

## Using Group Work and Reflective Journals for Developing Learner Autonomy in an EFL Classroom at a Japanese University

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大学生の英語の自立学習を促進するための試み  
- グループワークと日記の導入

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### 1. Introduction

The first author conducted action research in which she introduced reflective journals and group work into her EFL classroom at a university in northern Japan to encourage students' autonomous learning. A questionnaire was given at the end of the semester to ascertain the extent to which these interventions encouraged the learners' autonomy. The questionnaire results indicate that these projects can facilitate learner autonomy; however, the way they were implemented needs some modification. The results are discussed from the perspective of four aspects related to the concept of autonomy: reflection, responsibility, motivation and self-confidence and suggestions for future improvement are given.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1 Interrelated aspects of autonomy, reflection, responsibility, motivation and self-confidence

The notion of autonomy is elusive. According to Benson & Voller (1997), the term 'autonomy' has different definitions and is seen differently by

individuals and social groups and there is no uniform concept in the field of applied linguistics. They explain the term has been used in multiple fields such as philosophy, psychology, politics and education. Nevertheless, citing Holec (1981), Little (2007, p.3) explains that the diverse interpretations and definitions of the common notion of learner autonomy can be thought of as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning."

Previous literature indicates that responsibility, reflection, motivation and self-confidence are related to autonomy. These elements are not exclusive of one another and thus occur together. For example, according to Sinclair (2000), reflection on learning can help learners take more responsibility for it, therefore, "Without an explicit and conscious awareness of the process involved in learning a language, learners will not be in a position to make informed decisions about their own learning" (p. 9). Scharle and Szabó (2000) similarly observe that "raising awareness is the starting point" (p. 9) for developing learner autonomy and encouraging the students to consciously examine their own contribution to their learning can enhance responsible attitude

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towards their own learning.

Regarding motivation, Scharle and Szabó (2000) note its significance in enhancing learner autonomy in saying, “Intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify with the goals of learning and that makes them more willing to take responsibility for the outcome.” They also explain that apart from motivation, self-confidence contributes to the development of autonomy. Because if learners believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and they can rely on themselves, their dependence on the teacher will decrease. They state, “...motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other” and “self-confidence contributes to the development of responsibility in its own right” (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 7). In this study, questionnaires asking students about their reflective journals and group work were analyzed in terms of how they encouraged promoted students’ self-confidence, reflection, motivation and responsibility, which are interrelated elements of autonomy.

## **2.2 Reflective journals and group work to promote autonomy in the Japanese EFL class**

### **2.2.1 Introducing autonomy into the Japanese EFL classroom**

In the words of Takagi (2003), Japanese students are often seen as “passive and teacher-dependent in the language classroom” (p. 130). According to Aoki (2008), this is an influence of Confucian philosophy, in which studying means imitating words and deeds of a good teacher. She explains therefore, challenging a teacher is considered to be taboo and she contrasts this Confucian influence in Japanese education to Western education, which is based on Socratic philosophy, in which debate is encouraged. Whereas such researchers as Kubota (1999) allege that this kind of generalisation needs reconsideration, it is the authors’ experience that many Japanese students seem to be overly dependent on their teachers for

setting their learning goals. This is why autonomy was introduced into this research context, i.e. to promote autonomy through increasing students’ confidence and facilitating a responsible attitude towards their learning through reflection.

### **2.2.2 Using reflective journals and group work to promote autonomy**

It was hoped that facilitating students’ reflection and responsibility through the reflective journal would encourage students to take charge of their own learning more. Boud (1999) alleges “Reflection is intrinsic to learning and occurs whether it is prompted or not” (p. 2). Benson (2001) states that several researchers such as Little (1997) and Dewey (1933) believe the capacity to reflect on one’s own learning process as a key psychological component of autonomy. Referencing Little (1997) he argues that “...conscious reflection on the learning process is a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 90).

Group work was initially incorporated into the classroom to raise the students’ sense of responsibility in their own learning and bolster their confidence and motivation. In terms of responsibility and motivation, some class tasks had to be divided among students and required cooperation. Scharle and Szabó (2000) explain, “Promoting cooperation in the classroom affects the learner attitudes in several ways. It encourages the learners to rely on each other (and consequently themselves as well) and not only on the teacher... pair work and group work (as compared to whole class work) may help you get a higher proportion of students actively involved in completing a task... These then are building blocks of responsible attitudes on the part of the learner” (p. 8). As for the element of confidence, because many students seemed to have difficulty in expressing their opinions in front of the class, it was assumed that they would feel more confident about doing so after practicing in the groups.

As described in 2.1, motivation, reflection, responsibility and self-confidence are interrelated factors to promote autonomy. The reflective journal and group work were incorporated in the target classroom, in order to facilitate the above four elements of autonomy.

### 2.3 Research question

Will reflective journals and group work increase students' sense of autonomy?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Setting and participants

The course was taught for one semester from October 2009 to February 2010. This class met twice a week, each time for 90 minutes, once with another teacher and once with the first author. The student participants in this research were 42 first-year students majoring in education at a university in northern Japan. The first author served as the instructor, and syllabus design for English classes at the university was relegated to individual teachers. The main audio-visual material used in this course was a film on DVD "Dead Poets Society" (Haft, Witt, Thomas & Wier, 1989). Each time, a segment of the film was shown for about 10 to 15 minutes in class, only with English subtitles. Throughout the course, various language activities were given to the students in class such as discussion, writing summaries of the video segments, role-play, grammar-translation and listening exercises.

### 3.2 Procedure for using reflective journals and group work

The reflective journal was given to the students as something to be done in their own time, to facilitate reflection on and responsibility for their learning. The journal was introduced to the students in the first class and the content was deliberately left open to see what kind of things the students would reflect on. Below is

the description given on the front page of the journal:

*Please write what you think you learned in each lesson. It can be something linguistic (e.g. Grammar, reading skills, vocabulary), something about the content (e.g. Social class and education system in America) or something else (e.g. It made me think about what I like about a certain teacher.) This will be collected every three or four weeks.*

After the journals were collected, very short comments were written in them by the teacher. The teacher's comments were kept to a minimum and the students' grammatical errors were not corrected. The students were encouraged verbally during the course to write and express their experience and opinions in their journals.

As mentioned in 2.2.2, group work was incorporated in the classroom to develop the students' sense of responsibility and bolster their confidence. It was also used to help them become more familiar with each other. At the beginning of the course, although some students knew one another, they did not know everyone. The instructor thought it was important that the students get to know one another for the intended group work to serve the purpose, because sometimes it is difficult for Japanese students to initiate conversation by themselves. Therefore, in each class, the students were put into different groups of four. Each time the students came to the class, they were asked to draw a card and depending on the number of the card, the grouping was decided. The students were asked to make sure that they knew everyone's name in their groups. If they did not, they had to introduce themselves to the new group members. Students worked in groups by discussing questions given on worksheets, writing summaries of the video segments together, doing role-play, and comparing their translation of the conversations taken from the film.

### 3.3 Evaluation of reflective journals and group work

A questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the semester to evaluate the course in general and some specific activities and projects given throughout the course from the learners' points of view. (See Figure 1 and 2 below.) The questionnaire was given to the students in Japanese to avoid non-uniform interpretation or confusion. The data were collected during the class from 36 students, who were present on that day. For this paper, only the items related to reflective journals and group work will be analyzed.

The items on the questionnaire were prepared considering the following aspects relating to autonomy: motivation, reflection, responsibility and confidence. As discussed in 2.1, these are the elements that are related to autonomy, which were also taken into account to design the projects and activities that constituted the course.

**Figure 1. Questionnaire items asking about the course in general and the projects**

*Please give your opinion about each item. Please also give your reasons.*

*a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. disagree  
d. strongly disagree   x. don't know*

- 1. This class made me think about education and what kind of teacher I would like to be.*
- 2. I feel more confident about presenting my opinions and speaking in English after taking this class.*
- 3. I feel more confident about speaking in English using the colloquial expressions practiced in class.*
- 4. I proactively contributed to the group activities and discussions.*
- 5. I worked hard on writing my journal.*
- 6. This movie (Dead Poets Society) was interesting.*

Items 4 and 5 are related to the projects discussed in this paper. Item 4 is asking the students to evaluate their involvement in group work, which has to do with the responsibility element of autonomy as well as reflection. As noted in 2.1, learners' reflecting on their own contribution to learning can facilitate their sense of responsibility (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Item 5 likewise is related to responsibility and reflection, as it is asking the students to reflect on their own contribution to journal writing.

The next set of questions (see Figure 2) asked the students whether they found the activities given in and outside of the classroom helpful. Tomlinson (2003) summarises the ideas of Krashen (1982), Wenden (1987) and Stevick (1976) by stating, "What is being taught should be perceived relevant and useful" (p. 21). According to Crookes and Schmidt (1991), when students can find relevance between their personal goals, needs and the values and the course instruction, it increases their motivation, which is associated with responsibility explained in 2.1. Thus, rating items were prepared in the following manner. In the result section, only items 8, 9, 10, and 13 are discussed as they are the items directly associated with reflective journals and group work.

**Figure 2. Questionnaire items asking about the class activities**

*Please give your opinion about the activities given in the class. Please also give your reasons.*

*a. very helpful   b. somewhat helpful  
c. not so helpful   d. not helpful at all  
x. don't know*

- 7. Pair conversation practice*
- 8. Translating conversations from the movie with the group members*
- 9. Group discussion on the worksheet items*
- 10. Presenting your group's opinion to the class and also listening to other groups' opinions*
- 11. Watching the movie with English subtitles*

12. *Practicing giving a presentation in English.*  
 13. *Writing the journal in English*  
 14. *Writing an essay in English*

#### 4. Results and discussion

##### 4.1 Results of the questionnaire

Results of the questionnaire items that are directly connected to the projects are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Responses to item 5 in Table 1 show that 58% of the students reported that they actively involved themselves in journal writing. In addition, although approximately 72% answered journal writing was either somewhat or very helpful (See item 13 in Table 2), it had the lowest rating out of all the activities given to the class during the course. The percentage of the students who chose either *c. not so helpful* or *d. not helpful at all* was the highest out of all activities (22.3%).

On the contrary, the items related to group work, items 4, 8, 9 and 10, were ranked as more helpful, especially Item 10, whose percentage of students who chose either *a. very helpful* or *b. somewhat helpful* was more than 90 %.

Below are the comments given by the students. All the comments were translated from Japanese to English by the first author. Comments that had a similar message are omitted here to save space.

##### 4.2 Students' comments on reflective journal

From the positive comments, it can be said that this journal task served to provide some students with opportunities to reflect on their learning (see comments 1 and 2), and some students thought it was a good writing practice and found it to be valuable (see comment 3). However, some of the negative comments (9 and 12) indicate that some students might have needed more guidance on what kind of things could have been written in the journal. Some other negative comments suggest that some students did not take the reflective journal seriously (see comments 11 and 13) It may be because they did not consider it as something that helped their learning process, or simply because they did not like doing extra work outside the class.

Although the reflective journal was initially introduced for the purpose of facilitating students' reflection and responsibility, comments such as 1, 2, 3, and 6 seem to indirectly show students' motivation as they are saying

**Table 1: Students' responses to items 4 and 5 (N=36)**

Item/Response*	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
4. I proactively contributed to the group activities and discussions.	8 (22.2%)	19 (52.8%)	7 (19.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.8%)
5. I worked hard on writing my journal.	8 (22.2%)	13 (36.1%)	12 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (5.6%)

**Table 2: Students' responses on the class activities (N=36)**

Item/Response	Very helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not so helpful	Not helpful	Don't know
8. Translating conversations from the movie with the group members	13 (36.1%)	15 (41.7%)	6 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.8%)
9. Group discussion on the worksheet items	12 (33.3%)	18 (50%)	4 (11.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.8%)
10. Presenting your group's opinion to the class and also listening to other groups' opinions	10 (27.8%)	23 (63.9%)	1 (2.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.8%)
13. Writing the journal in English	10 (27.8%)	16 (44.4%)	6 (16.7%)	2 (5.6%)	1 (2.8%)

the journal was helpful. On the contrary, comments such as 8, 10, 11 and 13 inexplicitly indicate the lack of motivation.

#### Positive comments

1. *It's a very good system because I could reflect what I learned each lesson.*
2. *I know what I learned clearly.*
3. *It helps your writing skills and I can review what I learned.*
4. *I can read it later and remember what I learned and how I felt.*
5. *It's good to keep a record of your studies, and then you know what to do next.*
6. *Even only a little bit, writing in English after each lesson is important.*
7. *I can let the teacher know my progress.*

#### Negative comments

8. *This activity is meaningless.*
9. *I didn't know what to write.*
10. *This is a waste of time.*
11. *I don't think this is necessary because I just write something without thinking deeply.*
12. *It would have been easier to write how I felt about the lesson, rather than what I learned from the lesson.*
13. *I didn't put my heart into it.*
14. *I didn't have a clear idea about what I learned from each lesson.*

#### **4.3 Students' comments on group work in general**

Over all, group work seems to have been received positively by this class and some comments given by the students indicate that group work was seen as something that can help them be more responsible for their own learning and have more confidence. It also seems to affect their motivation, presumably because the students think group work is helpful. As mentioned earlier, class activities which students perceive as relevant can

increase their motivation. However, as comment 26 indicates, there was a case when an activity was regarded as ineffective, thus, unmotivating. Therefore, not all kinds of group work can favourably affect students' motivation. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that group work generally is effective to promote learner autonomy. Presented below is analysis of students' comments on each questionnaire item relating to group work.

#### *Item 8: Translating conversations from the movie with the group members*

Positive comments indicate that some students felt that group translation work helped them learn from one another, as inferred from comments 17 and 19. Rather than rely on the teacher, relying on one another is a step closer to autonomy. Also, as is described in comment 15, some thought this activity was helpful in terms of responsibility. It is probably because it really forced him to complete the task divided by the members among his group. However, negative comments indicate that some students were too dependent on other students in completing assigned work. Some did not choose to work with other students. It may be because they simply preferred working on their own.

#### Positive comments

15. *It makes us more responsible.*
16. *It was just fun.*
17. *By comparing my translation to others', I could learn something new.*
18. *I could learn from others.*
19. *We can learn different ways of expressing.*
20. *We could interact with authentic English.*
21. *It is an effective way to work.*

#### Negative comments

22. *This was not so much different from what we did in high school.*
23. *People who don't understand cannot speak.*
24. *It was difficult.*

- 25. *I think I was working a lot by myself.*
- 26. *I don't think it is effective to translate what was assigned.*
- 27. *I was too dependent on others.*
- 28. *I look up words, but I cannot remember them.*

*Item 9: Group discussion on the worksheet items*

Some positive comments (30, 31, and 33) suggest that this type of group work can help the students learn from one another as they exchange their ideas and help each other, and they find it useful. The student who gave comment 29 says it helped her be more responsible. Negative comments suggest that there were cases where discussion time was used only for social interactions and was not seen as helpful by some students. Some students seem to prefer working alone. More time might have been needed for some students to finish certain tasks.

Positive comments

- 29. *I have to be more responsible for the assigned work if I am working in a group.*
- 30. *I can exchange ideas with other people and learn new things from them.*
- 31. *We can help each other and discover new things together.*
- 32. *I get to hear what other people have to say.*
- 33. *I learned that people have different ideas and my perspective is wider now.*
- 34. *I can check my English expressions with the group members.*
- 35. *I think this helps not only our English abilities but also our communicative competence in general.*
- 36. *It helps to have good relationships with people.*
- 37. *It was difficult, but I learned a lot and made me think a lot.*
- 38. *Talking with other people made me more confident.*

Negative comments

- 39. *I don't think there were many groups who were*

*having serious discussions. I think this activity will be meaningful if everybody decides to contribute more.*

- 40. *I think it is better to answer the questions by yourself.*
- 41. *We needed more time to talk and questions that were easier to understand.*
- 42. *It is too difficult to watch a movie without subtitles and discuss it.*

*Item 10: Presenting your group's opinion to the class and also listening to other groups' opinions*

In a similar way to the previous items, the positive comments indicate that this type of group work can help the students learn from one another and take charge of their learning by cooperating, rather than depending on the teacher. It also seems to help their confidence (comment 49). This may be because they do not have the same pressure when they present their opinions in English within their groups as they would in front of the whole class. After practicing to present their opinions in their groups and getting some support and reassurance from other members of their groups, speaking in front of the whole class would be easier. However, from the negative comments, as well as the previous item, it can be concluded that more time had to be given to the students so that they could complete assigned tasks.

Positive comments

- 43. *I can hear other people's opinions.*
- 44. *I get to communicate in English.*
- 45. *This is a good activity even for shy people.*
- 46. *This is a good practice for listening and speaking in English.*
- 47. *This was never boring.*
- 48. *We learned how to cooperate.*
- 49. *It's good to practice to present one's opinion in front of people. It gives us confidence.*
- 50. *It makes us take the work more seriously.*
- 51. *It makes us work more actively rather than being*

*passively.*

52. *I don't like to talk in front of people, but I think it was helpful.*

#### Negative comments

53. *Sometimes we weren't ready to present the group's opinion. That should be avoided.*

54. *I couldn't do it well.*

#### **4.4 Future implications**

One possibility for future improvement is to show some sample comments from past journal entries and give them some ideas. Also, the journal style could be modified by making it more guided, as introduced in the studies of Stephenson (2006) or Finch (2004). By doing so, it can give students the focus on reflection points. As Scharle and Szabó (2000) note, "Some students may not be able to handle uncertainty and do everything they can to avoid it..." (p. 5). Since the students were first year students who were used to having a lot of guidance, it was probably too challenging for some of them to answer an open-ended question, "What did you learn today?" Another way to modify the journal would be to create a web-based journal, where students can see other students' entries and get some ideas more easily.

Secondly, combining the group work and the reflective journal might be a possibility for encouraging autonomy, as group work had such a positive impact in this study. Students can exchange their comments verbally in their group discussions and they can share their reflection with their peers, which they seem to enjoy. In that way, these two elements of the project can reinforce each other more effectively. How much time to be given for group work also needs to be a careful thought, as some students mentioned in their comments that they had needed more time.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study offers some points to consider for developing similar projects in the future. Firstly, even though it had the lowest rating among all the questionnaire items, positive comments from the students indicate that a reflective journal is a good tool to facilitate learner autonomy in terms of reflection and motivation, if students are given more guidance about how to keep their journal.

A number of positive comments were given for group work and it seems to facilitate learner autonomy through helping build their confidence, raising their awareness on responsibility and increasing their motivation. However, several factors such as individual personality and learning style differences seem to influence group dynamics. They need to be taken into consideration in preparing activities given in class.

Lastly, although the reflective journals and group work did not encourage autonomy to the extent that the first author anticipated, one comment from a student offers an insider perspective into the potential of this endeavour to encourage autonomy. This student, who gave comment 37, says that group discussion was difficult, but it made her think a lot. It resonates with the famous words of Socrates, "I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think."

#### **6. Limitations of the study**

This action research was conducted over only one semester at one university class. The evaluation tool was highly subjective as it was evaluated only from the students' points of view. Other criteria such as periodic observation or an analysis of students' journal entries over the course of the semester would provide more insights as to whether or not their autonomy developed.

Preparing a student questionnaire with questions directly asking about each element of autonomy would also help elicit analysable responses that do not require



presumption.

#### Author Note

This paper was written as part of the first author's master's degree study and revised for submission to this journal.

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