

# Learner Beliefs about Language Learning and Learner Autonomy: A Reconsideration



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*Learner autonomy has received increased attention in recent language teaching and learning literature. Although Holec (1981) proposed a somewhat categorical definition of learner autonomy, this concept can be viewed in various ways depending on factors such as context and culture. One may posit that learner autonomy is based on Western values and, as such, is not as easily accessible in the Asian context. With such views in mind, the purpose of my study is to gain a greater understanding of Japanese students' beliefs regarding foreign language learning in a particular context. Learner autonomy is defined in this chapter as learners' internal attitudes for self-motivation. My study shows that positive self-beliefs and metacognitive awareness can be considered as keys in promoting learner autonomy. Instead of training learners to satisfy teacher expectations, or simply giving students unlimited freedom to make decisions, learner development should be more concerned with the nature of both students' and teachers' learning as a path towards self-growth.*

学習者自律は、最近の言語教育・学習分野で注目を集めている。Holec (1981) は、学習者自律を定義づけたが、その概念は、コンテキストや文化的側面によって、様々な視点から解釈できる。たとえば、学習者自律は、西洋的な考えがもとになっており、アジアでは、簡単に適応できないという見方がある。こうした批判的な見方に対し、この研究では、ある状況における日本人学習者の外国語学習に対するペリーフを探る。この研究から言えることは、学習者自律とは、学習者が自己動機づけを高めようとする意識であり、そして、肯定的学習者ペリーフとメタ認知意識が、学習者自律を高めるための鍵であると考えられる。教師の期待に沿うよう(沿わせるため)学習者をトレーニングしようとしたり、学習者に単に決定権を持たせるといった自由を与えるかわりに、真の学習者自律向上には、教師と学習者の両者が自己成長を遂げる過程が必要である。

In existing understandings of learner autonomy, learner responsibility is often focused on the learners' independent management skills—that is, their own learning processes. This focus tends to stress the learners' active display of autonomous behaviour. Because Asian learners are typically viewed as passive, such a concern with active displays of autonomous learning leads to the view that Asian learners may need to change their beliefs and expectations. In this chapter, I explore whether such stereotypical attitudes towards Asian learners, especially Japanese learners, are justified. Through a series of interviews with two groups of students, I suggest that different interpretations of their apparent passivity are possible. These new interpretations are based on an examination of the internal attitudes and beliefs that learners have themselves towards the question of learner responsibility. I argue that respect for, and appreciation of, learners' own perspectives may not only lead to a deeper understanding of the development of learner autonomy in Japan and other Asian education systems, but also in other contexts and cultures, too.

## PART 1: FROM A LITERATURE REVIEW OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

### THE NOTION OF LEARNER TRAINING

Within Asia, a general approach to promoting autonomous learning seems to depend on learners changing from being passive to active participants in their learning, as identified by researchers such as Dickinson (1987), Sinclair (2000), and Wenden (1991). For such a reorientation to occur, it may first be necessary to retrain teachers towards acting more as facilitators and less as transmitters of 'knowledge.' This appears to be the pedagogic basis for promoting learner training and raising learners' awareness of their own roles as learners. According to Wenden (1998a), the reason for the importance of 'learner training' is that "it should enable learners to become effective agents of change within their educational context" (p. 5). She further indicates that learner training is likely to bring about major changes in the learner's role if they are helped towards greater learning responsibility by planning, monitoring, and evaluating what they do. This will raise their awareness of metacognitive and affective factors in their learning.

Specific examples of the application of Wenden's theoretical stance can be seen in Robbins (1996), Wilkins (1996), and Lin (1996). All three teacher-researchers discuss the organization of learner training within an Asian context. Robbins (1996) presents "a metacognitive model of learning strategies instruction adapted to the Japanese university classroom environment" (p. 169). In this model, Robbins comments:

...students are expected to become *self-regulated* learners, that is, taking responsibility for their own learning by choosing the strategies that will help them to be more effective in completing language tasks, and managing their own learning through metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about how we learn) that is developed during strategies instruction. (p. 172)

Wilkins (1996) also emphasizes the need for such explicit training in teaching Japanese students. She puts the case like this:

...because most students are not educated about the nature of the thinking processes involved in manipulating information, they fail to understand or learn these processes that are so necessary to foster independent, life-long, language mastery outside of a classroom. (p. 254)

Wilkins goes on to demonstrate how to foster independence through developing the metacognitive processes of “planning, monitoring and assessing one's own thinking” (p. 254). Similarly, Lin (1996) describes training students in Malaysia so that they become ready “to direct the course of their own learning in the self-access centre with minimal supervision” (p. 117). Lin sums up learner training as being focused on “. . . a change of psychological attitude towards what learning is and confidence building” (p. 117), explaining that:

Learning training also includes training of skills and strategies required for independent learning. Students learn to select their own learning objectives, identify the relevant resources, design their own learning plan, assess their own performance and select the appropriate strategies. (p. 117)

Taking these three examples as typical, we may deduce that learner training currently occurring in Asian contexts is predominantly aimed at reorienting the thinking processes of learners without teachers understanding better the apparently inappropriate beliefs that learners are thought to hold about language learning.

### **AUTONOMOUS ACTIVITIES IN ASIAN CONTEXTS**

One approach towards promoting learner autonomy in Asian contexts involves adapting the notion of learner autonomy to what are seen as group-oriented societies. Littlewood (1996) states that Asian learners should be provided with an interpersonal environment imbued with mutual support and harmony. He suggests that “reactive autonomy” (p. 136) should be focused on in Asian contexts. “Reactive autonomy” is the notion that the learner regulates their activity, once the direction has been externally established. This contrasts with Littlewood’s view of “proactive autonomy” where the learner takes charge of their own learning and action. Littlewood implies that “proactive autonomy” is characteristically Western.

Beyond such a simple dichotomous understanding of autonomy, there have also been attempts to produce ‘negotiated’ versions of autonomy applicable to the Asian context generally, and the Japanese context in particular (e.g., Aoki & Smith, 1999). Various educators in Japan have tried to integrate autonomy with group work in an empirical fashion through their own classroom-based action research. It has thus been suggested that group work settings could work well with Japanese students. For example, Hart (2002b), Murphey and Jacobs (2000), and Smith (1998) provide evidence of group cooperative learning, resulting in increased active involvement by Japanese students. With Japanese students’ passivity in accepting teachers’ power and authority seen as stemming from Japanese educational influences, Aoki (1999) emphasizes the importance of giving students decision-making opportunities. Thus, both group activities and decision-making opportunities may offer students the chance to improve their active participation in the classroom. Such approaches aim to provide students with practical involvement in learner-centred activities and tangible experiences of collaboration.

### **CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS AND EXISTING ATTEMPTS AT PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY**

Given that different cultural issues relating to learner autonomy have been raised, we will now consider such issues in more detail. The notion of learner training in Asian contexts is predominantly based on assuming Asian students’ passivity. Although small-group approaches to active involvement and responsiveness in classrooms might be effective in Japan, the main

focus should not be a 'Western versus Eastern' perspective. This is because different contexts exist even within the same culture and should not be overgeneralized.

Contextual differentiation often occurs due to individual teacher differences within a culture or institution. Esch (1996) has, for example, argued that "cultural differences may not be the main barrier to the promotion of the concept of autonomy in countries with a group-oriented tradition" (p. 46). Moreover, Jones (1995) raises some doubts with regard to the cultural appropriateness of autonomy, while Aoki and Smith (1999) point out that "arguments against the aspirations of people and/or for the political status quo in a particular context can easily be masked by stereotyping or arguments against cultural imperialism" (p. 23). They make the claim that it is important to recognize that autonomy is not an approach enforcing a particular way of learning. It is rather an educational goal, as Holec (1981) explicitly states. Aoki and Smith (1999) thus assert that "...objections to autonomy based on students' current incapacity to learn in a wholly self-directed manner therefore lack validity in any context" (p. 21).

Beebe (1998) has suggested that rather than underestimating or giving up on Japanese students, teachers ought to find out what the students are doing on their own with regard to their learning, and what lessons their experiences can offer to the teacher and other students. What may be needed are more in-depth investigations of students' insights about how they learn and what they believe to be their part in the process. Because learner autonomy does not mean that learners have to display certain behaviours, we need to find ways to strengthen learners' awareness of, and commitment to, their own responsibility as learners. Yet, to do that, we need first to understand better the stereotypical cultural assumptions that are made about Japanese learners, particularly with regard to arguments about 'Japanese-ness' and 'passivity.'

Although in the 1990s the cultural appropriateness of autonomous learning in Asian contexts began to be addressed (Benson, 2001), culturally appropriate forms of learner autonomy have yet to be promoted to any meaningful extent in Japan. Japanese learners are often said to be passive and dependent (Usuki, 2002). It is also widely acknowledged in Japan that the discrete relationship between teachers and students is accentuated within typical traditional classroom settings where teachers demonstrate their authority and students passively accept their teacher's power. Accordingly, Japanese learners tend to be perceived as accepting the teacher's authority in an unquestioning and unchallenging manner.

In Japanese society, successful learners praise themselves positively for their efforts, whereas less successful learners blame their apparent failure on insufficient effort. In addition, successful students gain the teacher's attention and trust, while less successful students receive less attention and will be expected to put in greater effort. As a result, it is successful learners who, with the help of external reinforcement, are likely to develop positive self-beliefs, whereas less successful learners more likely to develop negative self-beliefs (cf., Puchta, 1999).

Attribution Theory (Barry & King, 1998) can help further explain this. Attribution Theory deals with the teacher's perceptions of the students' performance as well as the students' perceptions of their own performance. Thus, perceived causes of success and failure may influence students' motivation to expend effort, and mediate teaching and student achievement. Clearly then, teachers' own beliefs about learning can and do influence their learners' beliefs about learning. Aoki and Smith (1999) emphasize this point:

Teachers' actions in the classroom and their interactions with their learners will mirror, either implicitly or explicitly, their own beliefs about learning, their views of the world, their self-views, and their attitudes towards their subject and their learners. Thus, whatever methodology teachers purport to adopt, whatever course-book or syllabus

they are following, what goes on in their classrooms will be influenced by their beliefs about the learning process. (p. 27)

Teachers' beliefs and educational institutions' expectations of classroom learning and teaching need to be considered so that the stereotypical view of Japanese students' passivity can be challenged. As long as teachers are concerned only with the students' display of active classroom behaviours, cultural differences will remain problematic for the development of learner autonomy. In brief, learner autonomy needs to be understood from the learner's internal functioning rather than from external evidence alone.

## PART 2: THE STUDY

### THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of high achievers' beliefs about language learning. In total, 16 students majoring in English at a private university in Japan were selected for the interviews on the basis of their TOEIC score improvement. English majors take the TOEIC several times a year after entering university. The high achievers were chosen on the basis of their score improvement by comparing their present scores with their first TOEIC results. Out of approximately 200 students in each year after the first year, the students with the highest achievement and improvement were selected.

The students' TOEIC examination scores and pilot interviews in English, together with their oral test results were combined to determine their overall English proficiency. Also, the participants' grades for all their English-related subjects were obtained. Through interview transcription analysis, 12 learners' beliefs were clearly identified as representing either stereotypical or non-stereotypical characteristics of Japanese learners. Six of the 12 learners were termed *Heterogeneous learners* because of their non-stereotypical consciousness. Another 6 learners were labeled *Homogeneous learners* because of their broadly stereotypical attitudes. (Four of the original 16 students could not be immediately categorised and were therefore excluded from further analysis in this particular study.)

### RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The research procedure for this study consisted of gathering retrospective self-reports of the participants' beliefs about language learning. The semi-structured, open-ended, and audio tape-recorded interviews were conducted and transcribed by the researcher in order to identify in detail the similarities and differences between the participants' beliefs. Consent forms were given to all participants of the study for reading and signing. Before the interviews, the participants were surveyed about their background experience in foreign language learning (such as their past English learning experiences and overseas visits). This was done so that students who had learned English most of the time in Japan and had less experience staying overseas could be selected for interview. Interview questions were given to each interviewee prior to the interview. Each interview took approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in Japanese. From the interview data, the students' insights about self-direction were explored by comparing and contrasting key words and sentences in their responses. All the data analysis was then translated into English. (See Frontman & Kunkel (1994), Glasser & Strauss (1967), and Strauss & Corbin (1994) for similar procedures.)

### IDENTIFICATION OF TWO STYLES OF LEARNING

In the process of comparing and contrasting the data, it was found that the Heterogeneous Learners' approaches to learning were positive and active, while the Homogeneous Learners' approaches were negative and passive. Furthermore, learners in the Heterogeneous group displayed some non-stereotypical Japanese characteristics such as being challenging, brave, and independent. On the other hand, learners in the Homogeneous group showed both a passive attitude, that is, a fear of standing out from others, and rather stereotypical characteristics such as being quiet, shy, and collectivist in attitude.

As homo- and heterogeneity seemed at first sight to be related to stereotypical and non-stereotypical behaviour respectively, a closer investigation of the characteristics was undertaken. The stereotypical / non-stereotypical characteristics of Japanese learners have been explored by previous researchers (e.g., Kubota, 1999; Purdie, Douglas, & Hattie, 1996). Based on a literature review of such studies, Table 1 below summarizes the stereotypical and non-stereotypical characteristics of Japanese learners. The descriptors are identified by acronyms and explained beneath the table.

**Table 1 Homogeneous (Stereotypical) and Heterogeneous (Non-stereotypical) Characteristics of Japanese Learners**

<b>Homogeneous Learners Stereotypical Characteristics</b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
<i>Acceptance of Teacher Authority</i> Unquestioning / Unchallenging / Keeping distance	SATA
<i>Passive</i> Following the direction set by others / Dependent / Shy / Unconfident	SP
<i>Lack of Self-Expression</i> Quiet / Fear of making mistakes / Memorising by rote / Lack of creativity / Lack of critical thinking	SLSE
<i>Groupism</i> Harmony / Collectivist / Same as others	SG
<b>Heterogeneous Learners Non-stereotypical Characteristics</b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
<i>Questioning of Teacher Authority</i> Questioning / Challenging / Relating well	NQTA
<i>Active</i> Following own direction / Independent / Brave / Confident	NA
<i>Self-Expression</i> Talkative / Acceptance of mistakes / Understanding / Creative / Critical thinking	NSE
<b>Individualism</b> Personal interest / Individualist / Different from others	NI

SATA=Stereotypical characteristics of Acceptance of Teacher Authority

SP=Stereotypical characteristics of Passivity

SLSE=Stereotypical characteristics of Lack of Self-Expression

SG=Stereotypical characteristics of Groupism

NQTA=Non-Stereotypical characteristics of Question of Teacher Authority

NA=Non-Stereotypical characteristics of Activeness

NSE=Non-Stereotypical characteristics of Self-Expression

NI=Non-Stereotypical characteristics of Individualism

The next section further elaborates the stereotypical and non-stereotypical characteristics of Japanese learners summarized in Table 1, through specific analysis of interview excerpts from the Heterogeneous and Homogenous Groups. The descriptors for the non-stereotypical characteristics (NQTA, NA, NSE, NI) and stereotypical characteristics (SATA, SP, SLSE, SG) are indicated in the excerpts.

### THE HETEROGENEOUS GROUP:

#### HIDEO, KYOKO, TOORU, ICHIRO, YASUHIRO AND KAZUKO

All six English major students in the Heterogeneous group were aware that their attitudes towards learning were very much individualistic and different from other students around them. These learners appeared to accept themselves positively and to have a distinct positive self-image.

These Heterogeneous learners had had teacher-centred lessons devoid of any focus on communicative English use. Although they had experienced overseas stays, their periods abroad had been limited. They had spent most of their time learning English in Japan; yet, despite such a limited English-speaking learning environment, they still displayed non-stereotypical self-beliefs.

#### EVIDENCE OF A HETEROGENEOUS LEARNING STYLE

Some of the non-stereotypical characteristics of the six learners within the Heterogeneous group can be seen from the following verbatim excerpts of how they expressed themselves in the interviews. The excerpts are shown in italics, and the stereotypical descriptors, which were identified in Table 1 above, have been placed in parentheses to cross-reference the characteristics of the 6 Heterogeneous learners.

#### Hideo

<i>A little strange (curious)</i>	(NI)
<i>An exceptional student</i>	(NI)
<i>An odd person (quite a character)</i>	(NI)
<i>My existence itself is a gag</i>	(NA)

#### Kyoko

<i>Strange</i>	(NI)
<i>Strong personality</i>	(NA)
<i>Annoying</i>	(NQTA)
<i>Persistent</i>	(NQTA)
<i>A difficult student</i>	(NI)
<i>An odd person</i>	(NI)

**Tooru**

<i>Strange</i>	(NI)
<i>A very positive person</i>	(NA)
<i>I feel like I'm standing out</i>	(NI)

**Ichiroo**

<i>Tough</i>	(NA)
<i>Hard for others to assimilate</i>	(NI)
<i>Sticking out</i>	(NI)
<i>Patient</i>	(NA)

**Yasuhiro**

<i>A challenger</i>	(NA)
<i>Self-intoxication</i>	(NI)
<i>A juggler</i>	(NA)
<i>Conspicuous</i>	(NI)

**Kazuko**

<i>Optimistic</i>	(NA)
<i>Not depressed</i>	(NA)
<i>I am unusually confident</i>	(NA)

During the interviews, these learners appeared to be confident and responsive to the interviewer's questions all the time. In fact, of the 16 participants, the above 6 were outstanding with regard to their improvement and achievement in their TOEIC scores. Their school marks in English subjects were of a high level, as were their English communication skills.

**THE HOMOGENEOUS GROUP****KAORI, TSUYAKO, SUMIKO, AIKO, ASAMI, MAYUMI**

Because of their awareness of their passivity and lack of desire to stand out from the rest of the group, the following 6 female English major students were included in the Homogeneous group: Kaori, Tsuyako, Sumiko, Aiko, Asami, and Mayumi. These learners spoke openly about their fear of standing out from others. They also shared common aspects in their language learning experiences in that their English lessons at high school had focused heavily on university entrance examinations. None of them had had much experience of an English-speaking environment.

**EVIDENCE OF A HOMOGENEOUS LEARNING STYLE**

While the overall improvement in TOEIC scores was higher than those of average students, the Homogeneous group learners' individual English communication skills varied. For example, Sumiko, Aiko and Asami had acquired good communication skills in terms of adequately expressing themselves. On the other hand, Kaori, Tsuyako and Mayumi still had problems in their actual use of English for effective communication. Although they were serious students and came across as committed to learning, they were sometimes hesitant to use English in class. The following excerpts show this internal ambiguity about their stereotypical preference but underlying non-stereotypical desire. More detailed transcriptions have been provided for this group as their interview performance indicated that they preferred to develop their reasoning to a greater extent than the previous group. This may in itself be indicative of the cognitive processes used by stereotypical learners.

**Kaori**

*If I were stricter with myself, I would improve more. Once I improved, I would see my potential. If I did a little more, I would see it. (SP) I think of myself not as a hard worker, as others think of me. I worry before tests, and worry how others will do on tests. (SG)*

**Tsuyako**

*I think of myself as a normal student, not so bad, but not so smart either, just the same as people around me. (SG) I am a little passive. As I don't have enough ability, I can't say what I want to say. (SP)*

**Sumiko**

*I have a feeling of not wanting to stick out. When I stand out a little from others, people around me look at me as if they would like to avoid me. Even when I consciously try not to stand out, I am told that I am a serious student. (SG)*

**Aiko**

*What can I say, I feel shy in front of my classmates, because they are the same age as I am. (SG) It would be no problem if I could speak English perfectly, but my English is not perfect at all. (SLSE) I feel shy when my class members see me trying hard. (SP)*

**Asami**

*I believe that my teachers think of me as an average student. (SA) I think that in class I ask questions quite often, and maybe too often. So, to avoid embarrassment, I ask teachers more, after lessons. I don't want anyone to think about me as a pushy person. (SG) I have lots of things in my mind, but I can express only 20% of what I think in English. Because of this, I feel very frustrated. (SLSE) My conversational class teacher might think that I am not so good. Also, I did not have such good rapport with him. (SA)*

**Mayumi**

*I don't stand out. I don't make a strong impression on people. (SG) I'm a quiet person. My teachers might not notice me. Although my school marks are good, I don't contribute much in class. (SLSE) I feel like I should not do anything wrong, I feel like I should not speak out too much, I worry about making mistakes. (SLSE)*

As can be seen, all 6 learners indicated that they were uncomfortable with their passive behaviour and wished to be more active in the class. Compared with the Heterogeneous group, these learners were less talkative and less confident. For example, Kaori kept silent for a while before replying to each interview question, and then she replied quietly with only a few short sentences. Mayumi was close to crying during the interview, which may have been due to her lack of confidence. There seemed to be a clear gap between what she wanted to say and what she could not say in class. Moreover, Mayumi, as well as Kaori, was often very quiet. This may indicate that for both girls, their basic communicative skills, as well as their characters, somehow influenced their behavior in English classes.

## COMPARISON OF HETEROGENEOUS GROUP VS. HOMOGENEOUS GROUP LEARNER BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH

From the interview transcripts, each of the participants' responses, pertaining to Little's (1991) notion of learner autonomy, was categorized. A descriptor was attached to each discrete aspect of learner autonomy revealed by the participants. After translating the responses into English, the responses and their corresponding autonomy descriptors were collated and placed into five broad categories. These five categories of learner beliefs were defined as follows:

1. **Affective beliefs** = Learners' wishes and feelings such as job related motivation; the wish to get a certificate, or high TOEIC score; the wish to acquire English skills.
2. **Self-perceptual beliefs** = Learners' awareness of self-management and self-responsibility factors.
3. **Self-motivational beliefs** = Learners' needs and reasons for promoting their own English learning.
4. **Cognitive beliefs** = Learners' awareness of strategic language learning skills.
5. **Social beliefs** = Learners' expectations of teacher's role and awareness of relationship with others.

From the analysis of the interview transcripts, learner beliefs for the two groups were compared and described under these five categories. The differences between the two groups can be summarized as follows.

### AFFECTIVE BELIEFS

In terms of affective factors, the main difference between the two groups of learners seemed to be one of goal awareness. The Heterogeneous group learners had a clear goal for learning English, and this goal was related to their self-actualization in life generally. Their English learning was, therefore, just a means of achieving their final goal. On the other hand, the Homogeneous learners seemed to be interested in learning English and better appreciating cultures in which English is spoken. They liked studying English and they admired fluent English speakers. In this respect, they saw the acquisition of English proficiency as an end in itself.

### SELF-PERCEPTIVE BELIEFS

The Heterogeneous learners were positive about themselves. They believed in their potential. The learners in this group also felt that their teachers had high expectations of them. Their teachers' high expectations further supported their confidence building. They were aware of, and utilized, the metacognitive strategies of self-regulation, self-direction, and self-motivation. The Heterogeneous learners always reflected on what they were doing, why they were doing it, and where it was taking them. The Homogeneous group, however, was very different in terms of self-image and self-trust. They seemed to have ambiguous, almost dichotomous feelings of both positive and negative self-images. They were very conscious and sensitive about others' opinions. Although they wished to acquire native-like fluency, they seemed to take a passive attitude in their conversational classes. The Homogeneous learners were recognized as good students in their lecture-type lessons, whereas they were not seen in the same way in their conversational classes. Thus, their self-image received conflicting positive and negative reinforcement from their teachers.

### SELF-MOTIVATIONAL BELIEFS

The Heterogeneous and Homogeneous groups tended to hold differing views about learning. The Heterogeneous group was aware of English as a means of communication and as a matter of life-long learning. Conversely, the Homogeneous learners seemed only to focus on their skill improvement rather than learning for communicative use. The Homogeneous group displayed an acute concern for perfection. As a result, they doubted that it would be possible for them to acquire their desired skills. In fact, they seemed to have insufficient drive for learning English. Such contradictions between their thinking and their actions seem to be one of the defining characteristics of the Homogeneous group. In contrast, the Heterogeneous group of learners was active and confident. One of their major characteristics was their flexibility. Also, the Heterogeneous learners had a strong, critical awareness that they needed to continue their present effort to maintain their level. Through this attitude, they seemed to have sufficient internal drive to motivate themselves towards their goal.

### COGNITIVE BELIEFS

In classroom learning, the Heterogeneous learners were recognized as active students, while the Homogeneous learners were seen as serious students. The Heterogeneous learners stood out from others, but they themselves, their teachers and other students showed a positive acceptance of their characters. The Homogeneous group, on the other hand, consciously tried to avoid standing out. They were recognized as normal students, and, in fact, they behaved like that. The Heterogeneous learners were aware of themselves as class members, and sought to create a good relationship with teachers and fellow classmates. They wanted a good class atmosphere to promote effective classroom learning. The Homogeneous group was highly conscious of their own English skills and how others thought about them. They seemed to lack awareness about the synergies which existed in the classroom.

As for effective learning strategies, both groups believed that authentic input was very important, in particular, with listening practice. Also, separate strategies for learning both inside and outside the classroom were considered important in making learning more effective. In this respect, both groups of learners were strongly aware of the totality of their learning process both within the classroom and in the world beyond it.

### SOCIAL BELIEFS

Learners in both groups were aware of their own responsibility as learners. They were all self-directed in their study. The Heterogeneous group believed that the teacher's role should be as a facilitator or supporter, whereby the students were responsible for learning and needed the teachers' support or assistance. The Homogeneous group felt the need for teacher direction and understanding. The Heterogeneous group also seemed to be more aware of the need for a good relationship with other students, while the Homogeneous group focused on the tacit relationship among students.

The comparisons between the Heterogeneous and Homogeneous groups are presented in Table 2 overleaf.

Table 2 Five-way Comparison of the Two Groups' Beliefs

(1) Affective beliefs	
<p><b>Heterogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having job-related motivation</li> <li>• seeing English skills as tools</li> <li>• enjoying and having interest in their learning</li> <li>• being strongly motivated to acquire English</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having no clear objectives</li> <li>• being interested in English for cultural understanding rather than using skills for their future career</li> <li>• having admiration for, or placing value on the advantages of, English acquisition</li> </ul>
(2) Self-perceptive beliefs	
<p><b>Heterogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being positive and displaying a belief in self</li> <li>• being aware of self-regulation, self-direction, self-encouragement, positive self-image, self-trust</li> </ul> <p><i>Teacher expectation towards the learner</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers thought of them as different from other students.</li> <li>• Teachers had positive expectation for them.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gaining high marks in English tests through considerable effort</li> <li>• being aware of both positive and negative self-image, self-trust, and doubt</li> <li>• feeling that they make a very good impression on their teachers in lecture-type lessons</li> <li>• having ambiguous feelings about their learning</li> <li>• being inconsistent with their actual behaviour</li> </ul> <p><i>Teacher expectation towards the learner</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They were recognized as serious students in lecture-type classes.</li> <li>• Teachers thought of them as quiet students, or at worst they were unnoticed by teachers.</li> <li>• They were recognized differently depending on the teacher and the class.</li> </ul>
(3) Self-motivational beliefs	
<p><b>Heterogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focusing on the communicative use of English as well as their own proficiency improvement</li> <li>• setting target test scores as a series of small progress-checking milestones</li> <li>• being open-minded and possessing a flexible way of thinking</li> <li>• being good at controlling themselves.</li> <li>• enjoying both learning English and their social life</li> <li>• having a long-term view of their language learning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homogeneous Group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having no clear purpose for learning</li> <li>• seeing the teacher as a leader/advisor from whom they obtained necessary skills and direction for further learning</li> <li>• being serious, earnest students who never fail to do their given assignments</li> <li>• gaining positive recognition from teachers in lecture-type lessons but being quiet and passive in conversation classes</li> <li>• focusing on their own English proficiency improvement rather than on communication with others</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having passive, short term effort, restrictedness, insufficient internal energy, —uncertainty about skills application</li> </ul>
<b>(4) Cognitive beliefs</b>	
<p><b>Heterogeneous group</b> <i>Classroom learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being aware of the classroom as a part of their learning process</li> <li>• being aware of learners' active involvement needs</li> <li>• being aware of self-responsibility</li> <li>• being aware of English-use needs</li> </ul> <p><i>Effective language learning strategies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creating an environment to support English language opportunities</li> <li>• being aware of authentic input</li> <li>• externally embellishing classroom learning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homogeneous group</b> <i>Classroom learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being aware of the classroom as an important opportunity for their English learning</li> <li>• being aware of challenging and active-involvement needs but not following through</li> <li>• emphasising their own needs</li> </ul> <p><i>Effective language learning strategies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being aware of English learning</li> <li>• being aware of authentic input</li> </ul>
<b>(5) Social beliefs</b>	
<p><b>Heterogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being aware of self-responsibility as a learner</li> <li>• considering the teachers' role to be facilitator or supporter</li> <li>• being cognizant of developing positive relationships between teacher and students and amongst students</li> <li>• being aware of collaborative needs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Homogeneous group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having different attitude and behaviour relative to teacher-expectation and type of class involvement</li> <li>• considering teachers' role to be helper and adviser</li> <li>• being aware of the teachers' understanding of their needs</li> <li>• being aware of peer pressure for conformity rather than facilitating interactivensess</li> </ul>

### DISCUSSION OF THE HETEROGENEOUS AND HOMOGENEOUS LEARNERS' BELIEFS

In comparing both groups of Heterogeneous and Homogeneous learners, it was seen that the Heterogeneous-type learners' beliefs were seen to be more effective and should be promoted to all students as effective routes to successful language learning. So, it seems that the goal of fostering learner autonomy in language education should aim at engendering and encouraging Heterogeneous-type learners' beliefs.

Despite the fact that the Heterogeneous learners were positive about themselves, they seemed to feel that somehow they were different from others. With reference to teacher expectations, all Heterogeneous learners tended to believe that their teachers thought of them as being very individual and therefore as standing out from other students. This recognition stemmed from the students' active behaviour and their teachers' positive reinforcement of that. They seemed to feel that their teachers recognized their hard work.

The Homogeneous learners had gained high marks in English tests through considerable effort. These learners were, in fact, very autonomous in terms of gaining high marks. However, they seemed to be struggling with the realization that they could not use the same skills and strategies that they had developed and utilized for their past examinations. For their lecture-type lessons, the Homogeneous learners felt that they would therefore have to make a very good impression on their teachers. In fact, these students never failed to do what was required of them. They would preview and review the lessons. In their conversation classes, they felt that their teachers did not pay attention to them, even though they tried their hardest. However, they reproved themselves for still not making the mark. With all Homogeneous learners apparently having ambiguous feelings about their learning, their perceptions also seemed to be inconsistent with their actual behaviour.

Homogeneous-type learners' beliefs, such as low confidence, being afraid of standing out, perfectionism, and the contradictory behaviour of wanting to be communicative but not displaying any such desire, were seen as not being conducive to language learning. These behaviours are arguably a product of Japanese educational influences upon the students.

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have looked at existing definitions of learner autonomy and argued that learners' internal attitudes should be given more focus than external behaviour. From my own experience, the main issue in promoting learner autonomy can be understood as the learners' internalization of their beliefs and attitudes for taking charge of their own learning. It is their acceptance of responsibility for their own learning, in Little's (1991) terms. The main issue in promoting learner autonomy is therefore not one of methods of teaching, but rather how learners perceive themselves, and in what ways they motivate themselves in their own learning. It seems that these two points are most important when considering learner autonomy in language learning. By comparing stereotypical views of Japanese learners with the more in-depth insights gained from this interview study, I believe that we are able to confirm these two points.

This study examined students' beliefs in a specifically Japanese context. The group studied was small, and the learners were chosen from one particular context in Japan. Because of these limitations of this study, it might be difficult to generalize from the results of this study. Yet, in anticipation, the study may make a contribution to developing a deeper understanding of the concept of learner autonomy for pursuing and achieving educational goals. It may also be relevant, I hope, to successful language learning in wider contexts.

## CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

STACEY VYE

Miyuki's project has sparked an exciting debate for me about how autonomy relates to various learning contexts in Japan. I am curious about her project because I am interested in the perceptions of English learning and learning contexts that native Japanese learners and learners from various countries living in Japan have.

Reading about her project I wondered: Who makes up the body of teacher-researchers that stereotype Japanese learners as being passive? Are they of a certain native language orientation? In addition, Miyuki mentions in her chapter that teachers' beliefs about passive stereotypical views of Japanese students need to be challenged. My sense is that, at least in Japan, teacher-researchers including Miyuki are in the process of reaching beyond the stereotyping and are focusing on learner perceptions and processes.

Both because of the duality of the categories and out of general curiosity, I also wanted to know more about how she defined *Heterogeneous learners* and *Homogenous learners*. Additionally, I noticed that all four of the learners with male names in her project are in the heterogeneous group, while the homogenous learners' names are exclusively female. That made me curious to know if her homogenous / passive students had gender or anxiety issues that learners of various languages can experience.

It would be nice to meet Miyuki sometime. If she and I have the chance, I would enjoy discussing her project face-to-face with her.

## CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

ERIC M. SKIER

Reading this chapter, I felt that Ms. Usuki's research held a number of very important reminders for those of us hoping and trying to foster autonomous language learners (in any country). The first is that just saying one believes in fostering autonomy doesn't necessarily equate with being an 'autonomy-fosterer.'

Right from her introduction, Miyuki speaks of autonomous behavior being equated with active displays (in the classroom), and I am as guilty as the next teacher of shows of Attribution Theory and displaying a preference for the energetic outspoken student. I guess I have a soft spot for anyone as talkative as me. However, over the years in my own classrooms, I have come to realize that no matter what I do or believe, it is the students' own actions (obvious and maybe not-so-obvious), as well as their perceptions that will ultimately affect and shape their learning experiences. Speaking for myself, this leads to the biggest leap of faith required when trying to foster autonomy: Forcing someone to speak out when they don't want to could be the most counterproductive action I as a language teacher could engage in. Which, in turn, leads me to the likelihood that successful language learning for the sake of communication may boil down to factors that the teacher has absolutely no say in or control over: time, out-of-class experiences (see Chapter 3), and, as we see in this study, the students' personality and/or character.

Whether homogeneous / passive or heterogeneous / active, the students in this study have shared a great deal with us, and I think we should all be thankful for their reminding us that we teachers can't see everything that is going on in a classroom, no matter how good or dedicated we are.

## CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 3

## KAZUYOSHI SATO

As language teachers, we know the difficulty of changing students' attitudes and beliefs about language learning. Although learner beliefs have gained prominence in the recent literature, few studies have been done, especially about how learner beliefs affect language learning (Ellis, 1994). The strength of Usuki's paper is that she has found and described Japanese students with positive self-beliefs, which contrasts with stereotypical views about passive Japanese learners. These students also outperformed others in TOEIC scores, oral tests, and overall grades. She concludes that, in order to promote learner autonomy, teachers should pay more attention to the beliefs that students bring into their classrooms.

However, it is not clear how these good students in the heterogeneous group developed their beliefs about language learning. What kind of beliefs did they bring into their classrooms when they entered the university? What kind of instruction did they receive? How did teachers' beliefs influence those students' beliefs? Although Usuki was aware of the importance of the relationship between learner beliefs and teacher beliefs, she focused on learner beliefs in this study. In short, recent studies are more concerned with how learners develop or change their beliefs about language learning in relation to teachers' beliefs than what kind of beliefs students have (cf. Kern, 1995). In fact, Kern showed that students in western countries had difficulty changing their beliefs and called for a more comprehensive study using both quantitative and qualitative measures.

In contrast to previous studies that mainly relied on surveys such as BALLI (*The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory*), Usuki used interviews to collect rich data about students' beliefs. I personally would have liked to have seen even more of the data instead of summaries, heard more students' voices to better explain the characteristics of their beliefs, and seen the quantitative data of the TOEIC scores, oral tests, and overall grades with the correlations among them. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) recommend employing multiple data sources including both quantitative and qualitative data to better describe learner and teacher beliefs. Another concern is why she categorized 12 students into heterogeneous and homogeneous groups and eliminated the 4 other students. Those 4 students who did not belong to the two distinct groups might have shown an evolving nature of learner beliefs. In this way she might have been able to show more clearly how students in this institution developed their beliefs, what strategies they used, and how they became autonomous learners.

There are some questions for future study. How do students develop and change their beliefs? How do teacher beliefs, materials, tasks, and assessment influence learner beliefs? How do students with positive beliefs influence other students (see Murphey & Arao, 2001)? What is the relationship between learner beliefs and outcomes? How do learner beliefs influence other individual characteristics such as learning styles, motivation and attitudes, personality, and learning strategies? What are the relationships between the context, teacher beliefs, and learner beliefs? These and other questions need to be investigated in future studies in different contexts in different countries.