Promoting Autonomy in University Students
Brandon Narasaki

ABSTRACT
This paper will introduce the implementation of a self-reflective activity designed to promote learner autonomy through self-monitoring and evaluation in the Fall 2014 semester. In Rikkyo’s English Discussion Class (EDC), a student-centered approach to learning is adopted and fostered in weekly lessons. With the focus taken away from the lecture-based structure many Japanese students are accustomed to, EDC instructors are trained and encouraged to use a more “hands-off” approach to teaching. The move from a teacher-centered to student-centered method pushes these first-year students into a role of being more responsible for their own progress and development. This creates an ideal context for developing learner autonomy. Before explaining the setup and implementation of the activity itself, this paper will cover a brief overview of the history of learner autonomy in the field of language education, and highlight key theories and models relevant in current research.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The term autonomy for learning originated in the 1960s when politicians were debating the development of learning skills and independence (Boud, 1981). Twenty years later, Holec (1981) coined learner autonomy as, “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3), and this concept started becoming more widely used in the area of language education and research (Dang, 2012; Jingnan, 2011). Over the last thirty years, learner autonomy has become a prominent area of research in both general education and foreign/second language education, leading to a vast number of models and practices. Learner autonomy has taken on many translations and variations, but seems to be focused on four main abilities in language research: (1) a general ability of knowing how to learn (Wenden, 1991), (2) an ability to ‘control’ one’s learning activities (Cotterall, 1995), (3) an ability to learn without the involvement of a teacher (Dickinson, 1987, p.11), and (4) an ability to make and carry out choices (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428).

In Holec’s (1981) study, ability and responsibility are seen as a combination of five crucial operations for developing autonomy: (1) determining objectives, (2) defining content and progressions, (3) selecting methods, (4) monitoring procedure of acquisition, and (5) evaluating what happened (Dang, 2012). These areas comprise a learner’s ability and willingness in developing responsibility for one’s own learning, and Little (1991) argues that this acceptance of responsibility for learning is at the core of learner autonomy. By promoting learner autonomy in the classroom, instructors are helping students to find ways to improve their language abilities without the constant support of a teacher.

With the belief that learners should have the capability of taking charge of their own learning, an autonomous cycle of developing, implementing, monitoring, organizing, and assessing one’s own plan can be created (Dornyei, 2001). Dornyei (2001) continues this idea by arguing that learners should have the desire to take responsibility for their own learning with the above cycle in place, and that they should find appropriate methods to help promote positive language values and attitudes.

Smith and Ushioda (2009) point out the need for attention to socio-cultural factors by urging researchers and educators to keep in mind the effects of trying to develop autonomy in learner’s who may have no, or minimal, experience in a more autonomous educational method. In the context of English foreign language (EFL) education in Japan, autonomy is an area that has
had little prevalence. Tagaki (2003) states that, “Japanese students are often seen as passive and teacher-dependent in the language classroom” (p. 130). Even though Aoki (2001) urges caution to educators and researchers who use generalizations of Japanese students, she goes on to explain that the origins of Western (Socratic) and Japanese (Confucian) education styles may be the reason for the challenge Japanese students face when adapting to autonomous learning. While Socratic philosophy focuses on the need for debate and individual thought, Confucian principles emphasize an imitation of the words and deeds of a good teacher (avoiding challenges to the all-knowing teacher). With this being said, implementing a course of action for developing autonomous learners in the Japanese EFL context may be difficult (considering their underlying beliefs and practices in proper education and learning). However, Scharle & Szabo (2000) explain that simply “raising awareness is the starting point” (p. 9) for developing learner autonomy and encouraging students to consciously examine their own contribution to learning. In other words, taking small steps towards developing a sense of autonomy is needed, since pushing highly dependent learners too fast may bring about a resistance or avoidance of autonomy. But hopefully, “if learners believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and can rely on themselves, their dependence on the teacher will decrease” (Scharle & Szabo, 2000, p. 7), thereby directly increasing autonomy.

**PREPARATION AND PROCEDURE**

The only material needed for this self-feedback activity is the *Self-Reflective feedback sheet* (see Appendix). For each week, the target function/communication goal and topic are provided for the students (so that they can recall the focus of the lesson upon review in a subsequent class). In each lesson box, a space for strengths (marked by a “😊”) and weaknesses (marked by a “☺”) is provided so that students can easily organize their own comments. In order to prevent problems with students losing their feedback sheets over the semester, it is probably best that the instructor distribute the sheets at the beginning of class, and collect them before the students leave. This is also a good chance for the instructor to give students individual feedback when first implementing this activity. As the semester goes on, instructors can choose whether or not to continue providing feedback (and how to do so). Taking time after class to look over how each student assesses his/her own work in each group discussion throughout the semester will help the instructor track self-feedback progress or problems.

The *Self-Reflective feedback sheet* for each student (see Appendix) aims at helping learners accept the idea that their own effort and input are crucial to the process of learning. Students are instructed to keep track of their strengths and weaknesses in each group discussion, aiming for improvement between Discussion 1 and Discussion 2 every regular and test lesson (lessons 2-13), as well as overall progress from week to week. The weaknesses from the previous week’s discussions become goals for the students to work on in the following lesson. This means that students should be given time to read any teacher comments written on their feedback sheet, as well as review what they had written themselves. Since this will be a new activity for most, if not all students, the instructor will initially guide and facilitate this activity by providing teacher-fronted feedback as well as giving suggestions for what kinds of strengths and weaknesses each student can choose to write on their self-feedback sheet. With learner autonomy being the primary goal, teacher-fronted feedback will decrease as the semester progresses, aiming for a completely self-reliant system of feedback and improvement on the students by the end of the fourteen-week course. This will help to provide more meaningful individual feedback for each student, which is often too difficult and time consuming with teacher-fronted feedback used in EDC classes. Even though instructors will ideally be giving less feedback throughout the
semester, it is possible to continue observing the way in which students track their own progress by reviewing the students self-feedback every week. Students may continue to write the same strengths or weaknesses, so the instructor may need to see what the reasons are for the repetitive self-feedback. This scaffolding technique comes from Smith and Ushioda’s (2009) claim that it is important to keep socio-cultural factors in mind, and remember that most Japanese students are not accustomed to autonomous learning.

**VARIATIONS**
This activity is fairly general in nature, and is designed to give students the freedom to write down their own personal feedback based on group discussion performance. One possible variation attempted during the implementation of this activity in the Fall 2014 semester was the focus on different kinds of strengths and weaknesses for different levels of students. For example, the lower level IV students were only required to comment about the use (or non-use) of target functions and communication skills, while higher level students were asked to reflect on what they found easy or difficult for each new function and topic (e.g. expressing deep ideas in difficult topics such as “The Right to Life?”). The feedback sheets were designed to be very simple so that both teacher and student could use the activity in varied/unique ways. Although there is more than one way to adapt this activity, these were ways in which the activity was used in these Fall 2014 classes.

**DISCUSSION**
Based on in-class observations, as well as tracking each student’s use of their own individual feedback sheet every week, one common trend seemed to occur: many students gradually became more aware of their own performance, and wrote strengths and weaknesses that matched teacher notes. Even though most students did not seem to know their own strengths and weaknesses before teacher feedback (both oral and written) at the beginning of the semester, many of them became more aware of what they did well and what they could work on more.

However, one important point learned from the first trial of this class activity from the Spring 2014 semester was that the points students focus on in their self-feedback tend to closely align with suggestions/feedback the instructor points out. For example, in the spring semester, teacher feedback focused mainly on target functions and communication skills, which resulted in almost every student writing strengths and weaknesses based solely on their use of functions and communication skills. Hence, in the Fall semester, teacher feedback was broadened to more than just the target phrases from the textbook, adding comments about students’ ability to create deep discussions, develop group cohesion and support, enjoy the discussions, etc. This resulted in a direct transfer in many of the students’ written self-feedback. As a result, it is strongly recommended that you consider what kind of focus (if any) you give the students for how they decide what to write for their own feedback.

Another point to make clear is that not all students take the activity of self-feedback seriously, so some students who may either copy the same points other students chose, or repeat the same points from previous weeks’ comments. Instructors who use this activity may find it useful to check each student’s written feedback before collecting them, as well as review the feedback sheets and possibly make small comments. This can increase the usefulness of the activity itself, since each student will see that the teacher is checking self-feedback in class each week, as well as making written comments as a type of individual teacher feedback. Although this activity did take more time to do outside of class, informally asking several different classes about their experience with the Self-Reflective feedback sheets helped to validate that most
students found it useful, and enjoyed having a space (i.e. feedback sheet) to track their own progress in class every week.

CONCLUSION
This paper started with an overview of the major research in the field of learner autonomy, and how a range of different definitions have been used since the original term was coined by Holec (1981). The activity explained in this paper made use of a *Self-Reflective feedback sheet* for each student to keep a written record of their personal performance in weekly group discussions. It was planned in a way that decreased the amount of teacher intervention and feedback as the semester went on to encourage these first-year university students to take charge of their own learning for possibly the first time in their academic careers.

However, this initial study only made use of informal observations and teacher notes collected during class activities, as well as reviewing completed student *Self-Reflective feedback sheets* outside of class. To understand the effects of this activity more deeply, the use of *focused student observations* (either using video recordings or focusing on an individual or small group for each discussion to collect more accurate and detailed notes) or *quantitative note taking* (e.g. counting the exact number of times a student uses each function or communication skill) could provide more details into how beneficial self-reflective feedback can be to a student’s development in autonomy.

REFERENCES
## APPENDIX

**Self-Reflective feedback sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 2: English in Japan / Changing Topics</th>
<th>Lesson 3: Studying Abroad / Balancing Opinions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☻</td>
<td>☻</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4: Young People and Fashion / Agreeing &amp; Disagreeing</td>
<td>Lesson 5: Popular Japanese Fashion Brands / Discussion Test 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☻</td>
<td>☻</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☻</td>
<td>☻</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>