

Autonomous Student Learning Groups: Aims and Outcomes

Richard SILVER

Abstract

本研究は、五週間に渡る英語の自律学習グループのパイロットプログラムを報告したものである。対象者は同じ第一言語（日本語）を有する大学生で、英語を使う目的で集められた。プログラムは自律的に進められ、英語の母語話者によるサポートはあったが、その者がプログラムに干渉することはなかった。本研究では、初めに日本の大学における英語教育の背景を紹介し、自律学習グループが学習者の学習にどのような役割を果たすのか、特に、学習者自身の学習過程の内省と今後の各自の自律学習を促進する一助となるのかについて述べる。そしてパイロットプログラムを詳細に説明した後、Oxford (2003) の自律学習の四部モデルを使って学習グループの理論的基礎を概説し、Esch (1997) の先行研究がいかに学習グループの設計に役立ったかを説明する。各学習グループが参加した三回の本セッションだけでなく、本セッション前のシラバスを決める話し合いと、本セッション後のフィードバックの集まりも全て録音された。本研究はプログラムに参加した三つの学習グループの内一つに焦点を当て、音声録音の分析を元に、各週に起こった出来事を要約した。最後に、フィードバックのセッションで集められた学習者のコメントを考察し、将来的なプログラムの可能性に言及する。

Keywords : autonomy, independent learning, learning groups, Japanese model of English

1. Speaking opportunities in Japan: Some concerns and issues

1.1 The Japanese model for speaking

While Kirkpatrick (2007) states that the institutional model for English in Japan is that of the American native speaker, Kubota (2002) suggests it is standard North American or British varieties, a situation that has largely grown out of the close historical, political and economic ties of modern times between Japan and Western military powers. Kubota also notes that the belief that English is the international language and thus “leads to international/intercultural understanding” has sustained the dominance of “standard English and Anglophone cultures” as the focus of language education in Japan (p. 19). However, even though, as Kubota notes, there are more non-Japanese residents living in Japan now than at any other time, there are very few opportunities for Japanese speakers of English to interact with native speakers of the preferred models of English.

The lack of opportunity to practice speaking English in Japan has been a cause of frustration for university students, who feel English could benefit their employment chances, a belief that is in line with the global trend to view English as a highly valued economic commodity (Kubota, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007). For teachers as well, who know that without regular speaking practice linguistic gains are likely to be slight and short-lived, the restriction of students' speaking opportunities to within the classroom is a source of frustration.

Though students' meta-linguistic knowledge of English is often well-grounded as a result of six years of studying English prior to entering university at a combination of junior high school, high school and cram schools, it is often noted that students' speaking skills are neglected (Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004). And though there has been an increased presence of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in junior high school and high school settings, most notably as part of the JET program, this has only served to increase the sense that the best models for English speaking are those from North America and Britain (Kubota, 2002).

Outside of mainstream education, the popularity of *eikaiwas* (English conversation schools) has reinforced the belief that native English speakers are the best models for spoken English (Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004). This reflects a more general bias in English education around the world towards (often) untrained native speakers at the expense of better trained non-native speaker teachers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Thus the *eikaiwa* model, which in advertising can be seen to rely heavily on images of native speakers, is in line with a more worldly view that has privileged what Kachru (1985) has described as the inner circle of English language speakers, thereby creating a learner goal of speaking like a native speaker that has more recently come to be seen as unrealistic. It also works to maintain a belief still held by many language learning students that "being taught by someone who has English as a mother tongue will somehow help them learn better" (Harmer, 2007, p. 119).

In summary, the focus of pre-tertiary language education in Japan on North American and British models of English, combined with the successful marketing of *eikaiwas* with native speaker teachers as gateways to native speaker fluency has possibly had a limiting effect on the development of Japanese students' speaking ability. While on the one hand the exposure to English speakers, for example through the JET program, can be considered a positive development in that it has created opportunities for interaction where previously it didn't exist (Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004), as Kubota (2002), Kachru (1985), and Kirkpatrick (2007), amongst others, point out, the resultant discourse cannot be accepted as straightforwardly beneficial. In the case of Japanese students, I suggest that it has created a situation where speaking opportunities are only actively pursued with inner circle native speakers. A corollary of this has been the negative view of the possibilities for interaction in English between two native Japanese speakers. As a result, Japanese speakers of English might not only be missing opportunities for practicing English, but also for developing learning strategies that could lead to greater language learning autonomy.

1.2 The experience of a Japanese university student

As Richards and Lockhart (1994) suggest, by the time language learners reach university they have developed a system of “very specific assumptions about how to learn a language and about the kinds of activities and approaches they believe to be useful” (p. 55). At times these beliefs will be at odds with those of the teacher, resulting in a negative language learning experience. Clearly then, it is important for language teachers to be knowledgeable about the beliefs and goals of their students, as this could impact the types of learning activities both inside and outside of the classroom that they are prepared to involve themselves in. Informal discussions with my students over the past eight years support the idea that students believe that native speaker teachers are best for learning speaking and native speakers are best for speaking practice. However, it was meeting with one of my ex-students, Kanako (not her real name), that helped illustrate the potentially restrictive effect of this belief on language use and opportunities for speaking practice outside of the classroom.

I had taught Kanako for one semester during her second year at university. At the end of the year she decided to take a year out from university and study abroad in Canada for a year. I met her on campus about a month after she had returned. Though she had enjoyed her year away she was disappointed at the speed with which she perceived her English ability to be declining, a natural decline a lot of students report on suddenly losing any opportunity to use English. As she was about to enter the third year of university she had no English classes, and though there were on-campus opportunities in the “communication room” to drop in and speak to native speakers for a ninety-minute period, her schedule meant she was unable to attend any of the sessions. I suggested that that she should practice with her Japanese friends; however, Kanako answered this was difficult because of them being shy and the situation being unnatural.

Kanako’s predicament and response to my suggestion struck me as resolvable, even though ordinarily in the absence of a need for English as a lingua franca Japanese students are unlikely to feel the need to communicate with each other in English. Given that I knew many students who were motivated to practice English and looking for opportunities it made me think that Japanese students practicing English with each other, even without the presence of a native speaker or teacher, represented the best chance for them to get regular speaking practice. The issue was how to help students achieve this kind of practice in the face of such a dominant and seemingly ingrained native speaker ideal that develops in Japanese language learners through their formative English language learning experiences pre-university and is often sustained throughout it. One possible answer, as described in this paper, is setting up autonomous student learning groups that would not only offer students opportunities to practice English with each other, but also raise awareness of the possibilities for language learning with other Japanese speakers of English, skills that could benefit their language learning even after graduation.

2. An autonomous student learning group: Structure, methodology, data analysis

2.1 The structure of an autonomous student learning group

The organization of the autonomous learning groups was as follows: students met for about an hour every week, and during that time did what had been agreed upon in the previous week's session, guided by principles and rules agreed in the opening syllabus negotiation meeting with the teacher. In the actual learning sessions there was no teacher and so the responsibility for the running of the session lay with the students themselves. However, the teacher joined the group for about ten minutes before the end of the session in order to answer any questions that might have arisen and generally offer support. The kinds of support that had been envisioned before setting up the groups were requests for materials, photocopies, general learning advice and error correction, although in fact there were few requests from the groups after each session ended.

The setting for the autonomous student learning groups was a small, restricted-access classroom called the “communication room” that has language teachers available for informal conversation at fixed times during a semester. The room is much like a self-access center as it has English language newspapers, magazines, graded reading materials, desks and computers with internet access and a white board. However, because it is normally locked the teacher was a necessary gatekeeper, who at the beginning of a session had to unlock the room. The pilot project described in this paper ran for five weeks including the syllabus negotiation session and the feedback meeting.



Figure 1. The “Communication Room”

2.2 The philosophy behind the autonomous student learning groups

The philosophy that guided the way in which the autonomous learning groups were constructed can be found in the ideas of learner-centered teaching (see Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996 for in-depth studies) in which students are given full responsibility for deciding what their learning goals are, what should happen to achieve those aims and how success should be measured.

The week-to-week practice of the autonomous student learning groups was intended to be self-governing; however, the importance of the teachers in initiating the process cannot be underestimated, even if the role was somewhat different to that which is normally expected of language teachers. The teacher's classroom role is often described as being that of a facilitator who creates situations in which students can use and explore ways of learning language (e.g., Richards

and Lockhart, 1994; Harmer, 2007). However, in the case of these autonomous student learning groups the role of “conciierge,” that is one of “directing learners to resources or learning opportunities that they may not be aware of” (Bonk, 2007, quoted in Siemens, 2008), seems more appropriate. The conciierge role is re-imagined by Siemens as “curator”:

A curatorial teacher acknowledges the autonomy of learners, yet understands the frustration of exploring unknown territories without a map. A curator is an expert learner. Instead of dispensing knowledge, he creates spaces in which knowledge can be created, explored, and connected. While curators understand their field very well, they don't adhere to traditional in-class teacher-centric power structures.

2.3 Research methodology and the research aims

The pilot study discussed in this paper can be described as the first cycle of an action research project. In the paradigm of action research the guiding principle is to “clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 171). Harmer (2007) suggests that it is done by teachers who want to evaluate a practice, improve their teaching or solve a problem. The researcher then is involved in and normally intimately familiar with the situation being researched prior to beginning what are described by Nunan and Bailey (2009) as action research cycles. While the benefits of action research are considered to be for all parties involved in the research, some have noted that for educational practitioners, in particular, being involved in research can be beneficial for better decision making and more effective practice (Robson, 2002).

As previously explained, the setting up of the autonomous learning groups was largely inspired by a conversation with my student Kanako about the obstacles to English speaking practice in Japan. The primary function of the groups then was to provide a solution to a common complaint of Japanese students: the lack of opportunities to speak English in Japan. However, besides offering students this opportunity, it was also hoped that the groups would provide opportunities for peer support in language learning and to encourage participants to reflect upon their methods of language learning, in particular on the issue of the native speaker model.

As a researcher my setting up the groups revolved around two issues: firstly, I wanted to know whether or not a group of Japanese students could sustain conversation in English for an extended period of time without a teacher, and second I wanted to learn to what extent the teacher had to play a role.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

Three groups of students (A, B, and C) participated in the pilot program and each of the sessions, including the syllabus negotiation session and feedback meeting, was recorded using a portable IC recorder that was placed in the center of the table and visible at all times. For this paper only data from Group A has been analyzed. The recordings were listened to and summarized, with some

significant incidents also being transcribed. To illustrate salient events, in this paper a simplified transcript of interaction has been used.

Prior to the start of the sessions a survey was handed out asking students why they wanted to take part in the group. After the sessions were completed, students completed a post-survey.

2.5 Transcription conventions

| | |
|--------------|---|
| () or (xxx) | stretch of unclear or unintelligible speech |
| (guess) | transcriber doubt about a word |
| ((laughter)) | non-verbal actions or author's comments |

For simplicity erms, ahs and pauses have been removed from the transcripts.

3. Models of autonomy in language learning

3.1 Autonomy and language learning: A brief overview

Though Henri Holec's early definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981 quoted in Benson, 2001) is still much-quoted in the literature, the focus of autonomy in language teaching has moved away from trying to define exactly what it is and towards what it means to try to put it into practice. Discussions about autonomy generally reject the idea of autonomy as learning in isolation (e.g. Little, 1995), and report instead on the goals of fostering student autonomy in formal classroom situations and self-access centers. The autonomous learning groups in this paper could be described as something of a hybrid of both types of learning situation. More recently, Macaro (2008) has emphasized the need in formal educational settings for students to be given choice in language learning so that they can develop their capabilities for making "strategic decisions...between psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors" (p. 60) and realize themselves that they are language users as much as they are language learners.

In terms of trying to define the behaviors that make a person autonomous the focus has been on learning strategies (see Cohen, 1998) in three areas: identifying strategies, assessing the link between learning strategies and the use of language, and finally how learners can be trained to use strategies (Benson, 2001). The exact meaning of learning strategy is quite wide and self-evaluation, goal setting, memorizing, and reviewing could all be included. However, Cohen stresses that a crucial and defining characteristic of a strategy is the learner's conscious employment of it. Oxford (2003) suggests learning strategies are "specific steps or plans people use to enhance their learning" and that they are "often viewed as a psychological gateway to L2 learner autonomy" (p. 84). Breaking the psychological barrier to using English with other Japanese students and recognizing its value was one of the hopes in setting up the autonomous student learning groups.

Furthermore, Oxford tentatively suggests that those learners who showed greater motivation to use the language outside of class were more autonomous learners.

Autonomy is now recognized as being established within the mainstream of research into language learning (Barfield, 2009) and with it has come the re-construction of the role the teacher plays in the development of autonomy within a language learner. What the literature makes clear is that though the teacher's position may have shifted from one of having absolute authority to needing to devolve power to students, they are still fundamental to students' language learning in formal educational settings, largely through exercising what Little (1995) describes as "teacher autonomy". However, as Voller (1997) suggests, teachers also need to have greater self-awareness of their position and be capable of greater self-reflection on their teaching, as well as be able to negotiate learning procedures and outcomes with their students.

3.2 The autonomous student learning groups and Oxford's (2003) model of L2 learner autonomy

3.2.1 Describing Oxford's (2003) model of L2 learner autonomy

As Oxford suggested in her 2003 paper, the various attempts to define autonomy and create models for it had resulted in "ambiguous and conflicting frameworks" (p. 76). This was visible in much of the research into autonomy that attempted to generalize about language learners while failing to clarify, even at the most general level (e.g., of EFL or ESL), the effect that different learning contexts have on the meaning of autonomy for learners and how they are able to pursue it. In Japan's EFL context, for example, the absence of a visible English-language culture is likely to affect the readiness with which students are prepared to become autonomous users of English. Today, it is recognized that autonomy is never likely to mean one thing to all learners or teachers, nor be simply defined (Holec, 2008).

Building on what she considered to be a weakness in Benson's (1997) helpful but fragmentary model of autonomy, Oxford (2003) developed the technical, psychological and political levels of autonomy that he discussed thereby creating a model with four perspectives each made up of four parts. In her model the main perspectives are *technical* (skills for independent learning situations); *psychological* (the characteristics of an individual including cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies); *socio-cultural* (divided into two parts: i. The individual's interaction with other individuals and ii. The individual's desired interaction with a community of practice) and *political-critical* (the concern of autonomy as a means for gaining power).

Oxford discusses each of the four perspectives under four separate themes: context, agency, motivation, and learning strategies. The usefulness of Oxford's model is not only in the attempt to structure and separate different concepts connected to autonomy, but is also in its considered re-construction of autonomy as a complex and dynamic process, subject to different influences that might appear to be similar but are in fact distinct, e.g., motivation in an EFL context and motivation in an ESL context. As she herself acknowledges, research into autonomy needs to take into account

each of the perspectives if the situation is to be understood in a meaningful way.

3.3 Autonomous learning groups as seen through Oxford's (2003) model

3.3.1 Technical

In formal educational settings, such as in university language classes, it is in the technical aspects of autonomy that the teacher's guiding hand is most obviously seen. The teacher by managing learning in the classroom often risks taking decision-making power away from the students. As a result, in institutional settings the presence of the teacher is sometimes viewed as a self-evident hindrance to autonomy, as it interferes with the individual's agency; however, the re-thinking of the role of the teacher (see Voller, 1997), as well as a recognition that autonomy can have stages (Benson, 2011) has made the presence of a teacher and the growth of autonomy less of a contradiction.

From the technical perspective, the autonomous student learning groups that this paper describes sought to free the participants from reliance on an overbearing teacher influence (both a real presence in the classroom and a psychological phantom in their own minds). However, it recognized the valuable role a teacher can play in securing facilities, organizing timetables, connecting participants and, most importantly of all, raising students' awareness of different learning strategies. It could be argued that because the setting up of the group relied on the teacher it was not autonomous; however, while at the beginning a teacher was necessarily central to facilitating the autonomous student learning groups, the sessions themselves were conducted entirely by the students.

3.3.2 Psychological

Though a strong and stable motivation to study English and improve was apparent in all the students who joined the learning groups, it appeared that they had a limited view of the possible strategies for language learning that were available to them without the involvement of a native speaker. However, they all held the view that English would be useful to them in the future, thereby framing their motivation in a future goal that is typical of learners in an EFL context, as opposed to learners in an ESL context for whom English has an immediate relevance. Another characteristic of the groups who took part in the autonomous student learning groups was that most had had positive learning experiences in the past, with many having studied abroad.

Within the psychological perspective in Oxford's model, learning strategies are "seen as psychological features of the individual that can change through practice and strategy instruction" (p. 77). In the EFL context of Japanese university there are restrictions to the growth of learning strategies and, therefore, autonomy. Limited opportunities to speak in an EFL context could also hinder the self-reflection on language learning that is considered necessary to sustain independent language use and as a consequence learning paths may be hidden or deemed unreachable by learners.

From a psychological perspective, these autonomous student learning groups sought to bring together similarly inclined students, thereby exploiting already existing characteristics. The teacher's role here was to identify such students and bring them together. As a result it was hoped that they would develop a group sense of responsibility for learning and together would discover new learning strategies through practice and self-reflection, and that their self-supporting structure would reduce the need for a teacher. It was also hoped that the agency of the individual learners would develop through encouragement to think more broadly about the possibilities for learning even in an apparently restrictive EFL environment.

3.3.3 Sociocultural

The sociocultural perspective in Oxford's model has two dimensions which concern both the relationship of a learner with more proficient learners around them and with the wider community. The first dimension is the personal sociocultural one in which autonomy is "self-regulation, gained through social interaction with a more capable, mediating person in a particular setting". The second is a group-oriented sociocultural dimension in which instead of autonomy the main goal is "participation in the community of practice" (p. 78). For students in Japan, because of the absence of a visible English language community, relationships with other English learners and English teachers become more significant because they must also play the part of the community to which a speaker belongs. Though virtual communities of language learners, most notably that created by Facebook, could be increasing the sense of bond that English language learners have with a diverse English language community, it unfortunately largely remains restricted to visual forms of communication through writing and photography.

Work into sociolinguistics has largely centered on an interest in Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development, in which learning is viewed to be mediated through the interaction of a novice with more able others who provide scaffolding for the learner to reach a higher level of understanding (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In formal educational settings the teacher is often seen as providing scaffolding. In setting up the autonomous student learning groups it was hoped to encourage productive interaction between student learners at similar developmental stages of language, without the need for a teacher. As mentioned, the native speaker model is doubly damaging if students believe both that native-like proficiency is what they must try to emulate and that native-like fluency can only be achieved through interaction with native speakers.

Through involvement in the autonomous student learning groups it was hoped that students' sense of being a part of a community of English learners in Japan would be enhanced. Increased opportunities like these could benefit Japan in a wider sense. By engaging students in speaking practice with individuals who are not models of native speaker fluency, the identification and growth of communities of Japanese L1 speakers willing to use English as a medium of communication outside of institutional teacher-controlled environments could become a valid and viable learning strategy, and the motivation to seek out opportunities for exploiting these strategies

could be self-perpetuating.

3.3.4 Political-critical

In terms of a learner's long term goal, learning English is often cited as offering individuals access to alternative ways of living, in particular by being a gateway to economic prosperity (Kirkpatrick, 2007). However, the development of a community of Japanese English speakers within Japan also has the potential for developing within the nation choice as to the model of English that is used. Though the autonomous student learning groups might only be a small step towards a flourishing Japanese variety of English that is one amongst a variety of Asian Englishes, in promoting the development of a definite step away from native model varieties of English, it can claim to have some agency from the political-critical perspective as well.

3.4 Esch (1997): Learner Training for Autonomy

In her 1997 paper Esch describes an autonomous learning group set up with the aim of training learners to develop their language learning autonomy. It involved self-selected groups of students in a British university who were motivated to improve their French language skills even though it was not their major. The autonomous student learning groups as described in this paper were modeled on Esch's:

The pattern was that every week, for an hour, the students would meet in the Resource Centre when they would try to carry out the activity that they had planned collectively the previous week. (p. 168)

There were, however, two major differences between Esch's groups and the autonomous student learning groups described in this paper. The first is that in her groups there was an adviser who was present in the classroom throughout, though only acting as an observer. The second difference was that Esch's groups of students focused on their own personal learning strategies as topics for discussion. Although, the stated aims of the two groups were significantly different, the main outcomes were achieved in the same way, through conversation, as Esch points out:

Fundamentally, the students were sharing their experiences as learners and...their contribution could be largely defined as participating in conversations with peers (p. 168).

4. Participants

4.1 Overview of participants

A general invitation in the form of an explanatory handout was made to around 150 students in classes taught by three teachers. The class comprised a mixture of required English classes and

elective language and culture classes for first and second year business and economics students in a private Japanese university. In addition, students from a previous elective English class as well as some ex-students (including Kanako) were invited by email. On the handout, which because of time considerations was only written in English, were brief explanations of the aim, the format and the proposed timetable of five weeks. The handout asked students to mark their available time and to return the sheet to the teacher with an email address. Students were then separated into three groups (A, B, and C) based on when they were available. The data in this paper is taken from Group A's interaction.

4.2 Group A: Yukiko, Ryoichi, Mika, Erina, Saori, Mayumi,

Group A met on Tuesday afternoons for five weeks and originally consisted of five girls and a boy. However, Mayumi, a fourth year student, did not attend any of the sessions after the syllabus negotiation meeting. All of the remaining students were second year students who were majoring in business and economics. Some of the participants knew each other from other classes and all of the students had studied abroad for at least one month.

5. Summaries of the pilot program: Group A

5.1 Week 1: Syllabus-negotiation

The first meeting of the autonomous student learning group was described as a syllabus negotiation meeting. Its aim was to explain the pilot project in more detail and decide on how the program would work. Initially in the syllabus negotiation session it was necessary for the teacher to be the focal point. In order to create group cohesion that could contribute to the efficacy of the learning environment (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003), the session began with self-introductions, followed by a group discussion about each person's language learning aims and hopes for the group. After that, six areas that it was felt could affect the success of the group were discussed (see Appendix).

As the session continued the teacher tried to let students lead the negotiations. This was possible because of the existence of two natural leaders, who both had opinions on how the group should work, but also exhibited an understanding of the difficulties that the group might encounter:

Yukiko I think there should be no rules because I want to discuss more freely. So I don't want to set leader because maybe leader will speak a lot (than others) so I want to talk freely.

Saori But today it already happened sometimes like no talking time. I think it's like not good for us because like time is limited and we have to like keep talking is more like practice. Yeah and like so some people don't talk and I want avoid this too

because everyone wants to grow up and some people talk like me and I really don't want to do that. So maybe in that case so somebody be leader is kind of good idea.

In the end the group decided that there would be no leader. Instead they agreed that they would change topic whenever there was an extended period of silence. In terms of the topics that the group would discuss, students opted to start by chatting about everyday topics before moving onto more complicated ones, as all students expressed a desire to do more than have everyday conversations. They also all agreed they would use English for the entire time.

The list of topics for the three sessions was set during the syllabus negotiation meeting. First, students brainstormed topics that they wanted to discuss, writing the answers on the board, before dividing them into appropriate themes and assigning them to one of the three weeks. Rather than use a textbook or pre-prepared materials, students agreed that they would bring in articles when appropriate. So as to communicate with each other, one student set up an email list that included the teacher.

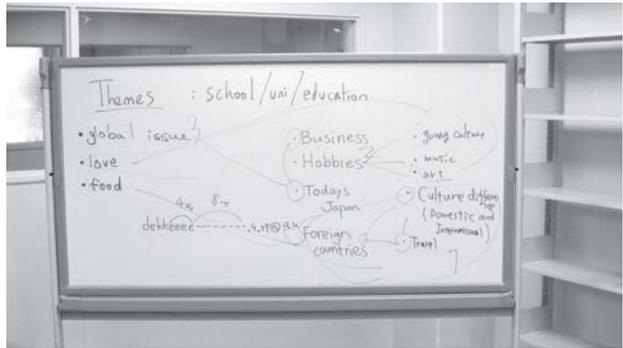


Figure 2. Whiteboard showing the themes brainstormed during the syllabus negotiation

5.2 Week 2: Session 1

The theme for the first session was travel and the meeting was characterized by a natural and continuous progression of topics. All students were able to contribute something of their experience to the session. There was some digression, so some of the topics the students spoke about were only vaguely connected to the theme, but this was not commented on by anybody in the group.

The group started a little uncertainly, but it was the two girls who had emerged as the most vocal in the syllabus negotiation session who took the lead by first reminding everyone of the agreed structure and initiating conversation:

- Ryoichi** Today's topic is travel
Saori Travel? Oh but I think the first five minutes just chatting. Do you remember that?
Yukiko Yes
Saori So hahaha how can we start?
Yukiko What did you do last week?

The set of rules established in the syllabus negotiation meeting helped students to start and

continue the discussion in an orderly way. It was also in the first session that evidence of mutual support for language learning began to emerge, particularly in terms of vocabulary:

- Erina** Why do you want to go to Vietnam?
Yukiko A really cute town. This is (xxx) and still remains of old buildings and museums and there used to be a what can I say *shokuminchi* in English?
Ryoichi Ah
Erina Colonies
Ryoichi Colonies
Yukiko Colony of France

In this case the students interact efficiently to fill in the missing vocabulary, suggesting the useful recourse to code-switching when it does not interfere with the flow of conversation. No one comments on the use of Japanese. Later on, however, Erina uses Japanese when she struggles to explain herself. Saori encourages her to use English, but in the absence of any help from others Erina continues to explain her idea in Japanese, after which Saori translates it:

- Saori** Do you have examples?
Erina Yeah mmm nn *tou*
Saori Come on let's try English
Erina *ritsu ni noranai toka jyunban wo (xxx) toka*
(Laughter)
Saori So they don't want to be in the lines of the trains or something like that

This was one of the few occasions when Japanese was used. Though Erina felt she had no option but to use Japanese to explain herself, Saori's role as both teacher and de facto leader was made even clearer as a result. After Saori's intervention the group was able to continue in English until the end of the session. As had been agreed, the teacher arrived ten minutes before the end of the session and discussed what had happened with the students and checked what the students were going to do the next week.

5.3 Week 3: Session 2

In the second session the group again started with five minutes of chatting before moving on to the week's theme. Again Saori and Yukiko were the most vocal in both breaking silences and directing the conversations. However, other students were also able to make contributions, most often when the theme overlapped with a direct experience (e.g., travel, drinking, clubbing, etc.). However, there were topics that not everyone in the group felt able to discuss and so to continue the conversation the group, once again, resorted to the pre-determined structure:

- Erina** I cannot understand art so I cannot say anything about arts
Saori Yeah, me neither
Yukiko So let's move on
(laughter)

As mentioned previously, the subject of Esch's (1997) learning groups was participants' self-reflection on language learning. In the autonomous student learning groups it was hoped that students would reflect on their learning in a more holistic way. There were occasional moments when this happened spontaneously, as in the following excerpt:

- Erina** But you can meet many foreigners at clubs. You can talk speak English
Yukiko Yeah sometimes
Saori Really? Is there foreigners?
Erina Yeah
Saori Oh really?

At the end of this session there seemed to be a concern that the teacher had not yet appeared, suggesting there was a group feeling that the conversation had become a bit of a struggle. When the teacher arrived the students reported what they had talked about and asked about English translations for Japanese food. Japanese words for food were one of a few times in this session when the students used Japanese, although it was normally restricted to words, not sentences.

5.4 Week 4: Session 3

The final session was the least successful of the three and the students were only able to continue their conversation for 45 minutes, not the full 50 minutes. Certainly, the timing of the session late in the semester was a factor. When discussing the challenge of speaking about difficult topics the students said that they were subject to other deadlines and in the future it might be better to discuss these types of issues early in a semester when they would have more time to prepare.

Though the students followed their plan as they had on previous occasions and tried to focus on their chosen topic of "global issues", they found it hard to continue the conversation for an extended period or explain their ideas in great depth. In the early parts of the session students used information from their classes that their teachers had talked to them about to try to start conversations. They were also able to use their own experience to generate conversation about global issues, such as Mika who mentioned that the amount of waste generated at her part-time job made her worry about starving people. Though the students may have felt that this was a difficult session to get through, they remained almost entirely in English and were able to discuss topics, though not to their satisfaction. In fact, the difficulty seemed less to do with using English but more to do with a lack of confidence in their own knowledge of the subject matter:

Saori I'm not sure. I think it's hard to tell about that. I think we should talk about more easier things because we have no information about it, yeah.

5.5 Week 5: Feedback session

The feedback session was an open-ended discussion that is a characteristic of a focus group interview (Robson, 2002). It aimed to gather opinions from all members of the group about whether they felt the learning group had worked successfully, whether or not they felt the experience had been beneficial and, finally, whether they would consider doing it again and, if so, what they would change. In order to help students express themselves in the feedback session the students were given a list of questions to answer the week before.

In terms of the crucial issue of native speaker teacher participation the feedback session revealed a split in the opinions of the group of students. Most students felt quite strongly that a teacher was necessary because they felt that they were not discussing the topic effectively:

Mika Sometimes I didn't know how to describe the way. So if teacher in this class I would I wanna ask.

Erina said a related problem was that she could not notice her mistakes. Yukiko similarly felt a lack of confidence in the group's ability to continue a discussion without misunderstandings occurring:

Yukiko Maybe we can't continue the discussion when someone don't know the way the way express one's feelings or ideas and someone don't know the someone missed the exact expression. Someone might misunderstand or miss the whole theme and if there is a teacher at the time, the teacher correct the right expression and the right theme and we continue the discussion.

Mika and Yukiko's opinions suggest that even though the analysis of the audio recordings shows that the groups had successfully overcome misunderstandings and a lack of vocabulary even without a teacher being present, their own experience was that they had not successfully done so. It could be suggested that the type of linguistic fluency which students aim at is unreasonably high. The teacher took the opportunity throughout the feedback meeting to suggest to students that overcoming these kinds of misunderstandings, even though they may be uncomfortable, is a normal aspect of communication even between fluent speakers of English.

Saori, who during all three sessions had taken on a leadership role, was the most relaxed about the need for a teacher saying:

Saori I don't care about so much you're (the teacher) in there or you're in your office because like if we don't understand the words or something we can ask each other

or maybe we can use dictionary as well and I think we like we have five people so we can realize like ourselves like we're on the right or not.

While her view that the group could function without the teacher suggests that she was the most autonomous language learner of the group, she later revealed that it was as a result of her past language learning experiences, including studying abroad as a high school student, that she had developed this view:

Saori When I was in Australia I didn't use like perfect English and the teacher I think she's from Tokyo and she is English teacher and she's like hear lots of Australian conversation and she said like they don't like speak like perfectly. So I think it's still okay like like we didn't use like perfect English but we can understand each other so I think it's okay.

Clearly, Saori's study abroad experience had broadened her openness to different language learning strategies and created a realistic view of linguistic fluency. Erina, on the other hand, in referring to her study abroad experience seemed to reveal that a positive experience had actually reduced her chances of being comfortable speaking English in Japan:

Erina When I was in Canada or Australia I could I was able to speak more fluently.

Teacher Do you think it was because you were practicing more?

Erina No, it's because of the environment.

Teacher And what was the environment?

Erina Everyone speak English.

Teacher Everyone speaks English.

Erina And every morning every night I always listened the hear the English.

Teacher So what's the difference with this group?

Erina Because usually in the school at the school I speak Japanese.

It seems that, rather like at the point when I met Kanako after she had returned from Canada, for Erina being submerged back into an all-Japanese environment actually reduced her sense of possibilities for studying language. Apparently then, students' comments suggest that rather than change their views on language learning the autonomous student learning groups had only served to reinforce what they already believed. In the case of Erina, Mika and Yukiko it had reinforced the sense of a teacher being necessary, while Saori had no problem without a teacher being present.

In terms of Oxford's model (2003), the comments during the feedback sessions suggest that it is within the psychological and sociocultural perspectives that obstacles to independent learning in Japanese universities are strongest. Erina's perception of a good learning environment seems to be

one in which she is surrounded by English all the time, and the absence of such an environment in Japan seems to affect her strongly. As a result she cannot identify her classmates with whom she would normally speak Japanese as also being a part of an English-speaking community.

Though the feedback session did not suggest that students' views of language learning had been broadened, the analysis shows that all sessions were conducted in English and independently of a teacher. In addition, even students who would have preferred a teacher to be present suggested that the groups had been a good speaking opportunity.

6. Summary of findings and suggestions for future research

The analysis of the interactions of this autonomous student learning group shows that Japanese students can sustain English conversations and discussions in self-supporting situations, even without the presence of a teacher. It also suggests that by being self-governing and setting their own rules and expectations, students are able to overcome silence and linguistic misunderstandings without any major difficulties, although the choice of subject matter for discussion seems crucial.

Several other key features of the student interaction became apparent:

6.1 The emergence of leaders and sometimes teachers

There were times during the sessions when students were able to help each other with missing vocabulary words. At other times, a collective effort was made to discover the meaning of a word using a dictionary, showing that the student groups were active in technical aspects of autonomy. Their technical autonomy was, however, challenged in the third session when they found it difficult and then gave up trying to discuss global issues in English, reiterating the point made in other research that teachers have roles to play.

The group itself worked successfully to create a supportive learning-speaking environment that from the sociocultural perspective indicates the possibilities for developing English communities of practice within Japan. In the absence of a teacher, other figures of authority emerged who both helped continue the conversation in times of difficulty and tried to monitor the group so that conversations remained in English. They were helped by the setting of rules that had been agreed by the whole group in the syllabus negotiation meeting.

6.2 Following the pre-determined structure

The syllabus negotiation meeting with the guidance of the teacher seemed an essential component that contributed to the successful running of the autonomous student learning groups. At many times during the sessions students made explicit reference to the pre-determined set of guidelines both in beginning each session and changing the topic of conversation when there was silence.

6.3 The change in emphasis during speaking from meaning to avoiding silence

Characteristic of the three sessions was an unspoken emphasis on avoiding silence rather than discussing the meaning of words or spending time trying to resolve any confusion which arose. This led to moments when uncertainty over vocabulary remained unresolved, in particular an incident in the second session when the students chose to continue the conversation rather than divert their attention to the difference between “hook up with” and “pick up”. However, in doing so they were developing speaking strategies that would allow them to continue a conversation even in circumstances where meaning is compromised. Macaro (2008) makes the following point:

Autonomy resides in being able to say what you want to say rather than producing the language of others. Saying what you want to say, however, involves risk of both error and incomprehensibility (p. 60).

As Macaro suggests, the space for a language learner to realize their autonomy can be created by the absence of a teacher, which helps students make the leap from language learners to language users in spite of all its risks and uncertainties.

6.4 The limits to autonomy created by a teacher-dependency

Part of the rationale for these learning groups was to help students realize their independence from a teacher, particularly a native speaker of English. However, comments in the feedback session suggest that from the psychological perspective of autonomy this capability was not recognized.

6.5 Suggestions for future research

As Esch (1997) also found, the basic component for the success of an autonomous student learning group seems to be self-selection by the participants. A successful learning group needs students who are motivated to improve their English, have views about how best this can be achieved and can devote the time to take part in it on a regular basis. Commitment to this kind of group, therefore, is both a motivational and practical decision. There is no shortage of Japanese university students who fit these criteria, but they might find it difficult to meet like-minded students. Thus the teacher plays a crucial role in facilitating the group, particularly from the technical perspective of autonomy at the beginning, but also throughout by supporting students as they develop autonomy from the psychological perspective as well.

University is an educational crossroads for students, and one role of the university language teacher is to encourage students to see themselves less as language learners and more as language users. In this paper, I suggest that autonomous student learning groups offer students a space to explore learning strategies within a supportive community of practice. While the initial analysis of one group in this pilot program suggest that the students had mixed feelings about the usefulness of the group in terms of linguistic improvement, by taking part in the groups there were

consequent opportunities for reflection both with other participants and with a teacher that could help students develop their learning strategies and autonomy. However, an overly strong belief in the necessity of a native speaker appears to restrict students' willingness to accept the validity of their own speaking and also the usefulness of speaking with other Japanese speakers of English.

The findings presented in this paper suggest that attempts to encourage Japanese university students, who share the same L1, to develop their English skills and language autonomy with like-minded peers in an EFL setting should be explored in future cycles of action research. While the onus for setting up such groups for many reasons rests with the teacher, whether Japanese or native English speakers, as this paper shows, when supported in the right way students will embrace the opportunity to explore their use of language and think critically about their development as autonomous language users.

7. References

- Barfield, A. Book review: Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses, Terry Lamb, Hayo Reinders (Eds.), John Benjamins, Amsterdam (2008). *System* 37, pp. 164–173, 2009.
- Benson, P. The philosophy and politics of learner autonomy, in Benson, P. and Voller, P. (Eds.), *Autonomy & independence in language learning*, pp. 18-34, Harlow: Longman, 1997.
- Benson, P. *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2001.
- Benson, P. Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching* 40, pp. 21–40, 2011. doi:10.1017/S0261444806003958
- Cohen, A. D. *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. London: Longman, 1998.
- Dornyei, Z. & Murphey, T. *Group dynamics in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Esch, E. M. Learner training for autonomous language learning, in Benson, P. and Voller, P. (Eds.), *Autonomy & independence in language learning*, pp. 164-176, Harlow: Pearson Education, 1997.
- Harmer, J. *The practice of English language teaching*, 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007.
- Holec, H. Foreword, in Lamb, R. and Reinders, H. (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses*, pp. 3-4, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008.
- Kachru, B. B. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle, in Quirk, R. and Widdowson, H. (Eds.), *English in the world*, pp. 11-30, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Kirkpatrick, A. *World Englishes: Implications for international communication and English language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Kubota, R. The impact of globalization on language teaching in Japan, in Block, D. and Cameron, D. (Eds.), *Globalization and language teaching*, pp. 13-28, London: Routledge, 2002.
- Lightbown, P. M. & Spada, N. *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Little, D. Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System* 23, pp. 175-181, 1995.
- Macaro, E. The shifting dimensions of language learner autonomy, in Lamb, R. and Reinders, H. (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses*, pp. 47-62, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008.

- Neustupny, J. V. & Tanaka, S. English in Japan: An overview, in Makarova, V. and Rodgers, V. (Eds.), *English language teaching: The case of Japan*, pp. 11-28, Munich: Lincom, 2004.
- Nunan, D. *The learner-centred curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Nunan, D. & Bailey, K. *Exploring second language classroom research: A comprehensive guide*. Boston: Heinle, 2009.
- Oxford, R. Toward a more systematic model of L2 learner autonomy, in Palfreyman, D. and Smith, R. C. (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures*, pp. 75-91, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Richards, J. C. & Farrell, T. S. C. *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Richards, J. C. & Lockhart, C. *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Robson, C. *Real world research*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- Siemens, G. *Learning and knowing in networks: Changing roles for educators and designers*. Retrieved February 1, 2010 from: <http://www.tskills.it/userfiles/Siemens.pdf>, 2008.
- Tudor, I. *Learner-centredness as language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Voller, P. Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? in Benson, P. and Voller, P. (Eds.), *Autonomy & independence in language learning*, pp. 98-113, Harlow: Longman, 1997.

Appendix

Student Autonomous Learning Groups: Syllabus Negotiation Meeting

Purpose of the meeting: In this meeting you need to discuss the following:

- ➔ **What the aim of the group will be**
- ➔ **How the group will work**
- ➔ **What you'll do every week**
- ➔ **Who will do what every week**
- ➔ **What help (if any) you want from me.**

Meeting Schedule: These are the things that you need to discuss at the syllabus negotiation meeting:

Mission: What is your group's aim?

Syllabus: What are you going to do every week?

Roles: Do you want a leader each week? Are you happy without one?

Materials: Do you want to use a textbook (photocopies)? If not, a newspaper?

Language policy: How will you use English? Will there be rules?

Intra Group Communication: How will you contact each other?

Please try to think about the above things before the meeting next week. You don't have to write anything down, but please try to come to the meeting with ideas!

