

LD SIG Grant Awardees: Essays on Research Interests LD SIG研究助成金受賞者：研究課題についてのエッセイ

Learner Autonomy from the Perspective of a Teaching Assistant

ティーチング・アシスタントの立場からみた学習者オートノ

ミー

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In this paper, I would like to introduce the research I conducted in a learner autonomy class at Meisei University with my colleague, Bill Mboutsiadis. I will also reflect on how I have become more autonomous, as a teacher and learner. The word *autonomy* means different things to different people. However, to me, it suggests “the students take on responsibility for their own learning” (Cook, 2008, p. 118).

Five years ago, I went to study abroad in Sacramento, California for one year. I became curious about many things and started to seek out various situations where I could learn English. Returning to Japan, I found a student assistant (SA)/ teaching assistant (TA) system at Meisei University, which I have now been involved in for three years. One of the classes that I have been a SA/TA for is a learner autonomy class. The class runs for 90 minutes, 15 times a semester, and is compulsory for freshmen and sophomores in the Department of International Studies. The teachers are usually native English speakers and the class takes place in a CALL room. The purpose of the class is neither to teach English nor computer skills by themselves, but to help Meisei students to foster autonomous learning independently.

In the first half of the semester, students are introduced to learning strategies (Oxford, 1990), time management, and setting goals for learning. For example, they fill out an online strategy inventory for language learners (SILL) survey (Oxford, 1990) to understand their current learning strategies so that they can be aware of the strategies they use frequently and those they don't. The students are encouraged to use various learning materials which they can utilize in and outside of the class, such as extensive reading, and websites such as English Central. In the second half of the semester, the teacher gets students to set goals and plan their own learning schedule.

During the last 10 minutes of each class, students write blogs reflecting on all the activities they have worked on, the learning materials they have used, and self-evaluation of how much responsibility they are taking toward their own learning. At the end of the semester, students self-evaluate their term mark (A, B, C, D, or F) and then the teacher, assistant, and student negotiate the mark by reviewing the term's work and student's blog. There is no exam; instead, the major evaluation criteria include class attendance, participation, the student's blog, and a final reflective project. For the final project, students create digital comics of their language learning history by using a website named *Bitstrips*. They create

their own avatar, and make an eight-panel comic strip of either positive and/or negative language learning experiences in their past, present, and imagined future. The students need additional time to make their digital language learning history outside of the class. Their past experiences included formal and informal learning environments and experiences. The present experiences reflect on their learning in the class, and anything outside of the campus. Finally, the imagined future describes their L2 possible selves (Dornyei, 2005), their future careers, and lives.

Assessment in an autonomous learning class is a challenging element of the class. In contrast to the conventional way of assessment, Vygotsky's theory, the Zone of Proximal Development and Dynamic Assessment are embedded in the process of assessing students (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). In other words, teacher and assistant scaffold students to find their ZPD. Assisting learners to find what their ZPD is could help them choose the most appropriate and effective learning material/strategy. Learner autonomy can be fostered by using effective strategies, and these differ from learner to learner. Therefore, teachers and assistants help students evaluate learning strategies individually, introducing various new learning methods and materials, in order to develop an individual learning plan.

While working as an assistant, I conducted a survey to collect data on the learners' experiences of having a SA/TA in the learner autonomy class. I found students saw me not only as a translator or a tech person, but as a learning adviser. For instance, to the question, "How did the TA's presence help you to become an autonomous learner?" one student answered, "It was good when he told me some ways to learn English which I didn't know". It is different from other classes, in the sense that the main teacher gives me an opportunity to talk about my own language learning experiences to the class. I believe it is important for them to know how I learned another language as a native Japanese speaker. I found from some of the students comments that they viewed me as a near peer role model for speaking English (Murphy, 2001). Another student commented, "Since the TA is really good at English, I thought I want to be like that and I was able to learn more". Moreover, another student answered, "It was very helpful to know an ideal portrait of what I want to be".

In conclusion, I have been considering the extent to which I can assist students. I believe a TA has a significant impact on how students learn and become more autonomous. It is not always easy to find an answer since it depends on each student's situation. However, consideration of all these issues in advising and interacting with learners helps me to develop my learner autonomy too.

Finally, I presented the study with my co-researcher Bill Mboutsiadis at the Pan-SIG Conference 2012 in Hiroshima with the financial assistance of the LD SIG for which I am thankful. As I have been conducting this research, writing papers, going to conferences with Bill, and meeting and talking with fellow educators, I have been learning about other people's views and research about learner development and autonomy. All of these experiences help me to picture my imagined future self which is to become a good teacher and more autonomous learner. I'd like to continue to participate in various activities, pursue my academic career, and contribute something to the EFL academic field in the future.

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Positive Self-Perception of Japanese Language Learners in Groups

グループ学習における日本人言語学習者の肯定的な自己認識

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As a teenager I played the violin in the Colchester Youth Chamber Orchestra, conducted by George Reynolds, a Scottish professional trumpeter. A master of warm strictness, he was the only conductor I knew who insisted that all sections mastered basic breathing techniques. He conducted entire movements with the orchestra miming, his eye contact and wafting wisps of white hair inciting us to be our very best—silently. He always told us, “When you take your seats, you are the best orchestra in the world. So behave like it.” So we sat with our backs straight, feet solidly on the floor, attentively awaiting his signal. When we began playing, we were not the greatest orchestra in the world, but we were pretty good nevertheless, once performing in London’s Royal Festival Hall.

Why this nostalgic story?

In France, many French people informed me that “the French aren’t good at English”. In Japan too, I hear a similar chorus about the Japanese, from teachers, colleagues, and friends, all saying something along the lines that, “even after seven years of lessons, the Japanese still can’t speak English”. However, I have met numerous Japanese with fantastic English communication skills, casting doubt on the validity of this view. Self-identification with a supposedly linguistically inept group negatively impacts language learning in Japan (and France). Reality and perception are not distinct but are complementary and engaged in an evolving symbiotic jig. To change them, I suggest it is easier to shift perception first, steering the dance on an altered trajectory, inevitably leading reality. A shift in perception towards “I am Japanese and we are good at languages” will therefore have a positive effect. Before they say a word, the Japanese are the best English speakers in the world.

Having taught English as a foreign language in France and England, upon arrival in Japan just over two years ago, I immediately realised a change in certain strategies was required. Rarely could I depend on students raising their hands to answer questions, nor could I expect an answer “from anyone” when addressing an open question to the group. Even when I knew