

# Fostering Autonomy in Japanese Learners

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**Abstract**— The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of self-directed learning and learner autonomy for Japanese college students who arrive at university by being accustomed to teacher-directed instruction. Therefore, the author presents an activity where students choose a topic, prepare presentation content, create PowerPoint Slides, practice their content, present it, and engage in Q&A. During this preparation and delivery stages of this project, the teacher remained withdrawn and allowed students to recognize the responsibility they have for their learning.

**Keywords**— autonomy, learner-centered, teacher-directed instruction, Japanese English education.

## JAPAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Japan is well-known for its strictly standardized education system which weighs strong emphasis on test results and continuous assignments aiming to challenge students' abilities to the maximum level and prepare them for their lifelong employment journey, which usually begins once they graduate from University. After world war II, the United States occupied Japan and made liberal proposals to reform the Japanese school system and in 1947, the Fundamental Law of Education and the School law were enacted to establish the new school system on the principle of equal educational opportunity. The school system was centralized and the curriculum was standardized. Under this national policy, children were disciplined and educated to become obedient, hardworking workers, who would contribute specifically to compete with other advanced nations. (Nemoto, 1999)

The school period in Japan is comprised of six years of elementary school, three years each for middle school and high school, and four years of University education, a total of 16 years of education. Pre-school education is also provided from the age of 0 to the age of 6 through kindergarten and nursery schools. Japanese law requires all children between the age of 6 and 15 to receive an education appropriate to their physical and mental development. High schools, which provide both general and specialized education are not compulsory. Although Japan's education system was established based on the influence of the western education system. Ishikawa represents some distinct features of the Japanese education system as opposed to the principles of western education.

Ichikawa (1990) enumerated the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese education system as follows. (1) The way that schooling and school education dominate children's and young people's lives;

(2) the privatized development of pre-and post-compulsory education and the large share of private funding for education; (3) the preference for general education under a single-track system; (4) automatic promotion between the grades based on age; (5) the low enrollment of non-Japanese students and adults in schools; (6) the high educational achievement with a low level of deviation; (7) the unique screening function of entrance examinations.

This standardized system also applies to English language education (Egitim & Garcia, 2021; Egitim, 2022; Steel & Zhang, 2016). During elementary and secondary education, English language classes are mainly taught based on teacher-controlled instruction using the grammar-translation method (Egitim & Garcia, 2021; Steel & Zhang, 2016). The teacher is seen as the main source of knowledge, and students become passive recipients of that knowledge. This power dynamic originated from the entrenchment of Confucianism in the Japanese education system (Egitim, 2022). This learning approach remains ineffective with no effort made on the part of students and lacking any deep level of critical thinking and involvement.

## *The Role of Learner Autonomy in Learning and Teaching and its Relationship with Learners' Perceptions*

Learner Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to control one's own learning. Autonomy is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process. (P. Benson, 2001). Autonomy does not imply learning in isolation, learning without a teacher, or learning outside the classroom.

Nor does autonomy imply particular skills and behaviors and particular methods of organizing the teaching and learning process. It is defined as readiness and capacity to take charge of one's own learning.

Learner autonomy is bound up not only with the learners' but also with teachers' own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs about autonomy (Lamb, 2008, p. 286). According to a definition made by Aoki 'teacher autonomy includes the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching' (2002, p. 111). Autonomy also requires tutors to trust students' abilities and to promote the use of student-directed learning.

Students should constantly be encouraged to develop their capacity and readiness to take charge of their own learning which will enable them to acquire their own independent learning skills and reflect on their experiences and create their own meanings and challenge ideas and theories. Acceptance of responsibility is a conscious intention that entails the development of explicit skills of reflection, analysis, and evaluation. Teachers need to communicate openly and emphatically with their students and vice versa. (Brown 2000, pp. 89-90).

Voller (2014) suggests that "The rise to prominence of learner autonomy as a goal in classroom settings, in turn, has led to needs for retraining and enhanced awareness both of the importance of the teacher in structuring or 'scaffolding' reflective learning and of the complex, shifting interrelationship between teacher and learner roles in pedagogy for autonomy. If students are to learn to take control, the teacher may need to learn to 'let go', even as she/he provides scaffolding and structure. Therefore, we should emphasize the role of autonomous teachers in developing autonomous learning skills as the classroom is the main environment where learning takes place (Egitim, 2017).

However, accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing cognitive functions throughout the learning process. It has an equally important dimension: in their commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach, autonomous learners are motivated learners. Although they may not always feel entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks. Fostering students' motivation toward learning is essential to establishing a positive classroom climate.

Deci defines autonomy as "feeling free and volitional in one's actions" and thinks that "Autonomy is a basic human need that is as relevant to learning as to any other

aspect of life. Autonomy is nourished by, but in turn, nourishes our intrinsic motivation and our proactive interest in the world around us. Learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation." (Deci 1995, p. 2). Holec (1981:p3) describes meaning of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." However, Benson P. and Voller P.(1997, p. 1) suggest that in language education the word has been used in at least five different ways:

- a. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- b. for a set of skills that can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- c. for an inborn capacity suppressed by institutional education;
- d. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- e. for the right of learners to determine the directions of their own learning.

However, we should also bear in mind that the complexity of the learning and teaching process may sometimes force tutors to take charge of the overall learning situation. We may all agree that knowledge, understanding, and skills differ significantly for each learner. Thus, not all learners obtain an equal level of knowledge and understanding to build their independent learning skills and they may sometimes fail to determine the directions of their own learning. Learning involves risk-taking and therefore, presents numerous challenges for teachers and learners. It is mostly the teacher's job to ascertain each learner's own preferred learning style and adapt it to learners' needs and expectations. For instance; an elderly man would presumably have a different learning style than a teenage girl.

#### CLASS ACTIVITY

- **GOALS:** Choose a topic, prepare a presentation draft, put together PowerPoint Slides, practice your draft, present the topic, and engage in Q&A.
- **LEVEL:** Intermediate & above
- **LANGUAGE FOCUS:** Gain content knowledge, improve presentation skills
- **DELIVERY:** Time limit -- about 5 minutes

In this activity, students assume the teacher's traditional role of designing a task and carrying out the activity on their own. They also hold Q&A sessions within their respective groups. The presentation projects provide learners with training that can help them grasp the importance of their role in their learning. Once students

start their projects, I refrain from the process and let them prepare and carry out the activity by themselves. As the teacher withdraws from the process, students are gradually put at the center of their own learning. The only time the teacher is engaged in the process is when they provide correction and feedback. This approach also helps students recognize the ownership of their learning and encourages them to take greater responsibility for their future assignments (Egitim, 2014).

### CONCLUSION

Teachers' spoken communicative competence is essential to create a suitable classroom environment for students to take more control over their own learning. A communicative teacher is a teacher who is aware of the need to communicate to foster the growth of their students and therefore, constantly promotes communicative interaction in class which would allow learners to take the responsibility for their own learning.

I also believe that a certain emphasis needs to be placed on teacher autonomy. Teachers can not be expected to foster growth in their learners if they do not know what is to be an autonomous learner. In all their pedagogical actions teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously.

An autonomous teacher, regardless of being a native or non-native speaker, is able to create an ideal classroom environment that will foster growth in their learners and urge them to take responsibility for their own learning. If learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved.

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