

LD SIG Members' Voices

LD SIG メンバーの声

My Learner Autonomy and Intercultural Communication Research Interests



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My interest in learner autonomy started in 2009 when I took up a new teaching position in a Vietnamese EAP context in Ho Chi Minh City. It was clear early on there that passive learning behaviour was an issue. Among the expatriate teachers, complaints such as 'the students do nothing outside of class' were commonplace. Indeed, the perceived passive learning was often used to explain poor results. And yet, while it was possible to sympathise with these frustrations, they seemed a little unfair. The well-meaning intentions of the teachers were clear, but I felt that many of their frustrations stemmed from a lack of understanding of the local context.

As a teacher on the programme, I wanted to learn more about learner autonomy in order to find more effective ways to promote the concept, and so I completed an action research project to address the cultural challenges that my colleagues and I were facing. This was a collaborative process involving a number of teachers and students which led to the development of an intervention to ensure

a stronger and more consistent approach to autonomy-promoting practices in the institution. This took the form of an independent learning journal. After a 5-week trial in several classes, there was some indication of more autonomous learning practices. In addition, the feedback from the learners was positive overall with most feeling that it helped them transition from their traditional learning practices to those required of them on the EAP programme and later on their specialist degree courses. The journal is now in use across the EAP programme.

I left Vietnam in 2011 to work on an education project with Newcastle University in both Angola and the UK. During this time, as a result of working with high-level learners of diverse nationalities and backgrounds, I developed an interest in intercultural communicative competence (ICC), an area that has experienced rising interest over the last 10-15 years (Sinicope, Norris & Watanabe, 2007).

I am now about to combine both of my interests in learner autonomy and ICC as I undertake a research study as part of a PhD with the University of Southampton, UK (due to start in February 2014). I want to analyse how a learner autonomy approach may help develop ICC acquisition among Japanese EFL learners since this is a relationship that is still to be studied in depth. I am especially interested in: (a) how can definitions of learner autonomy and ICC be framed in a Japanese EFL context?; (b) in what ways are learner autonomy and ICC encouraged in a Japanese EFL context?; and (c) to what extent does learner

autonomy aid the development of ICC among Japanese learners in EAP?

I believe that this analysis of the relationship between learner autonomy and ICC is important as the acquisition of ICC can be hindered by the classroom setting (Byram, 1997). Therefore, my aim is to understand the extent that ICC can develop among a group of EFL learners in a Japanese university context within an organised framework outside of the classroom, where students may develop their own autonomous learning approaches. I hope to find that ICC skills can be acquired as a result of learner experience and learner reflection, when the focus shifts from teaching to learning (Zumbihl, 2012, p. 227). It is my hope also that this study will further the understanding and possibly reinforce the notion and philosophy that learner autonomy and ICC are a fundamental part of a learner's journey.

My research will take place in a university EFL context in Kumamoto, where I am now based. Here there is an emphasis on the development of learner autonomy through teacher support. I intend to adopt a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, enabling comprehensive accounts with data from questionnaires designed to reach a large number of learners, and more open-ended responses from focus groups which will be richer in detail (Lichtman, 2010, p. 84). The focus groups should enable an analysis of learner autonomy and ICC skills and by providing multiple views and experiences (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010, p. 165). This combined approach can be beneficial in language research as it stands to reveal wider aspects (Lazaraton, 2005, p. 215) which I hope will lead to a more complete understanding of learner autonomy in its relationship with ICC acquisition.

However, given that I will not be carrying out any actual research for at least a couple of

years, it is likely that the research methods will adapt as I start to work more closely with my supervisor and with the Southampton research group. Currently, I am working on the early stages of my literature review in which I am discussing contrasting perceptions towards learner autonomy and ICC in Western individualist and Asian collectivist cultures.

In terms of my personal motivation for doing this research, I hope it will provide assistance in meeting my long-term career goals of continuing to work in tertiary institutions with international people. While my primary aim is to provide learners with transferable skills through student-centered, open-ended, problem and inquiry-based learning, I also want to further my development and prospects in educational research in Asia.

I would be very glad to hear from any Learner Development SIG members who have similar interests or who may be able to offer some PhD preparation advice.

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How Learning Experiences Affect My Teaching



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I obtained my MA degrees in ELT and Japanese studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Hungary. When I started university, humanities students had to choose two majors. As I had always wanted to become an English teacher, majoring in ELT was obvious. However, I wanted something rare as my other major and as Japanese language proficiency was not required for the

application I was accepted to do Japanese studies. The two departments had completely different attitudes to teaching and learning. In my English courses, I always felt that teachers considered students' progress to be important. They were also accessible when students needed help, for example recommended books for self-study and introduced learning strategies. On the contrary, the Japanese department positioned itself as an educator of the new generation of researchers, therefore, little was done to meet or attend to students varying levels of Japanese proficiency, pace and learning difficulties. The curriculum consisted of reading academic texts and classical grammar from the second year on and Chinese readings ('kanbun') from the third year, all of which required a firm language knowledge which most of the students lacked. As a result, students soon realized that they had two options: give up (which was chosen by more than 70 per-cent of my classmates) or study together and help each other. I selected the latter.

First of all, we needed to become able to look up new words quickly. Senior students introduced us to useful software programmes and websites and we also borrowed dictionaries and grammar books from the library for reference. At the beginning, our study group met only before the classes to discuss our different translations and attempted to create the 'best possible solution' by putting the best part of each work together. As the workload and difficulty of the texts increased, we started to divide the texts into smaller sections and assign each section to a person in the group to translate it. Before the classes, we simply copied the missing parts from others. However, this method did not prove to be effective when the teacher asked for the reading of a kanji or the meaning of specific vocabulary or grammar items. So, we decided to assign each passage of the texts to at least two people who worked together. In

addition, we increased the number of meetings both to discuss the texts, and translate the most complicated parts together. During our meetings, we not only improved our translation skills but also mastered various study techniques. The learning strategies and techniques we developed were applicable to studying in general. As a result, by the end of the third year, we had become autonomous learners and we now formed a coherent and effective study group, whose members made decisions about their own learning processes. These experiences proved the validity of collaborative learning to me and made me realise that collaborative learning goes hand in hand with, or leads one to, greater autonomy.

Since April 2013, I have been teaching English at Meisei University, Tokyo. Here, I am trying to make use of my language studying history to foster my students' improvement in communicating in English. I have introduced strategies and techniques that I found useful, for instance flashcards, recording my voice, making posters, and shared my learning experiences such as collaborative learning and how I became able to make decisions about my learning and become autonomous.

In the first few weeks of the semester I observed great differences between my first and second year students in terms of co-operation. The second-year students worked well together from the beginning and were ready to make decisions about the roles and responsibilities within the group even at the start of the semester. On the contrary, for my first-year students, group and pair work activities were rather new. In high school it seems that they hardly needed to co-operate with one another in the language lessons; consequently, initially, they felt uncomfortable solving various tasks with other students who they had just met.

I have 12 students in my first year class, so it is easy to form groups of two, three or four. Activities include discussing topics, information gap activities, filling in charts, making posters, and preparing presentations. The length of group work varies according to the task, ranging from 2-3 minutes to 15-20 minutes. I often re-group students within one lesson so that they can get to know each other and learn to work with different people. The problems I face when doing group activities and projects with them are disruptive behaviour and going off task. If one member of the group is unwilling to participate it breaks the balance, and as a result, it either makes other students go off task also or imposes more work on them. Therefore, as a teacher I emphasise the importance of taking responsibility for learning and make students aware of their own learning processes. If they learn to make decisions on their own learning, then they start getting closer to becoming autonomous.

I consider it important to foster co-operation—with each member taking part equally—in order to be able to get closer to the implementation of collaborative learning later. (I would not call my first year class collaborative, as it implies students taking great responsibility over how tasks are to be executed and roles to be assigned (Hirade, 2011), for which they are not ready yet. We are still approaching that stage.) You will recall that as an undergraduate I was 'forced' to use collaboration as a tool but my students are introduced to it step by step. I regularly apply activities in which they have to make decisions or determine the role of each student. I attempt to make them think about how various tasks and problems could be resolved and ask them to reflect on the way they approached and solved the task, which helps them realise how they can learn most

effectively. I believe that such activities help them become more autonomous at the same time.

At the time of writing this in July, the Spring semester is almost over and I have seen considerable changes in how my students are becoming more and more responsible for their own learning. In the final group project, which involved writing and preparing an advertisement, they were free to decide who they wanted to work with, their topic and how to execute the task. Hardworking students deliberately selected each other as partners and the less engaged ones realised that they had to work together, which they did not like. However, they all knew the importance of the project in their final grades so instead of pretending to be inept in order to do as little work as possible they attempted to put something meaningful together. That was a significant point for them: they decided not to fail the course and take it more seriously. Although there was great difference between the quality and language of the final products the groups submitted, I consider all of them successful in relation to the decisions they had made and how they carried out the task. I feel that they made a big step towards autonomy.

As a university student, I experienced how collaboration can influence one's attitude to learning and the results of it. As a teacher I am attempting to implement the strategies and approaches I used as a learner in my classroom: collaboration was a key educational/ sociocultural process for me which helped me become autonomous, and I believe that my students can benefit from such an approach also. However, they first have to see that they are the ones who need to make decisions on and take responsibility for, their own learning. They also need to recognise how collaboration can be used as a tool. If they do, then these practices might well be able to lead them to greater autonomy.

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Meet Joël Laurier, a Cooperative Learning Facilitator!



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Hello, my name is Joël Laurier. I am a French Canadian but was born and raised in English Canada. I am bilingual and working on mastering Japanese to a reasonable degree. I have been in Japan for 16 years and call Tatebayashi, Gunma my hometown. I am currently teaching at Gunma Kokusai Academy where I have the great fortune of working with fantastic children who do have motivation toward learning English. I have just finished my MA in TESOL at Teachers College Columbia University. It was there that I learned of my new passion—cooperative learning. This teaching strategy has changed not only my way of teaching but also the way I look at teaching in general. I joined the Learner Development SIG in order to be able to share ideas on cooperative learning with like-minded people in Japan who think their students deserve better than a traditional style of teaching. I look forward to meeting you all.

A Welcome and Necessary Change: Introducing Autonomy in a Low Motivation Environment



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In my current situation introducing student autonomy could have a great impact on my students' lives both inside and outside of the classroom. In this short article I will explore the concept of autonomy in language teaching and learning within the context of my current educational institution and outline a general action plan for my own classes for the next two semesters. With a careful implementation I believe that I can help my students become more autonomous in their language learning, a welcome and necessary change if I wish to support their journey becoming independent, successful language users.

The learning context

Among the many definitions of autonomy published I prefer the simple and direct definition given by Benson (2011): "a capacity to control one's own learning" (p. 58). Scharle and Szabo (2000) elaborate that autonomy is not a trait that a student either has or does not have, but is instead possessed "to varying degrees" in every individual in every context. Currently I am teaching at a private high school in Japan with about 1,000 low proficiency, low motivation students. I see a majority of the students at school only once a week, severely limiting time-on-task and often hindering my progress (and theirs) through the

lessons and curriculum. In addition, in each class I have a significant number of other obstacles such as student absences (sometimes as many as 1/3 to 1/2 of the class are missing) and an inability to assign homework due to lack of student cooperation. The students in this environment often act out in class, walk around freely, talk loudly, or sometimes openly refuse to do any work at all as instructed.

Working in this environment can be very frustrating, but I understand the importance of trying new ideas to encourage the students to learn and, more importantly, to want to learn. The current English educational system is not working for my students. Using my own quizzes and tests, established vocabulary size tests, and self-efficacy surveys, I have yet to find a significant difference in ability or confidence in English between the 1st year and 3rd year students, despite the two years of instruction that separates them. If the current system is not working, I feel that I have an obligation as a teacher to search for a new approach to English instruction. I personally believe that rather than continuing to remove student responsibility to make instruction easier, I should give it back whenever possible and let the students take more control of their own education.

Previously attempted student-centered lessons have generally led to confusion and failed plans. Discussions and classroom observations with colleagues have lead me to realize that students spend a majority of their time in other classes copying English phrases and sentences word for word along with Japanese translations into their notebooks. To my surprise and seemingly at odds with the literature denouncing grammar translation and such rote-learning activities, the students seem to be much more focused and motivated during these tasks. Given simple and mechanical tasks, almost all of the students seem to

focus on the activity and complete it as instructed. Although I would like to label this situation as lacking student autonomy due to the heavy teacher influence, the students often seem to prefer it, autonomously opting for a teacher to tell them exactly what to do. This echoes the concerns expressed by Pennycook (1997) that our desire as teachers to impose autonomy could lead us to dismiss such 'opting out' as a legitimate possibility. I must therefore work within this context to increase the students' motivation in class while slowly trying to increase their confidence in the efficacy of autonomous learning.

I believe there are two significant reasons why I should encourage student autonomy. The first is my hope that nurturing the students' autonomy will inspire change and help increase student motivation, as "learners can only assume responsibility for their learning if they have some control over the learning process" (Scharle & Szabo, 2000, p. 80). The second reason is to support the students who are interested in learning English but are being limited by their less-motivated peers. Fostering the desire and ability to take control and learn outside of the classroom could help these students be successful in an otherwise difficult environment.

The plan

As Benson (2012) explains, rather than having direct control over student autonomy itself, as a teacher I can only influence any of the three variables which comprise it: ability, freedom, and desire. I can only help to create an environment that fosters the growth of autonomy within my students, by aiming to "bring something out of students, rather than put something 'in'" (Benson, 2012, p. 7). Due to the limited time available and the conditions of my workplace environment, I want to make limited changes to variables that I

can control rather than worrying about issues that I have no influence over such as what happens in other classrooms. Over the next two semesters I will work to enthusiastically provide the space and materials for more motivated students who have the desire to independently come to study and learn, focusing on the "ability" of students to study autonomously.

First I plan to simply offer open study times where students can come and interact with English, on a completely voluntary basis and initially supervised by a teacher. This open study session will be located in the school's Language Laboratory every morning before school where the students can choose to attend and review material covered in class, study for a large-scale test such as TOEIC or EIKEN, or simply try to use English and communicate in a relaxed space. I feel that this alone will be a large step towards autonomy when compared to their current classroom setting, as well as offer a much better environment to meet the students' individual needs. In addition to providing the physical space to learn, I would also like to equip the students with the tools they need to study on their own, including instruction in using various study methods they can practice outside of school such as using word cards and extensive reading. I believe in the power of extensive reading, in particular, and its potential to encourage student autonomy. Fortunately, I was able to arrange for the purchase of over 300 graded reader books in April this year, which act as the start of a library the students can use to learn on their own. Such forms of informal English extracurricular learning have not previously existed at my school, but I believe they will be very useful in encouraging the students to take control of their own learning experience. Lastly, I would like to include some form of self-reflective tasks in this process, reminding the students of their roles

and guiding them to consider their own learning. It is imperative that the students come to view themselves as a crucial part of the whole learning process (Scharle & Szabo, 2000) if they are to further develop their capacity to control their own learning.

My hopes

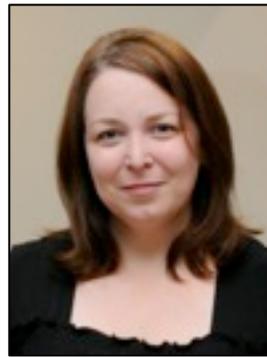
I consider autonomy an essential component of language learning, but it cannot be forced upon students who are not ready or willing to embrace it. With a slow, steady, and well-thought out introduction, however, it is my hope that these ideas will spread and I can help my students become better learners throughout their lives. While the plan outlined above is small in scale, even if only a few students benefit it will have been worth the effort. While I do not know how many students will utilize the space and materials offered, with any luck the students who come will see the benefits and bring any knowledge and enthusiasm gained back into the classroom to the benefit of others.

Finally, I would like to thank the Learner Development SIG for the opportunity to join this community and learn from those much wiser and more experienced than I am. While I am eager to try the ideas outlined above and see if I can help inspire positive changes in my students, the plan is flexible and I am open to other suggestions. I would love to hear from anyone who has had similar experiences introducing student autonomy, whether successful or unsuccessful, or anyone with any advice to give. I am still very new to the field of learner development and I have a lot to learn, one of the reasons why I was eager to join the LD SIG. I am looking forward to learning more from not only my own experiences and trials, but also from the experiences of others.

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Exploring Learner Development through e-Portfolios



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The Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) at Sojo University in Kumamoto, opened in April 2010, and I was one of the original 10 teachers who were responsible for the set-up. Initially the main issues that we faced involved trying to get a curriculum in place for over 700 students, figuring out how we were going to assess them, and dealing with shell-shocked non-English majors who had not one, but two classes of English Communication a week. After a while, the next challenge for us was to introduce the students to the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), which occupies the entire second floor of the building. It

consists of a conversation lounge, a reading area with multi-level graded readers, listening stations, speaking booths, a large English-only DVD collection, with comfy sofas and large screen TVs to watch movies, and much more. Although some students started using the SALC for their own purposes, it appeared (to me) that the majority of students were using the SALC only to complete the activities they were required to do in class.

As this seemed to me like a waste of a great opportunity to use such a useful facility, I decided to find a way to get the students more interested in using it. I first came up with a project that had the students choosing their own homework that paired their own interests with English study (Meilleur, 2013). For example, if they enjoyed watching movies, they could watch movies in English and use movie books or other resources to learn from them as well. However, most students did just enough to meet the requirements and nothing more, and almost none of them did their work in the SALC (or used SALC resources). After that, I realized that students would need more “training” in how to be (hopefully motivated) autonomous learners. Thus I began a new project with two of my colleagues that focused on reflective writing. The idea here was that students would become better equipped to make the language learning choices they needed if they reflected more on what worked and didn’t work for them, and why. Afterwards, they would be introduced to various external activities (i.e., any language study done outside of the classroom, whether it was done in the SALC or not) that they could later choose to use either concurrently with their English classes, or in later years. Students were asked to reflect on a variety of topics, ranging from their own English-language learning histories, to activities done in class, as well as reflections concerning projects and presentations. Initially the reflection questions

were quite specific, but over time they became more generalized, and we tended to get more detailed responses from the students as a result. Students did become better at reflecting as the year wore on, and they provided a lot of useful information as to what they found useful and interesting to do (not always the same thing.) We were able to complete the first stage of this project, but unfortunately not the latter stages, primarily due to time management issues in the second semester.

These two previous projects have led me to my current project. After reading several articles about the benefits of language learning portfolios (Banfi, 2003; Cadd, 2012; Collins & Hunt, 2011; Davis, 2003; Lam & Lee, 2010; Nunes, 2004; Shimo, 2003), I decided to use the concept of student-generated websites as e-portfolios as way of encouraging students to keep a record of their language learning progress, both in and out of the classroom. Although we have some server issues, our facility is CALL-friendly (English laptops and headsets in every classroom for every student, digital projectors, etc.), and I knew I would be able to help my low-level students in class in building their sites. I was unsure where to start, but a colleague of mine introduced me to the Weebly platform <<http://www.weebly.com/>>, which is very user-friendly. After creating my own class website with it, I realized that if I could use it myself, my students would be able to as well. It is mostly a question of dragging and dropping to create what you need on the pages. Students can build as many pages as they like on the site, upload audio and video files, embed documents and YouTube videos, have their own personal blog, and more. This, of course, is with the Pro version of the site, which I currently pay for (\$1 a student per year), but the free version offers quite a lot of possibilities as well.

The initial set-up for the e-portfolios was very teacher-specific. I wanted the portfolios to have the same basic set-up that students would personalize as they went along. Thus, every student's website has the same title (i.e., Name's English Portfolio), and every website has the same four basic pages: Home, Homework (with added subpages), My Blog, and My Links. The Home page is a place where students describe themselves, and their English-learning, personal, and future goals. They can also add photos or other information here. The Homework pages (which include reflections, a speaking journal, video uploads of their speaking tests and presentations, and more) are a repository of all the work that I have asked them to do in and out of class. The Blog page is just that, a personal blog where students can write what they like on topics of their choice, although occasionally I ask them to write about something related to what we have done in class. The Links page is a place where they can add links to useful sites at school—such as the Sojo Moodle and different Facebook pages—and also to other language learning sites that they enjoy.

While there may be some argument as to how tech-savvy Japanese students are (outside of using their mobile phones), I find that most of the students are engaged with their own websites to varying degrees. With the exception of a handful of students, most know how to navigate their sites and add the elements they need to their pages. As this is a new project, there have been a few minor hiccups along the way, but I continue to have students upload their work, reflect on it, and introduce them to various activities they can do outside of class. In the second semester, the teacher-directed focus will lessen as the students will be required to come up with their own English learning plan, with teacher guidance of course. I

hope to discover whether or not, over time, how many will continue to use and add to their e-portfolios through their own self-directed study long after they've finished my class.

Some of the current challenges I am facing with this project include finding a way to evaluate the work done on the websites and trying to be consistent in checking in on the students' websites on a regular basis. In addition to these practical matters, there is also the challenge in having the students "own" their websites, where they take control of the content, and add to them as they see fit. Hopefully, in doing so, students will become more aware of their own learning development, and will be able to become more motivated and autonomous language learners.

I have been working over the past two and a half years on developing autonomy with Japanese students and have found from my previous projects that there is a real need to foster and develop learner reflection and modes of autonomous learning with them (Lyddon, 2011; Matsumoto, 1996; Skier & Vye, 2003); however, there is also a danger in having students become as dependent on the teacher for their autonomy as with other elements of their language learning.

I will be presenting on e-portfolios at the Exploring Learner Development Conference in Tokyo this November, but I am also interested in collaborating with other LD members who may be interested in this project, or something similarly related. Please feel free to contact me any time.

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The Reluctant Language Learner Turned Language Teacher: A brief outline of my language learning history



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My language learning history has been tenuous at best. Like the majority of Irish children, I had absolutely no interest in learning my native language, Irish (Gaeilge). It is generally viewed as a 'dead language' by the majority of the Irish youth—a language with no 'real world' applications outside of Ireland and only slightly more within. By the end of secondary school, I could not even create a simple grammatically correct sentence in Irish that I had not learned by heart. My repertoire now consists of very basic vocabulary and useful expressions like "Can I go to the toilet?" and "Merry Christmas", and this is after almost 16 years of language learning. I also spent six years learning French, and my skill in this language was little better. Deciding to view myself as a 'bad language learner' enabled me to rationalise this ineptitude quite well. I had absolutely no conception of the essential role of grammar in either language and found myself attempting to re-learn the present simple during my final years in secondary school. This pursuit was quickly abandoned when I realised that all I needed to do in order to obtain a high grade in both languages was to 'learn the exam'. Although this tactic left me

incapable of speaking either language, it did result in quite high grades in both exams, which suited me perfectly at the time and continues to suit an increasing number of native Irish learners.

Since moving to Japan almost four months ago with just the words for “hello”, “goodbye” and “thank you”, I already have a better knowledge of Japanese grammar than I ever had after 16 years of learning Irish and six years of learning French. Teaching language learning has undoubtedly helped in this process, but I am of the opinion that lowering my affective barrier was and is the main component of my progress. Instead of relying on osmosis, I am actively studying the language and making an effort to speak it as often as possible. This does not mean that I am anywhere close to having a conversation in Japanese, but I am slowly building up a base of grammar and vocabulary which I am hoping will all come together within the year and enable me to have a semi-basic conversation in Japanese.

Upon deciding to move to Japan, I was informed that I would be teaching students of a lower level than I was accustomed to. From the beginning, I assumed that not having an even partially fluent second language would negatively affect my teaching. I thought that I would not be able to relate to my future students as language learners and that I would not be able to understand the difficulties that they were facing. Surprisingly, I feel that my ‘non-language learning history’ is giving me good insight into the feelings of my compulsory English students. I find myself regularly thinking back on what I know about Irish and French and trying to remember the reasons why these language points managed to slip through my affective barrier. I feel that this is helping me to proactively combat disinterest and to frame lessons/teaching accordingly in ways that accommodate the students’ feelings towards

language learning and that benefit them as a result. I also feel that I now have a greater understanding of my English communication students’ difficulties. Moreover, I find it easier to explain the nuances of the English language by giving a few examples of what I know about the Japanese language. Overall, I believe that my “non-language learning history” is on the way to actually becoming a “language learning history” and I am looking forward to using this to my advantage for the rest of my teaching career.

Learners’ Development of Autonomy through a Speaking Task



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My name is Robert Werner, and I have recently joined the Learner Development SIG. I am a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies, as well as the Associate Editor of the *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*. My experience includes eight years of ESL/EFL teaching at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels in both the United States and Japan. I am new to the field of learner development, having become interested in it recently through an in-class assignment. This in turn led to a desire to assist my students in becoming better learners.

Highly motivated students of mixed ability levels in my university English communication class completed a series of assignments where they recorded a conversation with a proficient user of English, listened to it, and reflected on their performance. The assignment was designed for

students to improve their speaking over the course of the semester, and part of the reflection entailed making a plan to improve for the next conversation (again with a proficient user of English), which was to take place about three weeks later. Students then had time to implement their plan and prepare for the next topic before repeating the process.

As the instructor, I listened to their recordings, read their reflections, and gave as much meaningful feedback as possible to support them by annotating their electronic submissions with comments on the conversations and reflections. Through grading assignments and examining students' reflections over time, I noticed an ability by some students to critically reflect on their speaking and make adjustments in order to improve in specific skill areas. For example, one student initially wrote, I want to improve my grammar and vocabulary. I couldn't speak right grammar and difficult vocabulary. If I improved them, I [would] be able to speak English fluently. An excerpt from a later reflection by the same student not only shows a detailed and thoughtful response, but also that she was enjoying the experience: I would like to improve vocabulary. I do songs worksheets. I will listen to the songs and fill in the gaps. I can learn vocabulary as I sing! So, it's easy to learn words by heart. This strategy improves my skill, not only word skill, but also listening skill. As a result of this and other students' progress, I became determined to improve my own teaching so as to facilitate this type of development in more learners.

Around the same time, I had a conversation with one of the university's learning advisors, and it became clear that we had been independently been working toward the same goal with some of the same students. He was trained in the field of autonomy, whereas I was fueled by my prior experiences in helping younger English language

learners develop their critical thinking skills. This unexpected discovery instilled in me the belief that I was moving in the right direction, and I could see the potential for further student improvement through becoming more active myself in the field of learner autonomy.

I feel that CALL has also played a part in my students' development. In my never-ending quest to use technology both in and outside the classroom, I have introduced students to Edmodo, an online social networking tool for educators that has an interface similar to that of Facebook. With so many students using Facebook, Edmodo provides familiarity without a high learning curve. Students have access to folders customized by the instructor, including links, documents, and audio/video files that can be accessed anywhere, thus providing an online tool for autonomous learning. These folders constitute an electronic library, which is exclusively available to the students in a particular class or classes, as determined by the instructor. My class's Edmodo library contains folders labeled dictionaries (including collocations and synonyms/antonyms), pronunciation (videos of mouth movement and place/manner of articulation), vocabulary (student-created "how-to" guides for strategies taught in class), and pragmatics (student-created videos on correct pragmatic language use). By accessing these folders, students can revisit various resources throughout their development as learners (both during the course and after it has ended).

My current research investigates students' plans to improve in speaking over the course of a semester (as described above). I am analyzing their goals (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.), the means of achieving these goals, and examining the relationship between students' perceptions of self-efficacy (and other factors) and their choices. In the future, I hope to look more deeply into different

ways of thinking with regard to improvement in speaking in order to better understand why individuals make certain choices. As I am constantly pushing students to reach their individual potential, I am also striving to develop professionally myself. Through this process I want to help as many students as possible not only to attain their goals in acquiring higher language skills, but also to progress in their development as autonomous learners. Through my present and future research, I hope that I am able to make a positive contribution to the field and help other educators to likewise assist learners in their development.

A Life Spent in Learning Development



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Hello there, my name is William Hassett. I am currently a lecturer at Dokkyo Medical University working for the Department of Premedical Sciences in its language division. The emphasis of the department isn't focused on English language. In fact, it is only since 2012 that the native language teachers working here even saw a contract. I was offered a full-time/yearly contract in April and I hope by accepting the post I will find, at long last, some security in this profession.

I've been in Japan for a very long time, longer than most of my students. I've seen a lot of changes, my work, the hairdos, AKB48? But something that hasn't really changed so much, I think, is teaching and... how little Japanese I speak. Unfortunately, I didn't major in education; I'm not a natural teacher. I'm an engineer. So when

I began teaching, I didn't view it as my profession mainly because I knew nothing about it. Neither did I plan on staying in Japan for so long. So, what happened?

I hail from foggy London via rainy Ireland and I had a promise of a new start at sunny Melbourne University. To be honest, I was bored and I wanted to go back to school to study History. Luckily, I had a cousin who was a lecturer in 'Australia's No.1 University' and a good way in. But my re-education plan needed funding. It's a long story, but basically I arrived in Japan and started my teaching career at a lowly Eikawa in downtown Utsunomiya, a factory town... and as it was the bubble years... ka-ching!

In those days, most visitor-teachers in Utsunomiya, came from the U.S.A. or Canada. At first, I found it difficult to find a job because I am/was London-Irish, but when I got a start in teaching I found getting work easier using that 'difference' to my advantage. We had a tight-knit community back then; we helped each other and did what we did to get by. It took awhile, but then I began seeing the job as more than a means of putting rice on the table. With the encouragement from the real teachers among us, I started to take things more seriously, eventually returning to the UK to get a TEFL Diploma.

When I returned to Japan, I was able to move away from cram schools and I started teaching for Time T.I. (a subsidiary of Time Magazine). I began teaching, in factories, to young engineers. Back then, many of the big companies were sending their workers abroad, mostly to the US and Europe. I prepared them by improving their general communication skills, but I also helped them to communicate their work knowledge, in English, to foreign engineers when they were posted. My engineering background became a useful tool and I felt at home walking

around the factory floor with my students explaining their jobs to me. For the first time I felt the joy of teaching and it was so fulfilling. But then came the depression and factories started cutting back in education support resulting in my company folding. Fortunately, with the slimming down of the JET program, I was able to find work teaching at a Junior High School then at a High School and now finally I have moved to the dizzying heights of DMU, which I started in spring 2013.

Looking back, I realize that my whole life has been one of Learner Development. In my case, my search for security in Japan has forced me to change and adapt but more importantly to learn and develop new skills. I'm still learning, hopefully still developing, but I've a long way to go before catching up with my peers and the thought of that gap scares me. A bigger scare is knowing that it's only now that I'm beginning to understand what it's really like to be a teacher... even after all this time, there is so much I don't understand and so much for me to learn.

Back to the beginning and my job at DMU. There is so much that needs to be done here. Persuading everyone that English is important is one thing but my biggest task at the moment is to motivate my students who are busy learning to be doctors. In this regard, I'm trying to establish a self-learning/access center where all our students, doctors and nurses can come, meet and make friendships through English. But I need help. By joining the Learning Development SIG I'm hoping to find people there who can advise and help me make my SAC real and successful. I need to understand more about Learner Development and how to go about developing my students' English skills autonomously. The JALT Kobe Conference in October will be a first. Further down the line, on November 23-24 I will make it my business to

attend the 20th Anniversary Conference and hope to see many of you there.

Learner Development Issues in Language Education

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Two concerns arise when I think of learner development in the study of English. First, the motivations behind the pursuit to learn English worldwide seem questionable. Second, it seems newer ways to assist students in learning a language have yet to be significantly utilized. I'm currently in the process of finishing an MA in TESOL, and my study has focused on looking at the influences that push students to learn a language along with how they might do it more efficiently.

Not long ago, I watched a TED talk which detailed that over two billion people are studying English. The speaker in the TED talk seemed to think the situation was of benefit to the world. But, I wonder what the different motivations are behind these two billion people. I wonder what kinds of social systems they are involved with. I wonder if they might be in need of not only re-evaluating their motivations to study English, but their involvement within the societies that they exist.

A review of the literature seems to point to corporate influences as a persuasive factor in shaping students' perceived needs for English. Tsui and Tollefson (2007) state that individual reactions to globalization have been "shaped, and even determined, by the linguistic practices and preferences of multinational corporations, transnational organizations, and international aid agencies" (p. 18). Language learners may perceive that by acquiring English as a skill, they will have gained some worthwhile help to ensure their

economic security. As to who can actually use English to enhance their lives economically or otherwise is in question. Some contend that the usefulness of the language is decreasing relative to population and that this parallels the increasingly polarized economic realities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" (e.g., Holborow, 1999). In other words, English is a language that provides opportunities more for the established elite than for the masses. In any case, this is a social distortion that needs to be looked at and addressed with students.

In second language acquisition, I have thought about how one might introduce new types of material that could both cognitively and motivationally assist students in achieving their learning objectives. Material that would appeal to students who either can't engage with existing material or simply want variety. I've considered two types of reading material that might help—comic book formatted reading material, and motion comics. Evidence shows that language learning material in a comic book format might offer substantial cognitive and motivational benefits over conventional material (El Refaie, 2009; Jones, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Liu, 2004; McCloud, 1994; Wolk, 2008).

I've studied these two areas for some time now, though I have yet to write an article for a journal. The study of what motivates students to learn English is disturbing, as it seems to indicate a worldwide failure in education in general. On the other hand, the more technical study in reading for second language acquisition seems somewhat uplifting. Despite questions regarding student motivation to study English, it seems a winner either way if students can be helped to do it more effectively.

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Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, just warfare, mathematics, strength, strategy, the arts, crafts, and skill.