Talking to Naoko Aoki 青木直子に聞く

Naoko Aoki is a professor at the Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University. Originally a teacher of Japanese as a second language (JSL), she is now a JSL teacher educator. She was a founding joint-coordinator of the Learner Development SIG and is one of the coeditors of Mapping the Terrain of Learner Autonomy *published by Tampere University Press in 2009. She is also currently one of the three convenors of AILA's Research Network for Learner Autonomy.*

As Naoko is one of the keynote speakers at the LD SIG 20th Anniversary Conference in November this year, Alison asked her to talk about her involvement in learner autonomy past, present and future.

Alison: Naoko, how did you come to be interested in learner autonomy?

Naoko: I'm a child of the 60s. I was too young to join the students' movement but grew up in that atmosphere. I read Ivan Illich just out of curiosity a bit later. I didn't know this was going to be an important publication in my future career.

After I started teaching Japanese and when I was doing my MA at Sophia University, I started reading Christopher Brumfit and he briefly mentioned learner autonomy and the work of Illich. So I went back to it then and I was amazed. That's how I got interested.

A: *So are these the main influences on your thinking?*

N: When I was a novice teacher, I was attracted to humanistic psychology and humanistic approaches to language teaching, so Carl Rogers in general education and Earl Stevick in language teaching had a great influence on me. What I like about Stevick's thinking is that he considers both sides of learning: the cognitive and the affective. I think of learning as three-dimensional: cognitive, affective and social. In terms of the social, I found Adrian Holliday's book, *Appropriate Methodology in Social Context* to be very fascinating. And as far as teacher autonomy is concerned, of course, reading Clandinin and Connelly's work on Narrative Inquiry was an important turning point for me.
A: *Could you explain why?*

TEACHER AUTONOMY AND NARRATIVE
N: People often say that in order to foster learner autonomy in your students, you have to be autonomous as a teacher. And for teachers to develop autonomy they should be engaged in research of some form or other. I was skeptical about the idea, but I wasn't able to pin down the reason for a long time. Then I

read Clandinin and Connelly, who say that a teacher's professional knowledge is in narrative. People tend to assume that research needs to be paradigmatic; cutting up data, counting and categorizing. Narrative isn't like that. So you have to learn to tell stories and understand teachers' practice as stories. For some people, including myself, who like to summarize things and turn things into abstract propositions, it's really a challenge.

A: *So how does that relate to autonomy?*

N: So if teacher autonomy is to allow teacher to do things in their own way, then they should be allowed to think in their own way. If you expect teachers to talk and write in a paradigmatic way, that would be against their autonomy.

A: *But Clandinin and Connelly claim that teachers tell different kinds of stories, don't they?*

N: That's right. Teachers tell three different kinds of stories: secret, sacred, and cover stories. Teachers tell secret stories about their practice in a safe place. The other two stories are not really about their practice in the classroom. Cover stories are for defending against outside pressures; sacred stories are kind of unconscious assumptions about good teaching and good teachers.

For example, in Japan many people believe that teachers should know everything and should

be able to answer all questions. Some teachers believe it so completely that when they face a difficult question, they just put on this face and tell students something totally ungrounded. Helping teachers to become aware of those sacred stories and get over them, hopefully, helps improve the quality of life for teachers.

A: *It's interesting that you mention "quality of life"; it's a term that I associate specifically with Exploratory Practice. So do you think that narrative inquiry is a kind of Exploratory Practice?*

N: Well, yes and no. EP recommends to integrate the exploration into usual teaching and learning activities and not to do any extra work for EP, doesn't it? Fully fledged Narrative Inquiry involves a lot of extra work. In that respect they are different. But a small scale Narrative Inquiry and EP may be similar in that they improve quality of classroom life in a way or other, I think.

Anyway teacher autonomy should mean allowing teachers to tell secret stories of their practice.

A: *I'm interested that you start with teacher autonomy rather than learner autonomy.*

N: I didn't start with teacher autonomy. I have to think about it because I'm employed as a teacher educator. But I've always been concerned with learner autonomy.

A: *Could you talk about that and about how you came to found the Learner Development SIG?*

STARTING THE LD SIG

N: When Richard approached me and suggested coordinating a new SIG, I thought it was a great idea. I'd been teaching Japanese more than 10 years then, but as I had a lot of English speaking friends, I heard a lot of negative things about the Japanese classes they attended. Normally, teachers don't hear this kind of stories. I heard them because these people were my friends.

Richard was making a newsletter *Learner to Learner*, basically learners writing for other learners, and I thought that was fascinating, learners taking matters into their own hands. I wanted to support that. For me the beginning was learners, not teachers, doing something to make learner autonomy possible. So that was the beginning. Then I started thinking about what I could do to encourage my students to become more autonomous.

A: *Was Learner to Learner in existence before the SIG? Was it part of JALT's activity?*

N: Richard and a couple of his friends were doing it on their own. Richard wanted a forum for the publication, so that was why he wanted a SIG.

A: *So what was it that made the SIG distinctive at that time?*

N: At that time we already had quite a few SIGs in JALT, about a dozen maybe, and each SIG was working on their topic hard so the only two things in which we were different were that we were bilingual and that we had a huge committee. At the time we had nearly 20 people on our committee. So that was probably the main difference.

It meant that many people in the SIG were very involved. I think that's important. The way I originally got involved in JALT, going back to your earlier question, my first ever job teaching Japanese, was in a small Japanese department of a large language school. This school had a generous plan that if teachers did a JALT conference they would pay the conference fee.

So I went, and it was like Disneyland! Interesting workshops, all those famous people, lots of books! I loved it! So I kept going back each year. I went to mini conferences as well, and that's how I met people like Virginia LoCastro and Michael Rost. They gave me jobs, like organizing a colloquium or editing a special issue of *The Language Teacher*. I translated part of Mike's book, too. That kind of thing. It was important for me to come to know Virginia and Mike and to learn from them.

I don't think I was aware of this connection then, though. We needed people. If we had a party, the more the merrier. I don't know what

it is like now, but at that time, we needed a certain number of members to be recognized as a SIG. So we started talking to people and asked would you like to be on the committee. Then we got involved in organizing a JALT Tokyo's mini conference, if I remember correctly, and tried to reach out to more people. From the very beginning we were trying to include as many people as possible.

A: *It's interesting that those original aims seem to have carried through to the present day. But there have been some key changes, probably the most striking one being that it's not bilingual any more. What do you think about that?*

N: Well, trying to be bilingual takes a lot of time. Translating the newsletter takes up a lot of space. Also, there are many Japanese speakers who can speak English, but not so many English speakers who can speak Japanese. So the burden tends to be on the Japanese speakers. If you don't have any one who is willing to take on that responsibility then it would be very difficult to keep the bilingual policy. So you really need a sense of mission. Of course, you can say there's no reason to be bilingual, since everyone speaks English. That's true, but being able to participate in Japanese gives more members opportunities to do so. Some people may not be so confident. Others may not have the time to read and write long e-mail messages in English, for example. The speed is one of the last obstacles for non-native speakers, you

know. So you really have to commit yourself to the value of bilingualism.

A: *I think that is an ongoing debate within the SIG. And it's probably a good thing to keep the debate alive. But let me move on now to the field of Learner Autonomy in which you have played, and continue to play an important role. How have you seen the field change in the last 20 years?*

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR LEARNER AUTONOMY

N: It has changed both quantitatively and qualitatively. As you know, quantitatively, it has expanded geographically. Now teachers in China, for example, talk about learner autonomy: that's geographical expansion. And also the idea got into mainstream education. As a result, we have more books with learner autonomy in their titles and numerous journal articles.

Qualitatively, 20 years ago you could argue that learner autonomy was a western idea and it wasn't appropriate in Japan or Asia. But nowadays, we have a more nuanced understanding. It's not just national cultures, but different factors that influence whether one particular learner will or will not be autonomous. I think people writing language learning histories, like Leena Karlsson in Finland, don't necessarily use the term learner autonomy in their writing, but it's very much related.

We stopped seeing learners as a group and started seeing learners as individuals, and that's a good thing. Another change, thanks to David Little, is that we now think learner autonomy is not learner independence, but we look at how other people, significant others, influence one's learning. That's a difference, I think.

Also some people have started talking about environment, like Garold Murray and Terry Lamb, and that's a new development. Learner autonomy doesn't happen in a vacuum. First we considered the human context, and now they're considering the physical context.

A: *What directions would you like to see Learner Autonomy take in the future?*

N: This is just my preference and other people might have different ideas. I'm not claiming that this is the best way to go, but this is the way I'd be interested to see it develop. One thing is we really need to see life as a whole. Phil Benson has already started exploring the relationship between learner autonomy and personal autonomy. I totally agree with him. You want to learn a language to become someone and it's just part of your life.

A: *So do you see it as life-long learning or is it something more than that?*

N: I don't necessarily think of it in terms of learning. It's about achieving certain things in your life; it's about self-actualization. First of all, what are you learning this language for?

We tend to study our students. Practically that's a very realistic way of learning about learning, and we have to write about our students anyway for our accountability. But there is a whole range of non-student population who are learning languages, so someone has to talk to them and find out what they're doing. So that kind of expansion is another thing I'd like to see.

Apart from that, in the field of SLA, a lot of exciting things are happening now: complex systems, brain science in general, I'm hoping that Learner Autonomy will connect with those developments. Maybe these fields can explain why we need learner autonomy and how it works in language acquisition. So that is something I'd like to see.

Recently, I've been thinking, when we talk about learner autonomy, we think of planning and doing and reflecting, in other words, we think of this very rational way of doing things. So we have this portfolio, for example, and ask students to fill it in. But probably there are intuitive and messy kinds of learner autonomy. I still don't know how to study it, but I think, maybe in the future, we will have some different view of learner autonomy.

MUTUALITY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

I have a doctoral student who studies tandem learning and, with her help, we started this tandem learning project at Osaka University, in which we ask students to keep a journal. We pair up international students and local students and they help each other to learn their partner's language. It operates on the principle of reciprocity and learner autonomy. This is an extra-curricular activity, so we suggest a way of doing it, keeping journals, but they're not obliged to follow this. Maybe more than half the participants don't keep them. According to the questionnaire we administered at the end of the term, they have all the reasons not to keep journal, but all the same, they say they enjoy tandem learning and they are learning a lot of things.

I have another tandem project for students who are taking my course. They pair up with students of Japanese in other countries, like Singapore, Malaysia, the UK and New Zealand. These students need credits so if I tell them to keep a diary, they do. But in the extra-curricular programme, they say diaries don't help, so they didn't keep them.

A: *That's interesting! So comparing the two tandem groups, do you notice anything different between them in terms of the quantity or quality of learning?*

N: Quantity of learning, how do you measure it? You could do pre- and post-test learning, but that's not nice. This is not an experiment.

Let me tell you about one student who had this idea about the superiority of native speakers. She was paired up with someone of the same age, who started to tell her about some problem, and the student was able to give some advice. She counseled the native speaker and that gave her a lot of confidence. Native speakers are people just like her. There's no reason to feel intimidated in talking with them. I think this is quite an achievement, but you can't measure that.

If you think of CEFR descriptions, confidence is part of your ability. So, comparing these two groups in terms of the amount of language they learned doesn't make sense to me. According to the students in both groups, they enjoyed tandem learning and they learned important things. Whether they keep a diary or not, they learn. This is one of the experiences that have made me suspect the existence of this messy kind of learner autonomy.

Learning is social. In tandem, you're learning at the same time as your partner, so you can't really drop out. If you drop out, you deprive your partner of the opportunity to learn, so you have a mutual commitment which develops into joy, into pleasure and into sense of achievement and feeling of self-efficacy. The magic of tandem learning is, probably, taking responsibility for someone else. You take care of someone and they take care of you. So it's reciprocal, it's give-and-take. It's, in a sense, a support structure for learning. And it may be

this structure that makes the messy learner autonomy possible, but this is just my speculation.

Editor's note:

A big thanks to Alison for arranging the interview and Naoko for her thought provoking answers. We are certainly looking forward to Naoko's presentation at the 20th Anniversary LD SIG conference in November. For more details of the conference, please either visit the website:<www.ldsigconference2013.org> or see the conference's "Call for Contributions" in the "Looking forward section" of this issue.

Also speaking at the conference is- Richard Smith (who co-founded the LD SIG with Naoko), as well as, Kensaku Yoshida, who has a wealth of experience of language education in Japan. Both will be interviewed next issue but for now, here are their short introductions as a taster.

Richard Smith ・リチャード スミス

Richard founded the JALT Learner Development SIG in 1993 with Naoko Aoki when he was a lecturer at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. He had been writing self-study materials for learning Japanese (Japanese – Language and People, published by the BBC in 1992) and originally came to learner development and learner autonomy that way, via reflection on his own learning of languages. He developed his ideas about pedagogy for autonomy through teaching English in Japan during the 1990s, but in 2000 moved back to the UK to start work at the University of Warwick, where the notion of 'teacher-learner autonomy' and a belief in the value of supporting teachers to engage in contextually relevant, collaborative practitioner research have increasingly informed his practice as a teacher educator and research supervisor. Richard is now the coordinator of IATEFL's Research SIG and co-convenor with Alice Chik and Naoko Aoki of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy.

リチャードは東京外国語大学で講師として教えていた1993年に、青木直子と共同で学習者ディベロプメント研究部会を 設立しました。彼は日本語学習のための自主学習教材（『Japanese – Language and People』BBC、1992）を出版しており、そこから、また自身の言語学習の内省を通して、学習者ディベロプメントと学習者オートノミーについて考 えるようになりました。彼は1990年代に日本で英語を教えていた経験を通してオートノミーを育成するための教授法についての自身の考えを発展させましたが、2000年にイギリスに帰国し、ウォーリック大学で教鞭を取り始めました。そして、そこで「教師—学習者オートノミー」という概念と、教師たちがそれ ぞれのコンテクストに関連した共同の実践研究に従事するのを支援していくことの重要性に対する信念が、教師教育者および研究指導教員としての彼の実践にま すます

多くの見識を与えるようになりました。現在、リチャードはIATEFLのResearch SIGのコーディネーター、および、アリス・チクと青木直子と共にAILA のResearch Network on Learner Autonomyの執行役員を務めています。

Kensaku Yoshida ・吉田 研作

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上智大学言語教育研究センター教授。言語教育研究センター長。外国語能力向上に関する検討会座長、ＳＥＬHiの研究開発に関する企画評価会議協力 者、中央教育審議会外国語専門部会委員、The International Research Foundation for English Language Education 理事、Asia TEFL 理事、NPO小学校英語指導者認定協議会理事、国土交通省航空英語能力証明審査会会長、他．『現場で使える教室英語—重要表現から授業への展開まで』（監 修、三修社、2011）,『英語教育政策—世界の言語教育政策論をめぐって』（共著、大修館、2011）、『ベーシック　プログレッシヴ英和・和英辞典』（監修、小学館、2010）、『外国語研究の現在と未来』（監修、Sophia University Press、2010）、「小学校英語はじめてセット」（監修、アルク、2009）、「起きてから寝るまで英語表現７００」（監修、アルク、2009）、『21年度から取り組む小学校英語—全面実施までにこれだけは』（編著、教育開発研究所, 2008）、『新しい英語教育へのチャレンジ』（公文, 2003）、『日本語を活かした英語の授業』（共著、大修館, 2003）、他多数。