

**Beliefs and Attitudes towards Learner Autonomy:  
The Case of Gakushuin University Students**

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## **Abstract**

This article attempts to explore learner autonomy from students of Gakushuin University. I will address the two research questions: 1) How does learning experience at Gakushuin University influence learner autonomy? 2) What makes some students more autonomous? I adopted a questionnaire survey to address the first question and a follow-up interview survey to address the second one. The questionnaire asked about students' perceptions of teachers' roles, learning, themselves, past language learning experiences, control over their learning as well as attitudes towards responsibility, critical thinking, and independent learning. The results section will present some findings from the surveys, and the last section will highlight some points for discussion.

## **Definitions of learner autonomy**

The term, learner autonomy, has its roots in Europe, but the concept has existed in many societies throughout the ages. It was first used in language teaching and learning by Holec, when it started to have a considerable influence on language education in Europe. Holec defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981, p. 3), and this definition has been widely cited in the literature of learner autonomy. The ability to take charge of one's own learning involves the ability to take responsibility for the learning process, including setting learning goals, defining the learning content, selecting the ways, and techniques to be used, monitoring the process of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, p.3).

A fundamental question, however, arises with regard to how learners develop the ability to take charge of their learning. Is it a technique or skill taught by the teachers? Does it develop naturally within individual learners? Voller argued that "the truly autonomous learner would not need a teacher at all. Equally, autonomy is not a gift that can be handed over by the teacher to the learner" (1997, p. 107). Perhaps learner autonomy comprises of both sides. When learners are equipped with the ability to take control over their learning by themselves, it may mean that they become more responsible for their learning and independent, and if that means to be autonomous, the best way to approach autonomy is to teach the students strategies and techniques about how to learn effectively by themselves. However, independence in learning is

not always the best characteristic of learner autonomy. As Benson argued, if the synonym of autonomy is “independence”, it can be defined as the opposite of “interdependence” (2011, p.15). Language learning involves communication, so “interdependence”, in other words, being able to work with others, comes to be more important than independence for language learning. Littlewood’s definition of “proactive” and “reactive” autonomy is helpful to think about the question of whether learner autonomy develops naturally in learners or whether teachers should foster it. The former refers to the form of learner autonomy where the learners are able to take control of learning by themselves without directions by others. The latter refers to the situation where the learners are guided toward taking control of their learning by a teacher or other people (1999, p. 75). He proposed that students are able to develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy through group-based forms of learning such as cooperative, collaborative, experiential, and problem-based learning (1999, p. 87).

Benson introduced the three versions of learner autonomy:

1. Autonomy as the act of learning on one’s own and the technical ability to do so;
2. Autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one’s own learning;
3. Autonomy as control over the content and the process of one’s own learning (1997, p. 25).

The second one, the psychological version, refers to learners’ internal constructs such as beliefs and attitudes, which enable them to take more responsibility for learning (1997, p. 23). Constructivist’s theory of learning and knowledge supports this version. Therefore, learning and knowledge can be defined as a reorganization and restructuring of experience rather than acquiring predetermined knowledge. This view sees the knowledge as being constructed through experience rather than being taught.

For the current study, I have adopted the second, psychological version, as learners’ beliefs and attitudes towards learner autonomy were my research focus. Benson argued that a drawback of the psychological version is that it tends to avoid the political nature of autonomy that education and language imply by reducing them to the problems of individuals. However, he also stated that its potential lies in the fact that it enables learners to develop confidence and to become more able to participate in social changes with positive beliefs and attitudes (1997, p. 29).

I also adopted Benson's definition of learner autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning", because, as he stated, the construct of "control" is more open to empirical investigation than the constructs of "charge" and "responsibility" (2011, p. 58). He introduced three dimensions of control: control over learning management, control over cognitive processing, and control over learning content. Learners who control their learning management are able to use learning strategies, such as planning, organization, and evaluation of learning (2011, p. 92). For the development of control, a learner's attention and reflection are believed to be important (2011, p. 104). Learners who know what to study and desire to take control over learning content are autonomous, because they are more likely to direct their learning by themselves (2011, p. 112).

### **Research Questions**

Based on the definition, I will explore learner autonomy in Japanese university students who major in English at Gakushuin University. Research questions are as follows:

- 1) Does the students' learning experience from this university affect learner autonomy?
- 2) What makes some students more autonomous than others?

I adopted a questionnaire survey to address the first question and a follow-up interview survey to address the second one.

### **Previous Studies**

Cotterall conducted research on learners' beliefs to investigate students' readiness for learner autonomy in New Zealand. From a series of interviews with ESL students about their language learning experiences, she identified six key factors. The questionnaire included 26 items on the basis of the six factors: 1) role of teachers, 2) role of feedback, 3) learner independence, 4) learner confidence in study ability, 5) experience of language learning, and 6) approach to studying (p.2). The research participants were 139 adult ESL students. They answered the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. From her findings, she proposed that beliefs investigated in the factors 2) and 6) were found to be less relevant for readiness for learner autonomy. According to Cotterall, the importance of the study lies in the fact that:

By exploring the beliefs identified in this paper, learners and teachers can hope to construct a shared understanding of the language learning process and of the part they play in it. This awareness is an essential foundation of learner autonomy. (1995, p. 6)

In 1999, she extended the previous research by adding more questionnaire items and different factors to the questionnaire. She replaced a new factor, which is “strategies-related behavior”, with the factor of “approach to studying” in 1995. In the study, more than half of the students were from East Asia. The participants were 131 learners of English enrolled on three different English courses offered at Victoria University of Wellington (Cotterall, 1999, p. 14). She analyzed the responses by calculating percentages and mean scores. The study provides teachers with a clearer picture of the students’ beliefs on language learning.

More recently, a study by Spratt, Gillian, and Humphreys attempted to investigate students’ readiness for learner autonomy in relation to language learning motivation. They investigated more than 500 Hong Kong University students’ perceptions of: 1) their teachers’ and their own responsibilities for teaching and learning English, 2) their own responsibilities and their own abilities for learning English, and 3) their motivation and their frequency of engaging in out-of-class learning activities (2002, p. 250). Using statistical analysis and follow-up interviews, the authors showed how the students perceived their responsibility for and ability to take control over their own learning in detail. The findings showed a strong relationship between higher levels of motivation and greater engagement in outside class activities indicating that motivation played a key role in readiness for learner autonomy (2002, p. 262).

Based on these studies, I set up the five key themes upon which to investigate the students’ attitudes and beliefs about learner autonomy:

1. How do students perceive their teachers’ responsibilities?
2. How do students perceive their learning and themselves?
3. How are learning experiences in the past perceived?
4. How do students take control of their learning process?
5. How do students hold attitudes towards other characteristics of learner autonomy?

(Cotterall, 1995; 1999; Benson & Lor, 1998; Little, 2002; Usuki, 2003; Benson, 2011)

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Two groups of students were selected from Department of English Language and Cultures at Gakuhsuin University. First-year students consisted of 54 students from two English communication classes (34 women, 17 men, 3 unidentified). Third- and fourth-year students consisted of 50 students (22 women, 23 men, 5 unidentified), who belonged to several different seminar classes. As three out of the 54 students in the first-year students and four out of 50 students in the third- and fourth-year students did not answer the questionnaire in a complete way, 51 and 46 were considered to be valid data for the two groups.

For the follow-up interview research, three students were selected from each group based on how they scored in the questionnaire (i.e., higher, middle or lower). The first-year students selected for the interviews were all female students and the third- and fourth-year students were two male students and one female student.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire had 36 question items with a six-point Likert scale. The questions were all related to the five themes introduced earlier. The questionnaire included five open-ended questions where the participants were able to leave comments (see Appendix 1).

Semi-structured interviews (i.e., an interviewer decides questions to ask but changes a flow of asking acts depending how interviewees answer) were adopted for the follow-up interviews. The questions based on the questionnaire items were asked in more detail in the interviews.

### **Analysis**

The participants' beliefs and attitudes towards learner autonomy were analyzed by mean score calculation and t-test (i.e., a statistical test to determine if two sets of data are significantly different from each other). First, I calculated all of the participants' scores by addition. In the six Likert-points, 1 indicates the lowest degree of learner autonomy and 6 indicates the highest degree of learner autonomy. Therefore, a student who scored higher was considered to be more autonomous in my research. For example, a student answered 5 for all of the 31 questions items on the six Likert-point; thus, his score was 155 by addition, which

was quite high. Then, I calculated mean scores for the group of first-year and the group of third- and fourth-year students to compare the two groups. Next, to see if how different the two groups of students answered each question item, I calculated mean scores of each question in the two groups where t-test was carried out for the comparison. I analyzed the answers from the five open-ended questions based on content analysis.

I adopted a grounded theory approach to analyze data from the follow-up interviews, because to answer the second research question, this approach was considered the most appropriate. Data analysis went through the following procedures: I first transcribed all the interviews. The transcriptions were read many times and the important words were highlighted. Next, those highlighted words were categorized according to the five key sections (i.e., the perceptions of the teacher's roles, the perceptions of learning and themselves, the perceptions of the past learning experience, the perception of controlling their own learning, and the attitudes towards other characteristics of learner autonomy). Then I made connections between categories, attempting to integrate them and group them in order to identify patterns in them. Dörnyei explained that the second coding step (i.e., axial coding), by forming relationships between categories, allows us to highlight and position certain categories in the center of the coding process; in other words, it allows for the basis of the third phase (2007, p. 261). Finally, I selected what is called a "core category", which is the centerpiece of the proposed new theory (p. 261).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Study**

The group of the first-year students and the group of third- and fourth-year students respectively showed 110.8 and 112.5 on average. The latter group was slightly higher than the former on average, but t-test showed no significant difference. Moreover, t-test also showed no significant difference regarding how the students in the two groups answered each questionnaire item from 1 to 35. In other words, the first-year and third- and fourth-year students, according to the average scores of each group, shared the similar beliefs and attitudes (see Table 1).

Table 2 compiles the themes that were made based on the comments on the five open-ended



questions. It shows the words in order of how frequent they appeared on the comments. Therefore, we can understand from the table that what beliefs and attitudes the majority of students in the two groups hold.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviation and the results of t-test of The Questionnaire for Measuring Learner Autonomy

Item	<u>First-year</u>		<u>Third- and forth-year</u>		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
1	2.56 (4.43)	0.87	2.5 (4.50)	1.14	ns
2	3.41 (3.58)	1.28	3.34 (3.65)	1.32	ns
3	2.01 (4.98)	1.14	1.86 (5.13)	0.80	ns
4	2.70 (4.29)	1.13	2.69 (4.30)	0.98	ns
5	2.98 (4.01)	1.15	3.06 (4.65)	1.21	ns
6	2.56 (4.43)	1.15	2.21 (4.78)	1.20	ns
7	2.27 (4.72)	0.98	2.21 (4.78)	1.15	ns
8	2.43 (4.56)	1.31	2.41 (5.65)	1.22	ns
10	4.23	1.17	4.30	1.22	ns
11	4.49	1.02	4.13	1.25	ns
12	4.23	1.36	4.21	1.31	ns
13	2.98	0.90	3.00	1.15	ns
14	2.90 (4.09)	1.08	3.17 (3.82)	1.25	ns
15	3.13	0.84	3.54	1.27	ns
16	4.27	0.98	4.00	1.26	ns
18	4.47	1.18	4.32	1.26	ns
19	4.09	1.13	4.21	1.13	ns
20	3.21	1.22	3.39	1.08	ns
21	3.86	1.09	4.00	1.07	ns
23	3.70	0.98	3.82	1.33	ns
24	3.58	1.11	3.91	1.31	ns

25	3.84	0.92	3.86	1.16	ns
26	4.03	0.87	4.10	0.99	ns
27	4.05	0.88	4.21	1.03	ns
28	3.41	0.82	3.69	1.00	ns
29	4.39	0.87	4.60	1.02	ns
30	4.27	1.11	4.54	1.32	ns
32	4.74	1.07	4.67	1.19	ns
33	4.05	1.08	4.06	1.10	ns
34	3.76	1.24	3.71	1.37	ns
35	4.11	1.10	4.23	0.94	ns

*Note.* The numbers show the degree of learner autonomy with 1 representing the lowest autonomy and 6 representing the highest in the six-Likert scale. However, in the questions from 1 to 8, 1 represents the highest autonomy and 6 represents the lowest, so the scores were changed as follows: from 1 to 6, 2 to 5, 3 to 4, 4 to 3, 5 to 2 and 6 to 1 (the numbers with brackets are original scores from the students).

**Table 2.** Answers from the open-ended questions (question 9, 17, 22, 31 and 36)

<u>First-year students</u>	
Q 9. I want to learn	Communication (13), my difficulty in English (12), how to learn English (7), grammar, and vocabulary (7)
Q 17. I describe myself as a language learner	Passive (22), focusing on grammar and vocabulary (2), normal (2), enjoying learning (2)
Q 22. I describe language learning	Important for job hunting and for my future (14), communication with people (12), something to improve myself (10), obligation (4)

Q 31. I describe my learning strategies	Being more active (11), using English books, newspaper, and news (7), making a foreign friend (5), increasing vocabulary (5), raising motivation (3)
Q 36. I can study without a teacher	I can (32), I cannot (17)

Third- and fourth-year students

Q 9. I want to learn	How to learn English (11), my difficulty (9), what is interesting to learn (6), culture, politics, and interesting topic (3), grammar knowledge (3), how to write a graduation thesis (2),
Q 17. I describe myself as a language learner	Passive (11), good (8)
Q 22. I describe language learning	Something to improve myself (11), as a tool to enrich my life (7), a way to understand the world better (8), important for my future (7), communication with people (4), my growth and advantage (3)
Q 31. I describe my learning strategies	Using English as much as possible (12), using English books, newspaper, and news (3), learning making a foreign friend (2),
Q 36. I can study without a teacher	I can (26), I cannot (16)

*Note.* The numbers with brackets are the number of students who mentioned the words in their comments. There were other written answers in each question, but the ones that were frequently on the written comments were picked out and represented in the table.

To summarize these results, the responses to questions 1 to 8 revealed that the students' dependence on their teachers was relatively high. There were no significant differences, as reported earlier, but the results showed that the third- and fourth year students groups were found to be slightly more dependent on their teachers. For the question item 2, "I like the teacher to set my learning goals", the respondents showed less dependency (first-year 3.58 and third- and fourth-year 3.65 on average). On the other hand, I found that the respondents wanted their teachers to tell them what their difficulties are (item 3: 4.98, 5.13) and especially the third- and fourth-year students felt the need of their teachers to make learning more successful (item 8: 4.56, 5.65).

The scores of the second section from 10 to 17 were, as Table 1 shows, relatively high. The results showed that the students like trying new things out by themselves (4.23, 4.30) and they study/use English outside the class to improve (4.23, 4.21). However, the scores of question 13, regarding a sense of self as a language learner, showed 2.98 and 3.00 that were relatively low, and question 15, regarding their passivity in the classes, showed 3.13 and 3.54, which were relatively low as well.

The written answers to the open-ended question in this section: "how do you describe yourself as a language learner? Is that good or bad?" gave one of the significant findings. A large number of students from both groups perceived themselves negatively. The number of first-year students who answered that "they are passive and not active" reached 22. Other answers were "not mature and developing" (5), "standard" (2), but most of the comments included rather negative expressions such as "a lonely learner", "I tend to learn alone" and "I am not careful with translating activities". The students who had negative self-images as language learners reached 20 and only 4 students were found to hold positive self-concepts. They thought they were good because "I enjoy learning English", "I'm looking for the chance to use English at workplace", and "I analyze English in detail". Many of the third- and fourth-year students also described themselves as "passive" (11) and "lazy" (1). Many of third- and fourth-year students also had negative self-concepts, and 18 students perceived themselves to

be bad language learners. However, 8 students from the third- and fourth-year group were found to have good self-images. Moreover, they described themselves as learners in quite unique ways. Those expressions included “I am a grammarian”, “I am an adventurer”, “I am a learner making an effort alone”, “I am the type of a learner who prefers exercises to grammar”, and “I am a learner who seeks new expressions in the language”. Those unique self-descriptions, I interpreted, as the products of their learning experiences at the university.

In the third section, the students were asked about how they perceived their past language learning experiences. The average scores of the two groups were respectively: item 18, “I have a clear idea of what I need English for” (4.47, 4.32), question 19, “I have been successful in language learning in the past” (4.09, 4.21), and question 21, “I have my own way of improving English” (3.86, 4.00). One of the findings in this section is how they answered negatively to question 20, “I have my own way of testing how much I have learned” (3.21, 3.39), which implies that many of the students do not feel confident in evaluating their progress by themselves.

Questions 23 to 31 provided data on how the respondents felt that they took control over their learning. The responses to questions 23 to 25 asking about learning reflection showed the average score ranging from 3.58 to 4.00. This means that they felt that they engaged learning reflection to some extent. Questions 26 to 28 asked about the metacognitive abilities such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating. The first-year students scored 4.03, 4.05, and 3.41 in the three questions and the third- and fourth-year students scored 4.10, 4.21, and 3.69. Question 28 asked the degree to which they evaluate their learning progress, which overlapped with question 20. Their responses again showed that they are not confident in evaluating their progress in learning. For pair and group work, the students were found to have positive attitudes (4.39, 4.60 and 4.27, 4.54).

The open-ended question 31 tells us what kind of learning strategies they employ to improve their learning. The first-year students answered that they understand learning strategies as “becoming more active” (11), “using English books, newspaper, films, and news” (7), “making a foreign friend” (5), “learning vocabulary” (5), and “making an opportunity to speak English” (4). Some students mentioned more specific examples such as “using color pens”, “reading texts aloud”, and “sharing learning with friends”. The third- and fourth-year students also

thought of learning strategies as “using English” (12), more specifically: “speaking to myself”, “thinking about my opinions in English”, and “trying to use only English in classes”. Other strategies adopted by them included “review of learning” (3), “using English news, newspaper, and films” (3) and “making foreign friends” (2). A lot of students in the two groups were found to share the same learning strategies: “trying to use English”, “making a foreign friend”, and “using English news and books”.

Finally, we will look at the students’ attitudes towards other characteristics of learner autonomy. Here, questions 32 to 36 asked about important aspects of autonomy such as critical thinking, responsibility for learning, and the ability for independent learning. The students in the both groups responded that they look for the chance to use English outside the classrooms (4.74, 4.67), think about things carefully before they accept them (4.05, 4.06), are responsible for learning (3.76, 3.71), and think they are able to set up learning goals by themselves if freedom to do so is given to them (4.11, 4.23). Interestingly, the group of first-year and the group of third- and fourth-year students showed almost the same score for this section as well.

The students reacted positively to question 36: “Do you think you can learn without a teacher? If there were no class or teacher, what would you do?” More than half of the students in the two groups believed they could study English (see Table 2). They commented that “we can use English news and drama to learn”, “there is a person learning independently”, “I can use the internet”, and “I will prepare for TOEIC”. Those who answered that they would not study English without teachers and classes commented: “I don’t think I can give answers to my questions and problems by myself”, “there should be a lot of ways to learn which need to be taught”, “I need a teacher to improve speaking”, and “I cannot find my difficulties by myself”. Some of the third- and fourth-year students commented: “I can study by myself because I find fun from learning”, “what I can learn is limited without a teacher, but it is still possible to learn by myself”, and “I can use English films”. Despite their positive written answers, it is difficult to conclude that many of the respondents do in fact have the ability to learn English independently.

### **Follow-up Interview Research**

Follow-up interviews allowed us to understand were the students’ beliefs and attitudes

towards learner autonomy in more detail. The six participants in the interviews were given pseudonyms: Aki (first-year, female, more autonomous), Fumi (first-year, female, average), Haruka (first-year, lower than average), Junko (third-year, female, more autonomous), Ken (third-year, male, average), and Masa (fourth-year, male, lower than average).

### **First-year students (Aki, Fumi, Haruka).**

Aki, whose score was highest, has attended English conversation school for many years since she was a small child. She also listened to English radio programs and watched English news on TV when she was a junior high school and high school student. She was one of the few students who showed less dependency on teachers and perceived herself as a good language learner in the questionnaire. She thinks that she needs to set learning goals by herself.

Other students, Fumi and Haruka also shared the belief that it is important to set learning goals by themselves. What makes Aki different from Fumi and Haruka is that she feels that she has been able to actually set learning goals to learn. There were no other significant differences among them as to their perceptions on teachers.

They reported how they perceive themselves as language learners more clearly. Fumi and Haruka mentioned their passivity inside and outside the classrooms.

Fumi: “Well, you know that a teacher’s attention is paid to those who are able to speak English and those who have the distinguishing character. It is not easy to get in them.” (...) “I am just nodding when I study in group. Of course, when we are in pairs, I am forced to speak something.”

Haruka: “I just listening to what other students say without stating my opinions. Perhaps I am passive there without thinking what I have to say. I think pair and group work are good for those who are active, but for people like me, it is just an activity where we are just listening to what they have learned.”

Aki who perceived herself as a good language learner, on the other hand, answered differently.

Aki: “I try to talk to my partners in pairs or members in a group. At the beginning, we tend to be silent, so I try to talk to them, because I feel it is waste of time not to speak English there”. Despite how she answered, her positive self-image can become negative depending on situations. She mentioned that she feels herself to be passive when she was just listening to the

classes.

Aki: “I sometimes feel guilty when I just spent time talking about personal stuffs in Japanese and was not able to speak English as I expected myself to in the oral communication class.”

Aki does not seem to feel good when she ended her class without speaking English as much as she expected herself to. It might be assumed, then, that this bad feeling leads her to talk to other classmates more actively. Similarly, Fumi and Haruka expressed a sort of bad feelings when they were not active in the class. However, they do not seem to actually improve the situations. For example, Fumi said that she feels she needs to improve the situation but she has not made an effort. In this sense, Aki is more active in taking responsibility for her learning.

They did not differ in terms of their perceptions of being able to have learning reflection and to use learning strategies. Aki answered 5 for questions 26, 27, 28, but she mentioned the process of reflection, planning, monitoring, and evaluating revolves around homework assignment. She wrote using English newspaper, news, and radio programs as learning strategies but said that she no longer uses them. From how they answered questions 20 and 28, two of which asked about self-evaluation, it is assumed that the participants felt more difficulties with evaluating their own learning progress by themselves compared to planning and monitoring.

### **The third- and fourth-year students (Junko, Ken and Masa).**

Junko was the one who scored highest (133) in the questionnaire of the three interview participants, in other words, considered to be autonomous. However, she mentioned that she does not study English outside the classrooms at all. She perceives herself as a good language learner like Aki and she thinks she engages with activities actively in the classrooms. Ken and Masa are taking the teaching license course to become English teachers. Ken is a unique student in that he commented in the questionnaire that he created his own grammar books to study English in junior high school. Masa, who was not considered autonomous because of his score (101), has a clear idea why English is necessary for him. However, his dependency on teachers is quite high. He described himself as passive, and he thinks he learns English only by listening and reading. From the interview, it was not possible to draw a clear line concerning their perceptions of teachers’ roles between Junko as more autonomous and Ken and Masa as less



autonomous. Ken and Masa were found to have strong beliefs about what an English teacher can do to help learners, probably because they want to become teachers.

In general, Junko has a positive self-image, although her engagement with activities differs depending on classes. As I reported earlier, she does not study outside the classrooms at all, but she mentioned she just enjoys exposing herself to English such as watching English films and news. On the other hand, Ken and Masa, just like Fumi and Haruka in the group of first-year students, answered they perceive themselves negatively.

Ken: “It’s bad. I’m just learning by memorization without going deeper. (...)”

Ken and Masa mentioned they have not been able to learn English as they expect themselves to. Masa mentioned his passivity and laziness as the reason for this. Interestingly, Junko said that she does not feel responsible for learning, but she just enjoys using English. Conversely, Ken and Masa were found to hold strong responsibility for learning English.

Ken: “I major in English. People see me like that in the society, so I should be good at it. It is not only like that, but I also like English, so I want be good at it.”

Masa: “I want be an English teacher. Now English teachers are more expected to be good at English. (...) I have no experience in abroad. I think I don’t have enough at English, so I need to improve it.”

## **Discussion**

I would like to summarize some points to give discussion to the findings. First, the group of first-year and the group of third- and fourth-year students showed almost the same average score in the questionnaire. That is to say, they hold the similar beliefs and attitudes to learner autonomy despite their ages. However, some students indeed scored higher than others in the both groups.

Second, I was able to identify the characteristics of the participants from the questionnaire survey: 1) the respondents have relatively high dependency on teachers, 2) many of them perceive themselves negatively as a language learner, 3) they do not feel that they are able to evaluate their own learning progress (see Table 1). These reported beliefs allow teachers and learners to reconsider their teaching and learning in order for the development of autonomy.

Third, they shared the same beliefs of learning and learning strategies (see Table 2). Many

of the participants see learning as self-improvement, important for their future and communication, and learning strategies as to become more active, use English books, films, newspaper, and to make foreign friends.

The findings also raise a number of points for discussion. First, Aki was found to hold positive beliefs and attitudes towards autonomy. Unlike Fumi and Haruka, she tries to talk to her classmates. She had engaged with a lot of out-of-class activities since she was a junior high school student. Thus, Aki already exercises a higher level of autonomy despite her age compared to other students. Fumi and Haruka reported that they are not active in the classes and perceive themselves negatively. Does this really mean that these students are not ready for autonomous learning? Cotterall said that learners' beliefs reflect their readiness for assuming greater responsibility (1999, p. 3). Fumi, however, was the one who reported that she spent her time for learning English outside the classes most, and Haruka reported her willingness to engage with a volunteering activity to help tourists, which she has not been able to take part in, due to her lack of courage and confidence. Moreover, both, Fumi and Haruka reported that they tend to be listeners rather than talkers in Japanese. In other words, their passivity in the classroom may come from their personality and should not be taken for lack of their autonomy. People tend to think that "the concept of autonomy is embedded in notions of participation and liveliness" (Holliday, 2003, p. 113), but learner autonomy should not be understood merely as the students' active engagement in the activities during the classes. It is suggested that the students are encouraged to play a role in the classroom to be able to have a positive image. Positive self-images are important for learner autonomy (Benson & Lor, 1998; Usuki, 2003). In order for that to happen, I believe that the students should be given equal chances to have their voice. In that sense, the teachers have to reconsider their roles as a teacher, listener, facilitator, and adviser of the students. The students also should be aware of their roles in the classrooms.

There is another point for discussion. Is Junko an autonomous learner? She holds a good image of herself as a learner, and she is active during the classes. However, she does not study English at all outside the classrooms. Accordingly, despite her high score in the questionnaire, she does not appear to have any control or responsibility for learning. One of the possible interpretations is that she already established her own way of learning English from her

experiences. For her, reading grammar books, textbooks and memorization, strategies which Ken and Masa rely on, are not necessary anymore. In other words, she became a user of English from a learner. From what she said in the interview, she is free and positive. She does not need to feel responsibility for learning, but she just enjoys using English. In that case, she became an autonomous user of English. It is possible to say that Aki will be more likely to become like Haruka in the future because of her beliefs and attitudes (as explained earlier, she actively talks to her classmates). To define learner autonomy in this context and to understand what makes some students more autonomous than others, the aforementioned points should be investigated and discussed further. From the interviews with Fumi, Haruka, Ken and Masa, they were found to face a series of struggles in their learning that were described earlier in the paper. If this struggle is part of the process of becoming a user of English like Junko, they all have the possibility of becoming more autonomous.

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## **Appendix 1. The Questionnaire for Measuring Learner Autonomy**

### **-The Questionnaire for Measuring Learner Autonomy**

**Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements about your language learning by circling the number which matches your answer.**

- |                         |             |                         |                      |          |                      |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|
| 1. Strongly<br>Disagree | 2. Disagree | 3. Disagree<br>Somewhat | 4. Agree<br>Somewhat | 5. Agree | 6. Strongly<br>Agree |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I like teachers to offer help to me                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 2. I like the teacher to set my learning goals                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3. I like the teacher to tell me what my difficulties are           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 4. I like the teacher to tell me what to do                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 5. The teacher should make me work hard                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 6. Evaluation from the teacher is important                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7. Teachers are responsible for teaching                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 8. To learn successfully you need a good teacher                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. What do you expect your language teachers to do to you, and why? |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| <hr/>   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 10. I like trying new things out by myself                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 11. Learning a language is different from learning other subject    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 12. I study/use English outside the class to improve                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 13. I am a good English learner                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 14. I like waiting for directions set by others                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 15. I like to have an active role in language classes               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

16. I like studying alone 1 2 3 4 5 6

17. How do you describe yourself as a language learner? Is that good or bad?

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18. I have a clear idea of what I need English for 1 2 3 4 5 6

19. I have been successful in language learning in the past 1 2 3 4 5 6

20. I have my own way of testing how much I have learned 1 2 3 4 5 6

21. I have my own way of improving my English 1 2 3 4 5 6

22. What can you describe “learning a foreign language” for you?

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23. I share my learning experiences with others 1 2 3 4 5 6

24. I consciously think about my past learning experiences 1 2 3 4 5 6

25. I can look back to what happened in the classroom 1 2 3 4 5 6

26. I can consciously: think about what I should learn 1 2 3 4 5 6

27. : attend to what I am learning 1 2 3 4 5 6

28. : evaluate what I have learned 1 2 3 4 5 6

29. I try to support other members when in a group or pair 1 2 3 4 5 6

30. I am willing to work in a group or pair 1 2 3 4 5 6

31. Do you have any strategies to improve your learning outside or inside the class?

What strategies do you have and use?

---

32. I am willing to look for the chance to speak English 1 2 3 4 5 6

33. I don't accept automatically other's opinions 1 2 3 4 5 6

34. I am responsible for learning English 1 2 3 4 5 6

35. I can decide my own goals in learning English if given the freedom to do so

1 2 3 4 5 6

36. Do you think you can learn English without a teacher? If there were no class or teacher, what would you do?

---

Please add any comments in the space below.

**Finally, I would like ask you about your personal information. These information will be used only for the research.**

Male or Female ?      Male / Female

Learning experience outside Japan ?      Yes / No      How long? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you learn English at Jyuku (cram school) ?      Yes / No      How long? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your level of English?

TOEIC (                    )                    Eiken (                    )

How much do you study or use English outside the class on average for a week ? \_\_\_\_\_

\*Please write your E-mail address if you are willing to participate in the follow up interview  
(Please refer to the consent form for more detail).

E-mail address : \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for taking time to fill out the questionnaire.**