

## Learner responsibility in the Japanese foreign language classroom

### 外国語学習における学習者の自覚と責務

BURROWS, Christian

Faculty of Education for Future Generations

Department of Early Childhood Education

次世代教育学部乳幼児教育学科

バロウズ・クリスチャン

**要旨**：近年の言語教育においては、言語を習得するための、より有効で且つ確かなskillを身に付けることが出来るlearnerの育成を目標に、learnerの言語習得へのapproach (=取り組み方) に重点を置く傾向にある。

教育関係の報告書によると、言語そのものを学習させることと同時に、言語をどのようにして学ぶかというskillをlearnerに教える取り組みが、learnerに、より自信を持たせ、人に頼らない、有能な言語習得者へと導くということが示されている。

このことは、言語学習に限ったことではなく、あらゆる学習へのapproachにもあてはまるようである。

**キーワード**：learner autonomy, autonomous learning, learner responsibility

#### Introduction

Efforts at increasing learner participation in the language learning process, in the hope of producing more proficient learners, have increased with the belief that effective language learners assume more learning responsibility, independent of the teacher (Nunan in Jones, 1995 : 228). Equipping learners with the skills necessary to assume more responsibility for their learning has consistently been shown to be beneficial in helping improve progress in apprehending, internalizing and using L2 (Oxford, 1990 : 235). Promotion of such an approach is especially strong in collectivist countries, where the teacher-centered learning environment produces learners with an overdependence on the teacher for instruction in the language and how to master it.

Although the value of learners assuming more independence is recognized as desirable, so is the difficulty of introducing an approach into a teacher-centred environment such as Japan. Unaccustomed to such 'Western' teaching styles (Jones, 1995 : 229), the potential for learners to encounter

confusion, even frustration, when asked to contribute to the learning process, is a reaction which must be anticipated. To overcome such problems it is essential the teacher takes responsibility for encouraging autonomy through student training to raise awareness and involvement to foster, develop and strengthen learner independence. They also need to clearly illustrate pedagogical approaches, and explain the rationale and justification underlying the selection of activities. Once an understanding of the practical benefits to the approach has been developed, then motivation to improve will further stimulate other related study skills. Finally, once learners realize that they are able to take more control of their learning then the benefits are not only linguistic, but learners will be equipped with skills to experience independent learning, and strategies for adding to their study tools. However, it must be recognized that this level of learner involvement requires effort and input from the learners themselves. Only active and positive involvement, working with the teacher and other learners, can achieve the desired goals.

## Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is an approach which encourages learners to exercise greater control over one's learning. It is a matter of explicit or conscious intention as the learner 'must take at least some of the initiative and share in evaluating the extent to which learning targets are achieved' (Little, 1997). It can be defined as the ability to make decisions about what to do, which are reflected in a number of learner-centered approaches to language education that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Nunan, 1988, Dickinson, 1992, Oxford, 1990, Wenden, 1991). It is a skill so highly valued that success or failure in language learning, may in the end, be determined by whether or not learners can take charge of their own learning (Rubin and Thompson, 1982 : 3). However, the obstacle remains that this autonomy grows out of learners' acceptance of responsibility and can be defined as characterised by :

"... a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person. An autonomous learner is an active participant in the social processes of learning, but also an active interpreter of new information in terms of s/he already and uniquely knows."

(Bergen, 1990 : 102).

As Benson and Voller (1997) rightly argues, autonomy is a multidimensional construct of capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. It will also take different forms for the same individual in different contexts and at different times. However, a more specific description of learner autonomy is an element of the learning process which normally takes place beyond the formal classroom; this is not to say that independent learning is just seen as an adjunct or replacement for formal teaching but rather as an integral part of the whole learning and teaching process. Lack of clear consensus means that the term 'learner

autonomy' is one which could be applied to almost any learner who has a desire to improve their language proficiency. It also appears rather inaccurate to assume that some learners are unable to complete something without clearly defining what is expected. However, autonomous learners are seen as those who are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning and who are willing to learn in collaboration with others.

Benson and Voller (1997) summarises the main features :

1. Set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.
2. Exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning.
3. The right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.
4. Learners readiness to take charge of their own learning is a matter of capacity but also of attitude and motivation.
5. Learning is assumed to be an inescapably social (thus interdependent) process in which the individual learner nevertheless always retains his/her independence.
6. The autonomous learner is proactive in the social interaction that frames learning and in the individual processes.

A common mistake assumes that the development of learner autonomy requires the teacher somehow to fade into the background. This is impossible because :

1. Teachers create the contexts of formal learning : without them, it is unlikely that any learning will take place.
2. Although learners are capable of exercising a degree of autonomy, the gradual growth of their capacity for autonomy requires the stimulus and support of a teacher.

Despite the intention, it must be recognised that expecting immediate transformation is unrealistic and unfair to the learner. It is something which is

achieved over time with practice, experience and support, and possibly, with some degree of maturity. Only after considerable guidance and practice will they be in a position to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. As highlighted by Nunan (1996 : 15) learners may only be in this position at the end of the course.

### **Teaching autonomy and learning**

Education differences illustrate that both learners and teachers do not share the same understanding of what comprises 'proper' classroom behavior. Japanese learner reticence indicates a different learning style, and therefore they must be explicitly taught ways to engage and participate in the learning process. Different approaches need to be presented with learners allowed to adopt the one which best suits their learning style. To force one onto them as a means of becoming a 'better learner' will only lead to future problems when it is realised 'one fit does not suit all' (Jones, 1995). This focus on the learner changes quite radically the typical distribution of power and authority in the classroom. How learners go about making sense of language data therefore becomes of central importance, and it is these psychological traits (attitude, personality) that are central to successful language learning. Learners' efforts are important as autonomy and other learning styles and strategies are the mental steps that learners use to learn a new language (Wenden, 1991 : 18). These attitudes comprise a cognitive component and include beliefs and perceptions. This 'psychological proportion' may need direct instruction, otherwise due to different learning styles it will be unknown by all. This process of attitude change in adults is intended to teach learners to recognise the 'right' attitude (Petty and Capioppo, 1991 in Wenden).

Independent learning is fostered by creating the opportunities and experiences which encourage student motivation, curiosity, self-confidence, self-reliance and positive self-concept; it is based on learners' understanding of their own interests and

a valuing of learning for its own sake. In order to facilitate and lessen the risk, activities that promote group work tend to reduce the learners apprehension while at the same time building confidence. As long as learners have a general guideline of what is expected they will feel more assured and confident than if they were expected to study completely independently. It is also necessary to make the students aware that risks cannot be completely avoided merely reduced. Learners especially need to build self-confidence in their capability to work independently of the teacher. They need to take charge, organize, practice, memorize, guess, and accept uncertainty. Activities are also useful for developing pragmatic awareness and opportunities for communicative practice, especially role-playing, which also helps promote the process of cross-cultural dialogue. The misconception is that independent learning implies that learners learn on their own, since social autonomy (function as a member of a group) should be seen as an important element of autonomy. Some activities are directed by the teacher and others by the learners. To the extent that autonomy is a capacity that expands on the basis of appropriate learning experience, learners should be able to assume control of more and more aspects of the learning process as time goes by. But the teacher will always be responsible for maintaining the learning environment. In other words, although the individual learner's personality, past experience, interests and perceived needs must all be taken into account, learning itself is the chief of attention.

The background of this lies in the fact that 'second language learning is a highly interactive process' and the quality of this interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on learning (Ellis, cited in Richard and Lockheart, 1994 : 138). Conscious use of these strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990). However committed we may be to autonomous learning, we must recognize that there are countless things that learners cannot readily discover by themselves, and that they are being responsible if they do not

hesitate to ask someone who knows. As Little (1997: 210) points out : the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis, central to the development of learner autonomy, depends on the development of an internalisation of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions. Students need help in developing skills such as critical thinking, questioning techniques and self-assessment, and often fail to realise the depth of their own knowledge and skills. Furthermore, some language learners may agree with the notion that they should be more responsible for their learning, while for others an independent role is something they may prefer to avoid. These kind of false assumptions and prejudices which underlie their attitudes towards their role in learning must be changed, a process Holec (1981) terms 'de-conditioning'.

### **The cultural aspect**

Traditions of learning and teaching in Japan, differing as they do from Western countries, necessitate the need for 'a sound, culturally sensitive foundation' (Jones, 1995 : 229) that recognises these differences and incorporates the Japanese way of learning. According to Pennycock (in Benson and Voller 1997 : 43), the imposition of a 'foreign' teaching approach could be perceived as the free, enlightened, West bringing one more form of supposed emancipation to the unlightened, traditional, backward and authoritarian classrooms of the world. Because of its Western concepts of individualism and independence, introducing a teaching environment with an emphasis on learner-centred teaching would be a learning style that many Japanese learners are unaccustomed to after years of authority-orientated instruction. Certain values held in the West might have difficulty being transferred to other countries that share different learning styles. It is accepted that "the learners' knowledge and attitudes" are an important contribution in the learning process and influence the adopted teaching principles. Trying to encourage independence is countered by the fact that Japanese learners have little experience of a learner-centered environment.

With the increase in EFL teachers teaching in foreign cultures, problems of communication and even conflict can arise due to a variety of reasons; one being that learners from different cultures react differently to various situations in different ways. The cultural basis of the teacher-learner relationship tends to make cross-cultural learning situations fundamentally problematic for both parties (Hofstede, 1986 : 303). This can lead to differences being viewed negatively by the learner. Due to the difference in cognitive profiles the culturally insensitive approach would be to expect learners from other cultures to be able to adopt these 'foreign' strategies immediately. Why would Japanese learners, who have experienced years of teacher-centered learning, suddenly realise that they have to take more responsibility? This lack of awareness of alternative learning techniques obviously limits a learner's ability in situations requiring the use of these learning strategies (Dansereau in Wenden, 1991 : 4). Questions about the cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy often seem to presuppose that cultures are monolithic and unchanging. If education is about critical enquiry, it is also about questioning received values, institutions, social norms, including traditional notions about how teachers should teach and learners learn.

However, a common complaint is that learners from collectivist countries are particularly resistant to this idea due to overly dependent on their teachers. This stereotypical learner is not the product of any one particular culture, but of the teacher-centered pedagogies that seem to be fundamental to educational traditions around the world. In Japan it can be evident with learners who only seem to be focused on the products of English (entrance examinations) not the process of learning offered through learning opportunities in class. Japanese learners are therefore perceived to be relentless rote-learners, syllabus dependent, passive and lacking initiative; brought up in, and committed to, what we would regard as a surface approach to learning. The activity of memorizing, then, is not

the issue, but what the learner does with it. The same is true of dependence on the teacher for advice and information. Some of the most effective learners who consult teachers are concerned with correction of their errors. (i.e. what they do with it). There appears to be a misconception that learners who are free and independent from the teacher are able to conceive, develop ideas, i.e. this equals learner autonomy. And that this constitutes a higher level of application of ones ability than learners who are more teacher dependent. However, for learners unused to such freedom, they may lack the ability what is required of them there by negating the purpose of the exercise. It will also fail to improve autonomy as learners first need to be taught how to learn. It is clear therefore that the autonomy to learn is meaningless without autonomous learning. This process allows them to learn how to do things by themselves. This means that learners cannot accept responsibility for their own learning unless we have some idea of what, why, and how we are trying to learn.

### Conclusion

Does cultural variation in learning really encompass autonomy or is it just different learning styles? Could it be that some people are not accustomed to such group work and prefer a different learning style? By not stressing learning strategies, teachers in essence discourage students from developing and exploring new strategies, and in so doing, limiting their awareness of their cognitive capabilities (Wenden, 1991 : 14). Offering the learners the reward of mastering skills that will equip them to proceed would appear to be a basic requirement for the teacher. In teaching an 'alien' language teachers need to be sensitive to the fragility of using techniques that promote cultural understanding. Therefore we should not expect learners to deny the anger or frustration they feel. Those are real feelings and they need to be openly expressed. To smother these feelings may delay and actually prevent progress.

Becoming partners, however, imposes its own responsibilities, ones which have again not traditionally been accorded to the 'recipients' of teaching. Important among these responsibilities is that of consciousness about ones own learning process and strategies.

In the West responsibility is identified with autonomy. We see this in the literature on autonomous learning, where the aim of inducing students to take responsibility for their learning is routinely stated. But what does this 'goal' entail? Neither teachers nor learners can take this awareness for granted. Learners need awareness with a purpose, which depends on them knowing about themselves, their learning and also how to act autonomously (Wenden, 1991 : xi). It remains to be seen whether this can be brought to the Japanese classroom. The fact that the success record for acquiring competence in a second or foreign language in a formal instructional setting is so poor for many students should inspire people to look at how this can be solved so that learners actually learn in the classroom.

The first hurdle to overcome is the learners themselves. Their cooperation is essential in determining the effectiveness of the program. So the learners must be educated in the alternative teaching methods which are not only available but in many cases preferable to the authority-orientated one. Cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective, social and cultural factors play a role in our approaches to language learning. Learners are often not aware of the power of adopting learning styles and strategies that suit and them. Existing skills and knowledge also come into play, as well as the learners' ability to self-access and reflect on learning. However, the identification of responsibility with independence is a cultural assumption, rather than a natural or universal truth (Benson and Voller, 1997 : 8). Aversion to dependence is a Western value, not a universal one. Although human societies and cultures differ from one another in ways we are familiar with, we should not be asking ourselves : "Is learner autonomy appropriate to Japan?" since to do

so implies that Japanese learners have no capacity for critically aware 'self-production.' We should rather ask : "What forms can learner autonomy appropriately take when it develops within the Japanese cultural tradition?"

## References

- Allwright, R. (1981) What do we want teaching materials for ?, *English Language Teaching Journal*, 36, 5-18.
- Benson, P. and Voller, P. (1997) *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Bergen (1990) *Developing autonomous learning in the foreign language classroom*. Bergen University.
- Dickinson, L. (1987) *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Hofstede, G. (1986) Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 10/301-320.
- Holec, H. (1981) *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Jones, J. (1995) Self-access and Culture- retreating from autonomy. *ELT Journal* 49/3 : 228-234.
- Little, D. (1997) Language awareness and the autonomy language learner. *Language Awareness*.
- Nunan, D. (1996) *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. New York : Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. (1990) *Language Learning Strategies : What Every Teacher Should Know*. Boston : Heinle and Heinle.
- Richard, J.C. and Lockheart, C. (1994) *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* CUP.
- Rubin, J. (1989) How learner strategies can inform language teaching, in V. Bickley (ed.), *Proceedings of LULTAC*, sponsored by the Institute of Language in Education, Department of Education, Hong Kong.
- Rubin, J. and Thompson, I. (1982) *How To Be a More Successful Language Learner*. (2nd Ed) Boston : Heinle and Heinle.
- Rubin, J. and Wenden, A. (1987) *Learners Strategies in Language Learning*. New Jersey : Prentice

Hall.

Sinclair, B., and Ellis, G. (1985) *Learner training : preparation for learner autonomy*. Paper presented at the 19th Annual TESOL Convention, New York.

Wenden, A. (1991) *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*. Prentice Hall.

(平成21年11月26日受理)