Learner Autonomy:
A Question of Motivation

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Since beginning teaching at universities in Japan about 7 years ago, my teaching practices and research interests have been deeply influenced by the concepts of motivation and autonomy. Early on, what was actually a cynical comment from a slightly jaded veteran (but very effective educator) became an invaluable piece of advice and has guided me ever since: "If someone wants to learn something, they will; if they don't they won't." It became clear to me that the most effective practice and best use of my time and effort was not to make people learn, but to make people want to learn. Since then, I have found the key to developing autonomous learners, is to identify motivation (or lack of) and build upon that together with the learners.

Currently, I work at three universities in the Tokyo area. These teaching situations are extremely different, and they each challenge me to build upon the students' motivation in different ways. At two of the universities where I teach, my primary responsibility is compulsory first year English classes, which are prevalent at universities all over Japan. Of course, ability levels and general interest in learning English vary greatly across classes and individuals. On the first day of class, I always include an activity in which students identify their goals for the semester. After writing down their goals, these are passed around the class. Students then write advice for other students to realise their goals. Every semester, the most common goals are to "receive all credits" and to "make friends".

So, in conducting these classes and attempting to foster development of the learners, I keep these two motivating factors in mind. First is the practical desire to pass the class and receive compulsory credits. For this purpose I encourage and integrate learning techniques such as vocabulary notebooks, self-evaluations and student generated practice tests. Secondly, I seek to motivate students through the social aspects of second language classes. The more they are able to express themselves in the class, the more likely they will be able to connect with other students and form friendships.

Last year, I suddenly found myself teaching in a very different educational context. I was asked by a colleague to teach IELTS and TOEFL exam preparation classes at a top tier university. Although the general English ability, study experience and motivation levels are generally very high, there are of course a multitude of differences across the individuals. Also, the students' motivation is not always as simple as improving their scores on the test. While many students had already taken or were planning to take either the IELTS or the TOEFL, many were taking the class to improve/maintain their current level of English without any intention of taking either of these exams.

To build upon the motivation of the students and help the students to develop independent study methods that will be useful beyond this particular course of study, I use the first classes for simulation tests. Then, in the following class, students analyse their performance on the test by section and question type. Next, they select from a number of self-access homework assignments to be submitted online and develop a self-study plan based on their weaknesses and goals. Students then complete these homework assignments over the course of the semester. This enables students to personalise their study, study when and where they are able, and to focus on their own goals, whether these are specific to a certain test or more general. In the near future I hope to publish an action research article about using these student-selected homework assignments to improve individual scores on the TOEFL.

As an educator I have found that by identifying and utilising the key of motivation, I can help students to develop self-awareness and independence as language learners. Whether the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, everyone is in the classroom for a reason. Considering the factor of motivation informs my approach to learner development and my own development as a teacher.