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Autonomous Learning: How Can I Help my Students Foster it?
自律学習：学習者オートノミーの育成をどのように支援できるだろうか？

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One day, a few months into the new school year at St. Hilda's School in Tokyo, a first-year female high school student said to me, "It's beginning to get harder and harder to keep up with English classes, and I am getting a negative feeling towards English." I have been wondering what factors lay behind her words.

The classes in the school where I teach are organised according to a curriculum and syllabus in order to help develop the students' English language competence. Due to the introduction of the new curriculum by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), the school syllabus has changed and new teaching methods and activities have been introduced in order to provide the students with more opportunities to listen to and use English in the classroom.

Traditionally, the Japanese classroom is teacher-centered, and each class consists of many students (from about 35 to 45 students in general) with differing levels of English competence. Students are not usually given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning. Teachers, including myself, tend to be perplexed at how to deal with large mixed level groups and find such conditions taxing. Speaking of my own classes, students who are all to take the entrance examinations in a few years, are required not only to learn how to read English newspaper and magazine articles, essays, and so on, but also to increase their knowledge of many grammatical rules, apply them to their practice of English conversation or English essay writing, and do all of this at the same pace. This may be why some students feel that it's difficult to keep up with the class. In addition, they are required to take numerous weekly mini-tests as well as term examinations, whose marks directly affect their grades. That is, the results of the tests tend to give the students a positive or negative attitude towards learning English. Those who have failed to achieve good results have particularly negative attitudes towards English, asking why it is that they have to study English even though they are Japanese and don't have to use English in their daily lives.

However, at the same time, the students do like to use English when they communicate with people from foreign countries. Last week, my colleague and I took some of the students to the tourist district of Asakusa so that they could interview foreign tourists in English. Every student tried to make full use of what they had learned in their classes in order to communicate. When they made themselves understood in English, they seemed extremely happy and felt what they had learned was really meaningful, which was in turn an

extremely good experience. As a result of our trip to Asakusa, some of the students developed a more positive attitude towards English, and some said they intended to increase their contact with English by listening to music, watching movies, and reading books and newspapers.

Finding a way to connect such positive feelings of students with their current classes is something I would like to explore further. However, it is not a simple matter to construct these "perfect conditions" to improve all students' motivation, as McCombs and Pope (1994) assume is possible. In fact, studies have shown that learners cannot foster autonomy only in isolation, but need social interaction with a teacher and other learners in the classroom. Little (1999), for example, has said that it is necessary for teachers to provide learners with group work, where learners who are not working with teachers are able to gain motivation from frequently exchanging ideas with other group members. Dam (1999) has also mentioned that the teacher's involvement produces a powerful effect on learners' taking responsibility for the whole process, from choosing their goals to assessing their own motivation. According to Ushioda (2012), it is beneficial for the teacher to create an environment where learners can learn a language by means of interaction with the teacher and other learners and where they can be praised or encouraged by the teacher. Thinking of these studies in relation to my own classes, it may be necessary for me to create the kind of classroom environment where the students can socialize and shape their motivation, and where I can support and encourage the students wherever I can by giving them opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning. But are these measures really enough? What else do I have to do to improve my classes?

In order to make my classes better and more organized, I have returned to graduate school to study English Language Teaching in more depth. Studying while working as a full-time teacher and taking care of two boys (a five-year-old and a one-year-old) is quite challenging, but I find time to read, which broadens my horizons and enables me to look at my classes from different perspectives. I spend a great deal of my personal time doing background reading. The more I read books on English language teaching and recall my 15 years of teaching at a private girl's school, the more I think it necessary for teachers to help learners voluntarily continue studying and utilizing English even outside the classroom. This is why I applied for a Learner Development SIG Grant this year, which I am happy to have been awarded. Unfortunately, I have not being able to join the monthly meetings, but I am very grateful that I have been given the opportunity to study the field of learner development and to make improvements to my classes by attending conferences or events.

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