Part 2: Inquiry into language learners

# Guest writer


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### About Chitose

I work in the English Department of Foreign Language Faculty at Dokkyo University, Japan, where I teach English and TEFL methodology courses. My recent research interests include teacher education and the discourse of education policy change.

私は、獨協大学外国語学部英語学科で英語と教科教育法関連コースを教えています。教員教育、教育政策を最近の研究のテーマとしています。

The profession has come a long way toward understanding that language learning produces more desirable effects when learner autonomy is actively pursued. Now the challenge for language teachers is to develop learner autonomy in more effective ways and to figure out what kind of roles teachers and students should play in developing this learner autonomy. The first six papers in MAYA examine teachers' and learners' beliefs about autonomous learning and explore ways of building a more collaborative learning environment and making learners more aware that they are responsible for their own learning, both inside and outside the classroom.

Ellen Head reports on a study using an open-ended survey to investigate university students' views on learner autonomy and certain recent changes in Japan's education system. Looking back over the history of educational reforms in Japan, Head expresses the concern that there is a gap between the top-down suggestions made by the Ministry of Education, seemingly encouraging learner autonomy by implementing *yutori-kyoiku* (education without cramming) for example, and the realities of the classrooms and "the stakeholders at grassroots – teachers and students." Based on the survey she conducted with university students of English, Head concluded that many of the participants have built a positive self-image of being autonomous, though their beliefs of autonomy appear to be strongly influenced by their teachers' beliefs and teaching methods; additionally, their beliefs seem to be critical of Japan's present educational situation, which does not necessarily encourage them to become autonomous.

While Head examines the learners' beliefs about learner autonomy and the educational system, the next five papers focused on collaborative learning tasks and environments in the classroom.

First, Matthew Apple presents the results of his research, examining how learners develop autonomy through in-class strategy training in a listening class, and keeping an extensive listening portfolio. The qualitative data of students' reflection essays and in-depth interviews, which were drawn from 13 weeks of classroom discourse, show how learners benefited from strategy training, particularly in goal-setting. For many of the participants, choosing and altering goals and strategies on their own to suit their interests and abilities was challenging, but rewarding. Those who were successful in setting and altering goals and strategies became more responsible for their own learning and sought more opportunities to engage in English learning, from inside to outside the classroom, as well as from controlled to less controlled and more independent tasks.

Etsuko Shimo demonstrates how collaborative shadowing activities can be the first step toward creating an interactive and collaborative learning environment. Shimo explains that collaborative shadowing is easily conducted in classrooms and can foster active interaction among students. Learners can also benefit from shadowing in that they are immersed in the repetition of the same information, leading to increased comprehension levels. Thus, learners become more relaxed, confident, and eager to learn the language. By providing small scaffoldings of shadowing activities for learners, teachers can create a more interactive learning environment, eventually leading to collaborative and autonomous learning.

Even assessment can be used as a tool to promote learner autonomy. Yoko Wakui presents a framework that integrates self- and peer-assessment in developing students' presentation skills and their learner autonomy. University students are asked to plan by deciding on the topics of their presentations or partners with whom to work, and they assess their performances afterwards: their own and that of their peers. Wakui suggests that both self- and peer-assessments allow students to raise their awareness of how important it is to be a responsible learner and to build rapport among learners themselves.

Mark Surma and Miyuki Usuki also demonstrate how to improve students' oral presentation skills while reducing their stage fright. Fourteen postgraduate students with different nationalities participated in this semester-long course. The weekly program was conducted in order to build up their English proficiency, starting with various factors related to public speaking, such as giving feedback, overcoming stage fright, or using non-verbal strategies, and progressing to giving presentations. The participants were also asked to reflect on their learning each week in writing. Their reflections reveal that as the course progressed, the students' level of nervousness about public speaking decreased while the degree of their collaboration in working together increased.

In the sixth study, Marlen Elliot Harrison presents an approach to student-centered testing. While Wakui used the techniques of self- and peer-evaluation in order to improve learners' presentation skills, Harrison developed an approach of using a test creation process as a motivator for students to learn. By having students design and create their own tests in groups, Harrison indicates that teachers and students can negotiate power relations in terms of who assesses whom, and students can take more responsibility for their own learning. Harrison also found that this approach resulted in a decrease in students' performance anxiety, similar to what Surma and Usuki concluded in their study.

As Kohonen points out (1992), autonomy is developed by interacting with others, and not by doing things without the help of or interaction with others, because autonomy includes the "notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways" (p.19). Thus, learner autonomy can be best promoted in groups that provide rapport, feedback, confidence, and learning opportunities to one another as the studies in these six chapters indicate.