Reflections on Autonomy
自律学習のリフレクション

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My name is Michael Wilkins. I work at several universities around the Kansai area. I received a grant to attend the JALT national conference in Tokyo last November. I'd like to thank the LD SIG members for this support. I think these grants, however small, make a big difference to part-time teachers. The professional development costs of courses, books, and conference fees and transportations costs can add up over a year when coupled with no research grants from the universities. Last year, I had a new addition to my little family, and before I received notice that I would receive the LD grant I was seriously considering cancelling my attendance in Tokyo. However in the end I participated in five presentations.

My learner autonomy "history"
I've always been a bookworm, so when I first heard of Extensive Reading (ER) through a pamphlet written by Rob Waring and published by Oxford University Press, I was an instant enthusiast. However, my teaching context at the time was not conductive to experimentation so I soon started doing my M.Ed at Temple University. I think my interest in both ER and learner autonomy started from my own learning style and interest in reading. I actually joined the LD SIG at that time but was unclear on how to participate besides going to the national conference, so I let my membership lapse.

Another source of my interest in learner autonomy is from my classroom experience. Like most teachers I experiment in the classroom to see what works best. Essentially, I do my own action research daily and I found the obvious pattern that students would engage in learning much more readily when dealing with topics they were interested in and in ways they were comfortable with. Luckily, in the past 3 years I have had teaching situations that allowed me to be flexible and experiment with different materials and methods to follow up this interest. Some materials and methods I have tried are extensive reading, portfolio assessment, negotiated syllabi, projects, vlogging (video blogging), webquests, and various social media applications.

Autonomy research group
Last year I joined a group of 6 researchers from various universities but based at Kansai University of international Studies. The focus of the group is learner autonomy. We administered a survey to almost 1000 participants at various universities around Japan.

The research was inspired by a study conducted by Holden and Usuki (1999), which attempted to correct the misconception that Japanese university students are somehow less autonomous than learners from other cultural backgrounds. Their study utilized 10 open-ended interview questions to elicit students' attitudes and beliefs about learning, their expectations of themselves, and their expectations of their teachers in the learning process. Our study, however, utilized a questionnaire used by Ustunluoglu (2009) in Turkey. This questionnaire contained 22 questions to elicit: what learning decisions and tasks students perceive as their responsibility, what learning decisions and tasks are their teacher's responsibility and what learning decisions and tasks they perceive they are capable of doing. The final goal is to measure students' perceptions of responsibility and ability in the classroom - two main learner autonomy dimensions laid out by Littlewood (1999).

The process of doing this research has been as interesting as the outcomes. As the last person to join the group, I had no say in the initial structure of the research. However, being able to collaborate with a large group and participating in the process of collecting, coding, and analyzing data from a study of over 1000 respondents was a valuable experience.

My classes
I have been lucky enough to have been teaching in places where I have teacher autonomy. To me, teacher autonomy is the freedom to experiment and be creative in the classroom. This has allowed me to experiment with using new technologies, peer assessment, syllabus negotiation and other student-centered teaching methods.

I saw Steve Quasha's Best of JALT 2008 winning presentation at a Kobe chapter meeting on portfolio and peer assessment, and have been working on variations of that idea for over 3 years. Some things I like about this method are: the students reflect on what they have done over the whole course, the audience is more than just the teacher, the students have choices about what they will put in their portfolio and how they will present it. As well as English skills the students need to use artistic skills, and, most of importantly, students choose to share some surprising personal information about their successful experiences that brings the group closer together. Students always give this sort of evaluation good feedback.

I have also been experimenting with new ways for students to present their information. Some ways I have tried have been Pecha Kucha (see pecha-kucha.org), Prezi (see prezi.com) presentations, poster presentations, and video. Recently, the production and consumption of video has been a major area of student activity in and out of class. One reason for this is Facebook and smart phones make it extremely easy for students to make and share short videos and interact with each other.

Recent interests

For the last few years I have been really interested in polyglots, people who speak multiple languages, and their take on language learning. Their perspective is a little different than that of a language teacher, but they are the ultimate successful autonomous language learners so they must have something to say. Of course, throughout history there have been many good examples of polyglots, but in the digital age there are a few that have caught my attention: Steve Kaufman (thelinguist.blogs.com and lingq.com), Khatzumoto (alljapaneseallthetime.com), and Benny Lewis (fluentin3months.com). All three are very successful and autonomous language learners. They are not particularly supportive of language classes and teachers, but rather advocate Krashen-style input learning methods such as extensive reading and listening.

JALT National

Autonomy seems to have become a buzzword in the teaching community. At every session I attended the presenters mentioned autonomy and how their topic would positively affect student autonomy. This may have been due to my own focus but the presentations were often random ones I chose for their time and location next to my presentations rather than their particular topics. Since then I have noticed learner autonomy mentioned in almost every local presentation as well.

I'm embarrassed to say I had not heard of Phil Benson until his keynote speech, which piqued my interest. Through attending the LD SIG forum and dinner, I had the good fortune of talking to him at length. I have since bought his book and am currently working through it.

I participated in five presentations at the 2011 JALT national, four of which were connected to learner autonomy. The first was titled "Examining Learner Autonomy Dimensions" from the project described in the third section of this article. The second was titled "The 24 Hour English Challenge". In this project we asked students to volunteer to use English all day on a non-school day. Originally, the idea was for students to individually try a variety of autonomous activities but in collaboration. It evolved into groups of students interacting in English in the community while completing fun tasks. This worked well and was very satisfying when students recreated the idea themselves without direct teacher input (but as invited participants). The third presentation was entitled "Using Google Docs in the Writing Classroom". This was mainly an introductory presentation describing for teachers on how to use the Google Docs tool. However, the focus of the activities was on groups of students working autonomously on writing projects collaboratively on line. The last presentation was titled "Developing an Audience for ESL Writers", which looked at using the Internet to create spaces for students to create real meaningful content that others want to read and in turn motivate students to learn more.

Future

My main project next year is how to create an audience on the Internet for student work. Students react positively to an appreciative audience for their efforts. With the development of the Internet and social media, this has become easier than ever before. I'd like to start a blog, YouTube channel and Facebook page where students write about what interests them about Japan in English and attract people around the world who are interested in Japan.

A second project is an English Speakers' club. Students from various universities would meet to do fun activities in English only. Students often express a need to find social situations to use their English and meet others who want to

do the same.

References

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Reflection on the *JALT 2011 Conference* JALT 2011 の感想

National Memorial Olympics Center, Yoyogi, Tokyo, November 18th – 21st, 2011
国立オリンピック記念 青少年総合センター、2011年11月18日〜21日

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Were anyone to conduct a genre analysis of ELT conference reports, they would doubtless arrive at the conclusion that conferences are unremittingly sunny affairs, and presentations always professional, thought-provoking and engaging. But of course the reality is not quite the same. Conference-going, like any other activity, has its fair share of frustrations and disappointments. It's just that these aspects of the experience rarely seem to make it as far as the reports, and with good reason considering the huge amount of volunteer work that goes into organising a conference on the scale of JALT National. It seems almost inconceivable to report on a conference in anything less than glowing terms, as if to mention a negative experience is in some way a criticism of the conference as a whole. Even though this is most emphatically not the case, it is thus with some trepidation that I must report that my two days in Yoyogi included both ups and downs.

Despite the risk of living up to the common stereotype of the British as being obsessed with the weather, it would be difficult to write a balanced report on this year's conference without mentioning the torrential rain which persisted throughout the whole of the first day. I wish I had been able to ignore the effect of the downpour which set in when I was in the middle of Meiji-jingu, having foolishly decided that a walk across the park from Harajuku would be a more pleasant way to get to the site than attempting to change trains at the intimidatingly complex (to a non-Tokyoite at least) Shinjuku station. Sadly though, that would require a more phlegmatic character than that which I possess. Needless to say, arriving soaking wet was not a good start to the day, and with events split between three buildings drying out was never more than temporary. This combination of bad luck and my own bad judgment led me to reflect upon how these two factors can impact upon the conference-going experience.

A more predictable, but equally unavoidable problem, relates to scheduling. While one of the great advantages of a conference the size of JALT National is that there will almost certainly be a presentation appealing to your interests at any particular time, the downside of this is that there will often be more than one. Thus, when deciding on my first presentation of the day during my shinkansen journey from Kyoto, I was faced with the dilemma (trilemma, perhaps?) of choosing between three presentations which, for very different reasons, appealed to me roughly equally. Greg Sholdt's Featured Speaker Workshop - Getting started with quantitative research, sounded just the kind of thing I needed to help me with my current research, in which I am looking at ways teachers can encourage learners to make self-directed revisions to their writing, rather than relying on teacher feedback. Yet on the other hand, I really wanted to hear Marcos Benevides introducing his new series of graded readers, based on the *Choose your own adventure series* I enjoyed as a child. As next year I will be starting a new job at a university with a well-established extensive reading programme, I was especially interested in discovering whether the ELT version of the series had managed to retain the atmosphere of suspense and reader involvement I recall from my own reading.