students need to work entirely on their own. Holec (1984) agrees saying learning can indeed take place with other learners in small groups or in pairs, with the help of a teacher or outside help. This approach is

suitable for Japanese students who often prefer working in groups. To test these assumptions, in the next sections I will present two similar questionnaires about preferences and attitudes concerning learner autonomy and learner-centered teaching for both groups of students and individual teachers to complete. It was hoped that through this study the significance of learning autonomy in certain classrooms in Japan could be researched and lead to further studies on the subject.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Subjects. The subjects for this questionnaire (see Appendix 1) included both Japanese students and foreign teachers. The levels of the students ranged from early intermediate to advanced and have learned English for several years. Their ages ranged from 20-60. All the students were students at one local English school. The sizes of their groups were from 2-15 students. Of the 52 respondents, all but seven students were female. The teachers came from a variety of teaching situations (English schools, vocational schools, junior colleges, and universities). Their years of experience were all over three years and their ages ranged from 24-60. All were males.

3.2 Data collection. For this study, both the students and teachers were given questionnaires concerning learner autonomy and learner-centered teaching to complete. The questionnaires were similar, but not exactly the same (see Appendixes 1 and 2). The student questionnaire was given in Japanese (translated by this author's Japanese wife) and the teacher questionnaire in English. Both questionnaires were administered proceeding a brief introduction of their purpose in both English and Japanese for the students, and in English for the teachers. The purpose of the student questionnaire was to monitor students' preferences for both working alone and working with their classmates and to measure how much they indeed did so. The student questionnaire was administered during one weekly lesson. The length of the lessons was 70-90

minutes. All questionnaires were gathered as individuals completed them. The purpose of the teacher questionnaire was to compare the teachers' answers with those from the students and see if there were any discrepancies. The teacher questionnaire was given through email over a local network. Both questionnaires were multiple choice types offering three choices for each of the five questions. It was speculated that the students would indeed prefer studying in groups since groupism is a powerful social force in Japan and that there would be some discrepancies when the two survey results were compared.

4.0 Results

Below are the results of the questionnaires shown in five tables (Tables 1-5). The results from the two questionnaires are marked Student Questionnaire (SQ) and Teacher Questionnaire (TQ). The number of all responses and the percentages of all responses they represent (in parenthesis) are also shown.

Table 1.

1. SQ/TQ Which type of student do you think learns better?

A) A student who can study and learn well by themselves, that is, self-motivated.

SQ=14 (26.9%)

TQ=11 (64.7%)

B) A student that follows instructions well and gets along well with the teacher and other students.

SQ=31 (59.6%)

TQ=0 (0%)

C) It depends on the student and/or teacher.

SQ=7 (13.5%)

TQ=6 (35.3%)

Table 2.

2. SQ Which do you prefer, studying by yourself or in a small group (2-4 people)?

TQ Which do you think most Japanese students prefer, studying by themselves in the classroom or in a small group (2-4 people)?

A) Always or usually by myself/themselves:

SQ=4 (7.7%)

TQ=0 (0%)

B) Always or usually in a small group.

SQ=32 (61.5%)

TQ=7 (41.2%)

C) Both by myself and in a small group.

SQ=15 (28.8%)

TQ=10 (58.8%)

Table 3.

3. SQ Do you think it is important for you to speak your own opinion in class?

TQ Do you think it is important for your students to speak their own opinion in class?

A) No, seldom or never.

SQ=1 (1.9%)

TQ=0 (0%)

B) Yes, sometimes.

SQ=11 (21.2%)

TQ=5 (29.4%)

C) Yes, usually or often.

SQ=40 (76.9%)

TQ=12 (70.6%)

Table 4.

4. SQ Do you expect the teacher to correct your English in class?

TQ Do you think that the teacher should correct their students' English in class?

A) No, not usually.

SQ=1 (1.9%)

TQ=3 (17.65%)

B) Yes, usually or sometimes.

SQ=25 (48.1%)

TQ=11 (64.7%)

C) Yes, always.

SQ=26 (50%)

TQ=3 (17.65%)

Table 5.

5. SQ Do you study English outside the classroom?

TQ Do you think your students study English outside the classroom?

A) No, seldom (once a month or less).

SQ=9 (17.3%)

TQ=6 (35.3%)

B) Yes, sometimes (more than once a month).

SQ=32 (61.5%)

TQ=7 (41.2%)

C) Yes, many times a month.

SQ=11 (21.1%)

TQ=4 (23.5%)

4.1 Comments

Many interesting results came from the questionnaires. The biggest surprise was the responses to question number 1. A majority (64.7%) of the teachers

believe that students who can study and learn well by themselves, that is, are self motivated, actually learn better. It seems to be the general consensus among teachers that students need to make greater efforts towards self-study to progress in their language abilities. From what I gather from the questionnaire, teachers feel this is quite important. Students, on the other hand, believe that students who follow instructions well and get along with the teacher and other students make better students.

The differences in responses to question number 1 from both the students and the teachers can perhaps be partially explained by the responses to question number 2. A greater percentage of students (61.5%) prefer studying in small groups than teachers believe (41.2%). Also, although it is not reflected in the A) response to question number 2, a significant percentage (58.8%) of teachers believe that students like studying both by themselves and in small groups, therefore more on their own than student admits. Interestingly, students do not feel as strong based on their responses in B) and C). This may point out that student preferences for group study are stronger than teachers acknowledge or are aware of and are perhaps a big reason why both groups answered the way they did in question number 1, choices A) and B).

After very few surprises and differences in the responses to question number 3, number 4 proved to be much more interesting. The responses here can be related to the responses to questions 1 and 2 in that it is assumed that students who prefer studying and learning in groups are more willing to be corrected than those who do not and teachers who believe that students learn better if they can study on their own are less willing to correct them. Almost certainly both students and teachers probably agree that some error correction is useful, although to different extents. The differences found in choices A) and C) lead me to believe that students and teachers here view their own and each others' roles in the classroom differently as well. We may conclude that most classrooms are not as student-centered as teachers might like and that most classrooms are not as teacher-centered as students may like. Of course some compromise is needed.

Perhaps as students develop as self-learners their classrooms will become more student-centered, but not until then. Lower level students may always demand more help from teachers and I wonder how much teachers accept that.

Lastly, the responses to question 5 indicate that students are studying much more than the teachers believe and should be of some encouragement to teachers.

5.0 Discussion

One initial purpose of this paper was to answer the question: "To what degree do students actually desire to be autonomous learners if at all?" (or rather, to monitor students' preferences for both working alone and working with their classmates and to measure how much they indeed do so). Another purpose was to offer readers some significant insights as to how instructors may better understand their learners' culture and how to more effectively combine it with the assumptions and goals of learner autonomy to come to some sort of compromise between these two sides, or what I call "semi-autonomy". The teacher questionnaire was added to get a clearer picture (or at least a sampling) of what teachers felt about the subject and to compare their answers with those from the students to see if there are any discrepancies, and if there were, to try to learn something from them. Lastly, it was speculated that the students would indeed prefer studying in groups since groupism is a powerful social force in Japan and that there would be some discrepancies when the two survey results are compared.

The results of the research showed that the answer to the first question was that teacher expectations of independent, self-motivated learners falls short due to the fact that learners themselves value groupism and getting along with others much more than teachers seem to think is necessary, thus possibly hindering teachers efforts to make their classes learner-centered and develop autonomy. Considering what those knowledgeable about Japanese society and culture have said in the Literature Review, this has not come to a big surprise. However, as

also stated above and gathered from the questionnaire, there is hope in and outside of the classroom that students can develop autonomy and that classrooms can become more learner-centered. It is hoped that both students and teachers can form some kind of compromise so that both the merits of the teaching strategies mentioned in this paper and the more significant details of the society and culture found here in Japan can be better combined and coexist more effectively.

Although the results of the questionnaire brought to the surface many interesting findings such as teacher beliefs about “good learners” as compared with student preferences for learning in groups (questionnaire question number 1), there were, admittedly, some deficiencies. First, perhaps a wider and thus clearer range of choices for the questionnaire answers could have been formulated. It could be argued that three choices could not adequately cover enough teaching and learning possibilities in the stated situations. Also, the wording to some of the questions and choices was somewhat too vague or limiting leaving the questionnaire takers unsure of their answers and the findings thus suspect to debate. Nevertheless, I did find some areas where further study can be done regarding autonomy as. groupism.

6.0 Conclusion

Some of the key points of this paper can be found in section 4. They are briefly summarized below:

- 1.) A majority of the teachers believe that students who can study and learn well by themselves, that is, are self motivated, actually learn better.
- 2.) Teachers generally agree that it is important for students to make adequate efforts on self-study to progress in their language abilities.
- 3.) Students believe that students who follow instructions well and get along with the teacher and other students make better students than those who more strongly desire to learn alone.

- 4.) A greater percentage of students prefer studying in small groups than teachers believe.
- 5.) A significant percentage of teachers believe that students like studying both by themselves and in small groups, more so than their own students admit.
- 6.) Student preferences for group study are stronger than teachers acknowledge or are aware of.
- 7.) Students who prefer studying and learning in groups are seemingly more willing to be corrected in class than those who do not and teachers who believe that students learn better if they can study on their own are less willing to correct them.
- 8.) Both students and teachers tend to agree that some error correction is useful, although to different extents.
- 9.) The students and teachers view their own and each others' roles in the classroom somewhat differently.
- 10.) Most classrooms are not as student-centered as teachers might like and most classrooms are not as teacher-centered as students may like.
- 11.) Students are studying outside the classroom much more than teachers believe.

I mentioned earlier in the Literature Review that Brown says learner-centered, cooperative teaching is intrinsically motivating. This point has been somewhat contradicted in the questionnaire (question number 1), in my own teaching and in talking with other teachers. Doi offered some reasons why teachers may have difficulties motivating their learners in learner-centered classrooms when she spoke of *amae* (in which the individual relies on the benevolence of others). Her comments are indeed relevant in the replies to questions 1 and 2. Jones' warnings about how the concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values and making autonomy an undiluted educational object in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity are certainly true based on some of the discrepancies found in the replies, again most noticeable to questions

1 and 2. Robinson reminded us that the assumptions of autonomy come from Western ideas where dependence implies a “lower value” than independence and individual integrity. Again this was proven to a certain extent in the questionnaire. As I said earlier, the assumptions of autonomy are not without their merits and advantages. But again, the social and cultural conditions of any region or nation need to be given strong consideration when instructing a language. It is also important that teachers be aware of the students’ needs and characteristics based on their culture and find suitable ways to meet those needs. Teachers need to realize that, as Jones stated, learners will never be totally independent thus they will have difficulty making informed choices about how to go about becoming autonomous learners. Jones’ idea of working collectively is inspiring for ideas in autonomy. More studies on the subject of learner autonomy and learner-centered classrooms in Japan and how learners here are motivated to become learners in such classrooms could prove to be a valuable contributions to the literature.

Appendix 1-Student Questionnaire

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW AS HONESTLY AS YOU CAN. CIRCLE ONLY ONE ANSWER.

1. Which type of student do you think learns better?
 - A) A student who can study and learn well by themselves, that is, self-motivated.
 - B) A student that follows instructions well and gets along well with the teacher and other students.
 - C) It depends on the student and/or teacher.
2. Which do you prefer, studying by yourself in the classroom or in a small group (2-4 people)?
 - A) Always or usually by myself.
 - B) Always or usually in a small group.

- C) Both by myself and in a small group.
3. Do you think it is important for you to speak your own opinion in class?
- A) No, seldom or never.
- B) Yes, sometimes.
- C) Yes, usually or often.
4. Do you expect the teacher to correct your English in class?
- A) No, not usually.
- B) Yes, usually or sometimes.
- C) Yes, always.
5. Do you study English outside the classroom?
- A) No, seldom (once a month or less).
- B) Yes, sometimes (more than once a month).
- C) Yes, many times a month.

Appendix 2- Teacher Questionnaire

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW AS HONESTLY AS YOU CAN. CIRCLE ONLY ONE ANSWER.

1. Which type of student do you think learns better?
- A) A student who can study and learn well by themselves, that is, self-motivated.
- B) A student that follows instructions well and gets along well with the teacher and other students.
- C) It depends on the student and/or teacher.
2. Which do you think most Japanese students prefer, studying by themselves in the classroom or in a small group (2-4 people)?
- A) Always or usually by themselves.
- B) Always or usually in a small group.
- C) Both by themselves and in a small group.
3. Do you think it is important for your students to speak their own opinion in

class?

A) No, seldom or never.

B) Yes, sometimes.

C) Yes, usually or often.

4. Do you think that the teacher should correct their students' English in class?

A) No, not usually.

B) Yes, usually or sometimes.

C) Yes, always.

5. Do you think your students study English outside the classroom?

A) No, seldom (once a month or less).

B) Yes, sometimes (more than once a month).

C) Yes, many times a month.

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