SELF-TALK OF A TURTLE: AUTONOMY IN CREATING A CHAPTER

Naoko Harada

This essay explores the psychological journey that I undertook as a writer of a book chapter in Realizing Autonomy: Practice and Reflection in Language Education Contexts. *The key to completing the chapter in my case was balancing the two dialectical elements, independence and collaboration, under the framework of autonomy. Inspired by an image of a turtle in Tim Murphey's plenary session at the Realizing Autonomy (RA) Conference in October 2011, I reflect on my own mental process in the writing project.*

Realizing Autonomy (RA)の一章を完成させる過程においての書き手としての自律性と執筆グループの一員としての協調性の大切さに焦点を当てたエッセイである。２０１１年１０月のRA Conferenceの基調講演でティム・マーフィー氏が提示した亀に関する謎かけを踏まえ、肯定的な独り言の効用について考察する。

A Turtle Trying to Fly

At the Realizing Autonomy Conference, Tim asked the audience at the beginning of his lecture to think of ways to fill the blanks in the following sentence:

Why is a _____ trying to fly more beautiful than a _____ sitting in a tree?

The audience came together in small groups to discuss possible answers to this and other gap-fill questions, but no one around me came up with Tim's answer, "Why is a *turtle* trying to fly more beautiful than a *bird* sitting in a tree?" COBUILD's *Advanced Dictionary of American English* defines a turtle as "any reptile that has a thick shell around its body, for example a tortoise or terrapin, and can pull its whole body into its shell" (pp. 1405-1406). It is a creature that has the capacity to either walk or swim, but it cannot fly by itself. Tim's question made us realize that even with little possibility of flying, the sight of a turtle making every effort to fulfill its dream is beautiful.

On hearing Tim's answer, I thought, "Certainly a turtle with strong motivation can make an effort night and day. It will impress its friends. But some of its friends may think it is somewhat ridiculous and call it reckless." However, by the end of the presentation, I came to

like the idea of the turtle. Murphey (2010) states, "...we become excited with our creative agency (autonomy, independence) to increase control over our world. The fun of increasing it is more exciting than *getting there* (p. 10)." In other words, the process of working toward a goal autonomously has value by itself. If I were the turtle, even if I could not succeed in my mission to fly, I would have learned something new. By practicing step by step continuously, I might someday be able to collaborate with the crane, my dance partner in *Noh*. Turtles, representing longevity and prosperity, are deeply rooted in the Japanese cultural context, as in the example of the Noh play, *Tsurukame* (Crane and Turtle) and as an image on congratulatory messages (Sugiura & Gillespie, 2004). In line with this, the turtle that lives 10,000 years, according to the Japanese legend, may find a way to fly with the help of birds, technology, or merely by luck.
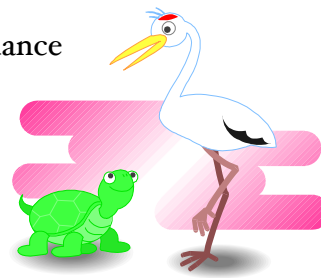
In his lecture, Tim also told us about the importance of continuing to be curious and of getting students to use a lot of self-talk to ask questions and think. Morin (1993) defines self-talk as verbally identifying self-information that is inherent to the individual (p. 230) and suggests that it shapes our thoughts, feelings and behaviors in a great variety of ways (p. 223).

Self-talk was one of the themes of my poster presentation during the afternoon of the conference. In the following sections, I would like to explain the background of how using the Harry Potter series in my chapter and in the presentation led me to think about self-talk and its role in learner autonomy.

The Entertainment Hook

In November 2008, I was sitting at the LD SIG display table at the JALT National Conference chatting to Ellen Head about my forthcoming presentation, *Learning Identity in Harry Potter's Class and Mine*, which was to take place in a few hours. I told her how much my students, who had already read the Japanese translation, wanted to read the Harry Potter series in English and how their passion motivated me to show scenes from the movie followed by reading passages from Rowling's book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, in the original English in the classroom. My teaching idea was to focus on the scene in which Harry's classmate, Neville, the least confident student in Professor Lupin's class, succeeds in performing a spell in front of the class to chase away a shape-shifter that embodies his fears. On hearing this, Ellen remarked it had both the entertainment hook and a bit of interaction analysis of how people learn to control their fear.

My decision to use the *Harry Potter* series as an entertainment hook for students is not without precedent. Belcher and Stephenson (2011) introduce the story of Allegra, a third-year special education teacher in a middle school in the United States, who has used audio books of Harry Potter with her students. One of Allegra's students had similar feelings of alienation from her foster family to Harry. The connection with Harry provided a strong hook for this student, motivating her to read ahead at home (p. 129). This student was described as a person who felt

that Harry Potter had relevance to her life and she showed a keen interest in reading the book, in spite of the fact that her usual performance in other activities in class was far from outstanding. Such a reaction is not surprising, as it resonates with my experience of becoming an adult fan and making it my major research theme, and reflects the popularity of the series worldwide.

In August 2010, the New York Public Library was offering nearly 7,000 copies of Rowling's books mostly in English but also in languages ranging from Arabic to Japanese. In addition, the U.S. publisher Scholastic's website, as of December, 2011, stated that the seven novels of the Harry Potter series had been translated into 68 languages and had sold over 400 million copies. These numbers provide a glimpse of the global Harry Potter phenomenon.

Think-Aloud

It is worth noting that including self-talk in our activities is regarded as a useful strategy to reduce pressure and anxiety. Experiments conducted by the California Institute of Technology suggest that sound can actually change vision (Highfield, 2002). When participants were shown a single flash accompanied by several beeps, some of them wrongly perceived them as several flashes. This study indicates that the brain processes information from each sense separately and builds up a picture of events around us, allowing us to see what we hear (p. 157). If we can use our voices more beneficially, it could help us to be more productive in accomplishing our tasks. A good example is Hurd's (2007) study of distance French language learners. During think-aloud protocols, learners who uttered positive expressions, such as "OK good" or "I'm happy with that" (p. 250), were better able to access their thought processes. The think-aloud protocols also indicated the negative effects of utterances expressing difficulty, uncertainty, frustration and confusion.

These two studies suggest that we tend to listen to our own words almost subconsciously and that, if we utter positive words to ourselves, they will influence our feelings and behaviors. I will now focus on self-talk that leads to a positive state of mind.

Positive Self-Talk

In the course of writing up my chapter for *Realizing Autonomy*, I came to see that healthy self-talk was effective when I needed a breakthrough. Since I was the sole author of the chapter, at first, I felt the burden of responsibility for completing my chapter was mine alone. The further I dug into the research area of emotions such as anxiety, fear, or worry, the further I walked into a psychological maze and let my feelings take the driver's seat. When I came to a dead end, in other words, a writer's block, my mind was full of *can'ts* and *don'ts*. I was focusing on what seemed difficult to accomplish and drifting further away from my goal of finishing the chapter. The editors of our group sensed the negative spiral I was in and advised me to focus on my research question. They gave me timely advice by introducing useful references and

sending me words of encouragement. I was ready to explore answers to my research question again.

A similar use of self-talk is seen in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the story that I used with my students. When the frightening sound of a boggart in the wardrobe caused some tension in Harry's class, Professor Lupin reassured the students with the phrase, "Nothing to worry about." In my chapter, I mentioned the example of a student in my own classroom who uses the same phrase as a way of reducing tension and encouraging herself when she is alone (Harada, 2011, p. 203). This self-talk is important for this student for helping her to relax and concentrate on her task.

During my poster presentation, Tim instantly identified my student's tension-reducing activity as *positive hitori goto (self-talk)*. Psychology specialists writing in a *Stress and Internal Self-Talk* section on the *Stress Management for Health Course* website point out that, among the 50,000 thoughts we automatically have in a day, a healthy internal self-talk ratio is around two positive thoughts to every one negative thought, and this can influence our feelings and behaviors (para. 1 and para. 6). In other words, people tend to have twice as many positive thoughts as negative ones. Experts also claim that under chronic stress, our thinking becomes more negative. However, we can change our thinking by positive self-talk, which is more realistic and optimistic, and this can help reduce our stress (para. 12). Thus, encouraging ourselves to do positive self-talk and lowering our stress will ultimately contribute to our mental health.

Looking back, I sometimes experienced negative thoughts and anxiety while drafting my chapter for the book. I was putting pressure on myself at times when I needed to relax. To improve this situation, I tried out two things. One was to vocalize "Nothing to worry about" while facing the computer screen on a day when I had made only a little progress. Saying this to myself provided me with an opportunity to detach myself from a chain of negative thoughts. It reoriented me toward my aim of completing my draft.

The other was to entirely trust my two editors. I said to myself, "If my editors believe that this chapter will be completed and if they are planning to send the drafts to the publisher, I should trust them rather than my present negative feelings." This worked to some extent, since I could clearly picture them sending out a package of all the chapters to the publisher when everything was ready. I realized my hope was to share with my readers the joy of introducing Harry Potter into classrooms and to explain how the movie scenes and paperback books could create the *flow* moment, the state in which people are involved in an activity where nothing else matters to them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999/2008, p. 4). All I had to do was write.

Collaboration in Reviewing

While each author wrote their chapter independently, when it came to reviewing the drafts, all the authors worked cooperatively. This activity helped to create a balance between the individual autonomy of the writers and collaboration of peers in suggesting revisions to each other's drafts. I benefitted greatly from reading my colleagues' drafts and learned how to make

clearer comments through this experience. Moreover, I felt privileged to have my initial drafts read by my colleagues in the Learner Development SIG research community. While Joseph P. Siegel gave insightful comments and taught me what reader-friendly writing means, Stacey Vye, exercising her experiences as a writing teacher, annotated one of my initial drafts with words that energized me.

Through interaction and comments from both colleagues in this project, I found myself in the position of my students who wait for their assignments to be returned with their teacher's comments. I had much to learn from my fellow writers' professionalism in analyzing, advising, praising, and sharing. Casanave (2009) writes that, in our development as teachers and as researchers, the ability to see our classes as our students do, and the ability to see our writing through the eyes of our readers are two important perspectives we should try to take (p. 5). I was lucky to experience both in this writing project.

Balancing Autonomy and Collaboration

Through the book project, I managed to learn how to write a chapter solo. If I had not experienced and overcome my writer's block with the careful support of the group editors and colleagues, my paper would not have reached the point of completion. If I had not experienced the collaboration with my colleagues through peer reading each others' drafts, I would not have improved my skills in giving feedback to my students. Consequently, I have learned the importance of balancing autonomy and collaboration. I would like to conclude this section by thanking the editors in our group for guiding me throughout the writing process, the conference organizing team for their Herculean work organizing the RA conference, and all other members supporting us to publish the book. Through this project, we have realized stronger ties in our educational community. With a pioneer spirit, a willingness to collaborate, and positive self-talk, even turtles might fly.

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