Exploring Students’ and Instructors’ Perceptions Regarding Learner Autonomy and More Independence in the Classroom

Devon Arthurson

ABSTRACT

Little research appears to have been done on both instructors and students in Japan’s perceptions of learner autonomy and more independence in the classroom. Using instructor and student surveys, data was collected about learner autonomy and more independence in classes. Gaining a deeper understanding of other English Discussion Class (EDC) instructors’ opinions and experiences, as well as EDC students’ opinions and feedback of autonomy-fostering activities can potentially create activities that better suit the learners’ needs. This exploratory research project will present students’ definitions of independence; instructors’ definitions of autonomy; and both groups’ views on the advantages and disadvantages of these concepts in the learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research project is to explore the views of instructors concerning learner autonomy and the opinions of students about having more independence in the classroom by examining the themes appearing in the data specifically for striking similarities or differences in the two groups’ responses. There seems to be little research comparing and contrasting students and instructors in Japan’s opinions regarding these topics based on qualitative data. It appears that the more understanding acquired related to the students’ thoughts on learner autonomy-fostering activities and creating more independent learning environments, the better instructors can adjust their teaching practices and materials to more adequately meet their learners’ needs.

Learner autonomy is defined by Benson (2011) as “the capacity to take control of one’s learning” (p. 61). Scharle and Szabó (2000) further stated that autonomy is “the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well” (p. 4). Fostering learner autonomy in lessons and creating a classroom where learners have more independence can be advantageous for a number of reasons. Citing a review of literature on autonomy and motivation by Dickinson (1995), Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) set out that “[a] key argument in linking autonomy and motivation is that both are centrally concerned with the learner’s active engagement with and involvement in the learning process” (p. 58). Scharle and Szabó (2000) emphasized that “learners can only assume responsibility for their learning if they have some control over the learning process… increasing independence may evoke and reinforce responsible and autonomous attitudes” (p. 4) and that “[s]ome degree of autonomy is also essential to successful language learning” (p. 80). It is my belief that EDC instructors have the responsibility to model professional behavior and encourage their university students to view their learning experience as worthwhile and beneficial for their future. Moreover, Scharle & Szabó (2000) underscored that “in order to foster learner autonomy, we clearly need to develop a sense of responsibility and also encourage learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning” (p. 4). Fostering learner autonomy in EDC lessons will aid the instructor in seeing their students as having some level of control over their learning and by giving learners more independence in the classroom. Moreover, this can potentially assist in better preparing them to enter the workforce after graduation.

Educational practices that foster learner autonomy are set out by Benson (2011) as:

“resource-based approaches regarding learner-interaction with learning materials; technological approaches regarding learner-interaction with educational technologies; learner-based approaches regarding direct production of learner’s behavioral and psychological changes; classroom-based...
approaches regarding learner-control over their learnings’ planning and evaluation; curriculum-based approaches regarding learner-control of curriculum; and teacher-based approaches regarding the instructors’ practice of fostering learner autonomy with the learners” (Benson, 2011, p. 125).

This research project will explore classroom-based approaches with the activities of evaluation (self-check and peer-monitoring activities), context creation (learners deciding new categories for discussion), and classroom management (learners controlling timers and the decision-making processes of roles and tasks for a fluency-building activity). To a lesser extent, learner-based approaches were used as the students participating in this project were told about ways in which having more independence in their learning was a way to potentially assist in their career preparation. It is important to call to attention that in the lessons and student surveys, the term “independence” or “jiritsu” was used instead of “autonomy” or “jishusei” as a Japanese instructor explained that jiritsu may be a term more familiar to the students which is why the term “independence” (in reference to students’ learning) is used throughout this paper.

**METHOD**

Three surveys were created to obtain data from instructors regarding learner autonomy and from students regarding having more independence in the lessons by participating in activities intended to increase their independence. This study’s purpose was to gain more awareness of not only the viewpoints of other EDC instructors but by gathering feedback from students to investigate their opinions of having more independence in lessons through mostly qualitative data. This echoes McKay (2006), who stated, “Qualitative research… typically starts with an assumption that classroom learning must be studied holistically, taking into account a variety of factors in a specific classroom” (p. 6). Gaining multiple perspectives from instructors and students about similar themes can assist in a better understanding of methods to foster learner autonomy. Guided by Glaser and Strauss’ (1963) grounded-theory research or “the discovery of theory from data” (p. 1), below are the questions which shaped the content of the surveys. Based on the instructors’ survey, the two student surveys drew from those questions specifically concerning self-definitions and advantages and disadvantages of learner autonomy or having more independence in lessons. The student surveys were originally written in English and the Japanese translations were completed by Japanese EDC instructors.

**Instructors’ Survey Research Questions:**

How do instructors define autonomy?

Do instructors implement specific activities to foster autonomy in their lessons? If so, how? What do instructors perceive the advantages and disadvantages to be of fostering learner autonomy?

**1st Students’ Survey Research Questions:**

How do students view the effectiveness of activities employed to increase their independence?

What do students perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of having more independence in lessons?

**2nd Students’ Survey Research Questions:**

Have students’ had previous experiences with activities related to content creation, evaluation and classroom management?

What are students’ overall opinions of the activities related to content creation, evaluation and classroom management? How do students define independence?
Participants
Twelve instructors with an awareness of learner autonomy, due to their experience with the program as fostering learner autonomy is used in some lesson activities and has been incorporated into faculty development, completed an online survey in July 2016. Three classes were selected for the two in-class surveys from Levels I, II and III. The levels are based on the students’ combined listening and reading TOEIC scores. Since the student surveys were in both Japanese and English, the class levels with varying English proficiency should not have prevented their comprehension or completion of the surveys.

Procedure
Near the close of the Spring semester, in July 2016, instructors completed an online survey (see Appendix A). In the Fall semester, twenty-one students completed the first survey during Lesson 6 in early November 2016 (see Appendix B). Twenty-two students completed the second in-class survey during Lesson 12 in mid to late December 2016 (see Appendix C). The student surveys were answered anonymously in either Japanese or English. Japanese responses were translated into English by a Japanese EDC instructor. All three surveys contained a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION
Guided by grounded theory practices, qualitative data was coded as “one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). Moreover, a major strategy outlined by Glass and Strauss of comparative analysis (1967, p. 1) was employed. In this project’s qualitative data analysis, keywords were coded based on their frequency of appearance.

Instructors’ Data
To gain more awareness of the educational practices Benson (2011) outlined to foster learner autonomy discussed previously, the instructors were asked to describe the practices they used in their lessons. In addition, by doing this, I hoped to learn more about other practices I could use in my own lessons. Some reasons that instructors provided for not incorporating learner autonomy in EDC lessons related to time restraints, their personal teaching philosophy, the course’s structure and its learning goals.

Table 1. Activities implemented or not implemented by instructors in their lessons (n = 12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Implemented</th>
<th>Not Implemented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content creation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom-management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-study</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities (e.g. reflection)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ and Instructors’ Data
Firstly, from both groups, the advantages of fostering learner autonomy and more independence in the lessons will be examined. Based on the coding of keywords through frequency in the students’ answers, a summary of the data based on my interpretation shows that the advantages of having more independence in lessons may lead to students’ improvement in EDC classes as well as in their interactions with other classmates with more opportunities to understand by being more
New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

active and making decisions. Then, based on the coding of the keywords in the instructors’ answers from my interpretation, it appears that the advantages of learner autonomy can result in an improvement in not only students’ English skills, but can potentially aid in their learning in other classes and after university resulting in more motivation, responsibility, understanding, confidence and creativity. With the keywords, perhaps due to students’ position as university students, it appears that they saw independence as less transferable to other areas of their education and in future learning than the instructors whose education, work and life experience could value the transferability. Students also saw independence as a more significant way to improve their interactions with other classmates, in addition to allowing them to think for themselves. Nonetheless, the quotations below reveal the similarities that both groups perceived as the advantages.

**Students’ Responses**
“Having more independence in the lessons makes us have more freedom to decide what we discuss and how we discuss. I have more opinions during the discussion.”
“We can concentrate to conduct so it can become more efficient.”
“I can make an effort to say my opinion and use English more actively. I can make a better relationship with classmates (opportunities to communicate increase).”
“Everyone can be more independent during the discussion too, so different people can start the discussion, ask questions, etc.”
“I can have more creative thinking. The class can be smoother because we can try to understand on our own.”
“I will be able to think more by myself and it can connect to my improvement of English skills.”

**Instructors’ Responses**
“Students feel more confident in learning and using the target language.”
“When they [students] pay attention to their own learning, they could learn or improve more [that can foster their motivation possibly.”
“Students can actively participate in the classes.”
“Autonomy helps learners to think for themselves, make decisions, and develop an understanding amongst their peers.”
“[I]t helps learners develop learning skills that they can use as lifelong learners.”
“[S]tudents could become more self-confident as speakers of English, and perhaps act more mature or responsible for their actions in class. This might even lead to the development of leadership or communication skills.”

Again based on the coding of keywords in the students’ answers, the following negative consequences were identified: the disadvantages of having more independence are uncertainty; feelings such as nervousness and anxiety; a gap between talkative or assertive and quiet or passive students; and a disruption to the smoothness of the class. In summary, the coding of the keywords in the instructors’ answers revealed that the disadvantages of learner autonomy are that it does not have enough feedback or explicit teaching; it is time-consuming; students may be confused regarding the goals of the class; the course losing its sense of direction; and lowering students’ quality of learning. It is notable that students seemed to be less concerned about receiving feedback from instructors than the instructors were in giving feedback or support. Students also expressed their worry about the gap between the assertive and passive students, in addition to being more sensitive to the class’ atmosphere. Instructors were more concerned than the students’ about issues
regarding goals. However, confusion and issues regarding time appeared in both keyword summaries. The following quotations expand on both groups’ responses:

**Students’ Responses**
“We have to think [about] our own ideas more because of independence, but sometimes it’s hard to express ourselves and it [is] a waste of time.”
“It disturbs the smoothness.”
“There will be more of a gap between talkative students and quiet students.”
“If I cannot come up with ideas, I will feel panicked.”
“Confusion about what to do happens.”
“Tiring.”

**Instructors’ Responses**
“If teachers encourage students to be autonomous and do not scaffold appropriately and give no feedback, students would think the teachers irresponsible.”
“[I]t might be a bit time consuming. However, once they [students] are trained to do, it will be smoother within a classroom setting.”
“Culturally, Japanese students are used to receiving instruction from their teachers and do not have to actively participate in lessons.”
“Learners might also simply prefer that the expert teacher set the goals.”
“[S]tudents may feel anxiety or an increased sense of uncertainty by having to make decisions on their own, without teacher input.”

The students’ and instructors’ definitions of independence and learner autonomy will be explored. Drawing from the coding of keywords in the students’ answers, independence was defined as using one’s own abilities to take action, as well as one’s own skills, without relying on others’ help to express their own ideas. Based on the coding of keywords in the instructors’ answers, learner autonomy was defined as the learner’s self-management and responsibility for making decisions using their own capability without relying on other people enabling their own improvement and freedom. Both groups expressed that one’s own abilities to control one’s self in taking responsibilities without others’ help by using their own skills and having more freedom was independence or autonomy. Instructors were more focused on goals and responsibility. However, students felt taking action and expressing their own ideas, opinions and thoughts were more significant as these themes appeared more frequently in their definitions. Both groups used similar language to express their definitions indicating that there seemed to be less of an effect of locality, based on differences such as culture and age, indicating that those barriers may not be so challenging.

**Students’ Data**
This section details the students’ feedback about the activities used to create more independence in the classroom in evaluation, content creation and classroom management. These activities were also what shaped the students’ responses in the previous sections. The evaluation consisted of a self-check paper used after every lesson’s two discussions based on the discussion test criteria and peer-monitoring activities done every fourth lesson before the test lesson. Students were asked to choose if the evaluation activities were a positive, negative or neutral experience. They were also asked to choose if the evaluation of the self-check paper helped or did not help them become aware of their performance. For content creation, in groups of approximately four students, students would be given a minute to decide together on another topic to discuss based on the set theme. For
example, if the theme was Japanese pop culture, a topic shared in content creation was video games. If they could not decide on a topic, they were referred to the textbook or received support from the instructor. They were asked to choose if this activity helped them to be more independent, less independent or no change compared to the first lesson. In addition, they were asked if this activity was a positive, neutral or negative experience. Classroom management activities were: controlling the timers for all the activities in the class; and making decisions about roles and tasks for a fluency-building activity without instructor-support unless it was directly requested. The results are in Figures 1 and 2. Again, they were asked to choose if this activity helped them to be more independent, less independent or no change compared to their first lesson, and if these activities were a positive, neutral or negative experience. Students were also asked to share further comments about the autonomy-fostering activities as follows:

Evaluation Feedback
“I can reflect with the feedback right away.”
“It becomes clear improvement and function phrases we need to use.”
“Better to make more self-check things. Discuss feedback is not necessary.”
“It’s a good chance for me to view myself but it can’t be better that feedback from teacher’s advice.”
“EDC’s evaluation is enough.”

Content Creation Feedback
“We can discuss the topic we want. It’s really nice experience during my study.”
“I can expand the opinion, not something that we are told to say.”
“It helped us to discuss because we decide the topic. Also it can lead participation.”
“It helps us to think of discussion content; [however, the m]ore important thing is to learn how to conduct discussion, it is waste of time to take a long time to think of content.”
“If it is decided already, it would be easier.”

Classroom Management Feedback
“I can manage our time and feel strongly to participate.”
“We deeply think of the topic and summarize the ideas.”
“Sometimes I feel at a loss but it is a good experience.”
“I think the teacher should lead the fluency.”
Figure 1. Students’ experience of autonomy-fostering activities (n = 22)

Figure 2: Students’ feedback of autonomy-fostering activities (n = 21). *For the Fluency question, one student answer was blank
CONCLUSION
According to Scharle & Szabó (2000), “Personality traits, preferred learning styles, and cultural attitudes set limits to the development of autonomy” (p. 5). Yet having more awareness of students’ opinions about autonomy can potentially remove some of these limitations. The data gathered from the surveys revealed many similarities between students’ and instructors’ perceptions. Personally, this helped me to better understand the challenges students view regarding autonomy-fostering activities. In future classes, I plan to address these areas of concern with the students, adjust the activities and provide more support. Benson (2011) affirmed, “autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individuals in different contexts or at different times” (p. 58). This research project provided me with inspiration from the EDC instructors and students to continue to find new ways to foster learner autonomy in my teaching.

REFERENCES

APPENDIX A
EDC Instructors’ Lessons and Learner Autonomy
1. In your own words, how do you define learner autonomy?

2. Do you incorporate learner autonomy into your EDC lessons? I. YES /II. NO

I. YES.
Please check the ways you incorporate learner autonomy into your lessons:
A. Evaluation
i. Self-checks
ii. Peer-feedback
iii. Other (Please specify)
B. Content
i. Student-generated content
ii. Other (Please specify)
C. Classroom Management
i. Students control timing devices
ii. Students set time limits
iii. Students make other decisions (Please specify)
iv. Other (Please specify)
D. Self-study
i. Students are encouraged to study / prepare outside of the classroom (Please specific about what)
ii. Other (Please specify)
E. Other (Please specify)
Please feel free to explain anything you do that you think is especially effective below.
II. NO.
Please explain why you do not incorporate learner autonomy into your EDC lessons.
Is there a different classroom style/class (writing, presentation, etc.) situation, you have had or would like to have which is more appropriate for incorporating learner autonomy into your EDC lessons? (Please specify)

3. What are the advantages of fostering learner autonomy in lessons?

4. What are the disadvantages of fostering learner autonomy in lessons?

5. If there is anything else you would like to comment about, please feel free to do so.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT SEMESTER SURVEY 1 / 学期アンケート 1

A. Evaluation
i. The self-check after Discussion 1 and 2 helped/didn’t help me become aware of my performance.

B. Content
As a group, by deciding the ideas for Fluency (E and F), I feel more independent / less independent / no change in my learning compared to Lesson 1.

C. Classroom Management
i. Using the timers in the lessons made me feel more independent / less independent / no change compared to Lesson 1.

ii. Making decisions in the Fluency (deciding speaker/listener roles, using the timer and the signs, changing partners and sides) without Devon’s help, made me feel more independent / less independent / no change compared to Lesson 1.

D. Feedback about Independence / 自律に関しての意見
i. What are the advantages of having more independence in the lessons? Feel free to give examples.

APPENDIX C

STUDENT SEMESTER SURVEY 2 / 学期アンケート 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Experience with Activities</th>
<th>Evaluation (Self-check paper and pair feedback)</th>
<th>Making content (Fluency E and F)</th>
<th>Classroom management (Fluency and timing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. 学習と活動に関する経験</td>
<td>評価 (セルフチェックペーパーやペアフィードバック)</td>
<td>内容作成 (Fluency E と F)</td>
<td>クラスルーム運営 (フルーエンシーとそのタイミング)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. EDC fall semester was the first time that I experienced these activities. (✓)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

| i. この活動を体験したのは EDC 秋学期が初めてだ。 (✓) |
| ii. I have had experience in other classes doing similar activities. |
| ii. 似たような活動を他のクラスで体験したことがある。（どのクラスでどのような体験をしたか自由に記述してください） |

### B. Feedback about Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation (Self-check paper and pair feedback)</th>
<th>Activities / 活動</th>
<th>Classroom management (Fluency and timing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive / neutral / negative experience.</td>
<td>positive / neutral / negative experience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive / neutral / negative experience.</td>
<td>positive / neutral / negative experience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### B. 活動に関しての意見

1. 全体を通して、この活動は

2. If there is anything else you would like to comment on regarding these activities, please feel free to.

### C. Definition of Independence

How do you define independence? / あなたは自律をどのように定義しますか？