

How Can I Be Myself? The Life Story of a Language Learner from Korea

韓国人留学生のライフストーリーに見る日本語話者としての私探し



Yoshio Nakai 中井 好男
Doshisha University 同志社大学

Email: yonakai@mail.doshisha.ac.jp

This presentation in the Learner Development Forum at JALT 2016 explored the learner autonomy of a Korean overseas student in Japan by using life story interviews. The story I introduced in the forum focused on the learning experiences of a 19-year-old Korean overseas student, Kim (pseudonym), who came to Japan in 2015 after graduating from high school in Korea and who has since been studying at a university in the Kansai area. Kim started learning Japanese as a second language in high school and studied it for three years. In the final year at high school, having decided to study abroad in Japan, he took the entrance exam for a university in Japan. At university, Kim was one of two students in my Japanese language class. As I got to know Kim, I decided to ask for his cooperation as a research participant in a life-story study because I saw specific changes in his behavior, such as his becoming more talkative, friendly, and relaxed in the class over one year.

My goal was to situate and interpret the development of Kim's learner autonomy in the social contexts in which he took part. Following Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), research on learner autonomy has been largely conducted and discussed from the meta-cognitive, psychological aspect. Other researchers have revealed how learner autonomy is influenced by the learner's emotion, learning space, and social environment (Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; Nakai, 2016). Learner autonomy leads to the development of second language proficiency, which contributes to achieving a higher degree of personal autonomy because it enhances a second language user's agency (Aoki, 2009).

In my own research I have done three time-scale case studies of Japanese language learners in different contexts to understand learning processes in home countries, learning experiences in Japan, and life experiences in Japan using Japanese as a second language (Nakai, Ou, & Wakisaka, in press). The research reveals that for those who learn Japanese, learning often occurs when trying to build a relationship with people such as learning partners, classmates, and individuals they want to interact with. This indicates the construction of "social identity" (Riley, 2007, pp. 122-123) that the individual realizes by relating to others through Japanese in the different communities/sub-groups/social networks they are part of (or wish to be part of). Learner autonomy is fostered and constrained by many kinds of factors surrounding learners, so we need to investigate not only learning processes, but also the whole social context surrounding learners.

In this short reflective paper, written from an ecological perspective (Palfreyman, 2014), learner autonomy is defined as socially mediated agency (Toohey & Norton, 2003) involving authorship of one's actions and one's own words (van Lier, 2004) relating to social identity.

Research Context

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person remembers about his or her history and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by the researcher. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime (Atkinson, 2002).

Seeing learner autonomy as socially mediated agency to achieve authorship of one's actions, voice, and an enhanced second language life, my aim was to use life story interviews to better understand:

- what the Japanese language and language learning mean to Kim;
- how Kim develops his learner autonomy but is constrained in Japanese society;
- how the development of Kim's learner autonomy is socially mediated and involves authoring his own actions to construct a second language identity.

I interviewed Kim three times between November 2015 and January 2016, audio-recording and transcribing each interview. In the first interview, I focused on his learning experiences to understand how his learner autonomy was situated in different social contexts. In the second and third interviews, I showed him the life story I had written and explored further with Kim his perspectives on this reconstructed biographical narrative.

Interpreting Kim's Life Story

The first part of Kim's life story shows how he feels himself to be different from the person he used to be in Korea.

“What is learning Japanese to me?”

I started learning Japanese in high school because I wanted to learn social welfare in Japan where it has developed most among Asian countries, and I will not need to worry about discrimination against Asian people. I loved learning it in high school. My Japanese language proficiency is not enough, but I can often make up for it by using a dictionary and the internet. Now I'm living in Japan and have a chance to talk Japanese with members of my club and sometimes with some girls in order to look for a girlfriend. Hahaha, I need these kinds of language lessons. Because now I'm feeling something weird when talking Japanese. It is definitely different between who I am now and who I used to be in Korea. I am originally very naughty and have a sharp tongue in Korean. I thought I was such a funny guy. I can communicate with everyone in Japanese, but how I talk in Japanese sounds too serious to me now. I feel really strange. I have no difficulties to live my life here, such as buying something. I think that it is more important for me to be able to express myself even in Japanese.

The meanings of Japanese language and learning changed for Kim after coming to Japan. He learned Japanese as a tool to enter university when he was a high school student, but after coming to Japan, the Japanese language became a tool to steer school life in the direction he wanted it to go. Living in Japan, he found that he couldn't realize what he wanted to do with the Japanese he had learned in high school. Because of this, learning came to mean acquiring Japanese phrases to express himself. In my class Kim became very talkative, funny, and entertaining as time went by, but he also thought of himself as a serious person speaking Japanese and wanted to become more of who he really is. His Japanese proficiency was high, but he was missing something to express his true self.

In the second extract from his life story Kim reveals how he tried to develop his learner autonomy in order to fill this gap, but was constrained in specific interactions that he faced in his expanding social world.

“Why can’t I say ‘No’?”

This faculty staff offered me one Japanese tutor who supports my school life. He was almost the same age as me, and was very friendly so I felt I was able to be me, and open up to him. One day, he took me to his friend’s house, I thought we would have a party something like that, but it was a kind of religious meeting. After that he became persistent in inviting me to some events related to international affairs. I guess these events also had something to do with his religion. I know it is my fault that I haven’t been say “No” to him. I can say “No” in Korea without any hesitation. But in Japanese, I can’t help thinking saying “No” is rude because I learned it from language teachers. I tried to refuse invitations by saying “ちよつと...,” but it doesn’t work at all and he kept inviting me to events I don’t want to go to. If I don’t need to take care of our relationship, I can refuse his invitation by using various Japanese expressions which may sound rude to him.

What Kim’s story shows here is that he tried to create networks in Japan by taking advantage of the opportunity to have a Japanese tutor, but this failed against his will. Through talking with him, I came to understand from his angry face and voice that he felt betrayed by his tutor. To make matters worse, Kim couldn’t say “No” to his tutor’s invitations although he actually knew many expressions to do so in Japanese (and he knew how to do so without hesitating in Korean). According to Kim, this was because he felt strongly affected by Japanese language education practices and textbooks which teach learners not to deny directly but use “ちよつと” to refuse someone’s invitation to avoid face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In fact, I have seen many textbooks recommending learners use ambiguous expressions to refuse indirectly. Japanese language teachers are likely to teach learners the sociolinguistic norms where indistinct expressions are preferred to clearly declining an invitation from a person with low intimacy. Kim was restricted by the simplistic nature of textbooks, as well as by the institutional relationship with his university-assigned tutor. This made him hold back his feelings of wanting to express himself. In this case, Kim’s tutor kept inviting him by using the Line messaging app after a first invitation, and Kim chose to ignore his messages to overcome these barriers. Their stilted relationship caused him to avoid building networks with others. Here, Kim’s learning experiences and knowledge of Japanese language norms prevented him from acting.

The next episode from Kim’s life story reveals what he has been doing and trying to do to become who he wants to be by using Japanese language through adapting to complicated social situations.

“Why can’t I be a university student as I imagined?”

Before I came here, I had an image of myself as a university student. Like my friends in Korea, I wanted to not only study but also lead an exciting campus life. I have played the guitar for many years, so I thought it is good for me to make friends who have the same hobby as me. That’s why I participate in the music club and play music in a band. We have good relationships and can enjoy only playing music itself but I still feel something empty. There are many Japanese students on this campus and almost all of them are engaged in playing some sports because they are in a faculty related to sports. I am not this kind of person and find it difficult to make friends here. Now I often go out with my Korean friend in Japan. Living in Japan means nothing if I spend time with Koreans. I don’t want to

have any relationship with Koreans here, but I expect to make my network outside of uni with his tutor because he is an outgoing person and knows so many expressions to pick up girls... I want to enjoy school life in Japan like Japanese students as I watched them on TV in Korea. To do this, I think I need to develop contacts to know how students talk in Japanese relating to my concerns.

This extract shows how the affordance of space influenced Kim's actions. He didn't expect this atmosphere at university, and it is different from what he wanted to be part of. He joined a music club and made networks outside of university to become the university student whom he wished to be. In other words, he exercised his agency to realize his social identity as his imagined self in Japan.

“Changing classroom into his space where he can be himself”

We have only two language lessons a week at this university. Here, I can meet my classmate from overseas and the language teacher. I feel like that this class is only the place we communicate naturally. We, students and teacher, are very close, so I can say anything I want. No one denies me. This is my space where I can feel safe and come out of my shell. I talked nonsense and asked how to say something in Japanese and how to act with people in Japan. I really enjoyed this, which made me feel that I was myself.

In this short episode from his life story, Kim seemed to feel safer in the language class than the music club. He enjoyed the music club, but didn't have his own place as he described it as “empty” in the previous extract. This might be because classroom interaction differs from interaction in the music club, where there is a classmate who can understand him and relate to him as an overseas student. “No one denies me” indicates the importance that Kim attaches to having his own place, even in a good relationship with others.

According to my observations in the Japanese language class, Kim really behaved innocently without affectation as a result of being treated as a younger brother by his Chinese female classmate. It is conceivable that the reason why he describes the relationship with the club members as good but empty is that he probably tried to be on his best behavior in the music club in the same way that he had done near the start of the language course. In my teaching I had emphasized a positive relationship with learners in my class and invested a lot of time in having dialogue with them; at the same time I taught them Japanese following a curriculum that aimed at the improvement of their performance in Japanese. This was because I had found it unpleasant to be judged only by exams by teachers when I was a student. I believe that language is a tool of communication. It develops through real communication and affects people's relationships. Talking with his classmate and me in the classroom may have allowed Kim to find that over time in the language class he could be his true self. This let him make good use of the language class to learn how to express his true self.

Discussion

From his life story, learning Japanese for Kim means finding a way to have his own voice in constructing and using appropriate utterances or “speech genres” (Bakhtin, 1986) to achieve his intentions. He joined the music club to play music and get acquainted with people he could talk with about music in Japanese. Apart from that, Kim tried to find a Japanese girlfriend with the help of a Korean friend of his who had lived in Japan longer than him, even though he didn't want to have any Korean friends in Japan. In this way, he autonomously got acquainted with people, learning and using Japanese to imbue it with

his own intentions to construct a range of social identities (Riley, 2007) to be himself. He also had the opportunity to develop his voice in the dialogic environment of the classes that he took with me and his peer international student from China.

Learner autonomy is exercised in a complex adaptive system that can acknowledge the mutual constitution of social and historical contexts and individuals as a complex system (Sade, 2014). A complex system continually evolves internally and affects the environment, in that it is composed of interdependent components and sub-systems which continually interact with each other (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008). Kim's learning has occurred in the context of a complex system that includes the people and the environment of the university, such as his tutor, a Korean friend, the members of the music club, and the sports-oriented atmosphere of the university. In this context, Kim tried to realize his imagined social identity. However, as his case indicates, not all factors always help him to foster learner autonomy and construct his social identities for himself. For example, he kept a good relationship with his tutor whom he expected to support him, but his tutor couldn't help Kim in his life in Japan. As another example, Kim's learning experiences prevented him from refusing directly even though he knew the expressions to refuse in Japanese. These conflicts led him to generate further actions on his part to adapt to the new environment around him. Thus, the complex adaptive system consists of factors that are related in non-linear ways and are not in simple cause-and-effect relationships. In such a system, events and phenomena are not simply understandable and predictable; rather, factors collaboratively create their functions and dynamically generate themselves. Kim is autonomously searching for possibilities to realize his imagined self as a university student in Japan through trial and error. His learner autonomy helps him adapt to the constraints of the ever-changing environment that he is situated in.

Continuing Puzzles

Kim's life story suggests that he needs to acquire his own voice to construct his social identities, and that this is just as necessary as learning content, resources, and language knowledge. Kim also needs learner autonomy in pursuit of his own voice, which fosters language learning and helps to situate himself in L2 society.

From Kim's story, the following questions arise: *What is learner autonomy?* and *What should language teachers do?* Following Nakai, Ou and Wakisaka's (in press) claim that learner autonomy is shaped and developed by social relationships, learner autonomy can be seen as a metacognitive ability for learning language to construct identity through adapting to ever-changing social situations. In order to foster learner autonomy, it is important for teachers to support learning itself through learning content and learning processes; it is also necessary to focus on the language proficiency that learners need in their living world beyond the boundaries of the classroom, as the classroom is an enclosed place disconnected from the social environment.

From this discussion, we can see that learner autonomy generates language learning to construct social identity in a complex adaptive system. Meanwhile, teaching might be also affected and generated in this system as well because the teacher is also one of the factors in the learner's social context. Thus, it can be said that the practice of learning and teaching are mutually interdependent phenomena related to the environment in which learners and teachers are involved. The people who support learners as one factor in a complex adaptive system need to listen to their narratives and try to bear them in mind when teaching language that will enable them to get the second language identity that they really want.

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Reader Response to “How Can I Be Myself? The Life Story of a Language Learner from Korea”



Yukari Rutson-Griffiths
Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University

In this article, Yoshio Nakai explores how one language learner tries to find his own voice in the social groups he is a part of or wishes to be a part of and to uncover the roles of learner autonomy in the process. Although more focus now has been paid to learners or learning itself, more practical studies on what successful language acquisition takes and how learner autonomy contributes to it from learners' perspectives are yet to be seen. What interested me in this article was that it gave insight to those questions with a real-life example by looking at Kim's case both inside and outside the classroom setting. In particular, it attempted to place the development of learner autonomy within those social contexts by taking the learner's social network and perspectives of the world around him into account.

Conducting three life story interviews, Yoshio showed how a Japanese language learner, Kim, sought ways to become his true self within the surrounding social contexts and eventually found a place (i.e., Japanese language class) to realize it. For any teacher, it is rewarding to see positive changes in students and their success in language learning. Ideally, we want to see more learners like Kim succeed, so investing in uncovering the “secrets” behind the scenes is worthwhile.

Following Yoshio's interviews and his interpretation of the student's account, however, I was left with a further question. The realization of both autonomy and identity is complex in nature. Examining Kim's situation within a complex adaptive system, Yoshio explains how small factors such as one's own experiences (e.g., instruction given by teachers) or the surrounding environment (e.g., a sports-oriented university) can influence one's actions (e.g., declining invitations to events, trying to make friends with the same hobby, and creating a network outside university) and at the same time create other situations for one to adapt to and take actions in. Voice is something Kim is struggling to find in these complex contexts, but is essential for realizing his ideal self. Kim becomes closer to his true self in his Japanese class but not anywhere else, and this can be interpreted as indicating that acquisition of voice can happen at different paces depending on the social space (e.g., class, club, relationship with a tutor). If so, how do learners like Kim develop learner autonomy and find their voice outside class?

One possible way to find answers to this question is to conduct longitudinal studies as they allow teachers and researchers to observe how learner autonomy develops or stagnates over time and to examine to what extent learner autonomy contributes to the acquisition of voice—and ultimately to successful language learning. It is remarkable that Kim opened himself up in his class in just one academic year, but it would also be interesting to see how a learner's growing repertoire of voices gradually goes beyond such limited spaces over the course of a few years. As individual learners take different courses, one case may be arguably different from another. More case studies

like this would provide a holistic view of voice acquisition, which would be valuable for the growing body of learner autonomy research, as well as informative for language learners who could learn from the exemplary paths taken by different individuals.

Lastly, as a learning advisor who provides students with one-on-one consultation sessions about their language learning, it was interesting for me to see the deep level of reflective dialogues in the interviews that Yoshio conducted. The stories that Kim told entail his exploring his beliefs and experiences. Yoshio also presented his interpretation of the stories to check his understanding, and this, I believe, led to Kim's further reflection. Extended reflective dialogues are what learning advisors use to foster learner autonomy, and in agreeing with Yoshio's last remark "[t]he people who support learners... need to listen to their narratives and try to bear them in mind when teaching language..." I do also hope more learners' stories are heard in this attentive manner for the learners themselves and for us as educators to learn more about our learners.

Reader Response to "How Can I Be Myself? The Life Story of a Language Learner from Korea"



Huw Davies
Kanda University of International Studies

I am very happy to respond to Yoshio's short reflective article. On first reading there seemed to be nothing for me to say, with my own views on autonomy closely matching Yoshio's. The story he tells seems to give credible answers to the questions he leaves us with ("What is learner autonomy?" and "What should language teachers do?"). However, in looking at how Yoshio answers these two questions, I hope I can add some fitting insights that will link theoretical perspectives connected to autonomy with demands learners may experience on a practical level.

Before thinking about what autonomy signifies in the field of language teaching, it is worthwhile considering why it is important in education in general. Brighouse (2006) has suggested that autonomy is essential for a productive and worthwhile life, and that it should be fostered by the education system:

The deeper principle is the idea that education should aim at enabling people to lead flourishing lives, and the argument that education should facilitate autonomy depends on the idea that autonomy plays an important role in enabling people to leave flourishing lives. (p. 15)

Autonomy is a state in which people are able to flourish, to live a valuable life they identify with. In the context of language education, being able to flourish means being able to communicate and express oneself in the target language in order to do something personally meaningful. Therefore, a key concern for language educators is for their students to each develop their own voice. Voice can only flourish in a social environment. According to Brighouse (2006), "Individuals do not flourish separately from others; their interests are

bound up with those of other people, and their reflection takes place within a given social context" (pp. 19-20). As Yoshio suggests, learner autonomy develops in a complex system, where language learners such as Kim negotiate their place and identity with other people. Developing one's voice is therefore not a linear process, but is a struggle that requires support, self-awareness and reflection.

If language learner autonomy is viewed as the development of voice, then one role of language educators is to provide a safe space in which learners can develop their own voices. Students need to be given the freedom to experiment, and need professional support to help them reflect on the learning process and their personal development. Yoshio highlights dialogue as being central to his approach to promoting learner autonomy in his class, and dialogue offers opportunity for both experimentation and reflection.

It is worth pointing out that the alternative to dialogue is a one-way "narrative" from the teacher (Freire, 1996), which is epitomized by the "Why can't I say no?" section in this short reflective article. Kim is unable express his agency having been trained not to say "No" by his previous textbooks and teachers. Having followed similar Japanese courses myself, I can fully understand Kim's frustrations. Classroom practices that promote learning through dialogue are beneficial in two ways: they situate the linguistic content in a context which is relevant for the learner, and they create an arena where deeper self-reflection by the students can be encouraged. To facilitate the development of voice the classroom should be both personalized and social.

What is striking about the voice that Kim develops during this study is that it sounds different than what he had expected: It is "too serious" and at odds with who he feels he is or who he wants to be. The gap between Kim's self-image and ideal self is something that would be worth exploring further, to see if the two converge as Kim develops as a Japanese user. What makes this area even more fascinating is the disparity between Kim's self-image and Yoshio's observations, where Kim is seen as "very talkative, funny, and entertaining." I am sure both interpretations of Kim are entirely valid, but reading this again makes me want to dialogue with my students about their self-image and how they are perceived by others. The views and voices of others profoundly help learners to co-construct their own voices and identities.

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