

## Students Interacting in the “Flow”



**Darin Schneider**

*Tokai University, Hiratsuka*

Email:

[schneiderdarin@yahoo.com](mailto:schneiderdarin@yahoo.com)

When I look back on my ten years of teaching EFL to Japanese learners of English, there was a light-bulb moment that became a benchmark in my teaching approach early on. It happened when I was an ALT teaching a lesson to Japanese elementary learners. The students began an activity that I had set up and they became so engaged in the activity that I do not think they realized they were even learning English. It was amazing to watch. The kids were having so much fun. I thought: “Wow! This is what I want to reach for every time I teach English.” Second Language Acquisition (SLA) psychologists and experts such as Csikszentmihalyi (1997) call this “*flow*”, and it can occur when learners are in an optimal state of immersion during an intrinsically motivating task.

That day I developed as a teacher because I became aware of what is possible. I learned that with an engaging activity and a bit of motivation, English language learners (ELLs) who might not initially be interested in learning English could enjoy learning. Even if some ELLs are not interested in external rewards such as getting a good grade, I think it is possible to ignite their intrinsic motivation by tapping into their curiosity and interests. The “*flow*” can happen if the task triggers students’ curiosity and they can perform it successfully on their own. An important dimension of intrinsic motivation is a coexistence of self-competency and autonomy among the learners (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is because learners have a basic human psychological need to feel they can complete a new social task with competence and without any perceived outside aid. Teachers can evoke and support intrinsic motivation, crucial in cognitive, social, and physical development, with positive performance feedback (ibid: 58-59).

In my present work, I am teaching elective and required English courses at university to first- and second-year students. My students are comprised mainly of Japanese students with a few other nationalities mixed in (i.e., Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Saudi). I have a few students each semester that are majoring in English or tourism. However, most students have majors that run the gamut and they do not see the importance of learning English in their field of study. Many do not have a direct (or indirect) interest in learning English. I believe if they had a choice to learn English or not, they would choose not to. Unfortunately, many do not foresee the importance of English within their fields of study. I often find myself trying to enlighten them on the potential benefits of being able to use English in their future careers, but many fail to picture themselves in these situations. Perhaps activating enough of their intrinsic motivation will build up their confidence so they can see themselves utilizing English.

In the required English courses, there is often a lack of English language learners (ELLs) who already possess the intrinsic desire to learn English. Therefore, the goal of helping ELLs become absorbed in their learning of English is a challenge. It is an especially tall order when you have to balance curriculum requirements that may not be ‘stimulating’ with teaching methods and techniques that are more appealing. But it is a challenge I enjoy. As long as the new material is at the right level, I try to create a safe and motivating learning environment that can bring forth “*flow*” in the classroom.

One activity that comes to mind is an activity called “Profiles”. As a part of Profiles, students think of a question they want to ask their classmates and then physically move around the room and find out their classmates’ answers. In the mean time, they also get to answer questions. Since the students in the class are at the same English level, the questions are usually comprehensible and the activity builds upon their curiosity of getting to know their classmates. Students are motivated to discover new facts about their classmates. As Krashen (1985) asserts in his “*i + 1*” formula, the task must be at the right amount of difficulty (comprehension) for the

student to want to pursue interaction. The right combination of task difficulty and motivation can help bring about “flow.”

Overall, I have an interest in finding out what works best for student learners. Recently, the relatively new field of language priming has peaked my interest. In terms of language acquisition, general language priming can be defined as, “... the phenomenon in which prior exposure to language somehow influences subsequent language processing, which may occur in the form of recognition or production.” (McDonough & Trofimovich, 2011, p. 1). There are many more specific kinds of priming, such as phonological priming, morphological priming, and lexical priming. There has been a lot of research on these types of priming, but little on the effects of priming used before assessments. I would like to investigate what I call “pre-assessment priming.” I often wonder how priming done just prior to a speaking assessment, influences students’ speaking performance on a test. In particular, I would like to investigate the differences in performance and production in students that have a warm-up period before a speaking test versus those that do not. It is another exciting challenge I plan to pursue in helping students develop their English capabilities and may serve as an additional way to get students in the “flow.” As a language educator and learner, what does “flow” mean to you, and what experiences have you had as a teacher or learner that you remember for their “flow”?

## References

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London: Longman.
- McDonough, K., & Trofimovich, P. (2011). *Using priming methods in second language research*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54-67

## Mimicry: The Straightest Path to Mastery



**Trevor Raichura**

Himeji Dokkyo University

Email: [trevor.raichura@gmail.com](mailto:trevor.raichura@gmail.com)

Despite the common theory that native-like pronunciation of a second language is highly unlikely after age 10, I have (so I’m told) managed to achieve a near-native Japanese pronunciation. I didn’t start learning until I came to Japan when I was 23. Perhaps my mastery of Japanese pronunciation was aided by previous experience with learning a second language, though. From age 5 to 15, I attended a French Immersion school in Winnipeg, Canada. Surely my mind benefited from the flexibility required to process sounds from two languages at a young age. Coming to Japan as an adult with no knowledge of the language other than a few greetings, I found one key secret to pronunciation that, in retrospect, had helped me when I was learning French, too.

Textbooks can help with grammatical structures and vocabulary, but often do not help learners sound like genuine speakers of the target language. Upon arrival in Japan, I had ample time to pore over my textbook to learn how the language worked. But as is common with such publications, the phrases in the textbook are seldom heard from native speakers. My keen sense of observation, both of people around me and those on television, helped me to bridge the gap between textbook and person. Then came the fun part: mimicry and practice.

Within my first month in Japan, I was making a conscious effort to adopt the speech mannerisms of my colleagues at the school and board of education. When do they pause? What are their common speech dysfluencies? What vowel sounds get reduced? What suffixes are used? What does intonation sound like on the sentence level? After hearing enough patterns, it was time to practice them in the privacy of my home. And practice I did, for hours on end. Watching recorded television shows (particularly variety programs)

multiple times also helped me improve my cadence and use of trendy phrases.

Come to think of it, I did the same thing (to a lesser degree, and in a way that only a child can) when learning French. By the time I went to Quebec at age 20 for a summer study program, I had local instructors convinced I had spent significant time there. (I hadn't.) Perhaps accents and pronunciation are innate gifts, but I could not have reached the levels I did without working at it.

I believe it was a combination of intuition, effort, and a fearless spirit (not worrying about sounding weird or making mistakes) that helped me achieve a native-like Japanese pronunciation. Perhaps not everyone can put in the amount of time I did, but extra awareness of the gap between textbook language and local jargon, and setting aside ample time to practice mimicking native speakers, can go a long way towards improving pronunciation and language ability.



## Knowing about Autonomy

**Dominic G. Edsall**



*Lecturer, Sojo University, Kumamoto; doctoral student, University College London, Institute of Education, London, UK*

Email: dominic.edsall@me.com

**E**pistemology. It isn't very often that we talk about epistemology in language teaching. I had to look up the pronunciation nearly a year ago when I first started working with this word meaning a theory of knowledge. For many language teachers, theories of knowledge begin with the ideas of explicit and implicit knowledge learned in a TESOL or CELTA class, and often end with staged debates between students respectively assigned to represent either side of the qualitative or quantitative debate in a graduate student course. For the most part, we don't need to worry about what knowledge is or is not - we just need to get our students to perform in the target

language in certain prescribed ways depending on what level they are deemed to be,

what goal they are striving for, and often what methods are expected in our classes. Teacher accountability, or rather its modern administrative interpretations, often leaves teachers with little time to worry about how we are imparting knowledge even if we have some choice about what knowledge to impart. So why bother worrying about a theory of knowledge?

Well, if you have read this far, past at least two repetitions of the word epistemology (now three), then you probably already know that knowledge and the traces of theories of knowledge can be found in everything we do as language instructors and teachers. Those debates between quantitative and qualitative "sides" have delineated the boundaries of education for a long time. Many of us are evaluated through somewhat quantitative end-of-semester surveys - surveys that may define the beginning and end of our employers' knowledge of our classes and us as educators.

Many LD SIG members will have attended research workshops, talked in hushed tones about closed versus open interview questions, surveys, SPSS, coding, NVivo<sup>2</sup>, and maybe R<sup>3</sup>, and most are likely to have cursed Excel under their breath more than a few times. Both the education we give and the education we receive revolves around knowledge, and many of us are required to prove how fresh our knowledge of SLA is through long lists of research papers and detailed answers to interview questions. Yet we never really have time or opportunity to think about knowledge itself in the wider pedagogical sense.

So what got me thinking about epistemology? Autonomy. Not my autonomy, but the autonomy of my students. Some have argued that the concept of autonomy is a western concept misapplied to collectivist Asian cultures (see for example Holliday, 2003; Oxford, 2008; Schmenk, 2005) like that in Japan: autonomy is thus limited to learner training. Yet, over the last decade, I have seen Japanese EFL students display a large amount of individual and collective agency by simply choosing autonomously not to do

<sup>2</sup> Software used to code qualitative data.

<sup>3</sup> A programming language used in data modeling and statistical analysis.

homework, not to speak in class, or refuse to engage with lessons; these observations are not limited to just my students either.

Notably, this negative autonomy does not fit with Holec's (1979/1981) often cited definition of a constructivist autonomy, where "objective, universal knowledge is ... replaced by subjective, individual knowledge" (Holec, 1979/1981, p. 21) in pursuit of positive learning outcomes. It must be noted that Holec's definition came out of work with adult learners who had already taken the decision to engage positively with language education (Smith, 2008). In the Japanese context, our students obviously have some knowledge to base any decision to engage positively or negatively with education, because on the whole it appears to be a conscious decision and not a reflexive habit or some psychological problem. As teachers, we should not rush to label a student decision as irrational or a random choice just because it contradicts our own opinion. Obviously, I'm excluding here very young students or those with special needs who may not have developed any autonomy. The question remains as to what knowledge of language learner autonomy students have that influences their decision to engage positively (or not) with learning tasks and activities. The fact that knowledge and theories of knowledge are always lurking in the background allows us to examine autonomy from the viewpoint of epistemology.

However, few have questioned the definition of autonomy from a knowledge theories viewpoint. Holec's definition is itself actually based on an earlier definition by Schwartz<sup>4</sup> (Holec, 1979/1981, p. 3; Schwartz, 1973). It takes a highly constructivist stance where students can literally (not just figuratively) create their own reality. Holec notes that autonomy and self-directed learning mean that the learner must construct and control the contents of learning without external mediation through personal discovery (Holec, 1979/1981, p. 13) and that there is no objective language – just their own personally constructed idiolect; that language can only be theoretically defined beyond the individual (*ibid.*, p.21). Ironically, a lot of recent research in autonomy

using Holec's definition is based in cognitive or positivist approaches to knowledge from the other side of this divide, where quantitative statistics is the main research tool used to define language within an objective reality (see for example Akbari, Pilot, & Simons, 2015; Ting, 2015). Mixed methods research very rarely does anything to address the split between approaches, and most SLA research mirrors this divide; however, there have been moves to suggest a bridging of this gap between cognitive and social approaches with several recent proposals, for example, by the Douglas Fir Group (2016) and Toth and Davin (2016). From the social approach, the Douglas Fir Group argues that SLA has been too narrowly defined by the legacy of linguistics and psychology and that a more holistic approach is required. In parallel, Toth and Davin make the cognitive case for a meeting of minds in a social world. Yet, educational sociologists from mainstream education got there first with critical realist (see Scott & Bhaskar, 2015) and social realist approaches to knowledge (see for example Moore & Young, 2010) attempting to bridge the qualitative and quantitative divide separating such cognitive and social approaches. Critical realism and social realism are related modern schools of thought in the social sciences, with critical realism being derived from Bhaskar's philosophy of science (see Bhaskar, 2008), and social realism being a later extension of critical realism dealing with social phenomena (see for example Maton & Moore, 2010). Both offer ways of combining qualitative and quantitative knowledge with that being one of the specific aims of the more philosophical critical realism, while social realism attempts to go further with a more specific focus on the social production of knowledge, particularly within the field of education. Thus, we have more than one possible epistemology to re-examine student autonomy, and in a somewhat roundabout way, I have the basis for doing my doctoral research into teacher negotiation of student autonomy in Japan.

## References

- Akbari, E., Pilot, A., & Simons, P. R. J. (2015). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in foreign language learning through Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48, 126-134.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of social science*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Holec cites Schwartz's work as being from 1977, but he appears to be referring to a publication that first appeared in 1973.



- Douglas Fir Group, T. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(S1), 19-47.
- Holec, H. (1979) *Autonomie et apprentissage des langues étrangères*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Janus Book Pub / Alemany Press.
- Holliday, A. (2003). Social autonomy: Addressing the dangers of culturism in TESOL. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures* (pp. 110-126). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maton, K., & Moore, R. (2010). Introduction: A coalition of minds. In K. Maton & R. Moore (Eds.), *Social realism, knowledge and the sociology of education* (pp. 1-13). London: Bloomsbury.
- Moore, R., & Young, M. (2010). Reconceptualizing knowledge and the curriculum in the sociology of education In K. Maton & R. Moore (Eds.), *Social realism, knowledge and the sociology of education: Coalitions of the mind* (pp. 14-34). London: Bloomsbury.
- Oxford, R. L. (2008). Hero with a thousand faces: Learner autonomy, learning strategies and learning tactics in independent language learning. In S. Hurd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Language learning strategies in independent settings* (pp. 25-41). New York: Multilingual Matters.
- Schmenk, B. (2005). Globalizing learner autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(1), 107-118.
- Schwartz, B. (1973). *L'éducation demain* [Education tomorrow]. A study of the European Cultural Foundation. Amsterdam: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Scott, D., & Bhaskar, R. (2015). *A theory of education, enlightenment, and universal self-realisation*. London: Springer.
- Smith, R. (2008). Learner autonomy. *ELT Journal*, 62(4), 395-397.
- Ting, Y.-L. (2015). Tapping into students' digital literacy and designing negotiated learning to promote learner autonomy. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 26, 25-32.
- Toth, P. D., & Davin, K. J. (2016). The sociocognitive imperative of L2 pedagogy. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(S1), 148-168.

**LEARNING LEARNING** is a forum for your voices and opinions. If you would like to comment or respond to articles or information presented in any issue of **LEARNING LEARNING**, please feel free to submit to a forum by going to **LD FORUM** or going to <http://ld-sig.org/talking-points/> or by sending an email to [learninglearning.editor@gmail.com](mailto:learninglearning.editor@gmail.com) We are looking forward to hearing from you!