Creating Learner Autonomy: Self-Access and an English Lounge

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Abstract

This paper seeks to outline current research on learner autonomy before focusing on the characteristics of Self Access Centers. It will conclude by suggesting how the English Lounge at a higher education institution has the potential to foster learner autonomy among Japanese learners of English. Referring to constructivist and critical theory philosophies of learning, it is thought that while in the lounge, learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and thus they can become independent learners.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine research relating to autonomy and will investigate how an English Lounge could be considered as a self-access facility and how it can help foster autonomy in Japanese learners of English.

1.2. Context

When colleagues began discussing autonomy, I felt quietly confident that I understood the ideas behind it and was making efforts to "empower" my students, build their confidence, and make them independent learners. However, I was compelled to turn to academic literature in order to further develop my understanding of the concept and actively participate in discussions. When I embarked on my reading, I soon realized that I was naïve in thinking that I understood the complex principles of autonomy. I found myself questioning what it was I was actually trying to do inside the classroom and more specifically, how what I was reading related to the recently opened English Lounge on campus. This paper is the result of my reading

and is an attempt to share the findings on autonomy and encourage others to think about how they can relate these findings to their situation.

This paper will first discuss the principles of autonomy before addressing how an English Lounge fits into these ideas of autonomy and will end by recommending ways to further develop the English Lounge.

2. What is Autonomy?

2.1 Philosophies of Learning

When beginning discussions on autonomy, it is important to acknowledge some general philosophies of learning: positivism, constructivism and critical theory (Thanasoulas, 2000). **To summarize**, on one hand positivism assumes that knowledge reflects object reality (Benson & Voller, 1997) while on the other, knowledge is seen as more effective when it is discovered rather than when it is taught.   While constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy, it differs from positivism in that it helps learners to reorganize their own experiences (Benson & Voller, 1997, p.23).   Finally, critical theory is similar to constructivism in that it believes that knowledge is constructed rather than learned. It means that learning is seen as a process of interaction with social context, which can bring about social change (Benson & Voller, 1997). As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded, they can become independent and dispel any preconceived ideas they may have (Benson & Voller, 1997, p.53).

2.2 Defining Autonomy

Delores et al (1996, p.85) states, "each individual must be equipped to seize learning opportunities throughout life, both to broaden her or his knowledge skills and attitudes and to adapt to a changing, complex and interdependent world". This implies that our role as educators is to prepare our learners to be fully functioning members of modern society in the hope that they will have the "ability to take charge of (their own learning)" (Holec, 1981, p.3). This urged me to begin this study to investigate how I could utilize the resources in my immediate vicinity to begin to foster learner autonomy. With particular reference to language learning and autonomy, Holec (1981, 1988), Riley (1985), Dickinson (1983, 1995), Wenden & Rubin (1987), Little (1991), Dam (1995) and Benson & Voller (1997) have been actively engaged in research for a number of years. Their work has helped to define autonomy yet it recognizes there is an underlying need for researchers to further debate by examining how autonomy can be implemented in different contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to this debate by discussing autonomy in relation to an English Lounge in Japan. Chan (2001, 2003), Littlewood (1999) Jones (1995) and Robbins (1996) have written extensively on learner autonomy in East Asia with particular focus on HE (Higher Education) in China, although work on learners in Japan is conflicting. Dias (2000) writes about the "special challenge" (Dias, 2000, p.46) of implementing autonomous learning to Japanese learners, as autonomy is an "alien" concept in Japan (Dias, 2000, p.46). Yet working within this Japanese context, I personally believe that implementing autonomous learning in Japan is not a "special challenge" and to say it is an "alien" concept is irresponsible and shortsighted. I am in agreement with Johnson et al (1998), Robbins (1999) and Rausch (2000) who believe that Japanese learners are already engaged in some aspects of autonomous language learning. I acknowledge

that the idea of the group in Japan is somewhat restrictive to personal autonomy, but as Littlewood (1999) proposes, this situation is workable by utilizing a "broader framework" (p.47). Hart (2002) stated it is important to create groups within an educational context, "that have a large measure of autonomy in working together to gather information, to understand it and respond to it". These groups foster individual autonomy (Hart, 2002, p.38). Therefore, as has become clear from the research, autonomy does not entail learning in isolation (Esch, 1997; Aoki & Smith, 1999; Little & Dam, 1998), since as social beings, we learn from each other. As Dam (1990, p.17) concisely states, learner autonomy entails "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others as a socially responsible person". Despite the multitude of definitions of learner autonomy, this definition by Dam (1990), will provide the basis for this paper as it encapsulates the social, psychological and individual facets of autonomy and takes a holistic view of the learner as an individual.

As can be seen, due to the many directions that discussions on autonomy and theories of learning can take, it is well beyond the confines of this paper to further discuss definitions and terminology. Therefore, we will now turn our attention to what practical steps need to be taken to begin to foster autonomy.

3. Practical Steps to Autonomy

3.1 Voice

Autonomy refers to the abilities and attitudes of an individual, while the terms self instruction, self access, out of class learning and distance learning all indicate ways of learning by oneself. This is strictly not the same as having the *capacity* to learn yet

they can help to facilitate autonomy. Self-Access has often been a buzzword associated with autonomy, and is often associated with favorable publicity for an institution. However, many commentators suggest that too much time is spent discussing self-access centers in relation to autonomy. Benson and Voller (1997, p.6) advise caution and state that there is "no necessary link between learning language in a self access center and the development of autonomy and independence". Pennycook (1997, p.43) reiterates this point by stating that it is "to easy to draw a line between autonomy and self access centers". Pennycook (1997, p.41) calls on us to focus on the social, political and cultural a context of education, arguing that autonomy is too much "increasingly concerned with techniques, strategies and materials". He believes that to promote autonomy in language learning, we need to help students find their "voice" – to help them struggle towards "alternative cultural definitions of their lives" (Pennycook, 1997, p49). Using this approach, learners will confront a range of "cultural constructions" as they learn English, and this is thus, a sufficient means of developing autonomy. However, despite the thought provoking views stated above, this paper will turn its attention to Self Access Centers as they are becoming a popular choice among universities in Japan and the institution within which I am working has a number of facilities that could be described as Self Access.

3.2 Self Access Centers

Self Access Centers (SAC) are said to have three institutional roots: the library, the language lab and the computer room (Fouser, 2003). They consist of "learning materials and organized systems" (Sheerin, 1997, p54) that take care of learners needs and promote independent learning. (For a brief overview of SAC throughout the world, see Fouser (2003)). However, in order for a Self Access Center to be

successful, the needs of learners and teachers need to be given careful consideration.

3.2.1 Learners and Self Access

Firstly, we need to consider the characteristics of learners. Omaggio's (1978) seven characteristics of autonomous learners (see Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998, p.41-42) seem a reasonable place to start when considering how to prepare an autonomous learner:

1. Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
2. Take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
3. Are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
4. Are good guessers;
5. Attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
6. Develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
7. Have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

For a SAC to be successful the literature provides a unanimous view that we need to prepare the learner to develop these characteristics (Sheerin, 1997, Ellis, 1984). Dickinson (1993) proposes that we need to provide learners with a methodological preparation for autonomy, thus helping the learner become aware of his/her learning style and preferred strategies available to them. Practically speaking there are two

ways that this could be achieved, one way would be to incorporate the teaching of these strategies into a language learning class, while the other could be a skills workshop held separately from the language learning classroom, possibly linked to pastoral care time. Yang (1998) studied the effect of teaching learning strategies within language teaching. She examined a language teacher's role in teaching learning strategies as well as language, to their learners and suggested ways that teachers can succeed. It was found that although this task was new to many teachers, it proved to be extremely valuable for both teachers and learners. On the other hand, Esch (1997) examined a workshop that was run to teach students of French how to avoid the misconceptions of autonomous learning. It was taught outside of the language classroom. The results were promising. After eight weeks, learners on the course promoted a deeper approach to language learning and had a renewed interest in materials. In both instances, learners were both implicitly and explicitly being prepared for autonomy.

3.2.2 Teachers and Self-Access

Learners are not the only ones who need to be prepared for self-access. Teachers also need to adapt to the requirements of a SAC. Breen & Mann (1997) in there discussions on creating in-class autonomy, detail teacher attributes (what a teacher can bring to self-access) and classroom action (roles that create space for learners to exercise autonomy). They state that teachers need: self-awareness of themselves as a learner, belief, trust and a desire to promote autonomy. While in the classroom, teachers must be "a resource" (p.146), must engage in decision sharing, be patient and obtain support from colleagues. The labels given to teachers during discussions on autonomy are interesting. Reily (1997) uses the term "counsellor" when discussing

teachers involved in self-access. The role of the counsellor is to 1) help the learner to learn by raising their consciousness as a learner, 2) help the learner to learn English (in this context), 3) help the learner to learn English in an SAC by introducing the learner to the organization and function of the SAC and 4) to possibly take a pastoral care role during interactions with the learners (Reily, 1997, p.121). The counsellor differs from a teacher in that they listen, instead of initiating conversation, they are positive as opposed to motivating, and supportive instead of rewarding and punishing. Therefore, these altered roles require a great deal on the part of a teacher; skills that many teachers do not possess. This therefore highlights the stark need to improve teacher training in this area. Having teachers engage in teacher development based on narrative research techniques could be an interesting area for development in the future.

3.2.3 Materials and Self-Access

As Fouser (2003) stated, SAC derives from libraries, computer facilities, and language labs. Therefore, it is assumed that materials would consist of books, CD Roms, web-based programs, CDs, tapes and videos. However, regardless of the number of materials available, they must have a clearly defined purpose for being there to be effective. Sheerin (1997) details the kinds of materials that work well in a Self Access Center (Box 1). She also stresses that materials need to be "browse-able", levels kept to a minimum so as not to limit choice, and must be labeled appropriately. An investment in decent, relevant materials inevitably affects the success of a SAC.

Box 1 Self-Access Materials (Sheerin, 1997)

1. Guided discovery tasks based on authentic data
2. Questionnaires designed to help learners clarify their own beliefs concerning language learning or to challenge their beliefs
3. Study guides containing suggestions for language practice activities, not based on didactic materials
4. Fluency activities for pairs and groups together with checklists and guidelines for self and peer evaluation
5. Suggestions for different ways to use learning materials
6. Student generated materials
7. Standard reading and listening exercises with questions designed for a particular text genre rather than for individual texts

Technology and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technology now play a huge role in independent language learning. The web, computer mediated communication (CMC), Blogs, Podcasts and mobile devices, are all rapidly changing the face of education. Jones (2000) through his experience of setting up SAC, states that students now "expect" to find computers available to them in these facilities. Murray's (1999) work on autonomy and language learning in a simulated environment found that "advancements in technology enable educators to foster learner autonomy by providing learners with the tools they need in order to make decisions and take action in harmony with their personal identity." Yet there are still some observers who advise caution and remind us that it is paramount to ascertain the "adequate proportion between effective teaching and learning strategies and the rational use of new technologies" (Reya and Fernandez, 2002, p.62).

It is important to realize that commercially produced materials can be modified to enhance learner autonomy (Nunan, 1997) and that there has been much success already in Japan in harnessing and using resources beyond the classroom (Ryan,

1997).

3.2.4 SAC in Higher Education in Japan

The following section will take a brief look at HE institutions in Japan that have already taken great steps in creating SACs. Firstly, Akita University's Center for Independent Language Learning [CILL] has three principal roles: "To promote self-directed language learning and learner autonomy, to support the professional development of educators interested in fostering self-direction and learner autonomy in their practice, and to encourage research and experimentation in these areas." (Akita University Website, 2006). They utilize a "Friends of the Self-Access Center" which is a group of dedicated student volunteers committed to ensuring that the Self Access Center meets the needs of the student population. The use of the learners in this manner is an impressive way to empower the students and show that these students have a willingness and ability to act independently. They serve as excellent role models for their peers.

Secondly, Kyoto Notre Dame University has a similar area called the Language Learning Center. Here, the resources for language learning are pooled and native speakers are available to "advise and assist students" (Kyoto Notre Dame University homepage). This emphasizes the role of the teacher as a counsellor, someone who not only orientates the learner and guides them to what is available to them but who also gives advice in a wide range of fields.

Finally, Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) provides learners with a Self Access, Communication and Learner Autonomy Center (SACLA). The center

includes a selection of audiovisual materials, reading lounge, listening stations and a group access area. Adjacent to the SACLA is an English lounge and Blended Learning Space. Within the confines of the SACLA, learners are invited to use the "learning how to learn" area, which gives learner training. As can be seen, the idea of an English lounge as being part of a SAC has been put into action here.

4. The Concept of an English Salon

The Ministry of Education (MEXT) researched and developed an English Strategy Initiative, released in 2002 outlining thirty action points to raise the standard of English education in Japan. The key objective of the plan was to "*Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities*" (MEXT, 2002). This is aimed to be achieved by "Boosting [the] motivation of learners," "increasing opportunities [for them] to use English" and "promoting contact with foreigners" (MEXT 2002). One practical idea mentioned in the plan, to facilitate the above, is the "promotion of English conversation salons" (ibid). The conversation salon is a place where learners can go to engage in activities in the target language. Although MEXT stated that contact with foreigners was promoted, the salon does not necessarily have to have native speakers present to function. Learners choose to attend the salon for a variety of reasons, to improve their English proficiency or simply to socialize. These English conversation salons, or English Lounges, as they are known in some institutions, have become popular with both learners at the HE level, and also members of the general public on a community level. In both instances participants could be said to be "seizing the learning opportunity" (Delors, 1996) that has been presented to them. In choosing to visit the lounge/salon, they are taking charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981). The

author's previous work on an English conversation salon for members of the Japanese community (Birchley, 2005) investigated the role and responsibility of native speakers at the salon and examined whether the salon represented a classroom or a café. It did not, unfortunately, discuss issues of autonomy. However, this could be revisited in the future. It was concluded that although many participants chose independently to attend the salon, while present they did little to establish themselves as autonomous learners. It could be said that they did not appear to share many of Omaggio's (1978) characteristics of autonomous learners, as many were unwilling to take risks to communicate in the target language. The reason for this, I believe is that the purpose of the salon was never clearly established and the learners had never been given learner training. Therefore, in light of this I wish to discuss how the English Lounge at Toyo Gakuen University could be developed to promote autonomous learners.

4.1 *The English Lounge at Toyo Gakuen*

The English Lounge at Toyo Gakuen is a large area, consisting of an outdoor terrace and an indoor area with sofas, tables, chairs, a TV/DVD unit, graded readers, magazines, newspapers and other materials. It welcomes and encourages learners to "Speak in English" (English Education Development Center (EEDC) Publicity). The EEDC offers learners the opportunity to visit "Lounge Time" where they have the chance to spend time with a native speaker. These sessions are offered seven times a week, for between 45 and 90 minutes each time. Learners receive no credit for attending these lounge times and come and go as they please.

4.2 *The English Lounge and Learner Autonomy*

It has emerged that the lounge is perfectly placed to begin to develop learner autonomy. It is not officially a SAC, yet it shares many of the same characteristics and purpose of a SAC, therefore, it can go some way to providing some of the benefits of a SAC. I therefore wish to classify the lounge as a self-access system that can begin to foster learner autonomy. Esch (1996) states that it is more important to focus on the environment rather than the methodology when thinking about how to develop autonomy, and along these lines, Sturtridge (1997) details factors of the environment that will enable the development of autonomy. I will now take five of these factors and will exemplify how the environment of the current English Lounge could be developed to foster autonomy.

1. **Good management**

The lounge is currently well co-coordinated by a full-time staff member however, if the Lounge wishes to further itself in the field of learner autonomy, students could also begin to assist in the running of the Lounge in a similar manner to the way in which the learners at Akita University look after their SAC and fellow learners.

2. **Suitable location and facilities**

The lounge is in an excellent location and has good facilities. The outdoor terrace has added a new dimension to the area; yet, it is too early to say if it will have a positive effect or not. The space the lounge occupies is extremely suitable for events and large gatherings, and provides a very social atmosphere. However, the facets of a traditional SAC (Language Labs, computer facilities and library) are not in such close proximity. However, I believe that with the correct resources in the lounge, it could function quite successfully as a SAC.

3. **Staff training and development**

At present, the staff engaged in Lounge Time are somewhat unsure of the major focus

of their being in the lounge. These mixed purposes are not necessarily negative.

Each individual teacher has their own view of lounge time and how to utilize the

lounge, however, as time goes on, there could be an argument for teachers to receive

more comprehensive training and information about how they should conduct lounge

time. Considering the role of the teacher in autonomous learning and self-access,

Sheein (1997) believes that it is crucial that teachers are not too dominant. Although

Sheein does not specifically state what teachers can do to avoid this, both Voller

(1997) and Riley (1997) examine the role of teacher as a counselor in self access

centers. To further autonomous learning among the learners in general, it would be

useful for learners to see teachers encouraging other learners to work independently

so that they too can do the same. Further research needs to be conducted into how

teachers behave during lounge time and what role the institution would like the

teachers to perform, before training is initiated.

4. Learner training and development

As stated previously, learners need learner training. Therefore, I feel it is absolutely

necessary for learners to have some formal form of orientation for the lounge. This

could be done via a promotional video or a greater amount of publicity that explicitly

states the purpose of the lounge. This could be offered during orientation or within

class time. By combining learning strategy instruction with the content course of

second language acquisition in class, as Yang (1998) suggests, we can go someway

towards creating autonomous learners. Curriculum planners and teachers must realize

that autonomy must pervade the whole curriculum (Raya and Fernandez, 2002).

Senior students could be utilized to introduce the lounge and its possibilities to new

students and in the future, learner achievement and self-assessment checklists could

be displayed on the walls, and learners should be encouraged to evaluate their environment. The lounge could be the structured environment outside of the classroom that could support independent initiatives promoted in the classroom context.

5.   Appropriate materials

The graded readers, magazines, newspapers, television, piano, and guitars that are currently available for learners in the English lounge are the beginnings of a SAC. An expansion of these materials and a greater knowledge of the materials currently available in the media center and tape library in an adjacent building, would further support the lounge becoming a self access area that can facilitate learner autonomy. When developing materials, it would be useful to refer to Sheerin's table (see above) to maximize the potential of the lounge. In addition, in light of Jones' (2000) research, the introduction of a computer to the lounge would allow teachers to demonstrate a number of web-based materials to learners in a relaxed atmosphere and without the restrictions and formality of booking and using the computer rooms on campus.

5. Reflections

At present, despite encouraging my learners to utilize these facilities, I realize that I have not been doing enough to develop learner training (Sturtridge, 1997) and thus intend to spend time fostering an awareness of learning strategies within my learners. I also wish to expand my knowledge of my potential role as a facilitator, counselor, or resource in the lounge (Voller, 2003). As Breen and Mann (1997) state, support is crucial for teachers embarking on projects involving learner autonomy. The team working on the SAC needs to be driven and to share the same goals. It is important to conduct some form of needs analysis and to gauge learner attitudes towards autonomy.

Carter (2005) in her study of students in Trinadad and Tobago compared student attitudes to learning and autonomy with what is documented in the literature. She discovered that there is a need to help students revise their interpretation of learning in a higher education context. Therefore, I suggest that it could be beneficial for us to question our students in a similar manner to ascertain how they see their learning environment. This is something I intend to do in the future.

6. Conclusion

The English Lounge at Toyo Gakuen could become another "institutional root" (Fouser, 2003) of the self-access tree. As it is only in its first year, it is still in the process of being developed and has the potential to be whatever the learners and administration wish it to be. The possibilities are endless. The lounge has the potential to develop not only learners' language skills but also their social skills. The social dimension of learner autonomy that originates in Vygotsky's theory (1978), could and probably is, already played out in the lounge during lounge time. The lounge is one education intervention that has the potential to foster learner autonomy. Whether learners engage in English conversation with a native speaker, peruse the selection of foreign magazines on the tables, or strum happily on a guitar in the corner, all have gained the confidence to venture one step towards having "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others as a socially responsible person" who in the future, can adapt to a changing, complex and interdependent world (Delores, 1996).

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