Part 1: Learner autonomy in Japan, past and present

Learner autonomy and education reform in Japan: Asking the students

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About Ellen

I have taught English in Japan since 2000, and at Poole Gakuin University since 2005. In my research I am interested in how the microcosm – autonomy within the individual – relates to the macrocosm – autonomy in society.

日本で2000年から、プール学院大学で2005年から英語を教えています。個人的オートノミーとしてのミクロコズムが、社会的オートノミーとしてのマクロコズムにどう関連するか、という研究テーマに関心を抱いています。

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ABSTRACT

Japanese Government policy since the late 1980s has increasingly come to articulate the need to find ways of developing students' creativity, independence, and individuality. The policy of yutori kyouiku, or "relaxed education," brought about a reduction in the school week and was supposed to give young people time for broader experience of life and learning, as opposed to the exam-focused curriculum of former years. However, many criticized yutori as giving too much freedom. More recently, various other reforms have been implemented, particularly in relation to English language education. However, there has been little consultation with students or teachers during the process of reform. Starting from the premise that the right to be listened to is a pre-requisite for developing autonomy, I decided to investigate a sample of students' views on issues related to independent learning and autonomy. In this chapter I will present a brief historical survey of the concept of learner autonomy in Japan, followed by a detailed look at the results of a survey of over 100 university students about their views on developing independent learning.

日本政府の教育政策は、1980年代後半からますます学生の創造性·自主性·個性を高める必要性に言及するようになった。ゆとり教育政策、つまり「リラックスした教育」は、授業日数の削減と以前の受験中心のカリキュラムに反し、若者に広い人生経験と学習の時間を与えるものと考えられた。しかし、ゆとりが自由を与えすぎているという批判の声が多くあがった。様々な特に英語教育に関連するさらなる改革が、近年になって施行された。しかし、改革の過程で、学生や教員の助言はほとんど求められなかった。話を聞いてもらう権利が、オートノミーの育成のための必要条件であるという前提に基づき、私は自主学習と自律に関する論争について、学生の見解の実例を調査することにした。本章では、まず日本における学習者自律の概念の簡潔な歴史的概観を提示し、その後100人を超える大学生に自主学習に関する意見を求めたアンケートの結果を詳細に分析する。

> *The most unusual thing about this school... was the lessons themselves...At the beginning of the first period the teacher made a list of all the...questions to be studied in the subjects that day. Then she would say "Now, start with any of these you like." ...So study was mostly independent, with pupils free to go and consult the teacher when necessary. (Kuroyanagi, 1996, pp.56-7).*

> *I have been processed only as a piece of data and numbered... I think that children don't look as if they are thinking much but actually they are thinking about many things by themselves. (First Year Student, Japanese University).*

Madogiwa no Toto chan (The Little Girl at the Window) is the story of an alternative school, Tomoe Gakuen, which was established in Japan in 1937. Kuroyanagi Tetsuko, a former pupil of the school, offers us a fascinating picture of a school where students were encouraged to develop skills for independent learning. In Kuroyanagi's account the classroom has the

potential to be a place of liberation and a cauldron for social and spiritual development. This school was not unique in the Taisho era (1912-26). According to Okano and Tsuchiya, Tomoe Gakuen was just one of a number of schools influenced by the libertarian ideas of the "New Education" movement:

> ...the proponents of New Education (*Shin Kyouiku*) ...urged schools to respect children's individual characters, initiative and creative capacities...Besides numerous existing schools that adopted the New Education approach, experimental private schools were established by individuals such as Masatarou Sawayanagi (Seijou School in 1917) and Motoko Hani (Jiyuu Gakuen in 1921) (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, p.23).

The reader may object that Tomoe Gakuen was a private elementary school and as such is not to be compared with state secondary schools which are the subject of the second quotation, and she would have a point. Tomoe Gakuen is introduced here simply to remind us that there is an alternative to the "processing" kind of education described by the student in the second quotation.

The rhetoric of the Japanese education ministry espouses the view that school should be a place for developing individuality and creativity. The 1998 University Council Report states that:

> Higher education must emphasize the cultivation of the "ability to pursue one's own ends". That is the "ability to independently respond to changes, voluntarily seek a future theme and judge the theme flexibly and comprehensively with a broad view". Cultivation of such ability should be based upon the elementary and secondary education that aims at cultivating the "ability to learn and think independently" (MEXT, 1998).

The Japanese government is engaged in on-going reforms of the education system. The pace of reform has gained in intensity particularly since the 2002 Strategic Plan to Create Japanese Speakers with English Abilities. What is the background to the plan? What will be its consequences?

One factor which is relatively little discussed is the opinions of the young people who will be the next generation of parents and teachers. In this paper I will explore education policy in Japan through a unique lens: the views of university students of English. To put the students' opinions in context, I will first outline the history of education reform since the Meiji era, and look briefly at some of the problems which have made reform seem urgent. I will then explain the methodology and context of the survey which I have carried out with the assistance of three other teachers. Since the interweaving processes of education, personal development and institutional reform are complex, dynamic and on-going, there will not be much in the way of a "conclusion." The focus will be on what kind of understanding of autonomy is revealed by the students surveyed, and how they view the education system in which they have developed. I hope that readers will accept the data (i.e. the students' words) as a catalyst to their own thinking and conversations with students and colleagues.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO EDUCATION REFORM IN JAPAN

In Japanese history, we can find signs of tension between those who think that education should be for the individual, and those who think it should be for the state or for society, as far back as the Meiji era. If we take a look at the 1872 Education Law (*Gakusei*) we can see that the

government at that time embraced both nationalistic and individualistic rhetoric. The 1872 law set out the idea that schools would play a role in creating a "rich nation and strong army" (*fukoku kyouhei*) and "increase in production and founding of industries" (*shokusan kougyou*). It seems something of a paradox that the new education system was also supposed to do the following:

1) Eliminate feudalistic barriers and open educational opportunities to all citizens.
2) Consider the individual's success in life and enlightenment as the goals of study and education (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, p.15).

Inoue Tetsujiro, commenting on the education law in 1899, explains it in the following way:

> Each person *(kakuji)* is one element of a nation *(kokumin)* and the nation is made up of each person. Individual and nation are indivisibly bound (Inoue cited in Tanaka, 2004, p.185).

The ultimate purpose of the law may have been to create a strong country, but the process also had an impact in terms of spreading Western ideas about developmental education.

Schools used American textbooks translated into Japanese, and foreign experts were employed as advisors and teachers. In the period between 1872 and 1939, the pendulum swung back and forth several times between forms of schooling that emphasized duty to society, and forms that emphasized the cultivation of individuality (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, pp.13-24). It seems to me important that when we look at teacher and learner autonomy in Japan today, there is at least a possibility of discovering continuity with pro-autonomy attitudes in the past. Linicome (1995) writes of the influence of American developmental education on Japanese educationists in the Meiji era. Following Linicome's analysis, Aspinall comments as follows:

> Developmental education...did not die out altogether because of its usefulness in assisting in the creation of good classroom practice...when the Americans arrived in Japan in 1945 there was already in existence a legacy of educational doctrine very similar to their own. Indeed, Linicome argues that the 1947 passing of the Fundamental Law of Education represented the transformation of developmental education from heterodoxy to orthodoxy (Aspinall, 2001, p.23).

Education was seen by the Occupation authorities as the key to building a democratic state. Hence the new education law emphasized respect for the child's individuality, equal opportunities, the need for social education, and teacher autonomy in conducting their classes. A few years after the implementation of the Fundamental Law of Education, the Japanese government reasserted control over school textbooks and over schools through local Boards of Education. In the 1950s and 60s, education focused on creating a productive state and "catching up" with the West.

Education reform became a key issue due to the rise of social problems such as assaults on teachers, bullying, and absenteeism during the early 1980s (Hood, 2001, pp.150-157). Although such incidents were still relatively rare compared to other countries such as the United States, they attracted a lot of media attention as a phenomenon previously unknown in Japan. It was suggested that the focus on rote memorization was making school stressful and irrelevant to the lives of many pupils. A school survey in 2000 showed that the percentage of students who said they could "mostly understand" their lessons was less than half, and the number decreased as students progressed through the system, from 48.2% in elementary school, to 39.5% in junior high school and 33.9% in senior high school (Hood, 2001, p.131).

Yasuhiro Nakasone, Prime Minister from1983-7, initiated changes which resulted in 1992 in the shortening of the school week and in the adoption of so-called "relaxed education" (*yutori kyouiku*) as the official policy for state schools. The word *yutori* means something like "room to breathe." It is sometimes associated with "integrated study" (*sougouteki gakushu*), a period in the curriculum devoted to experiences such as listening to a speaker from outside school, or doing voluntary work. *Yutori* was intended to produce a change from a teaching style that favoured memorization, to one that encouraged exploration and discussion (*Monbusho*, 1995, cited in Hood, 2001, p.124). Since this style is more time-consuming, curriculum content was reduced for all levels in the curriculum cycle from 1985-1994, and again from 1998-2003. One can see how *yutori kyouiku* might, in theory, encourage learner autonomy, by giving students time to deduce principles or rules for themselves rather than requiring them to memorize an overwhelming amount of content.

However, there were two problems; first, as many teachers had not been trained to teach in a style appropriate to deductive learning, many were not able to change their methods. Second, students were still being assessed by tests which generally focused on rote memorization, and so there was pressure for teachers to spend class time on preparation for tests. So perhaps it was not surprising that the reforms did not achieve success immediately. Tests of 450,000 elementary and junior high pupils in 2004 showed a slight improvement in some skill areas. The percentage of students who said they liked studying rose from previous years (for example, 45.3% of fifth grade primary students liked studying, a rise of 5.5%). There was, however, one area in which children's skills had supposedly declined; writing essay questions in their mother tongue. ("No Sign of academic decline seen in tests", *The Daily Yomiuri*, 2005). However, *yutori kyouiku* has been blamed in the press for the lower levels of attainment by Japanese students on international tests such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, in which Japanese 15-year-olds ranked fourteenth for reading skills in their mother tongue, and sixth for mathematics in 2004, compared with eighth for reading and second for mathematics in 2000 (*Mainichi Daily News*, 2004). Recently both the public and politicians have called for a return to "basics" in education. While politicians such as the previous Minister of Education, Noriyama Noriaki maintains that *yutori kyouiku* was not a mistake (*Asahi Shinbun*, 2005), it seems likely that a return to "basics" will imply a more traditional, less libertarian approach. Education reform in Japan is at a key juncture at the present time, 2006. Since the general election victory by the reigning Liberal Democratic Party in September 2005, the government proposes to revise the Fundamental Law of Education, and has the majority to carry through changes which would have been impossible at any other period since 1947. Changes are likely to focus on increasing the control, particularly in the area of moral education.

So far I have described three main periods of reform: the first; the modernizing wave in the Meiji era, the second; the supposedly meritocratic system created in the wake of the American Occupation, and the third; Nakasone's efforts at reform, which are connected to the present reforms by ideology and even by personnel, since the previous minister of Education, Kosaka Kenji, was Nakasone's secretary in 1986.

PROBLEMS IN THE JAPANESE EDUCATION SYSTEM?

It is time to take a closer look at the problems of the education system. In *The Japanese High School: Silence and resistance*, Yoneyama argues that bullying and school-refusal are related to a lack of autonomy in the lives of both students and teachers. Yoneyama draws her evidence in part from two volumes of writings by children who have a history of school refusal, which she calls *toukoukyohi* children. Their writings were gathered and published by an educational

psychologist, Ishikawa *et al.* in 1993. The writings show clearly how their experience of school is an experience of autonomy deprivation for some students:

- The principal is the king
- The deputy is the minister
- Teachers are soldiers
- The boss in the class is the village head and we are commoners.
- We cannot decide anything.
  (Fukuhara, in Ishikawa et. al, 1993, p.287, cited in Yoneyama, 1999, p.61).

This student has a dramatic way of articulating his experience but his feelings are echoed by many others in Yoneyama's study. Yoneyama's other evidence is from a comparative survey of high school students in Japan and Australia. In response to the statement "Teachers treat me with respect," 50% of the 500 Japanese students replied "Never," as opposed to 12% in Australia. In response to "It is easy to discuss problems with a teacher," 72% responded "Never" in Japan, as against 22% in Australia. This is in sharp contrast to the warm teacher-student relationships observed by others such as Le Tendre (1996). Yoneyama suggests that while the majority of teachers are caring and make great efforts to be fair:

> Teachers work in a structure that leaves little room for autonomy, with the consequence that their role often becomes merely that of "regulation enforcement agents" (Yoneyama, 1999, p.168).

Yoneyama is one of the most outspoken critics of the education system. What is fascinating about her work is that she insists on giving a voice to young people who have actually experienced Japanese schools. Some might argue that she foregrounds those whose experiences have been problematic. Nevertheless, her conclusions are disturbing. This is particularly so when we relate her ideas to current theories about autonomy and language learning. According to Little (2004), the development of autonomy is closely related to, if not a prerequisite for, the development of communication skills.

> ... autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin (the communicative dimension) (Little, 2004).

In other words, having autonomy involves becoming able to say what one wants to say; having the opportunity to speak (and be heard) is part of the process of coming to know and own the words of a language. Although much effort has been put into reforming English language education in terms of training personnel, developing curricula, textbooks and tests, there seems to be a gap between the ideals expressed at the top of the system and the experienced realities at the bottom.

ASKING THE STUDENTS

Why a survey of teachers' and students' opinions about learner autonomy?

We can see that there is a degree of conflict between the policies outlined in the 2002 Strategic Action Plan and the Vision for Universities in the Twenty-First Century, and the situation in schools and universities as criticized by authors such as Yoneyama.

It therefore seems worthwhile to investigate the views of the stakeholders at grassroots – teachers and students. Many foreign teachers are skeptical about the action plan, yet it is uncontestable that there are pockets of change – of which the present volume represents

one. Government investment in projects like "Super English High Schools" and teacher training programs, collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), suggest that the future is hopeful for English education and maybe for learner autonomy, too. However, the views of Japanese students regarding their own autonomy have not received much attention. As Usuki & Murphey argue:

> ...learners need to have a place for speaking out and having their own opinions listened to... asking students to express their opinions about their autonomy might be a vital step in the process of building both autonomy and language skills (cited in Markova & Rogers, 2004, p.211).

Fauzia Shamim, a university professor of English in Pakistan, has pointed out that learners' resistance or acceptance of change is an important factor in implementing any innovation:

> The role of learners – perhaps because they have low status – is by and large ignored in planning and decision making concerning the introduction of an innovation... ...the vast majority of teacher training and orientation programmes in relation to learner training programme before an innovation is introduced suggest that learner acceptance of a proposed change is largely taken for granted (Shamim, cited in Coleman, 1996, p.110).

The opinions of those who are studying English at university in Japan now, some of whom have already decided that they want to be teachers, seem pertinent in terms both of giving a deeper understanding of the present, and of what shape the future might take.

METHODOLOGY

The format of an open-ended survey was chosen in order to encourage respondents to think of their own words and to obtain maximally diverse answers. The students' responses were then analyzed to see what patterns emerged. As a researcher I was interested in both the overall pattern of the responses and also the patterns within a single respondent's answers. An open-ended survey was therefore more suitable for my purposes than a multiple choice instrument or one with a Likert scale. The survey was carried out on a total of 117 students between October 2005 and March 2006. The first 40 surveyed were first-year students of English at a Japanese four-year women's university. The class teacher provided an oral explanation in Japanese, and most students wrote their answers in Japanese, taking a 90-minute class period. Most wrote just over a page, but several wrote two or even three pages. The results were translated into English and looked at to find the trends across the whole group, as well as the configurations within each individual student. It proved easy to find underlying patterns (for example, agreement/disagreement with a proposition such as "Tests are fair") which could be counted to give an overall proportion of students sharing similar views.[1] Where a student's answer was not clearly aligned with the others, it was left out of the tabulation, but included in the discussion. The same method was used to analyse answers taken from other groups later.

In January 2006, answers were obtained from another two classes taking a teacher's license course at the same women's university (60 in all, of whom 30 were in their second year and 30 in their third year). In addition, participants also included 12 students on a literature course and 5 students on an elementary school teacher's license course at two different four-year universities in western Japan. Five university teachers (two with experience in high schools) were also surveyed. The teachers' answers have not been included in the tallies of results

but were useful when thinking about the interpretation. All the students' responses were anonymous. The questionnaires were numbered so that the reader can see when the same respondent is quoted more than once.

Before looking at the students' responses, it may be helpful for the reader to have a glance at the questionnaire (see MAYA! website for Appendix2A). The questionnaire was designed to lead from "easy-to-answer, less personal/controversial" questions to "more personal/controversial" questions. In the discussion of the results below, I have generally followed the order of the questionnaire, but some questions elicited more detailed and interesting answers than others, so the discussion will concentrate on these. Occasionally students provided information in response to one question which was illuminating in the discussion of another. In such cases, the answers have sometimes been cited out of order.

Before undertaking the survey, I was expecting to find certain configurations within individual respondents' answer-sets. For example, it might make sense for a student who replied that Japanese students did not develop autonomy (question 1) to say that the teacher should take management decisions about the class (question 7). However this kind of configuration occurred rarely. Students also presented points of view that I had not thought of, such as the idea that it is not possible to encourage autonomy in school.

1. Do students subscribe to a stereotype of the "passive Japanese learner"?

Question 1. Do you think Japanese students develop independent learning skills? Why? (or why not?)					
Yes /It depends on person		Only a few develop independent learning skills		No	
Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other
33 (*Yes*: 20/ *Depends*: 13)	20	3	10	19	20
Total=53		Total=13		Total=39	

Question 1 was intended to see whether the respondents subscribed to a stereotyped view of "Japanese" students as passive and lacking in independence. There was a significant difference between the students on the secondary school teacher's license course and the others, with a higher proportion of the aspiring teachers seeing through the "trick" question and answering either "yes" or "it depends." One reason for this might be that these students have had a positive experience of education themselves. It is also likely that they were influenced by their teacher, the textbook, Murphey's *Language Hungry*[2] and the methodology she selected, which involved intensive group collaboration and presentations.

A few students mentioned that this was a time of crucial change:

1.85 Qu 1
[The education system] encourages it [independent learning] but it is not really rooted. This is an era of trial as to whether they can encourage it or not.

1.57 Qu 1

In education conversation is becoming more valued and the tradition of rote memorization of grammar is disappearing so there will be more people who like English and want to learn it independently.

Some seemed to equate the study of English with "autonomous /independent" learning:

1.46 Qu 1
I think they will [become independent learners] because whether you like it or not there will be more occasions where you have to speak and listen to English in the future. So English is going to be introduced at elementary level...

Many of the first-year students were positive about their own development of autonomy:

1.6 Qu 1
It's good to study from your own power. Then you do twice as much as if you just do what you are told.

1.12 Qu 1
...If you study your own way of studying I think it is more efficient to learn and if you find a good textbook or exam practice book, the effect is much greater. Then if you have questions you can ask the teacher. I think studying independently is the best way *(jibun de benkyo suru noga ichiban ii).*

Of those who answered "it depends," 13 said that if a student has their own dream or goal they will develop independent learning skills. Some, but not all, thought that they themselves were such people.

1.34 Qu 1
Japanese students are not autonomous learners. This may only be true for people only like me, since I don't have a goal or dream. If you have your goal, and will to study towards it, you are different.

Over a third said that it was difficult for Japanese students to develop independent learning skills for various reasons. Some placed the blame for this on the education system:

1.2 Qu 1
The roots of the modern education system are said to be in the Meiji era. Students should learn hard from great teachers they respect. This kind of idea started then. Now too, this attitude exists, so our learning becomes passive. Also the future is a cause of anxiety, so they don't want to study. The desire to study *(gakushuu iyoku)* is reduced. So many children don't want to learn.

2.4 Qu 1
At present elementary and junior high students have no idea of preparing (*yoshuu*). They are studying homework given by teachers. For that reason Junior High students don't develop the ability of being independent learners.

The word "passive" was mentioned by four students while another five talked about being forced to study. These replies recall the criticism of the system in Yoneyama's study of high schools discussed above.

A couple suggested that Japanese culture in the wider sense is inimical to autonomy.

1.25 Qu 1
Many Japanese students wouldn't do it by themselves. I think generally Japanese are too sensitive to the eyes of others or just to others. Only a few people will take the initiative by themselves *(sekkyokuteki ni yaro)*.

1.1 Qu 1
...We don't have a sense of being an individual but a strong sense of group-consciousness *(dantai ishiki)* meaning that if no one else is studying I won't study either.

2. What do students think makes someone decide to become more autonomous?

Students wrote about having goals, the influence of friends and parents, life-circumstances, and personality. Nine students wrote of feelings of interest, enjoyment or curiosity:

1.45 Qu 2
When you have a feeling of liking or enjoying something...the English literature class was a requirement and at first I didn't enjoy it, then I gradually understood and came to enjoy it. Then I started reading more books or listening to the lecture more seriously and taking notes.

One student who found studying could become a kind of "virtuous circle" of personal growth:

1.85 Qu 2
When you really felt your growth, it means when you were able to do what you couldn't do before, you understand what you didn't before, and feel pleasure, then you want to keep on trying your best. On the other hand, if you don't feel your growth, you start to hate it or feel like giving up.

Fear of being left behind, or feeling their lack of knowledge (*muchi*) compared to others, was a recurring pattern, mentioned by eight students:

1.48 Qu 2
When people around me are much better at English than me I get anxious and try to catch up. It's for myself, of course.

1.52 Qu 2
Friends' influence gets strong when I feel I don't want them to do better than me *(maketaku nai)* or I want to *be* that person [who is doing well]. Other than that, longing *(akogare)* for others, for example if that is the way to get closer to the person you're longing for, it would be a big chance.

Only three said that educational experiences made people autonomous, and of these, one seemed to equate autonomy with "doing any study at all":

1.59 Qu 2
As long as your study progresses you will have a better understanding of English and its

culture and it will make you want to be autonomous. But the real motivation is when you are cornered *(seppatsu matta)*. I'm talking about myself. For example, I have to do my presentation tomorrow... then I will study, but only in that situation.

One admitted that she was influenced by the questionnaire:

1.38 Qu2
After reading this sentence I decided to study independently.

3. Do students think the school system encourages pupils to make decisions for themselves?

Question 3: Does the Japanese school system encourage students to make decisions for themselves, about learning and/or about other things such as club activities?					
Yes, about elective subjects		Yes, about clubs		No	
Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other
14	7	6	16	28	20
Total= 21		Total=22		Total=48	

Two aspects emerged from the answers: the potential for students to make decisions about elective subjects, and club activities.

2. 11 Qu3
When I was an elementary, junior high and high school student I was crammed. But when I was a High School student we made decisions for ourselves in some events for example the culture festival, chorus competition and school trip.

Almost half the students felt they had been encouraged to make their own decisions about some aspects of school life. But others (six students) said that the process of decision-making was only apparently democratic:

1.81 Qu 3
People tend to see freedom but don't like to choose. The system on the surface seems to encourage freedom and choices, but inside it is nothing like that.

1.83 Qu 3
Not yet. The relationship of teachers exerting control on students still lingers. From my experience, students' requests or opinions will be considered only if convenient or easy to carry out, otherwise they will be excluded.

Many had a sense of being at the bottom of an oppressive hierarchy:

1.29 Qu 3
The Japanese education system consists of doing what you are told from above *(Ue kara iwareta koto suru dake de)*. "They" don't understand the present situation at all *(Genjo o nanimo wakate wa inai)*.

Group work, usually thought by teachers to foster autonomy, was said by this student to be negative for autonomy.

1.29 Qu 3
There is a lot of group work and that means the necessity of self-decision is decreased.

Elective subjects were not generally perceived as encouraging autonomy because after the initial choice of the subject, the course was dictated by the teachers.

2.6 Qu 4
The number of classes are increasing and that's a burden for students. *Yutori* means they think they don't have to learn independently. They choose electives and are not taking the initiative apart from that.

1.80 Qu 3
Legally [the system] encourages student-decision-making, but in reality it is not as intended. Even with electives, you have first come, first served, so you can't take your favourite teacher's classes.

4. What do students think of yutori kyouiku (relaxed education)?

The issue of *yutori kyouiku* provoked an outpouring of feeling, perhaps because this generation of students has experienced life "before and after" *yutori kyouiku* was introduced[3]. Even students who had little to say on other topics wrote several lines, some as much as half a page. Over 83% of the students' answers reflected negative opinions (in two cases apparently gained from a recent TV news item). At least 20 students linked *yutori kyouiku* with the drop in school standards *(gakuryoku teika)*.

Question 4: Now *yutori* education is being discussed a lot. Is it connected with independent learning? What do you think of *yutori kyouiku* Why?					
yutori kyouiku is good		*yutori kyouiku* may be good if implemented differently		*yutori kyouiku* is bad	
Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other
11	7	7	11	27	36
Total=18		Total=18		Total=63	

It is worth remembering that the term *yutori kyouiku* refers both to the reduction of the school week, and to the more relaxed teaching style which was supposed to result from the reduced learning targets, which were implemented from 1998-2002. Many of the students who viewed *yutori* negatively interpreted it as relating solely to the reduced school week. Many said that the *yutori* policy was not being implemented correctly. The following comment shows that some schools apparently did not reduce the targets in line with government guidelines:

1.72 Qu 4
Yutori kyouiku is misunderstood and is conducted in a misunderstood way. *(Machigatta yarikata de yutori no imi mo machigatte uketorarete ita)*... We have Saturday and Sunday off but more homework and even though the class time is cut, the content to be learned is not reduced...I had a hard time...high school used to be six classes a day but became seven classes a day. This proves that *yutori kyouiku* became simply

cramming *(tsumekomi kyouiku)*. Giving one day off then giving more homework is not an appropriate environment for telling students to find out what they want and study it on their own.

1.59 Qu 4
...It's the opposite of what *yutori kyouiku* is said to be. People tend to escape to the easier or more fun situation. The purpose of *yutori kyouiku* might be connected to independent learning but ...I don't think we are now following the principle of *yutori kyouiku*...When we had class on Saturdays, it was OK. We enjoyed life. Students will study when they are forced to study a bit *(chotto gurai yarasareteiru to iu kanji no hou ga benkyo wa suru mono da)*.

One student said that the reduced school week meant pupils were not getting psychological and pastoral support:

1.54 Qu 4
On the surface *(tatemaejou)* it is supposed to be related but I don't think *yutori* is a good system, personally. True, as we have two days off we can go to learn about society but in reality we play games... Not only that, we have more classes per day, so we have to study more. Also the psychological aspect of children should be covered *(kodomotachi no seishinteki na men mo cabaa shita ika nakereba nara nai)*.

One student pointed out that it was difficult to change the style of teaching and learning to which every one had become accustomed:

1.42 Qu 4
I think [*yutori*] is related [to independent study]. Because of *yutori*, scores got lower. This is because before the *yutori kyouiku* system, the relations of teacher and student were such that the teacher simply teaches, the student is just being taught. So changing this system suddenly to *yutori kyouiku* doesn't change the students' passive attitude *(ukemi no shisei)* to being taught, and students don't know how to learn of their own volition *(mizukara manabu)*.

Others mentioned that many students attended *juku* (cram schools) on weekends to supplement, which would make society unfair for those who couldn't afford *juku*.

1.34 Qu 4
...a part of the time previously spent at school is going to be spent at home and that time won't be spent on autonomous learning. To spend the time more effectively the student will go to *juku* then it will take more money than you needed before. So I think *yutori kyouiku* is important but equally important is to give education on how to use your freedom (*yutori*).

This student identified herself in question 1 as "someone who doesn't have a goal." Yet she was perceptive about the need for a framework for developing autonomy, perhaps because it was the very thing her education lacked. More disturbing, three or four students felt that *yutori* would create anti-social behavior:

1.47 Qu 4
...*Yutori kyouiku* could contribute to the increase in juvenile crime *(kodomotachi no hanzai)*.

However, over half of the students who are aspiring teachers were more positive about *yutori.* A few of the others also felt that *yutori* was working as intended:

1.26 Qu 4
Easy. I think it is connected and I think *yutori kyouiku* is very good. The reason is that it will make students feel like studying, rather than the feeling of being very tense (literally, the space of being very tense: *piripiri shisugita kuukan*).

Among those who were more positive about *yutori*, there was still a feeling that as a methodology it needed fine-tuning.

1.2 Qu 4
I agree with *yutori kyouiku.* There are problems but integrated study is important. People think it is a problem that *yutori* is lowering academic ability but I'd like people to find some improving measures to make *yutori* better than it is now. For example the class should be smaller for example, less than thirty. Fifty is too many. But this is also connected with a money problem. You could leave this to each prefecture. But I'd like people to work on it. I agree with *yutori kyouiku* because I think it will bring out students' potential *(kanousei).*

This student made an interesting distinction between apparent autonomy and real autonomy.

1.2 Qu 6
In *yutori kyouiku* they say students are really constructing the class and at first glance it looks like the students are taking the initiative but actually the teachers are leading them into it, so in the end both the students and the teachers are making the class.

She doesn't regard this as a bad thing, as elsewhere in her answers she is in favour of *yutori kyouiku.* She is describing what could be called the scaffolding for autonomy.

STUDENT INSIGHTS INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND YUTORI KYOUIKU

Students seemed to have various ways of understanding "independent study." In some cases they associated it simply with studying to pass a test rather than studying for the joy of doing so or to develop one's own ideas. Two students said that the will to do this could not be taught and did not need to be taught in school, as it would arise naturally from "experience." It was interesting that these two did not see the classroom as a facilitating framework for this kind of experience. But both of them were firmly in favour of *yutori kyouiku.*

1.20 Qu3
Being an autonomous learner is not a thing to be taught at school. Those who want to study more should be autonomous. For those who don't want to study introducing autonomous learning strategies doesn't mean anything.

1.20 Qu4
I think *yutori kyouiku* is very good. If you have class from Monday through Saturday you won't have time for even reviewing. I think it may be important to have time of your own.

1.26 Qu 5
Not need for it [autonomy] to be taught. I think that is something you will not acquire by being forced. Rather I think you will acquire it through various experiences.

Another student was critical of *yutori kyouiku* but suggested that it was beneficial for children's social development.

2. 4 Qu 4
Japanese students have definitely less knowledge now because of *yutori kyouiku*. But that hour of *yutori* increases their opportunities to get in touch with the community so learning ability as social power (*shakai ryoku toshite no gaku ryoku*).

5. When do students think autonomous learning should be introduced?

The majority of students who answered (over 37) thought that autonomous learning should be introduced at elementary school. Many expressed the idea that children were impressionable and so it would be beneficial for them to pick up the habit of actively engaging with their learning at an early age.

1.45 Qu 5
If [elementary school children] learn autonomous learning while they have no knowledge about it, they take that as natural, and even if they don't [consciously] think that way it will become part of their habit.

One student referred to her own experience as a child:

1.58 Qu 5
I did independent learning when I was at elementary school. We were allowed to study anything but we had to show the teacher our notes. At the beginning I didn't know what to do so I repeatedly did a calculation drill that I wasn't good at. Since we were showing our notes to the teacher, this kind of learning can't be said to be perfectly independent, but because of this system I did a little independent learning at junior high. For these reasons I think it should be introduced at elementary school.

One first year student had a very clear idea of how to stimulate children's learning:

1.27 Qu 5
...First the elementary pupils should be given enough time for thinking. Then at the very last, the teacher will give examples. It's important that it should be introduced after the pupils practiced their own ideas first, because if it's introduced first then the children will be biased (*senyukan ni torawerete*) and that introduction will hamper their imagination.

However, 18 students thought that junior high was a more appropriate level to start thinking about autonomous learning. Here is one response typical of that group:

1.2 Qu 5
Autonomous learning should be introduced at junior high because doing a good job in what one is told to do or things given is a base of group work in society. So this training

should be at elementary school. Then training to act based on their own decision should start at junior high...

Eleven said autonomous learning should be introduced at senior high. Many of this group connected autonomy with the added motivation that comes when students think about their future job or university entrance. There seemed to be a correlation between these students' conception of autonomy as simply "studying on one's own," and their feeling that it was inappropriate for younger students.

6. Who do students think should control the class?

Question 6 is about the balance of power in the class. This seems to me a crucial aspect of autonomy in the classroom and therefore the most important question of the whole survey. When I discussed this issue with one colleague, he told me, "Students want to be told what to do." However, the students' replies showed that this is not always the case:

Question 6. Who do you think should control the class? Who should make decisions such as "who should go in the same group"? "what are we going to study?" The teacher? The students? Or both teacher and students together?					
Teacher		Students		Both (or "depends on age")	
Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other
4	6	8	11	42	30
Total= 10		Total=19		Total=72	

This question produced more consensus than any other. Seventy-two gave variations on the answer "the students and teacher should work out together what to do." Many students thought a teacher should provide the initial framework for the class and some of the energy to move it forward:

1.86 Qu 6
The teacher should move the class on, but the students should give their opinions.

1.68 Qu 6
The teacher should offer many choices and students should choose from between them.

1.70 Qu 6
[The class should be] student-centered. The teacher should take students' opinions into consideration, and balance them, and decide the content and the groups.

A couple had experienced being consulted by their teachers over classroom issues:

1.12 Qu 6
First the teacher should express what they want to do and propose their plan then they should ask if the students have a different opinion. The problem is it's difficult for them

to tell teachers if they want different content or method directly so they should write something on a paper without names and make a box for the letter. Actually when I was a high school student we did this. As for groups first the students should decide. If they can't then the teacher should do it, but respecting the students' opinions.

There was a degree of consensus that teachers were responsible for the initial planning, but students were responsible for providing some of the energy to "move the class forward" and for providing modifications to the plan. Responses were divided as to who should make decisions about groups, and who should "lead," with many wanting the teacher to take responsibility.

1.10 Qu 6
The teacher should control, when choosing groups, if the students are reluctant to do it. In the beginning, the teacher should decide what and how to study and then afterwards ask the students.

Eleven said that the students should have the most say in conducting the class (two of these specified "at university" however). Only 10 said that the teacher should be the main source of control.

1.77 Qu 6
At first I thought both but the teacher has a higher level of English and should know better than students how to do and what to do, so she should direct the students ...if the class is interesting, students will have a strong will to learn of themselves (*Mizukara manabu*).

Relevant here is the distinction Earl Stevick makes between "control" and "initiative" (1980, p.17)[4]. Stevick divides control into two aspects, first, structuring of the learning activities, and second, giving information about how a student's performance approximates to that of a native speaker. He believes that the teacher should exercise control when defined in this way, but suggests the desirability of structuring the class in such a way that students can take the initiative:

The "control" provided by the teacher may lead the students to exercise their "initiatives" in ways that involve cooperation and mutual interdependence ...improv[ing] the likelihood that a feeling of community will arise within the class (Stevick, 1980, p.26).

One inference that can be tentatively drawn from the replies to the questionnaire is that although students may not show from their behavior that they would like a larger share in the overt decision-making process in the classroom, it seems that the majority in this sample would indeed like a bigger share. I had anticipated a correlation between favorable attitudes to *yutori kyouiku* and the belief that students should take a part in controlling the class, but this did not materialize.

7. What do students in this sample think about being evaluated by tests?

Question 7 probes the respondent's degree of sophistication in terms of educational experience and theory, as well as the extent to which they accept the existing status quo. In the wider context of the debate about education, testing has been seen as being responsible for an alleged lack of autonomy in Japanese students:

> The selection-oriented, competition-based education system virtually killed all self expression, individuality, creativity and critical thinking (Horio, 1988, p.337, cited in Yoneyama, 1999, p.147).

The issue of assessment is deeply connected with autonomy because learning to evaluate oneself is part of functioning as an autonomous learner. The respondents to the pilot survey were all university students. As such, the majority were veterans of the test-orientated school system, and could be expected to have strong views about it.

Question 7. "Exams are a fair and accurate way to assess students." Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you experienced other methods of assessment such as continuous assessment? If you have, which methods did you prefer?					
In favour of exams		In favour of multiple short exams plus other methods		Not in favour of exams	
Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other	Teacher trainees	Other
18	12	14	16	26	6
Total= 30		Total=30		Total=32	

Of those who answered, about two thirds felt that exams were unfair if used as the sole method of assessment, while about one third thought exams were useful if combined with other methods such as reports and average grades for participation. This reflects the fact that a growing number of university teachers are using continuous assessment, whether by giving multiple short tests or other "packages."

> 1.25 Qu 7
> Many Japanese students wouldn't study at all unless they had a test. On the other hand a test gives a feeling of being forced to study so the students will just learn by rote with no understanding. So tests aren't a good method either. Grading by turning in assignments and attendance [is an alternative]. I experienced it in one class.

Five students said they had never experienced alternative methods of assessment. Of those in favour of tests, the most articulate justified their views by saying that tests were needed to provide a motivation for study. The following student's answer reflects her acceptance that tests are part of an established order almost like the changing seasons:

> 1.19 Qu 7
> I hate all tests but there should be tests so the *(meri hari ne)* tempo of relaxation and tension is kept... If the students are evaluated only by average, then the atmosphere will be too relaxed *(darakeru)*. After the final test then the long vac(ation) is easy to understand and the joy of the end of term is bigger I think.

It is interesting that she perceives "being relaxed" as negative for study. Similarly one of the teachers I interviewed, a *juku* teacher, reported that although he remembered little from the swotting done in his university entrance exam days, he felt the experience had been valuable because he had learned more than if he had not been forced to push his boundaries. In contrast he remembered clearly information learned while studying for a presentation at elementary

school. But it was not possible for him to perceive that experience as equally valuable in educational terms.

Five students expressed the idea that a good grade needs to reflect a students' attendance and cooperation rather than simply their academic performance.

> 1. 21 Qu 7
> It's unforgivable only to evaluate by test. If someone who never attended got higher marks in the exam while someone who never missed a class got a low score, it would be unfair.

One student mentioned that tests were unfair because they only measure performance on a given day, which might be the most obvious answer mentioned by students in the West. But several felt that there were things that could not be measured by tests. This feeling was particularly noticeable amongst those who aspired to be teachers.

> 2. 8 Qu 7
> I agree [with exams]. But to assess students only by exams is wrong. There are abilities that cannot be assessed by exams.

The most passionate writing came from a first year student, already quoted above:

> 1.2 Qu 7
> I have been evaluated only by tests. On the surface exams look the best, simplest and clearest way to measure students' power. However because I have been processed only as a piece of data and numbered I came to think that other evaluations are needed. I think that children don't look as if they are thinking much but actually they are thinking about many things by themselves for example, take electricity. From the parents' point of view "You left it on again," from the children's point of view "I left it on because the light collected a lot of insects outside the window." Therefore by evaluation each child's sensitivity and perception or process of making an effort, will encourage children to study more and grow appreciation in them, so they feel they are being watched over. That will make a real connection with teachers.

This student wrote elsewhere that she wanted to become a teacher. Her answer shows that she is sensitive to the issue of invisible or "covert" participation. She takes an example from home life rather than school, but her example highlights the differences in thinking between the adults whose priority is to save money, and the child, whose priority is not to get stung. This example makes a neat metaphor if we follow it through. The child is apparently passive but actually watchful and engaged. Children's underlying reasoning often remains unarticulated and unnoticed by adults. The student draws our attention to the marginalization of those who are not holders of power. At school there are similar issues of power and the need for the powerful to respect the views of those lower than themselves in the hierarchy. Yoneyama cites several cases in which discipline problems were exacerbated by the teachers' refusal to listen to the students:

> Teachers punished them when they tried to explain why they misbehaved. Only one asked them why (Kamata, 1984, cited in Yoneyama, 1999, pp.67-8).

Asking why and listening deeply to the answer could bring about a real connection. Institutionalized testing, for the student quoted above and many others, is perceived as an instrument of hierarchical manipulation, which, although sometimes necessary, is deleterious to real connection.

WHAT KIND OF UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNER AUTONOMY IS REVEALED FROM STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE?

Even researchers on the subject of autonomy sometimes talk in terms of a journey from a "false" understanding to a "true" understanding of autonomy (Stewart, 2003, p.48). We could expect the students to be influenced by the examples in the questionnaire and by the way these were presented by the teacher. One factor which came across clearly from many of the replies was the growth some students had experienced due to the methods and beliefs of their teacher. While for some, their idea of autonomy is restricted to doing routine actions without being told, others reveal a more complex and helpful idea of autonomy developing from personal growth and interaction with others:

> 1. 41 Qu 1
> Individual study seems to generate in people's relationship/interaction *(tsukiai)* and information within a group. There is no individual study without a clear target.

> 1.49 Qu 2
> There must be some people, like me, who don't want to be taught, but will lose interest even more when we are told. Therefore when I see my friends making efforts to be independent, I might make the same effort and then when I study what I want to study, it will lead to being independent.

The teacher who taught these students told me she made a point of discussing teachers' and students' roles with the class early in the course. She pointed out that the teacher generally has more experience but is in no way intrinsically superior to the students. Some of the student responses show that they absorbed this way of looking at the roles of teacher and students:

> 1.45 Qu 6
> I felt the teaching side also have to learn from the point [made by the] being taught side *(oshierugawa mo oshierarerugawa no shiten kara gakushuu shiteika nai to ikenai to omotta).*

A few of the students seemed to interpret autonomy as being selfish or childish. The following comment was uniquely pessimistic:

> 1.46 Qu 4
> In the long term there won't be many environments where I can choose what I want and by doing my own things I could be a nuisance to the people around. Giving *yutori kyouiku* at an early stage won't be a good influence in life.

This student's comment recalls the debate about "Moral Education" in Japanese elementary schools. In *Japanese Moral Education Past and Present* Kahn (1997) suggests that, "The appearance of Western style individuality is for outside consumption" (1997, p.132). He asserts that the Japanese government wants to be seen as encouraging individualism by the West, while still adhering to Confucian values, according to which the group takes precedence, for use inside Japan. One example he gives is of an elementary school textbook which shows a picture of rabbits playing games in the park, picking the flowers and trampling the flower-beds (bad), while the human children sit neatly on their rug (good). The lesson is, "Do not be a nuisance to others" (Kahn, 1997, p.141). This student seemed to have learned that lesson all too well. Her response reminds us that Moral Education is one of the controversial elements which is

likely to be strengthened when the Fundamental Law of Education is revised. Given the context of wider social change such as the aging population and the changing employment markets which mean that jobs are no longer guaranteed for life, this generation of students is faced with a particularly pressing need to work out a compromise between individual autonomy and the claims of society.

CONCLUSION: TO KEEP ASKING QUESTIONS

Carrying out this pilot survey of students' opinions about educational issues produced diverse answers, many of which showed unexpected insight into the development of autonomy. The students' self-image was by and large not passive, their attitudes were often vigorously and thoughtfully critical of the *status quo*. At a time when Japan is changing and the generation gap widening faster than ever before, it seems important to be wary of essentializing Japanese culture and systems pertaining to it, even when official discourse invites us to do so. In a field study of Japanese identity, the anthropologist, Sugie Takeyama Lebra notes many of her interviewees have spoken about the generality of Japanese culture while stating that they themselves were exceptional (Lebra, 2004, p.258). The prevalence of such "self-exceptionalisation" seems to throw into doubt the whole project of creating cultural constructs generalized across a nation without regard for age or regional difference. I hope that by asking students for their opinions about their learning and their autonomy, we can create more space for a future which is not pre-determined by the stereotypes of the past.

NOTES

1. David Silverman's account of tabulating qualitative data was helpful. See Silverman, 2001, p.41 and pp.48-50.
2. The text-book used was *Language Hungry!* by Tim Murphey. The book is a guide to autonomous learning strategies that can be implemented by the student on their own, such as listening to music, and adopting a positive attitude, risk-taking and so on. Students were asked to choose a chapter of the book which they would read in a group. This work continued over several weeks as students struggled to understand the book and in many cases translated it together. Eventually they did a presentation based on their chapter, to the other students of the class. The presentation formed part of their grade, together with grades from a mid-term and final test and one assignment. Several students mentioned the textbook in their questionnaire answers.
3. Changes in the school timetable and curriculum were phased in between 1992 and 1998, but the exact pattern varied from school to school. Some private schools did not reduce the targets to be learned, which may account for the comments made by one student that *yutori* became "cramming."
4. Many thanks to Brad Deacon for suggesting that I read Stevick on this topic.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

NAOKO AOKI, OSAKA UNIVERSITY

I am a teacher educator. I have been telling my students to try to understand learners in context, both in their personal history and in the social world they currently live in. Ellen's noble effort to understand Japanese university students reminds me of many issues that my students and I face in our practice. First comes language. Many language learners do not have the capacity to talk or write about issues teacher-researchers are interested in. Even with very advanced learners, what they say in their second language may not be the same as what they would say on the same topic in their first language (Pavlenko, 2006). This is an area in which teacher-researchers who share their first language with learners have far more advantage than native speaker teacher-researchers. Native speaker teacher-researchers have to either make do with whatever learners offer in their second language or rely on an interpreter unless they speak the learners' first language, which makes claiming trustworthiness of data and single authorship problematic. Second comes experience. Even if a teacher-researcher shares the first language with her learners, she often belongs to social groups different from those of the learners in terms of age, gender, and social class, for example. Understanding someone's lived experience requires bracketing (van Manen, 1990), or shelving one's own beliefs and frame of thinking. This is easily said, but difficult to implement. An insight into the learners' lifeworld often unexpectedly comes from something a learner does or says out of the research context. Research, however, cannot rely on serendipity. We need some mechanism in our research process to ensure that we are not trapped by our preconceptions. A long-term involvement with research participants, rapport, semi-structured interviews which allow participants to talk beyond the original questions a researcher poses, analyzing data not according to predetermined theoretical categories but by starting with it to create categories as grounded theory recommends (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and getting researchers' interpretation checked by research participants all contribute to that purpose. I know Ellen speaks Japanese. If she had sat down with a group of students who she is close to, talked through her questions in Japanese, and analysed the discourse of their talk not according to her questions but according to the students' perspectives, I wonder if the findings would have been different.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

STEVE DAVIES

Reading Ellen's thought-provoking paper, I was reminded of the results of a different survey that was designed to find out what, exactly, a sample of junior high school students enjoyed the most about their English lessons. Somewhat surprisingly, instead of the predicted, "group work," or "talking in English," the majority of these students wrote that their favorite activity was, "copying English words from the blackboard." Similarly, Ellen's data, drawn from a large sample of students, reveals a startlingly perspicacity about the difficulty of reconciling the basic premise of autonomy (as Ellen defines it) - "being able to decide what I want to learn, and planning how to learn it" - with the constraints of the exam-driven, pressure-cooker Japanese school system. Indeed, many of her respondents voice a distinct uneasiness about too radical a re-distribution of power in the classroom; preferring, instead, a more flexible approach in which teachers lead, but crucially acknowledge the voices of their learners in the decision-making process. Perhaps, we might envisage this process as part of the interlanguage of autonomy, part of a developing learner awareness that both sustains and resists change. Nevertheless, despite this acceptance of the need for more negotiated learner outcomes, yutori kyoiku, the government initiative that aims to liberalize education, provoked mixed reactions among her respondents. Significantly, many of them felt that the policy, rather than creating more freedom to pursue individual learning targets, simply resulted in more instruction during the week to make up for lost time at the weekend. In addition, there was an acknowledgement that unmotivated learners might use any free time to play rather than to study. This, in turn, suggests the need for more focused training in the use of learning tools - such as journals - that can be used to encourage more effective time-management skills and to establish a goal-setting agendum. In closing, Ellen's effective entextualization of learner voices, skillfully woven into a reflexive research narrative, stimulates critical reflection rather than concrete conclusions - and this seems particularly appropriate given the disputed nature of her key constructs - autonomy and education reform.