Autonomous Language Learning Perceptions and Practices in the Japanese Context

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Abstract

Sakai and Takagi (2009) argue that Japanese students are very keen to achieve high scores in exams, which often determine their future and, therefore, they study outside of class, as well as in class to acquire adequate English proficiency. Accordingly, Japanese students need to take responsibility for their own learning to succeed in an exam-oriented culture. Thus, students' success in language tests is related to learner autonomy. During the process of autonomous learning, students have more opportunities of experiencing significance, personal relevance, emotional engagement, and internalization. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to examine how Japanese students of English as a foreign language (EFL) perceive their own roles in autonomous language learning as well as their teachers' roles, how effectively they can make decisions while learning a foreign language, and what they do to acquire EFL outside the classroom settings. Quantitative data were collected and analysed from 148 college students who completed an online questionnaire. In addition, interviews were conducted with some of the participants. Students at higher levels of English as a foreign language assumed a greater share of responsibility for their education and were more driven than those at the intermediate level. Therefore, the study clearly demonstrates the necessity of incorporating autonomous learning into L2 language instruction.

Keywords: Autonomy; EFL; in class; outside class; proficiency

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has gained attention as an important goal in language learning both in Japan and elsewhere. The importance of this concept became clear under the assumption that far more language education is being done for far more diverse situations and for more diverse purposes than before. The concept of learner autonomy was initiated to help students to take control over their learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Benson, 2001). Earlier definitions of learner autonomy were based on the definition by Holec (1981) who defined learner autonomy with an aspect of self-direction as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", and to have "the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). Holec emphasized the individuality of students that includes the learner metacognitive skills such as reflecting, monitoring, and planning, and affective dimension (Holec, 1981). Furthermore, Little (1991) defined autonomy as "a capacity-for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The learner will develop a particular psychological relation to the process and content of his learning"(Little, 1991, p 4). Littlewood (1999) argues that learner autonomy relates to two main components "willingness and ability" of autonomous students who are capable of "making and carrying out the choices which govern his or her actions" (p. 428). While language learning goal is language proficiency, learner autonomy is the learner capability to learn away from institutional programs.

Herrington and Oliver (2000) defined the concept of authentic learning as directly related to the students' real life and real-world situations. Although there are different perspectives in the field of autonomy, many researchers agree that autonomy plays the most important role in acquiring authentic language (Benson, 2011). Richards (2015) argues that while language teaching has always been a preparation for out-of-class uses of language, much of the focus in language teaching in the past has typically been on classroom-based language learning. He states that limitations of classroom-based learning have been frequently acknowledged such as unfavourable class-size, time limitations, inadequate teaching materials, the English teachers limited English proficiency, and a test-driven curriculum. In his view, using English for social interaction in out-of-class situations such as online chat rooms, Listening Logs, TED Talks, social media, E-mediated Tandem Learning, and Voice thread provide many opportunities for students to maintain and extend their proficiency in English (Richards, 2015).

Learner autonomy is a highly significant goal in language education (Benson, 2000, 2006, 2011; Richards, 2015). According to Little (2007), levels of autonomy and target language proficiency are intertwined. Studies on autonomy (Benson, 2001) show that growth in learner autonomy leads to much improved language acquisition and skills. Based on the body of literature, there are some research studies on learner attitudes and perceptions of learner autonomy with a lack of comparative analysis of autonomous learner perceptions across different language proficiency levels in Japan. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the differences between intermediate level and higher level Japanese EFL students' perceptions on learning responsibilities and their autonomous decision-making as well as their conduct of autonomous learning activities in class and outside class.

2. Literature review

The concept of learner autonomy is interpreted in a variety of ways depending on both culture and educational setting (Benson, 2011; Little, 2007; Littlewood, 1999). Cotterall (1995) evaluated the preparedness of English language students to engage in independent language study by having them complete a questionnaire. The results emphasised the perspectives of the students on the duties associated with learning, the use of feedback in the classroom, and the confidence of the students in their own independent study abilities.

Spratt et al. (2002) found similar results of EFL students' perceptions on learning responsibilities. They concluded that students did not have awareness of their own responsibilities in learning. According to Spratt et al. (2002), it is preferable to leverage activities that students have already engaged in to develop autonomy through outside-of-class activities. Other researchers have looked at the effect that the different aspects of classroom teaching have on the development of learner autonomy. For instance, Luftenegger et al. (2012) found that students' motivating views were strongly connected to their perspectives on the amount of autonomy they had in the classroom. According to Humphreys and Wyatt (2014), one way to assist students in gaining greater autonomy is to provide them with opportunities to reflect on aspects of their own learning. As a result of participating in these reflective activities, students become more engaged in the process of their own learning. The results indicated that L2 students might benefit from more control over their learning by combining socially mediated autonomy with the assistance of their teachers. According to the findings of previous research, there is a connection between the degree of autonomy that EFL students exhibit and their overall level of proficiency (Mineishi, 2010). Mineishi investigated the different perspectives on learner autonomy held by successful and less successful Japanese students. Students who were less successful in school often worked in groups, did not voice their ideas or ask questions, and relied on the instructor rather than on themselves to evaluate how much they had learned rather than reflecting on their own progress. Futhermore, Jafari et al.(2017) examined Persian intermediate and advanced EFL learners' autonomus perceptions and revealed that learners' perceptions were affected by their previous educational experiences. Previous studies have shown that students with high levels of English proficiency are more independent, self-motivated, and self-assured in their capabilities to learn the language (Schmenk,2006). In addition, high-achiever students participate in a wide range of classroom activities and are knowledgeable about strategies for self-management and self-monitoring, all of which have contributed to an improvement in their academic performance and their capacity for learning. There are numerous research studies on students' perceptions and understanding of autonomy. However, the perspectives and perceptions of students with varying degrees of language skill on autonomy have received little attention to date. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to widen the scope of prior research on students' perceptions of autonomous learning by including Japanese EFL students with a different profile than those in earlier studies.

2.1 Research questions

The current investigation was exploratory by nature and examined the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Japanese EFL students with varying degrees of language skill perceive responsibilities in autonomous language learning?

RQ2. How do Japanese EFL students with varying degrees of language skill perceive their decision-making abilities in autonomous language learning?

RQ3. How do Japanese EFL students perceive their activities conducted outside class to support their language learning?

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and participants

This study was conducted at a Japanese national university located in Tokyo with an enrolment of approximately 4,000 students and a mission of conducting research and instruction on world languages and cultures in 26 departments of languages, including the School of Language and Culture Studies (1,480 students). A total of 148 1st-year students from the School of Language and Culture Studies were instructed to complete the questionnaire in class (73 intermediate level students and 75 higher level students). The questionnaire was correctly completed by 68 intermediate level students and 66 higher level students (excluding those that were discarded due to incomplete answers since 100 percent completeness was required). At the time of this study, all students were in their first year.

Reading, listening, speaking, and writing are the four sections of academic English that are evaluated on the Internet-based version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL, often known as iBT). The total score on the TOEFL exam, which ranges from 0 to 120, is determined by adding the scores from each of the test's four sections. This score has been categorized according to score range as follows: 118-120 equals expert, 110-117 equals very good, 94-109 equals good, 60-93 equals competent, 35-59 equals moderate, 32-34 equals limited, and 0-31 equals extremely limited. The score reports give descriptions of the appropriate scoring ranges for these areas. Student groups in this study were divided to intermediate level (60-93)and higher level (110-117)based on their the TOEFL iBT scores.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

According to Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002), an individual's culture and education influence how they view their own autonomy. Before attempting to increase learner autonomy, it is essential to comprehend how students view it. A questionnaire created by Chan et al. (2002) was used to examine the notions of autonomy held by Japanese EFL students. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese in order to meet the academic and cultural background of the study. According to the calculations, the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.90. The 50-question questionnaire has three components. The questionnaire began by asking students about their obligations to themselves and their instructors. Second, students were asked eleven questions regarding their English proficiency. The remaining 26 questions assessed students' independent practices in and out of the classroom. In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 5 intermediate and 6 advanced learners. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' and their teachers' responsibilities, their independence in learning English, and their independent practices beyond the classroom.

SPSS version 21 quantitative data analysis was used. First, the mean questionnaire scores of intermediate and advanced learners were obtained. Oxford (1990) recommended comparing and classifying collected means. This methodology classifies mean scores between 1.0 and

2.4 as "poor," 2.5 to 3.4 as "moderate," and 3.5 to 5.0 as "high." The methodology classified and analyzed outcomes. A series of t-tests were conducted to compare the autonomous learning ratings of intermediate and advanced learners. The data from the interviews were initially categorised into themes, then qualitatively.

3.3 Results

3.3.1. Students' perceptions on learning responsibilities

For answering RQ1, the first section of the questionnaire investigated the perceptions of the intermediate level and higher level EFL students on their own responsibilities in learning English independently, as well as the responsibilities of their teachers. Table 1 shows that higher level students had a mean score that ranged between 3.50 and 5.00, indicating that they considered themselves to be more accountable for their own learning. On the other hand, they regard the teacher as having a significant amount of responsibility for selecting appropriate learning activities for class ($M = 3.78$) and *determining topics to be covered in the next English class* ($M = 3.43$).

Table 1. Students' and Teachers ' Responsibility Mean Scores

Responsibilities	Higher level Students		Intermediate level Students	
	Student	*Teacher*	*Student*	*Teacher*
1. Ensuring you are making progress in class	4.57	2.97	3.32	2.77
2. Ensuring that you are making progress out of class	4.62	2.95	3.40	2.52
3. Encouraging you to study English.	3.90	2.35	3.51	2.95
4. Identifying areas for L2 improvement	3.57	2.00	3.20	2.77
5. Ensuring you are learning more diligently	3.77	2.62	2.97	2.80
6. Defining your course's learning objectives	4.25	3.02	3.71	3.10
7. Deciding what to study in your upcoming class	4.17	3.43	3.42	3.22
8. Selecting learning activities	3.25	2.52	3.02	3.91
9. Timing each task	3.50	2.82	3.30	2.82
10. Choosing materials to use in your English lessons	2.95	3.78	2.82	2.90
11. Evaluating your learning progress	3.72	2.82	2.92	2.97
12. Evaluating English coursework	3.60	2.65	3.10	2.87
13. Making decisions on what to study outside of class	4.75	2.32	3.76	3.05

The intermediate level students perceived themselves to be highly accountable for *making decisions on what to study outside of class* ($M = 3.76$), *establishing the learning objectives for English course* ($M = 3.71$) and *encouraging to study English* ($M = 3.51$). Regarding the remaining items, they perceived their responsibility to be moderate (M scores ranged between 2.50 and 3.40). Also, they regarded the teacher to be primarily responsible for *selecting learning activities* ($M = 3.91$). In order to compare statistically the differences between the mean scores of intermediate level and higher-level groups and the total scores were calculated and t-tests comparisons were conducted as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. T-test Comparison of Students' Self-responsibility Perceptions

	N	Sum of means	SD	Std. error mean	Sig.
Higher level students	66	50.66	7.18	1.14	.000
Intermediate level students	68	42.46	5.46	.87	

Score of higher-level students ($M = 50.66$) are higher than that of intermediate level students ($M = 42.46$). These differences in scores are statistically significant (sig = $0.000 \leq .05$), indicating that higher level students thought they were more responsible for their own learning than intermediate level students by comparison. Table 3 shows T-test Comparison of Students' and Teachers ' Responsibility Scores.

Table 3. T-test Comparison of Students' and Teachers ' Responsibility Scores

	N	Sum of means	SD	Std. error mean	Sig.
Higher level students	66	36.28	4.65	.73	.000
Intermediate level students	68	38.68	5.97	.94	

As shown in Table 3, the total score of higher-level students ($M = 36.28$) was lower than that of intermediate level students ($M = 38.68$). These differences in scores are statistically significant (*sig* = $0.000 \leq .05$), indicating that higher level students thought their teachers were less responsible for their learning than intermediate level students.

3.3.2. Students' perception on their decision-making skills

For answering RQ2, the answers to the second part of the questionnaire from higher level and intermediate level students were looked at. Table 4 shows that higher level students thought they were very capable of learning on their own, except when it came to *choosing class learning activities* ($M = 3.48$), *choosing instructional materials in cla*ss ($M = 3.41$) and *deciding what they should learn next* ($M = 3.38$). Table 2 shows that intermediate level students thought they had a medium level of control over a number of activities.

Table 4. Perceptions of English students' Decision-making Skills

Skills	Higher level students	Intermediate level Students
14. Choosing class learning activities	3.48	3.25
15. Choosing extracurricular learning activities	3.92	3.20
16. Choosing class learning objectives	3.72	3.40
17. Choosing extracurricular learning objectives	3.82	3.07
18. Choosing educational resources for the class	3.41	3.20
19. Selecting extracurricular resources for education	3.92	3.07
20. Learner evaluation	3.75	3.27
21. Review of the course	3.80	2.92
22. Identifying areas for improvement in English	3.50	3.05
23. Determining topics to be covered in the next class	3.38	3.15
24. Timing each task	3.50	3.02

A t-test was carried out in order to conduct statistical analysis on the disparities that exist between intermediate level and higher-level students' perceptions of their own capabilities when it comes to learning English on their own.

Table 5. T-test comparison of student automous learning abilities

	N	Sum of means	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	Sig.
Higher level students	66	40.20	6.27	.99	.000
Intermediate level students	68	31.38	5.72	.90	

The results of the t-test are shown in Table 5. They show that the difference is significant (*sig* = 0.000 ≤ .05). Higher level students (*M* = 40.20) thought they were more capable of learning the language on their own than intermediate level students (*M* = 31.38).

3.3.3. Student autonomy within and outside class

Answering RQ3 requires looking at the average results for the English exercises that advanced and intermediate students did on their own, both in and out of class. Items like *jotting down new words* (*M* = 3.71), *reading books on grammar and vocabulary* (*M* = 3.53), *watching English-language movies* (*M* = 3.51), and *trying to speak up in class* (*M* = 3.51). However, the lowest means went to activities such as reading *English-language newspapers* (*M* = 1.86), *talking with native English speakers* (*M* = 1.98), and *writing in English in a diary* (*M* = 2.18). For intermediate level students, the activities with medium scores were *asking teachers questions when they don't understand* (*M* = 3.41), *taking notes of new information in English* (*M* = 2.98), *jotting down fresh terminology* (M = 2.93), *trying to speak up in class* (*M* = 2.87), *practising grammar* (*M* = 2.83), watching English-language films (M = 2.72), reading books on grammar and vocabulary (*M* = 2.72), and *practising English with friends* (*M* = 2.42). Other activities such as *going to see their teacher about their work* (*M* = 1.97), *speaking with native speakers* (*M* = 1.77), and *reading English-language newspapers* (*M* = 1.67) were rated low by intermediate level students.

Table 6. Higher level and Intermediate level Students' Inside- and Outside-class Autonomous Activity Scores

Activities	Higher level students	Intermediate level students
25. Reading books on grammar and vocabulary	3.53	2.72
26. Completing optional assignments	3.22	2.32
27. Jotting down fresh terminology	3.71	2.93
28. English correspondence with pen pals	2.75	2.05
29. reading English-language signs nearby	3.05	2.22
30. Reading English-language newspapers	1.86	1.67
31. Using English to send emails	2.47	2.02
32. Reading English-language books and magazines	3.07	2.27
33. Watching English-language TV shows	3.32	2.57
34. Listening to radio in English	2.85	2.22
35. The act of listening to English songs	3.15	2.35
36. Speaking with native speakers	1.98	1.77
37. Using English to converse with my buddies	2.65	2.20
38. Using the language with friends	2.75	2.42
39. Practicing grammar	2.95	2.83
40. Seeing English-language films	3.51	2.72
41. Writing in English in a diary	2.18	2.12
42. English-language internet use	2.77	2.22
43. Revision not mandated by class	3.17	2.35
44. Collecting English-language texts	2.60	2.25
45. Going to meet your teacher to discuss your work	2.35	1.97
46. Asking teachers for clarification	3.02	3.41
47. Taking a note of new information in English	3.40	2.98
48. Putting forward ideas to the teacher	2.55	2.12
49. Trying to speak up in class	3.51	2.88
50. Discussing academic concerns with classmates	3.00	2.35

Table 7. T-test Comparison of Learner Autonomy Scores Inside and Outside Class

	N	Sum of means	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	Sig.
Higher level students	66	75.31	10.07	1.60	.000
Intermediate level students	68	61.98	9.30	1.48	

Table 7 shows the T-test for comparing learner autonomy in and outside of class. The t-test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference (*sig* = 0.000 ≤ .05) between the autonomous English learning activities of higher level and intermediate level students. Developing student language proficiency was associated with more positive self-refecton on their autonomus learning actvities. In other words, the total mean score of higher-level students (*M* = 75.31) was higher than the total mean score of intermediate level students (*M* = 61.98).

3.3.4. Qualitative data result

Because they were rarely given the opportunity to choose their own learning resources, the majority of intermediate students stated that they held their teacher responsible for selecting materials.

Student 1: "We must read the book and complete the assigned assignments."

Student 2: "Teachers select relevant and effective instructional resources. This makes English lessons more enjoyable."

Some advanced students stated that their teachers sometimes allowed them to choose activities.

Student 3: "Our teacher occasionally allows us to choose the lecture topic or bring non-book activities."

Student 4: "I must gain more experience to improve. I must strengthen my vocabulary and grammar.
Some advanced students stated that they were aware of their English strengths and shortcomings and could assume responsibility for their own education.

Student 1: "We would learn more if we spoke and listened more in English class."

Student 2: "I enjoy listening to music, watching English films, and gaining new knowledge."

If given the opportunity, advanced learners reported that they could handle learning activities.

Student 3: "I would permit students to do whatever they choose If I were a teacher. Since movies and music are not permitted in class, I view and listen to them outside of class.

Intermediate learners reported that they were unaware of all the useful learning resources and assignments and were less capable than advanced learners at generating course materials and objectives.

Student 4: "Teachers are aware of our educational needs. They acknowledge our vulnerabilities and provide us responsibilities to address them. I cannot locate self-study English materials."

Since English language learners at the intermediate level had less control over class materials and activities, they felt less responsible and qualified to select them. This may limit their

motivation and ability to learn English on their own. Allowing students to select additional assignments and topics will motivate and empower them to learn independently. According to the respondents, some students, particularly intermediates, rely solely on classroom activities to acquire English.

4 Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to examine the perceptions of intermediate and advanced EFL students on self-directed language learning with respect to their own and their teachers' responsibilities in self-directed language learning, their capacity to make decisions while learning, and their own activities in and out of the classroom. Statistical analysis of the data revealed differences in how advanced and intermediate students regarded the three components of learning independence. Both quantitative and qualitative studies found that advanced students were more likely to actively participate in their own education than their intermediate-level counterparts. Studies have shown a correlation between the responsibility students take on on their own and how well they eventually master the language they are learning (Mineishi, 2010). It appears that having a firm grasp of the English language led to an increase in personal accountability. This is what Schmenk (2006) calls a "automization process," in which students at higher levels begin to take more control of their education while students at lower levels continue to rely heavily on their teachers. This may imply that fostering a student's proficiency in the English language is crucial to their development as self-directed learners. Students who were intermediate in their English studies reported a moderate degree of independence in their studies. However, those with a higher learning level stated that they could effectively direct their own education if given the opportunity to do so. The interviews with students suported the survey's findings. Since intermediate English learners were not given much control on the classroom resources available to them, they incorrectly assumed that they lacked the maturity and judgment to make informed decisions about their own education. The interview results also demonstrated that students learn better when they are allowed to exercise their own education.

Students who believe they must have a teacher present at all times to study would likely struggle with independent and self-directed projects. Teachers have the power to assist students understand that they are not solely responsible for classroom behavior (Burkert, 2011). Self-directed learning is a skill that can be developed, and educators should be aware of this. Therefore, this skill should be incorporated into language teaching and testing to assist students improve. In other words, self-directed learning abilities should be taught alongside other general and subject-specific skills in the classroom. Despite these caveats, it is important to note that the current study is not without its flaws. Few students from a single language school participated in this research. Moreover, more research is needed in various contexts so that findings may be compared.

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