Raising Autonomy by Negotiating Rules with Students: An Exploratory Discussion about Action Research into Learner Development and Autonomy

ルールの話し合いで学生の自主性を高める：
学習者ディベロプメントおよび自律学習に関するアクションリサーチについての探索的考察

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Andrew Tweed: Tokiko, how about if we begin by explaining how we each became interested in action research?

Tokiko Hori: I'd heard about the term "action research" (AR) sometimes; however, I did not have any specific knowledge about it until I attended a faculty development forum at Soka University in which Anne Burns shared her experiences with her career as an AR professional. (She was a visiting professor at my university and was teaching TESOL students at that time.) I was fascinated by the stories of teachers who conducted AR, improved their teaching skills, and got a lot of fruit from that. When Anne suggested trying a project at the end of her lecture, I put up my hand. As a novice teacher, I promised myself to try every opportunity to develop myself as an educator/researcher as much as possible. I did not have any knowledge about AR (sorry to admit this), and I had never read Anne's books beforehand and really was not sure what it would be like.

At the time I had several challenges with classroom teaching and management, especially managing a classroom of 25 freshmen with mixed motivation and English proficiency levels. So it was easy to decide where I would take action and conduct research.

Andrew: You are very fortunate to be able to learn and get support from Anne Burns. I led some workshops on this topic with a group of teacher trainers in Cambodia, and we used Anne's book (Burns, 2010) on Action Research (AR). When I met Anne a couple of years later she said that she had wanted to write the book in a way that made it easy for teachers new to AR to try it out.

I think it was a good decision to employ AR in your situation. While teaching a group with varying levels of motivation and English language proficiency is a common issue, in this case, using AR would help you to understand the differences in your particular group. Two of the trainers I worked with in Cambodia were concerned with a similar issue—this is briefly discussed in a chapter I wrote about AR (Tweed, 2014). They taught large classes of over 50 students, their students had very different levels of English, and some of them participated much more than others. The question that they explored was how they could get students to speak more in their classes. What was the particular question that you asked in your AR, Tokiko?

Tokiko: My questions were related to my classroom rules. The course was a mandatory English class for freshmen, twice a week. Students were allocated to the class based on their TOEIC scores and supposed to be in the same class during Spring and Fall semesters. My university surveys students about courses at the end of each semester, and as a reflection on the results of the Spring semester questionnaire, I decided to introduce three rules in the Fall semester classroom. However, I was not sure whether those rules were really good for my students, because they did not seem to work well. In particular, the rule about "unnecessary smartphone usage" had not worked as I expected. So I wondered what I should do with those rules to improve the learning environment.

We, AR project members, were in Anne's office brainstorming what we could do for our AR attempts. I admitted my concerns about classroom rules, and Anne suggested involving the students in solving these problems. I was very lucky to have such helpful advice from her, and I decided to negotiate about the existing classroom rules with my students.

The first step I took was to allocate 30 minutes of class time for this negotiation. I started by explaining that those rules resulted from reflection to their responses to the semester-end questionnaire. I told my students that university students have more freedom and responsibility for their own learning, just as they have rights of voting and marriage because they are already regarded as adults. Discussion took place in small groups of three or four, which were randomly assigned. After 10 minutes, each group shared their opinions. Surprisingly, their responses were basically the same. There was more variety of opinions when they were discussing in groups, but no one disagreed or asked for any change to those rules. I wondered whether this was because of peer pressure or the well-known Japanese cultural norm of group-oriented behavior. At the time, I thought that this negotiation had failed, since there were no changes and no critical or creative opinions, which I had expected to hear from my students.

Andrew: It sounds like you got started off in a good direction. One of the key points of AR is to select a problem, issue, or puzzle that you would like to explore for the purposes of making some positive change. I like the idea of involving students in discussing issues. Sometimes just letting them know that there is an issue can make a difference, as students and teachers focus on different things and have different perspectives on learning when they come together in a classroom. Having these discussions with students can raise their awareness of issues they had not previously considered. In your case, however, the students did not suggest any new ideas. That must have been frustrating. I'm curious about the three rules that you mention. What were these three rules and why did you decide to focus on them?

Tokiko: The first rule was allowing students to sleep in classroom. There were 30-45 minutes of free reading and/or watching time almost every class. Especially when the lesson was conducted in the CALL room once in a week, students were to choose materials by themselves. Books with CDs and some DVD titles were provided, and they were also allowed to watch YouTube videos. We call this "*free reading*" and "*free watching*." Since this involved independent activity, some students fell asleep or struggled not to sleep. I know many teachers hate students sleeping in the classroom, but I believe people need so-called "power nap" sometimes, and set up this rule. The second and third rules were purely in response to my students' comments. A couple of students were upset that a few students were checking SNSs or web comics on their smartphones in the classroom. Those kinds of behaviors distracted other students, so the second rule addressed that. The third rule focused on students going out of the classroom during the lesson. The three rules that we agreed on are shown in Figure 1.

Andrew: I think it is interesting that you and your class agreed on these rules. While there are also classroom rules that might be related to academics (e.g., percentage of L1 vs. L2 spoken during class; homework lateness policies, etc.), these rules are related to students' individual rights in the classroom. I imagine that the students felt that they were respected and treated like adults because you involved them in making these rules and allowed some flexibility.

Figure 1.   Negotiated Rules

Sleeping in class:
You are allowed to sleep 15 – 30 mins in class.

Your partner should set the timer for 15 mins and then wake you up. Sleeping more than 30 mins = absent.

Unnecessary smartphone / cell phone usage:
If you are spotted unnecessarily using your smartphone for things like LINE or games during class, it will be counted as **1 out.**
2 outs = 1 absence.

* You may use your smartphone if you ask the instructor first, or if the instructor indicates you should use it.

Leaving the classroom:
You may leave the classroom to go to the toilet if you ask the teacher before you leave the classroom. However, 30 mins or more out from classroom is regarded as an absence.

Now I'm wondering what you did next. Anne Burns and others talk about the cycle of AR, and that this cycle does not always move in one direction. Sometimes things do not go as planned so we have to go backwards. What did you do when your students didn't give you any new ideas regarding these three rules?

Tokiko: That's so true. When people notice that there is a problem, it raises their awareness of the issue and sometimes solves the problems. According to my memo from Anne's lecture, I understand that there are four phases in AR: *Plan, Act, Observe,* and *Reflect.* Once I had taken *action*, I didn't do anything about that. Instead, I *observed* students' behavior with a slight hope of it changing.

About two weeks passed, and I was wondering why students in that particular class started to submit their homework much more than students in another class. Regarding the classroom rules, I could see that their awareness of those rules had grown slightly and that their behavior had changed a little—but not so much. However, I was surprised to see more and more students in that class starting to submit homework regularly, especially for the vocabulary development project, which was due by the end of semester. That project consisted of five worksheets of word lists that students should learn and master at their own pace. In contrast, regarding the other class (who were also freshmen, had the same proficiency level, but were from a different faculty), their attitude during class time was always good, but few students had submitted their vocabulary worksheets. It is important to point out that I had not negotiated any classroom rules with this other group.

This made me wonder whether there might be a connection between negotiating rules and the increased submission rate. I hypothesized that negotiating rules raised students' ownership of the class. Accordingly, the sense of ownership resulted in an increase in the

students' autonomy. In the end, I found an article that helped me to understand this situation. Stefanou, Perencevich, Dicintio & Turner (2004) propose three types of autonomy support:

- organizational autonomy support
- procedural autonomy support
- cognitive autonomy support,

and argue that varying combinations of those autonomy supports lead to different classroom outcomes. In my case, it seemed that, by negotiating rules with students, the class had become high in organizational autonomy support. Both of my classes were already high in both procedural autonomy support and cognitive autonomy support, so the difference between the two classes could, from this point of view, be attributed to the level of organizational autonomy support.

Andrew: I agree with you that these rules are related to organizational autonomy, but I still have some questions. What is the relationship between these changes in organizational autonomy and the changes in the students handing in the vocabulary homework? Do you have any data which points to a link between these two changes?

Tokiko: Before explaining my understanding about these changes, let me introduce those three categories of autonomy support and associated strategies by Stefanou et al. (2004):

Table 1. Strategies Associated with Different Features of Autonomy Support
(Stefanou et al., 2004)

Organizational Autonomy Support	*Procedural Autonomy Support*	*Cognitive Autonomy Support*
Students are given opportunities to: ● choose group members ● choose evaluation procedure ● take responsibility of due dates for assignments ● participate in creating and implementing classroom rules ● choose seating arrangement	Students are given opportunities to: ● choose materials to use in class projects ● choose the way competence will be demonstrated ● display work in an individual manner ● discuss their wants ● handle materials	Students are given opportunities to: ● discuss multiple approaches and strategies ● find multiple solutions to problems ● justify solutions for the purpose of sharing expertise ● have ample time for decision making ● be independent problem solvers with scaffolding ● re-evaluate errors ● receive informational feedback ● formulate personal goals or realign task to correspond with interest ● debate ideas feely ● have less teacher talk time; more teacher listening time ● ask questions

According to the table, participating in creating and implementing classroom rules is under organizational autonomy support as I mentioned above. Likewise, my classes

included procedural and cognitive support such as choosing the way of demonstrating competence and receiving cognitive autonomy support. For example, during "*free reading*" and "*free watching*" time, students made notes in a "*study report*" about what they learned from the material they chose.

As their teacher, I encouraged students to write down their reflections, including difficult words or phrases, and questions or opinions about the contents and/or language. Students were allowed to write both in English and Japanese. English was recommended but not forced. So some students wrote totally in English, but other students preferred to write in Japanese. Some even drew pictures to illustrate what they learned from the books she read. At the end of the activity, students shared their study reports with each other. Later, students received my comments on their reports as well as responses to their questions. However, in most cases, those responses were useful information or strategies to find the answers by themselves, which could be regarded as a form of "*cognitive autonomy*" support.

To come back to your question, Andrew, in terms of actual data, I don't have specific numbers now. However, more than half of the students of that particular class handed in vocabulary homework while only a few students in the other class did when I noticed the differences between the two groups. As I explained already, both of my classes had a lot of procedural and cognitive autonomy support. The only difference was the negotiation of rules (in other words, additional organizational autonomy support for one group). As a consequence, I hypothesized those increases in handing-in rate were connected to raising their autonomy, but I was not sure.

This also led me to reflect on my personal beliefs about language learning and teaching. After 10 years of working professionally as a freelance translator, I really knew well that grammar-translation methods have limitations with regard to language acquisition. I first came across extensive reading about seven years ago, and experienced language acquisition with minimal L1 support. That experience increased my interest in implicit language learning (i.e., extensive reading/listening, and casual speaking/writing), so I conducted some research on longitudinal implicit language learning of adult learners. My teaching beliefs are also rooted in value-creating (創価=soka) education, which my university is named after (Makiguchi, 1972). Value-creating pedagogy argues that the "happiness" of students is the purpose of education, and that the meaning of student happiness is the capacity to develop oneself and contribute to society by creating "values" (Ikeda, 1996).

Based on those beliefs, I designed the course to guide students to be users of English rather than learners of English—especially a user of English who can contribute to others using English as a tool of communication. So, I put greater emphasis on students' active learning and fluency development. For example, students engaged in quick writing (for five minutes, because they were basic level) for fluency development. Speaking practice starts from preparing to express their own opinions or information to lower their affective filter and to personalize their learning as much as possible. On the other hand, the textbook was used for language-focused learning, especially when grammatical items were explained. To practice those grammatical items, students were engaged in various games, pair work, and group activities, which is common in active learning classroom. Furthermore, I gave "*Express Yourself to the World*" as the theme of their final projects. For this project students were to find the way to connect themselves to the world by using English as a communication tool. I prepared two online platforms (a class blog and YouTube channel) for them to present their projects, allowing them to use other ways too if they wanted to.

So one student made a beautiful pamphlet of Japanese castles for international students, and another student made a picture book for kindergarten children.

Andrew: Your students were very lucky to have you as their teacher! What you describe is a very interesting approach towards conducting an English course. Fukuda and colleagues (Fukuda, Sakata, & Takeuchi, 2011; Fukuda, Sakata, & Pope, 2015) took a similar approach. They argued that many Japanese university students have been made to learn English, for example, to pass tests, and have lost interest and motivation to learn. In response to this issue, as well as in recognition of the belief that a focus on autonomy promotes lifelong learning, they decided to create a course in which the students have the freedom to set their own goals, plan what they would do, select their own learning activities and materials, and evaluate their own learning. And just like with your class, this was still a required class. In addition to promoting self-directed learning, the instructors actively supported students' needs, in terms of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which are the three needs emphasized by Ryan and Deci (2000) to help students become self-determined, or, motivated. Fukuda and colleagues did not measure gains in language proficiency, but they did measure students' changes in motivation by employing validated questionnaires measuring levels of "*amotivation*," "*extrinsic motivation*," and "*intrinsic motivation*." They reported a general trend of students moving in the direction of intrinsic motivation.

To return to your AR project, let me see if I understand the outcome and your conclusion. You negotiated rules with one class. By involving your students in making these rules, which were about going out of the class, sleeping in class, and smartphone use, the class had more *organizational autonomy*. After these rules were agreed on, you noticed a change, which was that students were taking more responsibility for turning in their vocabulary worksheets. The task of students doing their vocabulary worksheets can be classified as both *procedur*al and *organizational autonomy*. You also noticed an increase in students doing more extensive reading and joining which could be labeled under *procedural autonomy*. While another class you were teaching was a good class, you did not negotiate classroom rules with them, and you did not notice the same kind of changes in their behaviors. As a result of your observations, you hypothesize that by negotiating rules with students, which is classified as *organizational autonomy*, these students began to exhibit greater autonomy, which is associated with *procedural autonomy*. Does this sound accurate to you?

Tokiko: Yes, I think you articulated all the points I discussed above. And the work of Fukuda et al. (2011, 2015) has given me other insights to improve my teaching. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew: I don't think it is a leap to say that one kind of autonomy can influence another kind of autonomy. Going back to self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) claim that autonomy-supportive teaching can lead to more internalized forms of motivation. Considering that perspective on your findings, it is possible that your autonomy-supportive teaching was motivating for the students, and that this motivation led them to be more proactive and take more responsibility for their own learning.

I'm glad that we have had the opportunity to have this discussion about AR as I am also interested in interventions related to learner autonomy. I currently work as a learning advisor in a university self-access center. In this work environment, self-directed learning is the norm. However, one of our key challenges is to provide the appropriate amount of structure and support for the students while the learner still remains in control of the learning process. Another concern of mine, which many EFL educators in Japan share, is how to increase student motivation, which is so important for students learning in self-

access centers. I would like to undertake AR that explores alternative ways of offering structure and support to students in self-access centers as well as new methods for increasing student motivation.

How about you, Tokiko? Do you have any plans to for any future AR projects?

Tokiko: As you mentioned, balancing structure and support while allowing students to take responsibility for their learning is very challenging. Now I have all data from those classes and noticed the gap between the lowest and highest scores of TOEIC is much bigger in the class where I negotiated the three rules. Even though more than 20% of the students in both classes increased TOEIC scores by around 100 points, the scores of several students in that particular class noticeably dropped. Why did this happen? According to Stefanou (2004), the combination of "*low in organizational autonomy support*" with "*high in procedural and cognitive autonomy support*" leads to the best performance outcomes. I am therefore planning to re-design the course next academic year with better structure, and more powerful procedural autonomy support and cognitive autonomy support to decrease the gap. So, my new question at this point is "*How can I decrease the gap among students' performance outcomes by constructing well-organized, but flexible and individualized language learning in and outside of the classroom?*"

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