

Learner Autonomy and Motivation in a Cooperative Learning Class



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The purpose of the study was to investigate learner autonomy and motivation in a cooperative reading class that I taught at a Japanese university. I closely examined my class to find out how cooperative learning encouraged the students' autonomy and increased their motivation. In order to investigate the classroom atmosphere and student perceptions, I consulted my teacher observation notes, as well as the students' weekly learning journals and end-of-the-course interviews. The questions I investigated are: (a) How, in terms of their motivation, do my students perceive a cooperative reading class compared with reading classes they have experienced in the past? (b) How does the classroom environment influence my students' motivation and how does my students' motivation change as the class progresses? (c) What aspects of the learning environment encourage my students' motivation and autonomy? (d) Are there any problems with cooperative learning that hinder my students' motivation and autonomy?

本研究の目的は、私が教えた日本の大学の協同学習を用いたリーディングクラスにおける学習者の自律と動機づけについて調査することであった。私は協同学習がどのように学生の自律を促し、動機づけを高めるかを明らかにするために授業を研究した。授業の雰囲気と学生の考えを調べるために、教師による観察メモ、学生が毎週書く学習日誌、授業の最後に行われた面接を参照した。調査項目は、以下のとおりである。(1) 動機づけの観点から見て、学生は過去に経験した読解の授業と比べて協同学習による読解の授業をどのように捉えているか。(2) クラス環境がどのように学生の動機づけに影響を与え、授業が進むにつれ動機づけにどのような変化が見られるか。(3) 学習環境のどのような面が学習者の動機づけと自律の促進に影響を及ぼすか。(4) 協同学習において学生の動機づけや自律を妨げる問題点はあるか。

INTRODUCTION

Japanese university students are often regarded as passive and teacher-dependent in the language classroom. We cannot easily dispel this impression because, in the traditional Japanese education system, students are trained to behave passively in a teacher-centered classroom until they enter university. I remember that I myself had never thought of playing an active role in the classroom when I was a student because, until graduating from university, I had been exposed only to teacher-centered classrooms. Moreover, since many students learn English to pass university entrance examinations, their motivation is very low by the time they enter university. However, it is also true that they think English is important for their future and want to improve their English proficiency for real communication.

Even if students are willing to be autonomous learners, they do not know how to proceed. For a few years, I have had my university students keep learning journals in my classes. I often encounter comments which show their willingness to learn English autonomously outside of the class, but at the same time indicate their frustration over the fact that they do not know how to. In order to become autonomous, learners must change their view of the teacher-learner relationship. However, it is not easy to change the views of learners who for years have experienced only a teacher-centered classroom. If forced to be autonomous learners, they would be perplexed and find it difficult to adjust themselves to this new role. Ho and Crockall (1995) claim that, in order to promote learner autonomy, both students and teachers should help learners to realize that they must take responsibility for their learning. In other words, one must create an environment in which the responsibility for learning is shared.

Considering the above state of affairs, I decided to introduce cooperative learning into my freshman non-English-major reading class. The students' level was low intermediate. I admit that I maintained a high degree of structure in the class that may not seem compatible with promoting learner autonomy. However, my main purpose was to encourage the students to take responsibility for their decision-making in class as a first step to becoming autonomous learners.

In this chapter, I would like to present the results of my efforts in my class, as evidenced in part by my analysis of excerpts from student interviews and journals. Before I describe my class, I would like to review the literature concerning learner autonomy, motivation, and cooperative learning. This will help to characterize some of the most significant theories of the three concepts. I will then describe the action research conducted in my class. After I discuss the findings based on my observations, student interviews, and learning journals, I will talk about insights from other teachers and consider the implications for future research.

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION

For a long time, Gardner and Lambert's (1972) integrative and instrumental framework has dominated the field of motivational research. Both integrative and instrumental motivations represent the primary reasons for students to learn a second language. Integrative orientation signifies the learner's desire to identify with the target culture, while instrumental orientation refers to the need to fulfill practical objectives such as getting a job. As more research was conducted, it appeared that the dichotomy between integrative and instrumental orientation did not cover the complexity of all motivational components. Researchers claimed that

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motivation should be explored from a perspective that adds a context-specific approach to the general psychology of the integrative-instrumental motivation theories (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1990; Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

Concerning the relationship between autonomy and motivation, Dickinson (1995) criticizes Gardner and Lambert's model as being less useful for linking autonomy and motivation, and emphasizes the importance of cognitive motivation. In the cognitive approach, which has recently attracted attention, two theories, self-determination theory and attribution theory, are widely considered as being the most relevant to the task of encouraging learners to take control of their own learning. If learners can control their learning, they can increase their motivation; this, in turn, can lead to more effective learning.

Self-determination theory is based on a distinction between intrinsic motivation (learners are interested in learning tasks and outcomes for their own sake) and extrinsic motivation (learners are interested in tasks for rewards). It claims that learners who are intrinsically motivated are better able to identify with the goal of their learning and more willing to take responsibility for the outcome. In other words, learners who learn for pleasure and the intrinsic satisfaction of achievement are more effective learners than those who learn for extrinsic rewards. When I think about my students, many of them have learned English for the extrinsic reward of passing a university entrance examination. I hoped that I would foster the students' intrinsic motivation by providing opportunities for them to consider their learning and responsibility in a cooperative learning class.

Attribution theory relates to learners' perceptions of the reasons for success and failure. Four possible causes of either result have been identified: ability (internal and stable), task difficulty (external and stable), effort (internal, changeable, and under the learner's control), and luck (external, changeable, but not under the learner's control) (Dickinson, 1995). Learners who attribute their success or failure to an unstable or internal cause such as effort tend to persist in the face of failure. In other words, success in learning leads "to greater motivation only for those who accept responsibility for their own learning success" (Dickinson, 1995, p. 171). This indicates that for educators to promote learner autonomy, they should make students aware that, to succeed, they need to take control of their own learning. In this sense, cooperative learning seemed to me useful at least for the purpose of having my students realize the importance of being responsible for their education.

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning is designed to engage students in the learning process through carefully structured group work (Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Unlike conventional group work, cooperative learning is not accomplished when only one or two members of a group do all the work while the others wait for the task to be finished. Cooperative learning has been defined as a "group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups, and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning, and is motivated to increase the learning of others" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8). Cooperative learning is one of the most extensively researched areas in education. The literature indicates that cooperative learning is effective in promoting intrinsic motivation, task achievement, higher order thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as in improving inter-group relationships, heightening self-esteem, and lowering anxiety (Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Salvin, 1995).

Autonomy and cooperation might appear to be conflicting ideas if you assume that cooperation implies mutual total dependency. However, as Thomson (1998) suggests,

cooperative learning is a useful experience for fostering autonomous learning. Through interaction among learners, students can obtain complementary skills in autonomy and cooperation. The skills essential for cooperative learning such as problem-solving and negotiating differences of opinion are relevant to autonomous learning, while the skills essential for autonomous learning encourage students' active participation in cooperative learning. And as Wilhelm (1999) points out, students who are accustomed to a traditional teacher-centered method of instruction feel anxious when they are first asked to take responsibility for their learning. Therefore, we should give step-by-step guidance so that the students get through the transition period with greater confidence. In this sense, cooperative learning can also help the students to develop self-confidence.

OBJECTIVES

In this study, I wanted to investigate how to use cooperative learning to encourage learner autonomy and increase students' motivation in my reading class. I investigated the following four questions:

1. How, in terms of motivation, do my students perceive a cooperative reading class compared with reading classes they have experienced in the past?
2. How does the classroom environment influence my students' motivation and how does my students' motivation change as the class progresses?
3. What aspects of the learning environment encourage my students' motivation and autonomy?
4. Are there any problems with cooperative learning that hinder my students' motivation and autonomy?

OUTLINE OF THE FRESHMAN COURSE

The class was designed to help students improve their reading proficiency in a cooperative classroom environment. For 13 weeks, from October 2002 to February 2003, the class was taught once a week by a Japanese instructor in a 90-minute lesson. The purpose of the class was to increase academic reading skills and English vocabulary, to develop critical thinking skills, and to promote cooperation among the students. This was a required, pre-existing reading course for all freshman students intended to develop academic reading skills. Each teacher was free to determine the content of the class. This was one of two English classes that students took in the first semester. Since most of them had never experienced any form of cooperative learning environment before they entered university, I wanted to give my students this experience for the first time in order to encourage their learner autonomy.

Forty-eight Japanese freshman students in the Faculty of Regional Studies at a city university participated in this study. There were 32 male and 16 female students. Their level of English was low intermediate. They had taken English reading as a required subject and about half the learners were not highly motivated to learn the language.

In this class, I employed a jigsaw activity, which is a well-known cooperative learning technique. The technique is designed to encourage cooperation by making the individual group members pursue a common goal. How can jigsaw exercises be applied in a reading class? Let's take the example of a reading activity on the pollution of river water. First, students form groups of four called home teams, which are the collaborative learning groups. Four different reading passages are distributed to the respective members of the home teams. These passages are written from four different perspectives (such as those of a fishing cooperative, an expert from the

Department of Commerce, a manager of a chemical plant, and a consultant). Each member leaves the home team to form an expert team with members of other teams who have the same reading passage. These temporary focus groups become ‘experts’ in the part given to them. The job of the expert team is to familiarize themselves with the assigned piece and prepare to explain their understanding of it to their original home team group members. The expert teams then disband, and the students return to their home teams. Students then take turns teaching their selected parts of the passage to the other students in their home team. Finally, all the students perform a task that requires a full explication of the passage. For example, they can brainstorm solutions for water pollution that may satisfy all the parties involved.

The class did five jigsaw reading activities of this kind over a semester of 12 weeks. In the first week of the course, the students were told the objectives of the course and the reasons why the cooperative learning system was being implemented. In the second week, the students were introduced to a jigsaw-type cooperative learning method. To create balanced groups, the teacher formed groups by consulting a survey conducted at the beginning of the class and taking into account the students’ gender, personality traits (such as shyness or talkativeness), and attitudes towards learning English. (In addition, in this particular class, the teacher knew half of the students personally since they had taken a class with her in the previous semester.) In total, 12 groups of home teams were formed, each having four members. From the third week on, the students participated in full-length jigsaw reading activities.

I chose *All Sides of the Issue* (Coelho, Winer, & Olsen, 1998) as the course textbook. This book deals with a wide range of topics including legal, environmental, and industrial problems. Through content-based reading, each group of language learners dealt with four sides of a controversial issue, and this encouraged discussion and debate. There were five sets of four reading passages. The jigsaw reading activities using one set of passages were completed in two weeks. In the first week, students did pre-reading activities and reading skills exercises, and summarized the passages. In the second week, students shared their understandings of the passages with their home team members, discussed questions related to the passages, participated in role-play discussion, and took a quiz individually. The home teams remained the same throughout the course because I thought that this would help foster group cohesiveness. The other team, the expert team, consisted of members from different home teams. Unlike the home team, it was formed randomly every two weeks. I wanted to provide the students with opportunities both to develop group cohesiveness and to communicate with as many classmates as possible. In the class I had taught in the previous year, the members of the two different types of groups changed every week. Although the students worked with a wide variety of classmates, some told me that they felt uncomfortable talking with different classmates every week. Thus, to maintain balance, I decided this year to use both fixed and changing groups.

The main idea of the jigsaw reading activities is to increase a sense of individual accountability and positive interdependence among the students by ensuring that each group member has a specific role and contributes to the group equally. Positive interdependence is considered to be at the heart of cooperative learning. Students work together to accomplish a shared goal in groups, and all the members of the group need to learn and understand the assigned material. Johnson and Johnson (1999) state that positive interdependence “promotes a situation in which students work together in small groups to maximize the learning of all members, sharing their resources, providing mutual support, and celebrating their joint success” (p. 26).

The precise procedure of the jigsaw reading activities that I used was as follows. In the first week, the students formed an expert team of four members chosen from the different

home teams, and, on every given day, members from each group decided who would assume which role. There were four roles: facilitator, timekeeper, recorder, and checker. The facilitator moderated the discussion and kept the group on task. The timekeeper monitored the time so that the group could finish its task within the allotted period. The recorder wrote down important points from the group discussion and returned the notes to the teacher after class. The checker helped the group facilitator and made sure that all the group members understood the points raised and participated equally in discussion. After the pre-reading activity, the students each read the passage to get the main idea. They then completed the tasks cooperatively as a group. Finally, the students prepared to present information on the material they had read to the members of the home team the following week. In the second week, the students formed a home team of four, and members from each group assigned the roles for the day. After each member took a turn sharing his or her understanding of the reading passage, the students discussed questions about the passage raised by the teacher. They shared the results of their group discussion with the whole class. Finally, the students took a quiz to confirm each member's comprehension of the reading passages.

Keeping a journal was one of the class assignments. The students were required to submit their journals at the beginning of each class every week. The purpose of the journals was to help the students develop their own critical awareness of their learning process. The journal comprised three parts. In the first part, the students were required to list activities conducted in the class and evaluate them in terms of interest and usefulness. The original idea for this was taken from Woo and Murphy (1999). In the second part, the students made comments on class activities for the day. In the last part, the students freely wrote about anything related to language learning (such as disagreeable experiences in past English courses). I wrote comments in each journal, answered the questions the students raised, and then returned the journals during the next class.

DATA COLLECTION

The data I collected from this project included observations, group interviews, and learning journals. After the first, introductory week of the course, I recorded the class activities as well as my impressions of the classroom atmosphere and group dynamics each week.

At the end of the semester, semi-structured group interviews (each group had four members) were carried out in Japanese to investigate the students' responses towards the cooperative learning experience. Each group interview lasted 15 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. On the basis of the interviews, I identified the students' general responses to the class.

In order to understand better the students' feelings and attitudes towards cooperative learning as they appeared in the interviews, I also consulted the students' journals. The first week of the journal was excluded because it was mostly occupied with explanations of class procedure and ice-breaking activities. Thus, I read a total of 452 journal entries reflecting regular classroom activities over a 12-week period. I found it difficult to select, among 452 journals, statements that speak significantly to the questions raised in the interviews because there were many relevant comments as well as many other interesting comments which did not directly relate to the main themes identified in the interview. If I had read and analyzed the journals more closely, I would have discovered new perspectives, but, given the limits of space here, I will quote only a few entries.

FINDINGS

OBSERVATIONS

My observation notes from the class suggest how the students gradually developed their ability to work cooperatively with each other over the semester. During the first three weeks, the students were puzzled by the cooperative learning approach because they were used to traditional ways of teaching such as the grammar-translation method. Moreover, they were not quite sure how jigsaw types of reading activities actually worked. They were shy and did not speak up voluntarily in group discussions. However, by the end of the first cycle of jigsaw reading activities, the students understood how cooperative group work functions and gradually began to contribute to group discussion more actively. The assigned roles and the fact that the nature of the activity required each member to speak out helped the group members to participate in group discussions more or less equally. The attendance rate was very high, with about 90% of the students never skipping class. As the weeks passed, group cohesiveness increased, and the students became accustomed to expressing their opinions freely. Students also got accustomed to each of the four group roles and played their assigned roles well. This, in turn, helped them to concentrate on the discussions.

I also observed that some problems appeared. In the home teams, the students felt relaxed and were enthusiastic about participating in group discussions, whereas, in the expert teams, the students' behavior differed from member to member. When no member wanted to lead the group discussion, all the members tended to be quiet and discussion stopped. Another problem was the students' low English proficiency. Many of the students had not had much opportunity to practice their oral skills in high school and could not express their opinions very well in English. At the same time, they were afraid of making mistakes. In order to encourage discussion, I distributed a handout of useful expressions at the beginning of each class and had the students practice the expressions in pairs. In addition, I encouraged students not to worry about making mistakes. This helped to reduce the students' anxiety to some extent, but they still had considerable difficulty in conducting their discussions in English only. In order to solve this problem, I allotted a certain period of time in which the students were allowed to use Japanese, and this seemed to be an effective solution.

INTERVIEW AND LEARNING JOURNALS

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR MOTIVATION IN THE COOPERATIVE-LEARNING CLASS COMPARED WITH THEIR EXPERIENCES IN OTHER READING CLASSES

During the interviews, students described a clear difference between the cooperative learning class and other reading classes they had taken. Many students mentioned that their other classes were teacher-centered and passive. They felt that they needed to take more responsibility in their learning in order to accomplish group tasks and therefore participated willingly in the cooperative learning class. They said that they felt more motivated in the cooperative class for several reasons. One reason was that, since the students were assigned individual roles, they felt motivated to meet their clearly defined role responsibilities. The distribution of roles brought a certain level of tension to the students and led them to engage in the discussion more actively. Another reason was that the students felt it was more fun learning in a group than learning alone. As can be seen in Excerpt 1, cooperative learning provided the students with opportunities to think of problems from various perspectives, express their own opinions,

and listen to the various opinions of the group members. (All the excerpts from journals were translated into English by the author.)

Excerpt 1. *I understand the story better than usual. The oral summary made by all the other members was easy to follow, so our group was able to finish our tasks efficiently. Since all the members understood the story very well, they put forward various opinions, and I enjoyed the discussion very much.* (Learning Journal for Week 10)

In a communicative reading class, the students are more likely to find the approach to the reading topics stimulating. In high school, reading classes often focus on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. Here, however, the students have the opportunity to reflect on the reading topics with others and thus to develop their critical thinking skills, as Excerpts 2 and 3 below show.

Excerpt 2. *It was interesting to think about who discovered America. Is it true that Columbus found America? If it is true, what happened to the native Indians who already lived there? The story made me think of various things and was a very stimulating topic for me.* (Learning Journal for Week 12)

Excerpt 3. *We had a discussion in the home team today. Although each member focused on a similar point, I . . . learned a lot from the other members. For example, I learned that we needed to think of other financial matters than taxes. In order to solve the water pollution problem, I realized that each position needed to be compromised somewhat so that the final solution took each person's opinion into account.* (Learning Journal for Week 10)

The students also felt more relaxed about participating in a cooperative learning classroom. In other classes, students were usually required to give grammatically perfect answers to the teacher's questions. Thus, they were led to fear making mistakes in front of their classmates. It is understandable, then, that at the beginning of the course, many of the students were still afraid of making mistakes and were not willing to speak voluntarily in a group discussion. However, as the course progressed, more and more students lost their fear of making grammatical mistakes and stated their opinions frequently. The following interview extract exemplifies this tendency.

Excerpt 4. *Today's story was easy to understand, and the role playing, in which the members shared their opinions freely, was especially fun. As the class has progressed, I feel that every member has become more accustomed to sharing their opinions more smoothly in English. Although we may make a lot of mistakes, I feel that we have made progress in communicating with each other.* (Learning Journal for Week 9)

EFFECTS OF CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE AND A CHANGE IN STUDENT MOTIVATION

Most of the students perceived a great deal of change in the classroom atmosphere, and their motivation increased as the class progressed. Although some of the students adapted to a cooperative learning style very quickly, others took time to get used to this new approach to learning and felt anxious about working in a group. As Excerpt 5 shows, this anxiety had an adverse effect on the students' motivation to participate in group activities. However, Excerpt 6 suggests that, by the end of the course, students had become accustomed to the class and had started to feel that it was fun to talk with their classmates.

Excerpt 5. *I felt very nervous because I did not know the members of my group very well. I hoped I would be able to make friends with them soon. Since this was the first group discussion we'd had, all the members seemed at a loss but tried to cooperate with each other.* (Learning Journal for Week 3)

Excerpt 6. *I got a mark of 8 out of 10 in the True or False questions. I was surprised that I got the highest mark this time. I cannot believe that this is the last jigsaw activity. I will miss the members of the group now that we have opened up to each other. I am happy that I was able to make friends with many classmates in this class.* (Learning Journal for Week 12)

Each student's positive attitude towards learning in a group had a positive influence on the classroom atmosphere and, thus, as students reported in the interviews, group cohesiveness grew as the weeks passed. This was one of the most important attributes of the communicative reading class. It is clear that the students themselves recognized the development of group cohesiveness. Especially in the home teams, which met regularly with the same members, the students felt more and more comfortable about holding discussions (see Excerpts 7 & 8).

Excerpt 7. *The atmosphere of the home group is improving all the time, and each member is becoming more willing to give his or her opinion. I also participate more actively in the discussions and understand the reading passages better. However, in the expert team, the members are usually unmotivated, and I do not feel interested in participating in discussion.* (Learning Journal for Week 8)

Excerpt 8. *We had the last home-team discussion today. Honestly speaking, I was at a loss for words and did not feel very motivated when the class started. However, as the atmosphere of the class improved, I started to feel that the class was fun. As for my English proficiency, I am not sure whether or not it improved.* (Learning Journal for Week 12)

A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES STUDENT MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMY

In contrast with classes in which students are not often given the chance to use English and consequently lack the motivation to do so, in the cooperative learning class, the students are required to speak up in a group, regardless of their level of proficiency in English. Students have many opportunities to listen to and speak English and feel increasingly confident in their use of the language. The following excerpt highlights how the students found learning English to be meaningful and interesting.

Excerpt 9. *Today's story was easy to understand so I was able to relate the summary to my group members with great confidence. I feel great when I can give my classmates the messages I want to convey and understand the messages others want to convey. When I was a high school student, I learned English mostly in Japanese and felt it to be meaningless. However, in this class I realized that learning English in English is very meaningful. I have fun!* (Learning Journal for Week 11)

In the learning journals, the students seldom referred to the teacher but often mentioned their classmates. In a cooperative learning class, the classmates play a greater role than the teacher does. In other words, cooperative learning seemed to help students change their view of teacher-student roles. The following interview extract, which is representative of many

students' comments, suggests a link between encouragement received from other students and the journal writer's motivation.

Excerpt 10. *The objective of the members of our home team is to improve our discussion skills in English. I hope that everyone will be able to achieve this objective by the end of the course. The class looks challenging, but today the members of my group listened to me earnestly and tried to understand what I meant. I feel happy when I make myself understood in English and understand what others say in our discussions.* (Learning Journal for Week 3)

Some students learned from other group members that taking responsibility for each role facilitates group work. In other words, they become aware that, to make progress, it is important for them to be responsible for their own learning. Such self-awareness is crucial in making students more autonomous as learners.

Excerpt 11. *My group was well balanced with two women and two men, so our discussion was very lively. I noticed that the role of group leader was important, and since our leader did his job very well and led the discussion successfully, we were able to have a meaningful discussion. I realized that in order to make the discussion effective it was important for each of us to have a strong sense of responsibility towards our roles.* (Learning Journal for Week 3)

PROBLEMS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

When the students were asked in the interviews about the problems they faced during the classes, many of them pointed out that group members participated unequally. Furthermore, when one of the members was unwilling to participate in group discussion or wanted to talk about something irrelevant to the discussion topic, the group's work did not proceed well. Students said that if someone started to chat idly, they and the other members usually did not have the courage to stop the chatty student and everyone in the group would end up chatting throughout the class. Faced with a disruptive student, the other members tended to stop discussing topics seriously. One unmotivated student could ruin the cooperative atmosphere. In other cases, members depended on each other too much and did not take full individual responsibility. The group facilitator played the most important role. If the facilitator was effective, the discussions would go smoothly. Some students reported in their journals their frustration and complaints about other group members' behavior.

Excerpt 12. *I knew all the members of today's group, so we tended to chat throughout the class. We did not speak English very much. Although I was a facilitator, I could not get the members to concentrate on the discussion.* (Learning Journal for Week 5)

Another problem was that there were great differences in English proficiency among the members. Students with low proficiency sometimes felt alienated from fluent members and so did not participate in the discussion. One student said that, since he was not used to speaking English, he had difficulty speaking often and tended to use Japanese. The following interview comments indicate that some students reported difficulty in keeping up with the discussion in English.

Excerpt 13. *I feel it is very difficult to convey my thoughts in English. I speak Japanese in spite of myself. I want to avoid speaking Japanese and improve my communication skills in English. In addition, I have difficulty in guessing the meaning of unknown English words in a reading passage. I also want to improve my reading skills.* (Learning Journal for Week 5)

Excerpt 14. *Although I have become accustomed to the style of this class, I feel very uncomfortable speaking English all the time in class. Japanese sometimes comes out of my mouth without my noticing. Although I haven't had any problems in the written test, I feel shocked that I cannot speak English very well in a real conversation.* (Learning Journal for Week 6)

FEEDBACK FROM OTHER TEACHERS

I understand that this cooperative learning class is highly structured and represents only the first step in encouraging my students to be autonomous learners. Since I need to take the next step in promoting autonomy, I asked other contributors to the present volume for their advice. One said that I could give the students more topic choices. In this class the students did not choose the topics they dealt with, and some students mentioned that they participated in the discussion only when they found a topic to be interesting and stimulating. If they could negotiate with their classmates and choose topics among themselves, they would be likely to participate in the discussions more frequently. Another idea was to increase students' metacognitive awareness of autonomy. The students would be able to raise their awareness through discussion with their classmates on which learning strategies they used and what reaction they received from the other students during group discussions.

One of biggest problems in this class was that students with low proficiency tended to switch back to Japanese during group discussions. One idea for addressing this problem was that the teacher could set a tape recorder in front of each group to monitor their use of Japanese. In this way, the teacher could pressure the students of a particular group not to use Japanese while the teacher is not directly monitoring them. In addition, the teacher could listen to the tape and analyze under what circumstances the students tend to use Japanese. In later meetings, the teacher could then advise the students on how to avoid using Japanese. Another idea was to introduce the role of language checker. The language checker would check how many times each member speaks Japanese during the discussion. This student could also monitor other students' use of English and give feedback to them on this. While these ideas certainly might provide a short-term solution to practical in-class problems, the autonomous class has to maintain a level playing field for the students and encourage them not to fear being corrected for errors. In other words, the autonomous class has to prevent students from exercising authority over one another.

Another problem was that some students were less motivated than others, and, as a consequence, group members participated unequally, especially in the expert team. One solution suggested was to introduce warm-up activities that would help the students get to know each other better before discussing the reading passages. In this way, the members would feel at ease before moving onto the group discussion. Another solution offered was to fix the members of the expert team, not those of the home team. In the home team, the students have to share their ideas and perform tasks cooperatively, while in the expert team they are not forced to talk about the passage cooperatively. This is one reason why the expert team is not as talkative and cooperative as the home team. If the members were fixed in the expert team, the group cohesiveness would be stronger and the students would remain involved in the discussions.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed how cooperative learning worked to promote student autonomy in my reading class. Judging from my observations and the students' comments in the interviews

and journals, I can conclude that cooperative learning worked well in that it fostered the students' intrinsic motivation and encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning. In comparison with traditional teaching methods, the cooperative learning classroom encouraged the students to participate enthusiastically in group discussions. I was not, however, able to encourage all the students to learn for pleasure and the intrinsic satisfaction of achievement. Owing to their unfamiliarity with the system, it took a while for the students to appreciate the efficacy of cooperative learning. Some were still doubtful about the cooperative learning style at the end of the course. They thought that they could learn more efficiently in a teacher-centered class. In the future, I should make sure that students understand the basic principles of cooperative learning thoroughly and how it contributes to their learning. Other students attributed their problems to the difficulty of the tasks. To address this, I need to give the students more topic choices to prevent them from feeling that the tasks are too difficult for them.

As for the few problems discussed above, I will consider adopting the advice of other teachers in future cooperative learning classes. I would especially like to introduce activities which increase students' metacognitive awareness about autonomy. The students did not have the opportunity to share their opinions about the cooperative learning class. If they reflect on the meaning of cooperative learning and their new roles as learners, they might understand why they feel uncomfortable with this new learning style. The students might be more willing to participate in group activities as autonomous learners, once they understand the purpose and meaning of the class. They may also be able to share their learning journals with other classmates. Some students are too shy to share their opinions in groups, but if they discuss their opinions about the class and about their roles in a dialogue journal, they might feel more secure in sharing their opinions. In order to encourage learner autonomy, I will also pay careful attention to the students' voices as evidenced in their journal writing. I would like to encourage my students to report every problem they encounter during the class. For example, if they face the problem of a disruptive student, I will talk about the problem after class with the students involved. At the same time, I will encourage them to write their specific opinions of the teaching method and of the teacher's role in their journals. My students did not write very much in the journals about the teacher—that is, about me. I do not think that this shows that the students were intimidated to write to me about my role, because I had a good rapport with them and they often wrote about their private lives and personal matters. I have never asked my students to write on any specific topic, but, if I center their reflections in this way, I might be able to encourage them to learn more from observing the teacher-learner roles. Moreover, I would be able to select some of their opinions and share them with the class.

In their learning journals, some students expressed their desire to learn English by themselves outside of the classroom, since the class time was insufficient. However, they did not have a clear idea about what to do other than to buy a textbook and do exercises. A few students told me that they had started to learn English in such a way, but said that they had quickly given up because they were too busy with other activities. I assume that the real reason must have been that their method of learning English was boring. In order to sustain their motivation, I might suggest that they form their own English club that would continue after the semester is over. They could meet in person, or they could develop an online space where they could exchange messages in English and swap ideas about things they have found in English: movies they have seen, books they have read, and so on. Having my students become truly autonomous learners is my ultimate goal, so I will search for ways to promote learner autonomy beyond the model of a cooperative learning classroom.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

EMIKA ABE

I have been interested in cooperative learning since I first took part in a cooperative learning seminar. I considered introducing the idea of cooperative learning into one of my classes when I faced the difficulty of making my students work efficiently in groups. However, my insufficient understanding of cooperative learning hindered me from applying this to my class. In this chapter, Akiko documents her project very clearly. Her paper shows me, step-by-step, the procedure of jigsaw reading, and I can now picture myself organizing a similar activity in my own listening and speaking class. This is, therefore, a very good model for teachers who want to put cooperative learning group work into practice.

I agree with Akiko that it takes time for students to get accustomed to a new learning style. Introducing jigsaw reading is a new experience for her students. Thus, repeating the same structure several times must be a very effective strategy for her to incorporate into the design of this activity. This repetition gives students ample opportunities to practice the new learning style, and, through this practice, students can find the strengths and weaknesses of their learning. Moreover, a highly structured activity like this enables them to focus on the task. Through these extensive and well-structured cycles of practice, students can become aware of weaknesses in their learning and start changing attitudes towards their own learning. Akiko's project is, in all these respects, a carefully designed activity.

I understand that assigned roles in cooperative learning enhance students' responsibility. Once students have experienced that group discussion does not work well unless each person takes responsibility for each role, they realize that precious opportunities to learn and practice English have been lost because of their irresponsible action. This failure leads them to change their attitudes since they now know how important each role is. Through this process, then, students are taking greater responsibility for their assigned roles.

In the learning journals, Akiko finds students saying that they want to learn English outside of the class. Although students have to explore more effective ways of doing this, it is worthwhile mentioning that their willingness to do out-of-class learning shows their positive attitudes towards learning English. This, in turn, indicates that students have started reflecting on their learning processes and have found the necessity to do something more outside of the class. This is wonderful—they are taking responsibility for their own learning.

Overall, Akiko's project promotes students' motivation and develops their sense of responsibility for their own learning. More importantly, such a project has a great influence on teachers' self-reflection processes. Cooperative work with other teachers benefits Akiko very much, just as her students get great support and encouragement from their peers. I cannot wait to hear about new developments in her jigsaw reading project based on other teachers' comments and her own self-reflection.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

RICHARD SMITH

In the ‘difficult circumstances’ of a large class of apparently inactive students, how can a teacher begin to develop autonomy? Akiko’s account is a very useful one for teachers in this kind of situation, since she writes so clearly about the procedures she adopted. As I’ll explain below, I continue to have some doubts about whether cooperative learning techniques—on their own—can enhance learner autonomy, but Akiko has persuaded me that a ‘system’ like the one she’s described can be a useful foundation to build on *when* (as here) it’s well-designed to meet students’ needs and they can see its value. It’s very clear that Akiko’s students became much more involved in taking responsibility for their classroom learning than in a more traditional reading class, and more motivated too.

Cooperative learning techniques (jigsaw reading and role allocation in groups) certainly seem to have contributed to the productive classroom atmosphere that Akiko describes, and to have promoted a spirit of ‘positive interdependence’—an important aspect of autonomy. Probably, though, Akiko’s own positive attitude, and the way she clearly took account of needs that students had previously expressed via dialogue journals, played as much of a role in this positive outcome as particular classroom techniques. Overall, Akiko’s account reminded me how necessary good classroom dynamics are in any teaching situation, and how providing a supportive ‘structure’ is as important as enhancing students’ ‘freedom’ when it comes to developing learner autonomy in classroom situations.

To what extent, though, can students become interdependently independent of the teacher when there is, as Akiko herself admits, such a ‘high degree of structure’ (and, perhaps, so little actual freedom?) in a class organized according to cooperative learning principles? The teacher is much less obviously in control than in a traditional classroom, since tasks and roles are so effectively delegated—but events are nevertheless very carefully orchestrated by the teacher. Akiko’s account made me think there might be a useful distinction to be drawn between *delegation* as in this class (where overall teacher control is maintained) and *negotiation* (where at least some control over learning contents and/or procedures is transferred to students). Her account has also helped me to recognize that delegation and imposed group ‘rules’ can be good first steps in confidence-building towards autonomy, but my view continues to be that negotiation in at least some areas needs to then occur for autonomy to be effectively developed. Otherwise, won’t students remain forever dependent on how a particular teacher orchestrates the classroom—and stay in the same position as before regarding learning outside class? Negotiation would also provide an authentic reason for the ongoing reflection on work in groups, which Akiko already feels could enhance the development of her students’ autonomy.

One value of *Autonomy You Ask!* overall is the way we’re given rare insights into the *process* of developing autonomy—snapshots of a never-ending journey, not pronouncements set in stone. Akiko’s contribution is interesting and useful for many reasons, but I particularly appreciate the way it leaves behind its moorings in a conventional literature review, research questions, and intention to evaluate a particular ‘system,’ and opens up unexpectedly into learners’ voices, their diversity, and the questions which these give rise to. Opening up to doubt: Could that be what this is all about?