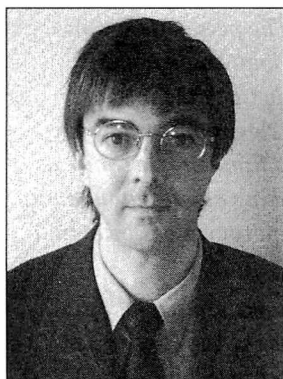


# Institutional Pressures and Learner Autonomy



**Michael Carroll**

Faculty of Letters,  
St Andrews Momoyama Gakuin  
University

carroll@andrew.ac.jp



**Ellen Head**

Language Centre,  
St Andrews Momoyama  
Gakuin University

ellenkobe@yahoo.com

*In this chapter we attempt to provide a rich picture of English curriculum development at a private university in western Japan. While developing in-house materials to be used by a large number of students and teachers, we have often found it a challenge to reconcile a commitment to teacher and learner autonomy, with the constraints imposed by the requirements of the university. The chapter deals with the challenges which we have encountered and our attempts to meet them. We also present our different perspectives on the theoretical significance of those challenges when we hypothesize about the place of learner autonomy in the curriculum.*

本章では西日本のある私立大学の英語カリキュラム開発を詳しく説明する。多数の教師と学習者のための学内専用教材を開発する中で、大学運営上の制約のもと、教師と学習者自律への責任を果たすことは大変難しいということが分かった。ここではその問題とそれに対する私たちの試みを取り上げる。また、カリキュラムにおける学習者自律の役割を考えるにあたり、これらの問題の理論的重要性について、私たちの様々な見方も明確にする。

## WIDENING THE FOCUS: MODELS AND IMAGES OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ACROSS A CURRICULUM

Michael: *When we think of an individual learner, it's not hard to envisage what learner autonomy means. It entails the learner making choices about their learning experiences, evaluating those experiences as well as their progress, and planning subsequent steps. When we think of a classroom, we can perhaps also envisage how a teacher might organise class activities which facilitate these kinds of individual behaviors. Of course, doing this at the classroom level is more complex than in a one-to-one situation. In any group of students there will be diverse needs, abilities, learning styles, and levels of motivation. Activities that support one person's independence may limit another's. For example, asking students to talk freely about their personal experiences may constitute a welcome freedom for some, but others may find the lack of direction to be a major obstacle: They may be simply unable to choose a topic. Still, the teacher may be close enough to his or her students to be able to keep track of student needs and address these variations by carefully balancing free choice with useful directions.*

*The place of autonomy in an institution-wide, planned curriculum is a further step removed from the personal relationship between teachers and individual students. The person designing curriculum frameworks, syllabuses or even specific activities may not even know many of the students. In fact, the whole idea of a planned curriculum might seem antithetic to the idea of autonomous learning and teaching. Trying to regulate what goes on in the classroom necessarily reduces the choices that teachers and learners can make. However, this is to think of free choice as being an all-or-nothing construct. A more useful, and realistic, way of thinking about autonomous learning arises out of the notion that a framework that defines a range of appropriate choices in some senses allows us to 'choose' more effectively than we could without any frame.*

*As curriculum designers, then, our task must be to create a system of supports, a scaffold that both teachers and students can use to make sense of their learning experiences. And for learners in particular, and sometimes for teachers too, we need to consider to what extent we have to explain how to use the scaffold: how it can be added to or by-passed as the occasion demands, and how it can best be navigated and monitored.*

Ellen: *The metaphors I would like to use for thinking about autonomy in the curriculum are the map and the menu. A map encourages autonomy by showing the layout, without dictating the route. Our curriculum is more like a fixed itinerary. Although some fixed elements are needed for learners whose sense of autonomy is not yet highly developed, such learners also need some 'optional excursions.' I believe it could be helpful to include a strand focused on learning to learn, a map of how to learn, which would enable learners to work out their own itineraries. The curriculum could also provide for a menu of choices of progressively increasing significance.*

*Writing about designing materials to encourage learner autonomy, Julian Edge and Sue Wharton (1998) emphasize the desirability of incorporating choices and providing ways for the teacher to share responsibility with learners.*

*A carefully designed coursebook can in itself encourage development: it can carry the seeds of its own adaptation. (p. 299)*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Heidi Evans Nachi for discussing various ways of carrying out curriculum evaluation.

The idea of including materials to help students work on their learning processes is by now well established in EFL coursebooks... materials are not capable of making learners autonomous or making teachers develop. (p. 302)

*I would like to suggest that as curriculum developers who think that learner autonomy is a good idea we have a responsibility to raise the issue with our colleagues. By talking and listening to the other teachers who are involved in realizing the curriculum in practice, we might be able to develop together. I don't want to take a positivist position, to imply that I know what learner autonomy is and I am going to teach my colleagues about it. I am aware of that as one of the perils of operating in a somewhat hierarchical academic culture. However, I think that asking questions like "What do you think about learner autonomy?" and "What do you do about learner autonomy?" is beneficial because it helps us to establish a shared vocabulary with our colleagues, and to articulate where the differences are. Torbert (1978) notes:*

The rhetoric of collaboration alone will not promote shared purpose and self-direction among members. On the other hand, to attempt to develop shared purpose and self-direction through coercion is self-contradictory [...] an ironic kind of leadership and organizational structure, which is simultaneously educative and productive, simultaneously controlling and freeing, is necessary. (p. 113)

### **CURRICULUM CHANGE: A CASE STUDY**

Our university is implementing a new English communication curriculum for 1500 first-year non-English majors. The curriculum is centred around an in-house coursebook which we have been writing and re-writing over the last two years. The program involves more than 40 Japanese and native English speaker teachers. The tension between prescribing objectives, texts, and sometimes activities, on the one hand, and facilitating creative teaching, on the other, has become an increasingly important issue for this initiative.

In this part of the chapter, we will briefly describe the situation that existed before the implementation of the new curriculum, and the way the university has gone about addressing the problems it identified.

#### **IMPETUS FOR THE CURRICULUM CHANGE**

The curriculum change was motivated by two broad trends. First, with the new English curriculum in Japanese high schools, students who graduate in the next few years will have a less comprehensive background in English grammar and a more restricted exposure to English vocabulary. At the same time, many of them will face an employment market on graduation that places increasing emphasis on English proficiency (Toyama, Carroll, Head, Miyake, & Nohara, 2001). Second, with the effects of the fall in the birth rate now impinging on university application levels across Japan, our university sought to rationalise the activities carried out within the first- and second-year compulsory English program. Although this program is the largest set of interrelated courses in the university, there had hitherto been little co-ordination between courses.

The university therefore set up a new administrative unit, The Language Centre, managed by a committee drawn from members of the Faculties. The chair of the committee is also the director of the Centre. The first task of the centre was to devise and manage the new curriculum, but it also administers the hiring of, and liaison with, teachers of English courses. At a later stage, it will also take on the management of programs for languages other than English, including Japanese as a Second Language.

The Language Centre has three basic policies for reforming language education in the university:

1. research and development of language teaching and learning methodology;
2. a system of full-time contract English lecturers;
3. the development of new texts and assessment processes. (Toyama et al., 2001)

Of these, most energy during the implementation phase of the new curriculum has been focused on 2 and 3.

One full-time English native speaker lecturer was appointed to start in 2002, the first year of implementation, another in the second year, and a third will start in 2004. In addition to teaching, these lecturers have responsibility for producing teaching and assessment materials and for assisting in the implementation of the new curriculum. These lecturers' full-time status gives them a broader view of the curriculum as a whole than is possible for part-time staff. It also allows them to mediate between the Language Centre management and the predominantly part-time teaching staff. In addition, these lecturers have been closely involved in the writing and revision of the new coursebook, the main vehicle of curriculum development in our particular context.

### **CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE IN-HOUSE COURSEBOOK**

A working group of four faculty members was set up in April 2001, whose primary task was to set up the Language Centre and to produce a coursebook. This coursebook would be used by all teachers for approximately half of their teaching time. In 2002, the first contract lecturer joined the working group, and in 2003 when the second lecturer was appointed, she also joined the group.

In addition to the concerns stated above (the changes in the high school curriculum, the perceived increased demand for English in business, and the need to rationalise across the very large English program), there were other issues which informed the way the curriculum was originally conceived by the management committee. First, this committee perceived students as being, in some senses, poorly motivated to study and requiring a lot of encouragement to produce more than isolated words and phrases. However, at the same time, it was recognised that there was a residual goodwill towards English classes, particularly when those classes were seen to be less pressured than some high school examination-oriented ones. Second, they assumed that most students had very limited experience of using English for communication, hence the hesitation when they were required to speak or write.

The working group therefore decided to create a curriculum which assumed minimal communication experience, relatively little grammatical knowledge, but post-beginner vocabulary levels. Initial goals and objectives were very broad: to motivate the students and to try to encourage them to use their latent capabilities. The working group conceived the coursebook from within this framework, and the way they attempted to achieve these broad objectives was to distance it from conventional high school texts, with their focus on English in the world beyond, and to begin with the focus on the students themselves, and their new surroundings, as first-years beginning to get to know the campus.

Since few students would have the opportunity to talk with English speakers on a regular basis, the text tried to provide the tools they could use if they were to talk to each other about the new experiences they were encountering together. The coursebook was therefore called



*English Here and Now at Momoyama*, and was divided into four books. Book 1, covering the first semester, focuses on the campus; Book 2 is to be used in the second semester, taking as its focus the students and their surroundings in Kansai. Books 3 and 4 are planned to broaden this focus to topics about Japan, and about Japan in relation to the rest of the world.

### LEARNING ARRANGEMENTS

Students meet for two 90-minute sessions per week, once with a Japanese teacher (English 1A), and once with a native-speaker English teacher (English 1B). English 1A comprises structured exercises based on words, phrases and structures from a written text, while English 1B consists of more extensive speaking practice based on model dialogues and other activities on the same or closely related topics. The two teachers (for the ‘A’ and ‘B’ courses) use the common textbook, *English Here and Now at Momoyama*, in which each unit is divided into an ‘A’ and ‘B’ section. This text is designed to take up 45 minutes of each 90-minute session. The purpose of the shared text is to give the students a sense of continuity between the ‘A’ and ‘B’ courses, while at the same time allowing teachers the freedom to include materials and activities that allow them to make the best use of their individual skills and teaching styles.

Each pair of teachers using the textbook is asked to communicate with each other week by week about their progress through the text, or other issues, as required. Since many of the teachers work part-time on different days of the week, they do not usually meet face-to-face, except at the half-day teachers’ pre-session meeting in March. For these reasons, we have encouraged teachers to fill in a ‘message to partner’ pro-forma with a brief summary of their lesson. The messages are also photocopied and copies filed in the Language Centre.

### ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS

The proposal for the new Language Centre courses, as it was formally accepted by the Faculty and by the University Management Board, stipulated that there would be a common final test and that this would account for 50% of each student’s individual grade. It was not explicitly spelled out in the proposal whether a single test would be common to both ‘A’ and ‘B’ courses (taught by a Japanese teacher and a native English speaker teacher, respectively), or whether each course would have its own final test. Since the fundamental concept of the textbook was the close connection between the ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections—with ‘A’ focusing on the language in a short text and ‘B’ on expanding on the same structures in a less restricted way—it would have been logical to have a single test. However, in interpreting the original proposal, the Educational Affairs Committee ruled during the first semester that, since the two courses were independently credit-bearing, each must have its own test. The creation of such tests raised a number of difficult challenges which we will explore in more detail later, but first we will look at how we went about getting feedback on the first edition of the textbook.

## EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

### FEEDBACK ON THE TEXTBOOK

The chronological pattern of our curriculum development cycle differed from the classic pattern of “needs analysis - objectives - testing - materials - teaching” (Brown, 2001, p. 14). The original plan for curriculum reform at Momoyama was lacking in provision for consultation with teaching staff, systematic needs analysis and program evaluation. This means that the pattern of evaluation up to the present has developed on an ad hoc basis.

Since the materials were not tried out before being delivered to a large audience, it was important for us to get feedback from teachers at an early stage. Our first step was to circulate a 'retrospective syllabus' for teachers' comments, followed by an end-of-semester evaluation form focused on the textbook and test. Over the past 18 months, we have modified the program extensively, largely as a result of feedback from teachers. However, we should point out that perhaps the most significant fact is the low rate of response. On average about 13 out of 40 teachers responded.

In the first semester that the new coursebook was used (Spring 2002), those teachers that did respond offered comments which suggested the materials were too complex:

- *The level of the language was too high for most of my students.*
- *The material needs to be streamlined and simplified.*
- *I would like to see a thinner, more compact book with clear main targets and more sample phrases/sentences for students to remember.*
- *Students stuck with the simplest, most familiar constructions in speaking exercises.*

### **MODIFICATIONS TO THE CURRICULUM IN RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK**

Since this feedback was received while we were in the process of writing the next installment of the text (for the autumn semester), we were able to respond by simplifying the layout and the task type, and making the format of the book more consistent from unit to unit. For example, we introduced a language summary section entitled 'What should I learn this week?' to provide a clear objective for each unit. This replaced a section in the first edition headed 'What did I learn this week?' where students were expected to write their own reflections. Other changes made between the first and second semester included providing a cassette tape to go with the textbook, adding some picture-based activities, and reducing the number of units from 12 to 8, which allowed teachers more time for revision and supplementary activities.

Apart from gathering written feedback from the teachers, we were also able to discuss the curriculum at workshops held twice a year. At a half-day workshop at the start of the autumn semester in 2002, we showed the next part of the textbook to a group of eight teachers, and asked for their comments. One teacher suggested the division of the textbook target language into core language and extension sections which could be used by students independently. Another colleague commented: "The textbook should be for the student rather than for the teacher." According to this view, complex instructions to students should be mediated through the teacher rather than being included in the textbook. Rather than 'optional activities,' the textbook should contain additional 'conversation starter' phrases that students could use.

These insights helped us to change our approach as we revised Book 1 for the second edition. Over successive revisions, our rubrics have become increasingly simple. Although we have provided teachers' notes on how to use the coursebook, these have been very little used. This suggests that our main efforts should be spent on clarifying the activities so that they are self-evident.

One of the difficulties in the first volume was that the language samples were often too closely tied to the context to be easily generalisable. In the second textbook we tried to include more generalisable language, and presented the practice through 'guided dialogues' (initial questions and closing phrases printed with spaces for students to fill in their own words). That was also problematic because students couldn't always manipulate the language in the way required. Some teachers were in favour of changing the format, so, in the revised edition of Book 1, we have

Figure 1 An example textbook extract

Book 2 First Edition 2002 ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Momoyama

Unit 5 Traffic Accident

Dialogue

Shinichi: **Hi Yasu, did you have a good weekend?**  
 Yasu: **Oh, not bad.** There was an accident in the street outside my house, though.  
 Shinichi: **An accident? What happened?**  
 Yasu: **It was around 11.00 pm. I was having a bath when I heard a noise outside.** I looked out of the window and a gang of bike riders were making a lot of noise in the street.  
 Shinichi: Oh no. How did the accident happen?  
 Yasu: **Well,** just then a car came along the street, quite fast, and tried to pass them, but one of the bike riders got in the way and the car hit the motorbike. The ambulance came, but the rider was not hurt too badly. He didn't go to hospital.  
 Shinichi: **It sounds like the bike rider was to blame.**  
 Yasu: **I think so, but still** the car driver should have slowed down too.

See how Yasu begins his story by saying what he was doing at the time.  
 Then he tells Shinichi what happened.

Book 2 Second Edition 2003 ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Momoyama

Unit 5 Traffic Accident

1. Read the dialogue as you listen. Then close your book, and explain to your partner what happened.

Shinichi: **Hi Yasu, did you have a good weekend?**  
 Yasu: **Oh, not bad.** There was an accident in the street outside my house.  
 Shinichi: **An accident? What happened?**  
 Yasu: **It was around 11.00 pm. I was watching TV when I heard a noise outside.** I looked out of the window and a gang of bike riders were making a lot of noise in the street.  
 Shinichi: Oh, how did the accident happen?  
 Yasu: **Well,** a car came along the street and tried to pass them, but one of the bike riders **swerved** in front of the car, and the car **hit** the motorbike. The ambulance came, but the rider was not hurt too badly. He didn't go to hospital.  
 Shinichi: **It sounds like the bike rider was to blame.**  
 Yasu: **I think so, but still** the car driver should have slowed down too.

See how Yasu begins his story by saying what he was doing at the time.  
 Then he tells Shinichi what happened.



2. Tell a story about an accident you have had or seen. First, write down the main points of your story. Then take it in turns to ask your partner about his or her story.

Dialogue Guide

Tell a story about an accident you have had or seen. First, write down the main points of your story. Then take it in turns to ask your partner about his or her story.

A: _____	When I was at high school 3 years ago
B: _____	2 weeks ago
A: <b>What were you doing at the time?</b>	I was sleeping
B: _____	I was playing football
A: <b>What happened? What did you see?</b>	I was sitting on the bus
B: _____	I was woken up
A: <b>What happened in the end?</b>	The ball hit me in the face
B: _____	I saw a man run out of the bank
A: <b>Was it a lucky escape?</b>	I was taken to hospital
B: _____	The police arrived
	His friend came
A: _____	Oh dear!
B: _____	Wow!
	Yes
	Really?
	That's terrible

As you listen to your partner's story, help him or her by asking questions. When your partner pauses (stops speaking) you can also help him or her by saying something to show you are interested:

**Question bank**

Have you ever had an accident?  
 What happened?  
 How did it happen?  
 When did it happen?  
 Who else was in the accident?  
 Where did it happen?  
 Was anyone hurt?  
 Who was to blame?  
 How did you feel after the accident?

**Phrase bank: injuries**

I was injured/hurt.  
 I broke my arm, leg, collar-bone.  
 I twisted my ankle.  
 I've got a bruise, a cut.  
 I hurt my back.  
 My leg hurts.  
 It's painful.

**Phrase bank: What happened?**

I crashed my bike.  
 I was in a car accident.  
 I saw a dog run over by a car.  
 When I was at high school, 3 years ago,  
 2 weeks ago,  
 I was sleeping.  
 I was playing football.  
 I was sitting on the bus.  
 I was with my parents.  
 My brother was with me.  
 I was woken up.  
 The ball hit me in the face.  
 I saw a man run out of the bank.  
 I was taken to hospital.  
 The police arrived.  
 His friend came.  
 I was shocked.  
 I was angry.

As you listen to your partner's story, help him or her by asking questions. When your partner pauses (stops speaking) you can also help him or her by saying something to show you are interested:

Oh dear! Wow! Yes. Really? That's terrible.

introduced ‘question banks’ from which students can choose the questions they want to ask, and ‘answer banks’ containing possible answers. This allows more freedom for teachers to decide how to use the material, as well as lets students start their conversations more easily.

The comments on the second round of feedback ranged from the positive—“Simpler clearer dialogues: Love the bold type”—to the negative—“Amateurish at best and occasionally offensive.” One teacher commented that “there are few usable oral activities in the text” and asked for more. The positive comments were evidence for us that we were starting to get a feel for what teachers wanted and were able to use. However, the negative comments showed us that there were still problems. Some of the negative comments stem from the problem that the coursebook was seen as an infringement on teacher autonomy.

It is inevitable that prescribed materials to some extent imply a teaching style. The staff include some very experienced teachers who have developed their own ways of working and materials over many years. Some of these had no investment in the new coursebook and perceived it as being inferior to their own chosen materials and methods. Actually some teachers simply refused to use the new materials, or used them despite feeling, “The curriculum is nonsense.”

Other parts of the feedback highlighted problems with institutional constraints such as the range of levels, lack of motivation and excessive class size:

- *In a class of 36 students, most of whom wish they were somewhere else, it would be impossible to get good results even with the best textbook in the world.*
- *The level of the students greatly differs.*
- *It is impossible to improve much in English in only 1 year with 50 students in a class. The latest research shows that 200 hours are needed to improve meaningfully, especially for listening.*

The feedback we received from the coursebook evaluation questionnaires and the workshop, was detailed and reflected teachers’ immediate concerns with the classroom process. In terms of the ‘map’ and ‘itinerary’ metaphor, we could say that obtaining feedback helped us to make a more accurate map of where students could be expected to go, at the same time as streamlining the itinerary—the activities that could be expected to take them there. The fact that we were seen to modify the textbook in response to feedback went some way towards compensating for the lack of consultation at the start of the project. However, the gathering of feedback needs to be incorporated into the materials development cycle as part of an on-going process. Ideally, program evaluation should take account of the students’ progress and students’ opinions about the course, as well as feedback from all (rather than, as in our case, a small part of) the teaching staff.

## **ISSUES: INSTITUTIONALLY CONTROLLED ASSESSMENT**

### **FEEDBACK ON THE TESTS**

The ‘A’ course, taught by Japanese teachers, and based on structured exercises, and the ‘B’ course taught by native speakers of English, and focusing on production, each had their own compulsory test. The imposition of these tests for the ‘B’ courses as well as the ‘A’ course created problems. While the ‘A’ course, with its more structured content and its basis in a set of texts, could justifiably use a simple multiple-choice test to measure student achievement, the ‘B’ course did not lend itself to such a method.

The 'B' course was specifically conceived as being open-ended, encouraging productive skills more than receptive ones, and valuing fluency over accuracy. While it would be possible in theory to assess productive skills, it would be much more difficult and more costly than our resources allow. Many teachers do assess productive skills in their own classrooms, but to attempt to do this in a standardised way across around 40 classes would be enormously costly in terms of both time and money.

In a university system with a narrow experience of assessment, mostly limited to easily marked, multiple-choice tests and reports, this kind of investment was not on the table for discussion. As a result, it was necessary to develop a multiple-choice test to fulfill the regulatory requirements, even though such a test could have little or no validity as a measure of achievement of the goals of the course. We therefore attempted to do this in a way that would have as few negative consequences as possible in the circumstances. We constructed a test of very easy listening and reading items, based on the content of the coursebook, and to some extent focusing on spoken discourse patterns. Since we did not want to disadvantage students by assessing them on criteria unrelated to the course goals, the test was deliberately designed to allow the majority of students to score highly.

Although we considered good test results an important way to encourage student motivation, the test results did not always accord with teachers' own assessments of their students. There existed among teachers a wide range of testing philosophies. Some teachers expected the test to yield a normal curve that would allow them to rank students; others were opposed to proficiency assessments in principle, believing rather that effort and improvement should be the basis of assessment. In consequence, some teachers designed their own assessment methods to compensate for the perceived deficiencies in the common test. Others reported that they felt forced to reduce their component of the grades to redress the balance. This kind of flexibility in the interpretation of the practical meaning of '50% of an individual student's final grade,' while not referred to in any documentation, was both recognised and implicitly approved of by the directorship of the Centre.

A further serious problem with the present testing system is that there is no institutional mechanism for informing students about their test grade as distinct from their holistic grade from the teacher. Teachers therefore have to devise their own way of informing the students about their two grades (the test grade and the teacher-determined portion of the grade). It is quite possible that, in some cases, the students did not know how they were assessed. This is an issue that we need to address.

### OUR RESPONSE TO THE FEEDBACK ON THE TESTS

As a response to the feedback, in the third, most recent round of testing, the 'A' test was simplified and the 'B' test was made more difficult, with the result that a wider range of grades was obtained. Nevertheless, the revised test still clearly does not match the curriculum. The mis-match between the stated objectives of the course (improved oral communication skills) and the style of the testing was felt to be problematic by many teachers:

- *[The test] had almost no correlation to their ability to actually speak English.*
- *It does not really measure what the students learned.*

In discussing how to address this problem, we found that we had significantly different approaches. Ellen was fundamentally in favour of a common assessment and grade allocation scheme. Michael was less optimistic about the possibility of creating a practicable framework within the system operating at the moment.

Ellen: *I am fascinated by the idea of implementing a scheme for assessment in some form that seems consistent with my conception of what learner autonomy is. When we look at any method of assessment, I think we should ask, "What is the backwash effect for learner autonomy?" The first essential seems to me that the assessment should be transparent to students. Secondly, I would like to give students the opportunity to evaluate themselves. Thirdly, I like the idea of using tasks which require the students to take some responsibility for the content of the class, such as presentation or group presentation. I recognize that it might be impossible to implement assessment guidelines for classroom-based assessment across such a large and diverse staff in a way that is both consistent and meaningful. I think this is connected with staff development issues. If we were in a position to work with a large proportion of the teachers to devise a set of guidelines for assessment, then it would not seem an imposition when the guidelines came to be used. Michael, how would you like to deal with assessment? I suspect you would like to give the teachers complete freedom to assess as they think fit?*

Michael: *If we think of the two main approaches to assessment that we see amongst teachers, proficiency-oriented assessment and effort-oriented assessment, I'm in favour of the former. In other words, I think we should set a standard of achievement, and give students credit for our courses to the extent that they achieve that standard. If our standard is pitched so that it is realistically achievable by most students, this means that some, at the highest level, should be able to achieve it without coming to class, or by making very little effort. (Of course we should also provide higher level courses for any of these students who want to study at that level.) In other countries this kind of recognition of prior learning is uncontested, but in Japan it's only just coming to be talked about, for instance in proposals to exempt students from certain compulsory courses if they have TOEFL or EIKEN scores at a certain level.*

*If I were to design a system like this, the assessments would be task-based rather than multiple-choice test-based. This kind of assessment requires a great deal of training of teachers, cooperation between teachers and management, and commitment on the part of teachers. For all these things, additional resources are necessary: payment for training and collaboration, assessment materials, and so on. Also, the current system of part-time teachers would need to be changed to allow for scheduling of time for collaboration. If those resources were available, then I'd like to see a coordinated assessment policy, developed and administered through continuing collaboration amongst teachers. However, in our present system, we have an attempt to compromise between two incompatible approaches. It doesn't work to anyone's satisfaction, so in that sense, yes, I think individual assessment of students should be left to teachers.*

## REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIGN OF THE CURRICULUM IN RELATION TO TEACHER AUTONOMY

The twin notions of (a) imposing a text to be used for half of each class and (b) imposing a test to be used for 50% of individual grades were intended to leave space for teacher autonomy. However, both notions are flawed. The compulsory textbook is perhaps less intrusive into the teacher's autonomy, and more manageable than the compulsory test. The textbook at least ensures some degree of week-by-week link between the content of the two courses, 'A' and 'B.' Where this partnership works well, there are certainly advantages to the students, not least in that they can experience in a tangible way some sense of a syllabus. However, some teachers reported problems with trying to, in effect, run two separate courses: one using the common text, and the other using their own materials or a different text. Ideally, of course, if the common text is seen as a de facto syllabus, the remaining 45 minutes of each class would



be best spent on activities related to the relevant unit, expanding on its themes, or deepening students' ability to carry out the same or similar tasks. While some teachers called for the common text to be reduced, to allow them more time for their own materials, others called for it to be expanded, so as to allow them to use it throughout the whole session. The former presumably were not satisfied with the content of the text, and saw a need for their own materials to remedy the deficit; the latter, perhaps, were expressing not dissatisfaction with the content, but the reasonable expectation that, if a syllabus was being imposed, sufficient materials should be provided by the management. While most teachers are used to selecting materials for teaching a syllabus of their own devising, selecting appropriate materials to complement a centralised syllabus is not at all the same thing. This attempt to accommodate teachers' rights to make decisions, while at the same time imposing external constraints, was therefore perceived by some as not enough and by others as too much.

As far as assessment goes, however, the 50% notion has serious problems. We have already referred to the inherent practical difficulty of assessing oral performance in a standardised way on such a large scale, and hence the implementation of a multiple-choice test only marginally related to the course objectives. However there are other problems too.

### TESTING TO ALLOCATE GRADES VERSUS TESTING TO EVALUATE THE PROGRAM

This confusion between the role of a common test as an instrument of curriculum evaluation, and its use as a means of individual assessment has been compounded by the somewhat unwieldy committee system. Under this system, a committee unrelated to the Language Centre, and without expertise in language testing or curriculum design, the Educational Affairs Committee, rules on questions of academic content and assessment procedures. This has led to the ironic situation in which these freshman English classes are the only ones for which a standardised testing procedure exists, not under the control of the teachers, in a university with a generally *laissez-faire* attitude to what goes on inside the classroom. The imposition of this test, therefore, was unlikely to be welcomed by teachers.

*Michael: Leaving aside the problem of how and what to assess, the idea of a standardised test is quite justifiable, if the purpose is to evaluate the effectiveness of a new curriculum. However, this is quite different from using such a test to award student grades. We have little data about how teachers grade students, but the data we do have seem to suggest that there is a very wide range of criteria used, and that these criteria differ fundamentally from one teacher to another.*

*Central to these differences is the question of whether students should be graded according to language performance criteria, or according to participation, effort, and improvement. While some teachers award grades strictly on the basis of test results, others combine test results with an assessment of attendance and participation, and others still consider only participation and effort. Some of this last group argue that since there is no streaming, and student levels within each class are so diverse, it's unfair to award grades based on performance. Some students would be able to score highly on the performance test even before the course had begun and would thus have to do little work, while others would begin so far behind the majority that they would have no chance of catching up within a single semester.*

*Ellen: Allocating a proportion of the grade for active participation can help to motivate students. I think that participation is a necessary pre-requisite to achieving fluency, so including participation in the grade tends to help students to focus on fluency as opposed to accuracy.*

## TESTABLE OBJECTIVES

A further issue arising from the necessity to test has been the effect on the revisions of the textbook. Given that a test was required, the textbook has had to be re-designed, in part in response to requests from teachers, so as to incorporate testable objectives. The open-endedness of the general aim of the 'B' section, expanding on a more focused 'A' section and encouraging fluency over accuracy, has been narrowed down in favour of specifying more concrete objectives. This may not necessarily be a bad thing, in that students may be more easily able to see the pattern of the course, but it is nevertheless seen as restrictive by some teachers.

### ISSUES: WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN PROGRAMME EVALUATION?

Ellen: *One of the tensions is that systematic evaluation is a high priority for us but not for the university. It seems desirable to discuss how the program is to be evaluated and to work to open channels of communication between all involved: those who administer, fund, write, teach, and study on the program. At the moment the means of evaluation are unclear. Statistical data from the students' term tests has been read out at the teachers' workshops each year, which suggests that undue emphasis may be put on it in some quarters.*

*The opinions of students are conspicuously absent from the Language Centre planning process. So far we have not given out a questionnaire for course evaluation to students. This is partly due to the fact that we have not wanted to burden teachers who already have to administer questionnaire forms from the university. Some teachers use their own course feedback forms or ask students for feedback orally, and the results are fed back through the teachers.*

*I think that students should be involved in the evaluation of the program on a regular basis in the future. We have talked about sending out a questionnaire to all students in December 2003, and setting up student focus groups in the autumn semester 2003. Do we need objective data for program evaluation? How would you carry out evaluation, ideally? What kind of factors limit that?*

Michael: *A problem with a lot of the work being done by teachers trying to encourage autonomous learning on the part of their students is that the central question, "Does this approach produce greater language gains than others?" is not easy to research or to find answers to. We need to decide how best to measure language gains, how to decide to what extent they are attributable to our attempts to encourage autonomy, and so on. And there are other aspects of evaluation, other questions we can ask, such as how teachers and students perceive the course, how attendance levels may reflect satisfaction or otherwise, how easily understood our objectives and learning materials were, how the administration supported or hindered teaching and learning, and so on.*

*We can collect much of this data quite easily, through teacher and student questionnaires and interviews, university statistics on attendance levels, and other documents. Data on language gains is more problematic, though. For many people this means test scores, but, as we've seen, our own test is quite inappropriate for this, and in any case, even the best pen and paper test would only provide information on a limited aspect of language gain. While it's true that the logistical problems of oral assessment of every student are prohibitive, one possibility would be to assess random samples of students, for the purpose of evaluating the program. This, together with the other methods I've mentioned, would seem to me to be a reasonable means of evaluating the curriculum.*

### ISSUES: LEARNER DEVELOPMENT (AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT)

We decided to include some learner autonomy-related goals in the course objectives which were circulated to teachers in Spring 2003. Among the general aims was the following:

“Students will develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.” In the section dealing with detailed objectives we decided to include ‘initiating and ending conversations.’ One teacher commented, “I really agree with this. But do you know how difficult it is for our students?”

As we were working with constraints in terms of class size, time, motivation, and previous experience, we did not feel able to make learner development a prominent theme of the course materials. We did, however, attempt to incorporate some ‘learner training’ in the revised version of the coursebook. In the first unit, we included a list of ‘Keys to good communication’ in the reading comprehension (taught by a Japanese speaking teacher). Students were then asked to put the advice into practice in the following lesson with the English native speaker teacher. We also discussed having a learner history in the textbook and including ‘writing your learner history’ as a task. Finally we chose to use an interview with an overseas student, and to focus on the ‘message’ that *It is OK to make mistakes*. However, our attempt to prioritise fluency over accuracy is undermined by having a compulsory multiple-choice test, as we have discussed above.

At the end of each unit, we put a section entitled ‘What do you want to remember from this week’s classes?’ The idea was that if students selected their own language items from the class they would be likely to learn more. However, students need to be trained to ‘notice.’ Ellen found that her students wanted her to tell them what they should write in that section, and actually she was not committed enough to pursue it at length. We wrote about this activity in the teacher’s notes, but that wasn’t an effective way of getting the message across. If a teacher isn’t familiar with an open-ended activity, she or he needs some explanation about how to do it. One teacher wrote: “*Students do not have, in my opinion, concept of ‘linguistic uptake,’ hence, they cannot intelligently do final exercise of each unit. I would like some help on how to help students do this.*” In the future version of the textbook, we have decided to retain that section but reduce the space allowed for it. We added a puzzle activity which students can easily see how to do on their own. In other words, we have tried to meet the students (and teachers) at their current level of autonomy.

### **TEACHER DEVELOPMENT BY RAISING QUESTIONS ABOUT LEARNER AUTONOMY: EXPLICITLY OR IMPLICITLY?**

Ellen: *I believe that any effective program to encourage learner autonomy at curriculum level cannot take place without wider involvement of the teachers. That raises the issue of teacher development. In our context, it seems most appropriate to approach teacher development by asking questions rather than by attempting to give answers. As part of our project to develop learner autonomy within the curriculum, we decided to investigate the teachers’ views about autonomy. A questionnaire was sent in late May 2003. The response rate was even lower than it was for the feedback questionnaires: just five replies from 40 teachers. This may indicate that the questionnaire was not perceived as being important or relevant to the majority of teachers. However, the five who did reply expressed a range of views, from “These students are not capable of learning autonomously,” to “What is learner autonomy? Does it mean communicate naturally?,” to detailed answers and worksheets from teachers who are actively pro-autonomy.*

*For some teachers using the coursebook restricted the time available to pursue learner-centred or negotiated elements. One teacher, commenting on the conflict he had experienced between the coursebook priorities and his own, wrote,*

I often wonder how I can work a topic or structure from the text into my classroom in an organic way. I often feel the need to 'cover the material' rather than looking carefully at what the students are doing and what they need to work on.

*Another teacher said, "Because the weekly topics are prescribed, there is less opportunity for students to study topics they are interested in, but such study can be undertaken independently in preparation for presentations / projects." This teacher is using the conversations in the coursebook for his own oral test: "My exams ask a student to be able to spontaneously communicate while allowing the student to have some freedom of expression (autonomy?)."*

*It seems to me that many teachers are not certain about the word 'autonomy,' and, in practice, some of them are using techniques to build student independence, while others are not. Do you think it's important to use the label 'learner autonomy'?*

*Michael: No, I think it's a nuisance. I'd rather we talked about good teaching, effective learning. You've talked about creating a shared vocabulary, by talking to teachers about autonomy. I see it the other way: The word 'autonomy' is not part of our shared vocabulary, but the vocabulary of teaching, learning, methods, and so on, is. So we have a shared vocabulary already. I think that good teachers have always motivated and inspired students to think about what they're learning and to continue to learn outside the class. This is what autonomy is. By talking about these things with teachers, we are in effect talking about autonomy, whether we use the word or not.*

### WORKSHOPS FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The university holds a workshop for teachers at the start of each semester. The workshops are usually attended by about half of the teachers, i.e., around 20 people. Up to the present, the workshops have been organized in a way that reinforces the traditional hierarchy in the university, with faculty members giving necessary information to the part-time staff in a lecture format. Such a context is not conducive to developing teachers' experience of autonomy. To lecture about learner autonomy would be worse than useless. We need to adopt Tessa Woodward's principle of *loop input* (Woodward, 1991), where the style of input is consistent with the 'message' content.

We attempted to introduce a more informal style into the workshop in April 2002 by spending a proportion of the time in free discussion in small groups. If we are able to adopt this approach in future we might start to restore the sense of teacher autonomy, which seemed to suffer when the coursebook and test were imposed.

*Ellen: I think that the bi-annual workshops might offer an opportunity to raise questions about learner autonomy, among other issues of interest to teachers. Do you think this is a possibility?*

*Michael: Only a few people, especially from the group of 'B' teachers, come to these meetings, so we should be wary of over-emphasising their effect. Also, if teachers make the effort to come, we should be providing something that makes it worth their while: practical presentations, workshops, materials demonstrations and so on, and anything requested by teachers. If we take the position that learners learn best by being engaged in tasks, becoming aware of the purpose of tasks, reflecting on their performance, and evaluating their own progress, these things will come through in practical presentation / workshop-type activities. Isn't this what autonomy entails?*

### 'GRASSROOTS' DEVELOPMENTS OF TEACHER AUTONOMY TO PROMOTE LEARNER AUTONOMY

Despite the lack of prior consultation with teachers, the curriculum development project has stimulated networking between teachers. As one of the teachers said: "Now I talk to my

colleagues more about the lesson because we are all using the materials.” In addition to this informal discussion, teachers have formed research groups on their own initiative. One group of ‘A’ teachers is writing supplementary material to go with the textbook. The worksheets produced by this group will be incorporated into the textbook in the spring semester 2004. The other group is carrying out a survey of students’ reactions to different ways of doing self-evaluation, for example, using detailed criteria with a tick-chart (e.g., *I remembered my textbook today, I spoke ... minutes of English today*)—versus a more global self-evaluation in diary format.

## CONCLUSIONS

Michael: *If we were to choose one key word for this project, it would perhaps be the word ‘tension.’ Just as popular psychology tells us that life changes such as childbirth, marriage, changing jobs and even moving house are major causes of stress, so too, for teachers curriculum change requires large changes to everyday life patterns. In our case, there are tensions between teachers and administrators, students and teachers, amongst teachers with different views of teaching and learning, and so on. These tensions are revealed in conflicting views of materials design, assessment, evaluation, and the extent to which teachers and learners are and can be autonomous. A curriculum on this scale, by definition, infringes on the autonomy of teachers and to some extent of learners too.*

*On the other hand, if we think of ‘autonomisation,’ especially for students, as something that works best within a framework, then the designing of a curriculum presents us with an opportunity to create the conditions for teachers to support learners effectively. We have tried to show how we went about creating materials to do this, despite being constrained by problems such as large class sizes, by an overall design of the textbook that was predetermined, and by regulatory restrictions such as those relating to testing. We have also discussed the problem of the inadequacy of formal evaluation systems, and our attempts to seek and act on feedback from teachers.*

*How all these things influence our attempt to encourage learner autonomy is the heart of this paper, and here too there are tensions between us, the writers.*

Ellen: *I see curriculum development as offering a potential opportunity to talk about autonomy explicitly with teachers and learners. For me autonomy is a desirable course objective in its own right, independent of short-term gains in language proficiency, because I believe it can lead to long-term gains.*

Michael: *I take the view that curriculum is a set of suggestions, to be taken up or rejected freely by teachers according to how useful they judge it to be. Autonomy—reflecting on our learning and making decisions as a result—is simply an aspect of learning a language. It’s implicit in discussions of effective teaching and learning, but without them has no meaning.*

Ellen: *Yes. For a moment let me play devil’s advocate in relation to my own position. Thinking and talking to colleagues about the place of learner autonomy in our particular curriculum has forced me to contemplate the possibility that it is just not appropriate in our circumstances. I hear about classes in which effective learning seems to be taking place—for example, one day my colleague told me with a smile that the students came out of the classroom actually saying the English phrases they had learned from the textbook. The students in question were the ‘sports class,’ i.e., students who have been granted admission to the university on scholarships for sports ability. When asked about learner autonomy, the teacher was adamant that it was not relevant to those students.*

*Recently I tried giving the students the responsibility for preparing discussion questions and a presentation on a pop band. Sometimes I had a sense of struggle as the students tried to push*



*me back into a conventional teacher role. In three of the classes, the students finally succeeded in generating their own material and managing their own discussion, while in one class I was forced back into the role of entertainer and provider. Incidentally, these were all students who had failed the English 1B course the first time round. Was it a waste of time to give them the option of autonomy? I feel sure that if I had developed the framework in a more cunning way, I would have had more success. However, the process was time-consuming and required a lot of commitment from the students and me. This highlighted the fact that developing autonomy takes time. What about autonomy in the classes of 48 students meeting with one teacher for 90 minutes per week? Benson (2001) notes:*

Programs aiming at autonomy will often involve phases in which the learners are expected to re-examine established approaches to learning and adjust to new methods of work. It is also likely that the natural tendency for language learners to regress periodically in order to move forwards at a later stage will be more pronounced in programs that allow greater freedom in learning. It is therefore important that evaluations of programs aiming to foster autonomy are sensitive to the temporary disruptions in the learning process that their goals imply. (p. 191)

*At the moment, in our context, the administrative and controlling bodies would almost certainly not wish to embrace a learning process that necessitates “temporary disruptions in the learning process.” As a result, our course is less concerned with developing autonomy than I wanted it to be initially. But my own point of view has changed during the process of developing the course. ‘Mass produced autonomy’ was never going to work. Instead we have provided a common denominator in terms of materials concerned with the ‘here and now,’ which at least does not close off the options for teachers to include more pro-autonomy activities themselves.*

*Michael: Has the curriculum been successful? In some senses we are still too early in the process to be able to answer. We need to expand on our current feedback mechanisms and build in others that take account of student perceptions and learning outcomes as well as teacher perceptions. However, we can point to some encouraging signs. The coursebook has been used, thought about, criticized, and revised. Anecdotal evidence suggests that on the whole students like the basic idea of a text about their own campus. Some transparency has been introduced in that every student can now see that there is a common content for all core English classes. Perhaps most positive is the clear fact that teachers now have a common experience which has allowed them to begin to talk to each other more meaningfully about their teaching, and that research and materials writing groups have formed spontaneously in response to the new curriculum.*

We are still at an early stage in the evolution of this curriculum, but these signs would seem to suggest that our attempts to mediate between the interests of a wide range of actors are bearing fruit. The more we can provide practical support to teachers or groups of teachers in carrying out their own projects, publishing accounts of what they have done, and in this way modeling good practice, the more likely it is that good ideas will spread and our students will benefit.



## CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

## HUGH NICOLL

Reflecting on curriculum reform in Japanese institutional contexts, I am often paralyzed by feelings of shock and awe. Reading Michael and Ellen's paper, I feel a great sense of admiration for the tenacity and perseverance they demonstrate. Even after many readings, however, I am still asking questions that I continue to find difficult to answer.

1. How can English Departments or Language Centers be expected to produce motivated, autonomous learners when the demands for raising learners' awareness of learning and general literacy are not shared, across the curriculum, by institutions as a whole?
2. How can the goals of helping learners become autonomous be achieved without supporting project-based learning activities?
3. What are the connections / relationships between what happens in English courses and the work students do in other departments? To what extent are the students making active investments in their own futures through the work they do in their required English courses?
4. Do Momoyama faculty have the ability to fail students if they fail to turn in the work assigned? Will the administrative staff support teachers who are 'strict'?

I am alternatively provoked and confused by the size and complexity of the challenges that Michael and Ellen have faced in their roles as developers of an in-house coursebook. The part of me most committed to autonomy-oriented approaches to curriculum development bristles with vicarious indignation at the constraints described in their chapter, and I feel tempted to argue that in-house materials should be limited to activity templates, questionnaires, checklists, and individual or group project task descriptions. A more conciliatory voice wonders if the most practical solution to the institutional environment described here would be for Michael, Ellen, and other autonomy oriented colleagues to seek alternative implementation schemes, perhaps along the following lines:

- Continue to develop and refine their in-house text as one of the materials available to teachers in their program.
- Emphasize self-access support for, and self-study use of, the textbook.
- Provide practical guidelines and models for more autonomous approaches explicitly focused on developing literacy skills as a way of meeting the needs of more motivated students and autonomy oriented faculty members.

We English teachers often put awful pressure on our students to speak out—to perform roles which demand the articulation of self through the oral expression of ideas, and to engage in discussions and debate. Some will object, and accurately predict, that I am going to argue here against a primary emphasis on oral communicative competence in Japanese English classrooms. And I will readily admit that there are ways in which oral skills can be cultivated, but I have come to believe that one of the best ways out of the maze of tensions inherent in the

shyness culture of Japanese educational institutions is through text. By the phrase “through text,” I mean to emphasize the power of reading and writing—literacy—as the basis for autonomous learning, and in many cases, as a way to escape from the familiar constraints of the once-a-week, 90-minute class.

## CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

### SARA COTTERALL

The two words in Michael and Ellen’s report which resonate most with me are *dialogue* and *opportunity*. I do not intend to dissect this report of their curriculum design project, but I will refer to ways in which it prompted me to reflect on my experiences with learner autonomy.

Michael and Ellen present their reflections in the form of a dialogue, posing and responding to questions; dialogue is also an outcome of their project—“The curriculum development project has stimulated networking between teachers,” they report.

So, why should dialogue reverberate so strongly with me? Because dialogue is central to my efforts to support learning. Dialogue about learning may take many forms: self-referenced talk similar to Vygotsky’s “inner speech”; learners chatting after class; e-mail exchanges between learner and teacher; hurried discussions with colleagues around the photocopier . . .

All these dialogues can be seen as ways of creating opportunities for learning to take place. Indeed, one view of the teacher’s function assigns a central role to “systematic management of learning opportunity” (Crabbe, 2003, p. 9). Our training in applied linguistics has taught us to recognise the essential conditions for language learning; exercising our expertise involves translating those abstract conditions into opportunities for learners to access and process input, participate in interaction, be “pushed” to produce output (Swain, 2000a), and pay attention to the feedback they receive. Similar concerns will have guided Ellen and Michael’s curriculum project decisions.

But any attempt to specify the ideal curriculum for promoting learner autonomy is doomed before it begins. To my way of thinking, a curriculum is a statement of potential, not a blueprint for action. What’s more, it can easily be subverted. Therefore, the most important activity remains that which takes place “inside” and “beyond” the curriculum—on those occasions where learner interest and opportunity coincide.

The kinds of learning opportunities which I have in mind to can be illustrated by referring to some of the dialogues I have participated in this week:

- talking with a Chinese student who wanted to clarify feedback I had written on his essay, so he could apply his new understanding in writing his next essay;
- talking with a colleague who was searching for arguments to persuade an international student that she will learn more if she tries to edit her own writing than if she asks a native speaker of English to edit it for her; and,
- talking with a learner of French and Spanish about strategies for remembering vocabulary.

Exchanges like this are part of the rich context of language learning and teaching. The outcome of many such dialogues is action; action that is borne of confidence. This confidence is not generated by anything printed in textbooks or enshrined in the curriculum; it develops as a result of opportunities created and seized.

Opportunities and dialogue—what more do we need?