

# EFL Instructors in Japan: Reflections and Definitions of Learner Autonomy in Intercultural Settings

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The following article explores learner autonomy through the reflections of EFL instructors in Japan. In Japan, fostering learner autonomy may differ from other countries, yet that does not mean that it cannot be practiced. Through exploration of the instructors' self-definitions of learner autonomy; their reflections of when they were learners; and their experiences with learner autonomy particularly as language learners, insight can be given into how current EFL learners in Japan may feel about learner autonomy. Furthermore, instructors for this research project were asked about the similarities and differences Western and Asian countries, specifically Japan, may have in defining autonomy. Since there are many non-Japanese EFL instructors, the classroom becomes a site for intercultural exchange. Autonomy can be perceived by cultures in different ways and for instructors working in cultures different from their own, understanding their own perceptions regarding autonomy and also that of their learners' is a valuable investment. It would seem that the more awareness and discussion there is about intercultural issues, the more sensitive instructors can be to their Japanese learners' positions.

## Introduction

Since I began teaching English in Japan nearly ten years ago, in the literature and through conversations with peers, it seems that some instructors feel that there are many barriers and even impossibilities to fostering learner autonomy in the EFL learning environment in Japan. Holliday (2006) cautions that some English native-speakers have a “‘moral mission’ to bring a ‘superior’ culture of teaching and learning to students and colleagues who are perceived not to be able to succeed on their own terms” (p. 386). However, perhaps it would be more constructive to replace the mindset presented by Holliday and shift the view from the impossibilities of fostering learner autonomy to opportunities for instructors to examine the intercultural factors present in the Japanese EFL classroom. This article will explore the reflections of EFL instructors in Japan's reflections about their own learner autonomy, their self-definitions of learner autonomy and their opinions about the cultural similarities or differences in how autonomy is defined by Western and Asian countries, specifically Japan. This article draws upon previous data I collected for a research project regarding grounded theory; however, in this article more emphasis will be placed on presenting the instructors' reflections and opinions regarding learner autonomy. In addition, this paper will outline ways in which reflective practice can potentially aid EFL instructors in Japan to better foster learner autonomy and ameliorate inequalities in the language learning environment.

## Learner Autonomy

The majority of publications regarding learner autonomy in language learning in Japan cite the Benson definition which considers such autonomy to be the learner's capacity to take control over their learning (2011). This definition alludes to the power element in learning with “take control.” In classroom-based approaches, Benson (2011) writes “the key factor in the development of autonomy is the opportunity for students to make decisions about their learning within collaborative and supportive environments” (p. 163). Benson provides a definition of learner autonomy, yet in intercultural settings, other

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factors are necessary as Apple, Da Silva and Fellner (2013) call for: “[a] need for a better understanding of how teachers can support their students’ autonomy... across diverse cultural contexts” (p. 30). Factors to consider could be the students’ previous learning experiences; traditional learner and teacher roles; values that both the learners’ and their instructor’s cultures hold which this paper will explore in later sections. In the 1999 article *Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts*, referencing Jones (1995), Littlewood writes that some believe autonomy is associated with Western values and unsuited to learning in Asian countries (p. 72), thus echoing the opinions of those who feel fostering learner autonomy in a Western sense in the Japanese EFL classroom is impossible. Holliday (2006) argues that Western English-speakers impose stereotypes on non-Western students, “especially when they have difficulty with the specific types of active, collaborative, and self-directed ‘learner-centred’ teaching–learning techniques that have frequently been constructed and packaged as superior within the English speaking West” (p. 385). Having worked in Japan’s EFL field for nearly 10 years, I do not feel that learner autonomy is an impossibility but attempting to assimilate Japanese students into thoroughly Western styles of learning may leave both the teacher and students with a negative experience. A respect for a culture’s values, instead of a replacement, is necessary, in addition to open-mindedness and understanding.

The findings from Littlewood’s study determined that for East Asian and Western students both were equally capable of developing autonomy in the manner they viewed best to meet their language learning needs (1999, p. 88). In addition, Aoki and Smith’s (1996) study revealed that Japanese students desired to be autonomous, further contradicting the stereotype that Japanese learners are passive and rely on the teacher (Littlewood, 1999, p. 72). The literature indicates that learner autonomy is achievable for language learning in Asian countries. During the literature research, there did not seem to be any works that directly addressed the reflections of EFL instructors in Japan’s reflections about learner autonomy. Little research, if any, explores how teachers in Japan define or reflect on their experiences with autonomy as learners, especially in regards to language learning. Reflective practice means that teachers must subject their own beliefs of teaching and learning to critical examination by articulating these beliefs” [as] “(t)eachers engage in personal self-reflection when they recall previous experiences for self-discovery ... (and) become more aware of how they got to where they are at present (Farrell, 2007, pp. 9, 15). Furthermore, Borg (2003) writes that “teachers’ prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualizations of L2 teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives” (p. 88). It seems that the more consciousness that an instructor has of his or her own experience as a learner, the more empathy and awareness of a learner’s needs and experiences an instructor possesses, and the better he or she can support the learners and create a safe learning environment for fostering learner autonomy. “In order to create spaces for learners to exercise their autonomy, teachers must recognize and assert their own autonomy” (Benson, 2011, p. 186). Drawing upon the words of Farrell, Borg and Benson, the following research project consisted of elements to create a hierarchical shift from experts to those practitioners, thus focusing on the experiences, definition and opinions of EFL instructors in Japan regarding learner autonomy and intercultural settings rather than on academics and scholars.

## ***Methodology***

### ***Participants and Procedure***

The 12 participants, 6 Japanese and 6 non-Japanese, who were selected for this research project, either were or had been my co-workers teaching the same university’s English discussion class. Other commonalities that the participants shared were that all had an awareness of the concept of learner autonomy and activities used to foster learner autonomy as many of them used such activities in their lessons. They either had or were currently living abroad with experience learning a second or foreign language, though with varying proficiencies ranging from intermediate to utilizing a second language through their postgraduate studies. This gave them an intercultural awareness as they has lived or were living a foreigner in either Western countries or in Asian countries. These participants were chosen as it was important that they also mirrored their current or former learners’ situation - learning a foreign language in a setting where the classes were completely taught in the foreign language as this university’s unified curriculum requires. Their learning histories could reveal understanding to not only to those who are teaching foreign languages but also to those who are learning foreign languages. This could potentially decrease the power between the expert and non-expert through the act of sharing their experiences and

knowledge. Moreover, I was interested to know if other instructors, who shared a similar experience to mine, also felt that there were more similarities than differences between Western and Asian countries' definitions about autonomy. Nonetheless, these participants could provide valuable insight into learner autonomy as these instructors have had the time and awareness to reflect on their experiences through the lens of not only a learner but with the additional perspective as an instructor.

After the required ethical procedures were completed, the participants were sent a link to an online questionnaire comprised of open-ended questions. Through a survey-hosting website, all data was collected anonymously. The expected survey completion time was 30 minutes and participants were given a 10-day time frame to submit the survey. As it was anonymous, there was no intention to make assumptions about how Japanese instructors' responses differed from non-Japanese instructors' responses when the data was analyzed.

## Instrumentation

The instrument used for this project was a qualitative questionnaire. These three opened-ended questions will be the focus of this article:

1. In your own words, how do you define learner autonomy?
2. Do you think you were autonomous as a learner? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Western countries and Asian countries, specifically Japan, have similar or different ways of defining autonomy? Please explain your answer and feel free to give any examples of these similarities or differences.

The questions were constructed with emphasis to how instructors are in relation to varying levels of power. The instructors have more power in relation to their students but in comparing these instructors to academics and educational administration, the instructors have less power. The questionnaire also asks the instructors to return to a time when they were learners, again to being in a situation of having less power. In the EFL learning environment, learner autonomy can be a way for instructors to share power with their students. Question 1 seeks to compare and contrast the expert with the practitioners' definitions. Next, question 2 requires the instructor to return to the role of learner in regards to learner autonomy and to their experiences learning. Lastly, question 3 asks the participants' opinions about the macro-level structures, that of countries' definitions of autonomy broadening the scope to reflect on the national and cultural components shaping their practices.

## Findings and Discussion

### ***Question 1: In your own words, how do you define learner autonomy?***

In the data analysis of the participants' definitions, through the frequency of keywords, 8 of the 12 responses had "own", 11 of 12 had "learn", and 6 of 12 had "ability/able" and 4 out of 12 had "responsible/responsibility. The following are excerpts from participants' self-definitions:

- "Allowing learners to learn on their own, at their own pace and in their own style."
- "It is the status where the learner can decide everything such as what to study, how to study, when to study, where to study, etc."
- "A learner should be able to perform tasks without being forced to, and know how to study on their own."
- "The ability to learn without aid from others."

Therefore "the ability to have responsibility for one's own learning" could be a collective definition of learner autonomy. It can be assumed that the responsibility for one's own learning means that another individual, most probably the teacher, gives the learner the responsibility. Taking the Benson (2011) or expert's definition "the learner's capacity to take control over their learning", it seems the participants or practitioners defined learner autonomy quite similarly save for "control" and "responsibility" as with "control" the focus is on power but with "responsibility" the focus is on ownership.

## **Question 2: Do you think you were autonomous as a learner? Why or why not?**

All of the twelve participants stated that they had been autonomous learners. Three of the twelve participants did not specify when or where they had experienced being autonomous learners. Two made reference that when they were young learners, as well as junior high school and high school students in Japan, they did not experience autonomy. When reference was made to where their autonomous learning took place, it was in their classes at predominately college and graduate school, both in Japan and abroad, with one respondent mentioning these other sites where autonomous learning occurred: at high school, in independent language learning and in *judo*. The participants' responses reveal positive benefits of learner autonomy that are much richer than "control" and "responsibility". The responses below signify how learner autonomy gave the instructors self-awareness as learners and motivation to learn through goal-settings:

- "I know how I should teach myself depends on what I study."
- "(K)nowing how to set my own goals, creating timetables for studying, having a better understanding of course rubrics and aims etc."

There is also evidence of the joy and interest taken in learning when the learner identifies as an autonomous learner with these responses:

- "I studied extra materials on my own and keenly pursued subjects that were not required - because I was interested in them."
- "I think that I am autonomous as a learner. Anytime I have made a decision in going to school or taking classes, I had a goal in my mind. Also, every day, I enjoy learning something new through books, the Internet, friends, school, and etc. I see unlimited opportunities to learn in our life, which I really appreciate. Learning is my internal desire that makes me happy."

The reflections of the participants as learners indicate not only the details of where and when the autonomous learning took place but the positive effects of learner autonomy. This could aid EFL instructors who want to foster learner autonomy to understanding that their activities will have other positive elements such as sharing control and responsibility with their learners, as well as considering their learners' feelings and position more deeply.

## **Question 3: Do you think Western countries and Asian countries, specifically Japan, have similar or different ways of defining autonomy? Please explain your answer and feel free to give any examples of these similarities or differences.**

Of the 11 responses, all stated that there were similarities in Western countries and Asian countries' definitions. Since one participant responded "No." without any further elaboration, this answer is omitted in the data analysis because it cannot be confirmed if the "No." means there are "No similarities." or "No differences." Many of the participants felt that the emphasis, importance or value placed on autonomy or the ways in which autonomy is demonstrated are what differed in the countries' definitions with less emphasis, importance or value placed on autonomy by Asian countries than Western countries. The subsequent answers signify this as:

- "I am not sure if there are significant differences between Western countries and Japan. However, there would be a clear difference between the two in that Japanese schools (especially junior high schools and high schools) cannot provide lessons to students where they can boost their autonomy."
- "In Japan, usually learners do not have to figure out the best learning style by themselves, and without knowing their own best learning style, they are given things to do, so they only have to think about when or where to do it. But sometimes they are not given anything so they can decide what to do by themselves. And this is called learner autonomy."

The above responses seem to indicate that the opportunity for learners in Asian countries to explore learning styles and to increase their autonomy in their learning may be quite limited. However, these responses below reveal that in Japan

learners have the capacity to be autonomous learners and that their instructors have the ability to create environments to foster autonomy.

- “I think that learners have the ability to be autonomous in their own ways, and above all, should independently accept autonomy or not. I think the main differences are at an ideological level, and less at a classroom level.”

- “I believe each teacher can also define autonomy even though they have to teach in their school systems.”

Regardless of the external factors connected to learner autonomy, such as differing emphasis, importance or value Asian countries, in Japan learner autonomy can be fostered. The participants’ answers reveal that there are more similarities than differences between Western and Asian countries regarding definitions of autonomy. Understanding the placement of emphasis can aid those instructors, working in intercultural settings and seeking who seek to implement activities that foster learner autonomy, to have more cultural sensitivity towards their learners’ values, as well as their learners’ previous learning experiences.

## Implications and Limitations

The study has implications that can make fostering greater learner autonomy in EFL learning environments achievable. As learner autonomy may permit the instructor to share power with the learner, more activities used to foster learner autonomy and lessen power imbalances in the classroom should be used. Instructors’ reflections of their experiences as learners can be empowering providing them with more insight into their classroom practices. If they were very autonomous learners, particularly in language learning, they could use the techniques that were successful for them in their lessons, and possibly to have more discussion with their learners and peers about these topics. In addition, reflecting on how an instructor was as a learner, may give the instructor more empathy for his or her learners bridging the divide between two often unequal positions of power. One limitation of this study is that not all EFL instructors in Japan have had the experience of studying a foreign language or being autonomous learners. Another may be the selection of participants who held similar experiences and opinions to mine. Hopefully, those instructors who feel that impossible barriers exist to fostering learner autonomy in EFL learning environments in Japan will reconsider their views. More studies, discussions and reflections in EFL settings in Japan about learner autonomy could make for new and creative ways that instructors can provide more opportunities for their language learners to be more autonomous in their studies.

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