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The Role of Autonomy in Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This paper explores the link between learner autonomy and critical thinking and aims to propose a practical approach to promote both skills in English classes at Japanese universities. Based upon the relevant literature review and examination of two survey questionnaires, the conclusion indicates that autonomous learning skills play an essential role in developing critical thinking skills among university students. In addition, more emphasis needs to be placed on the role of the teacher as a facilitator in order to enhance the quality of English education at Japanese universities.

Key words: critical thinking, English, facilitator, learner autonomy, promote

The Role of Autonomy in Critical Thinking

Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as one's ability to take control of their learning. When learners become more autonomous, they begin to understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). This process leads to increased self-motivation and confidence and can help second language learners during their language acquisition process.

According to a large body of empirical research in social psychology, autonomy "feeling free and volition in one's actions" is a basic human need (Deci, 1995, p. 2). It is nourished by and in turn nourishes, our intrinsic motivation, our proactive interest in the world around us. Autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens in their intrinsic motivation (Little, 2006).

Their motivation and independence gradually lead autonomous learners to self-direct their thinking. The process of self-management of thoughts is a way to intervene in one's thinking. This self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-corrective thinking can be defined as

“Critical Thinking”. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native ego-centrism and sociocentrism (Elder, 2006).

According to Elder (2006), a well-cultivated critical thinker:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively;
- comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Many scholars and researchers believe a direct correlation between critical thinking and academic achievement. Jacobs (1995) conducted a study to shed light on the impact of critical thinking skills on learners' academic achievements. Firstly, he gathered some empirical data by performing the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST). Then, he analyzed student success based on the data gathered from CCTST. The results indicated a direct correlation between students' verbal intelligence and critical thinking skills. In another study, Villavicencio (2011) examined the link between critical thinking and achievement among two hundred and twenty engineering students. His findings suggested that critical thinking was significantly correlated with students' final grades.

According to McPeck (1981), critical thinking is not an educational option but rather it is an indispensable part of education. He claimed that thinking critically is a necessary condition for being educated, and teaching with the spirit of critical thinking is the only way to satisfy the moral injunction of respect for individuals. In other words, learners have the moral rights to be taught how to think critically.

Especially in the context of second language acquisition, where learners are immersed into unknown social, cultural, historical events and issues, the need to have critical thinking skills becomes unquestionable. Language acquisition is a continuous process of acquiring new information, thinking, forming ideas and communicating them based on a given context. The main goal is to produce successful communicators, that is, students who understand linguistic conventions are capable of delivering them to suit particular situations and contexts (Butt et al., 2000).

In addition, when learners express their ideas and feelings through a second language, such as English, they have to think critically to make accurate linguistic choices. During this process they also have to reflect their linguistic and cultural awareness in others. This process requires reflective and independent thinking. Since autonomous learners are independent learners, they have the freedom and ability to self-direct their thinking. As a result, they can engage knowledge critically and make well-reasoned judgments. This realization also leads to less dependence on the teacher and therefore, enables learners to make an objective assessment of their own thoughts, as well as others.

According to Siegle (1980), learners should be given the rights to question, challenge, and demand reasons for justifications for what's being taught (p. 14). Thus, establishing such free learning environment is a vital step for all educators to promote critical thinking. Autonomous teachers, who are free of all methodological limitations and bias, are capable of establishing such environment. Those teachers are the ones that can think outside the box and encourage learners to direct their own learning process. Their role in the establishment of a favorable learning environment is indispensable. McKernan (1993) states that education should be open-ended and providing the environment to learners in which they feel most comfortable to develop their skills (p. 346).

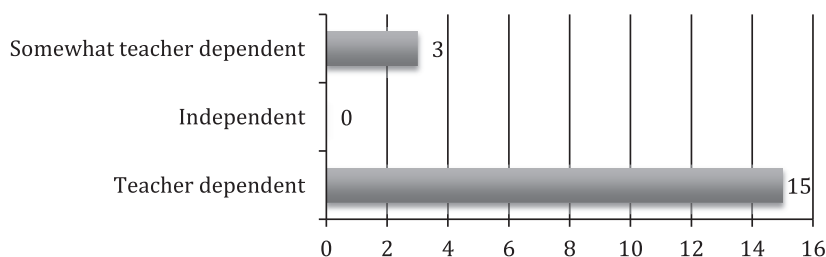
Therefore, the role of teacher autonomy in developing learner autonomy and critical thinking is vital. If teachers can take on the role of a facilitator and guide learners towards being more autonomous, learners will become less dependent on their teacher and gain confidence in their language ability. Then, teachers can gradually encourage them to think critically about a wide range of unknown social, cultural and historical events and issues.

Learner Autonomy Assessment in First Year University Students

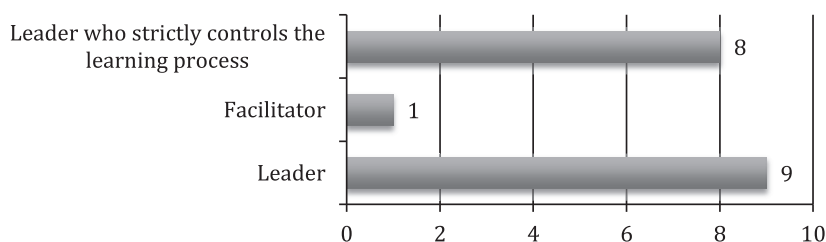
In order to have a better understanding of learner autonomy among university students in Japan, I conducted a brief questionnaire with first year intermediate level English Academic Writing students at a Japanese university. Eighteen students participated in the questionnaire which included four open-ended multiple choice questions. The bar graphs below show the questions and the number of responses given by the students.

The first question looked into students' learning style during their English studies at high school. As shown in the graph, fifteen students selected the answer choice "Teacher dependent" while three students opted for "Somewhat teacher dependent". Surprisingly, no students selected the answer choice "Independent". Their responses indicate that they were mainly instructed through teacher-centered approaches and expected their teachers to direct their

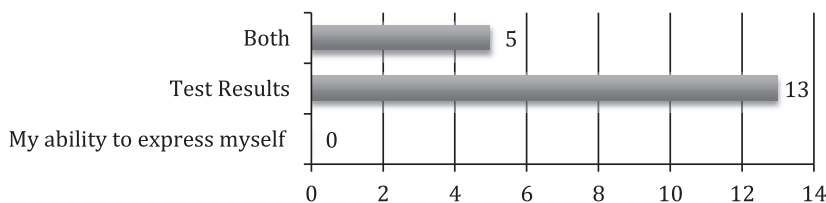
1) Which of the following describes your learning style at high school?



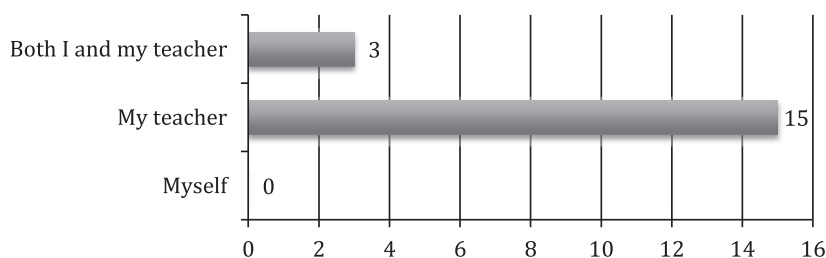
2) Which of the following best describes the role of your high school English teacher?



3) Which of the following do you think was the most important indicator of your progress in your language skills during your high school education?



4) Who was setting your language learning goals?



learning process.

The second question shed light on students' view on their English teachers' role in class. Nine students regarded their teachers as the leader while eight of them viewed them as the leader who strictly controlled their learning process. Only one student opted for the answer choice "Facilitator". Based on the answers, it is clear that the majority of the students per-

ceived their teachers as the leader of the class.

The third question tried to find an answer for the most important indicator of learners' progress in their language acquisition. Sixteen students selected "Test Results" as the main indicator and the remaining three opted for the answer choice "Test results and their ability to express themselves". Needless to say that the majority of the students regarded test results as the main assessment tool in their language acquisition in high school.

The fourth question was asked to find out whether their teachers or students themselves set learning goals. Fifteen students opted for the answer choice "the teacher" as the person who set their learning goals for them while three students selected the option "Both I and the teacher". As a result we can conclude that most students expected their teachers to set their learning goals for them. This perception may be linked to the strong emphasis on teacher-directed approaches in English education at Japanese high schools.

According to McKernan (1993), setting predetermined goals imposes constraints on one's education and greatly inhibits learners' ability to learn through discovery and enquiry. Needless to say, it would be unrealistic to expect learners to develop autonomous learning skills in a learning environment where their goals are predetermined. Most Japanese secondary schools follow standardized education system which determines success based on test results. Since students are obliged to take tests to enter junior high school, high school and university, their goals and needs are mostly pre-determined. This in return, results in a less autonomous and more teacher-dependent classroom environment.

If students are accustomed to teacher-directed learning, presumably, they'll expect the teacher to lead the learning process. Since the teacher has the full control, students will avoid taking responsibility for their own learning. As a result, they won't develop the ability to monitor and measure their own language learning process, and gain the awareness of their own learning to become effective and independent learners (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 39).

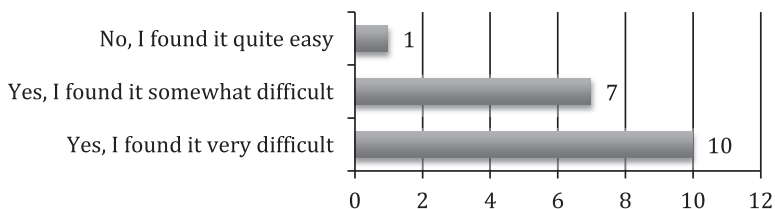
Critical Thinking Skill Assessment in First Year University Students

In order to assess their critical thinking skills I gave the same group of students an in-class writing assignment based on the following three questions:

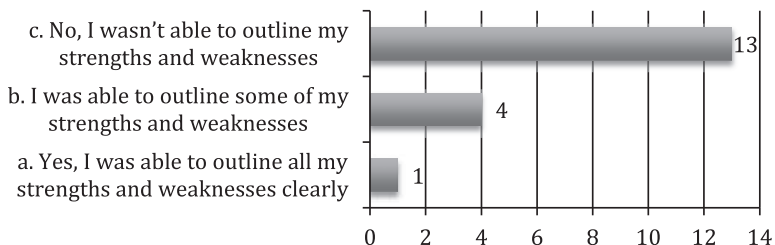
- Do you have a clear purpose of joining this class? Why? / Why not?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses in your writing?
- How do you think English Academic Writing classes can help you in the future?

Upon the completion of the task I gave students another questionnaire based on the above questions to assess their critical thinking skills. The questionnaire consisted of three

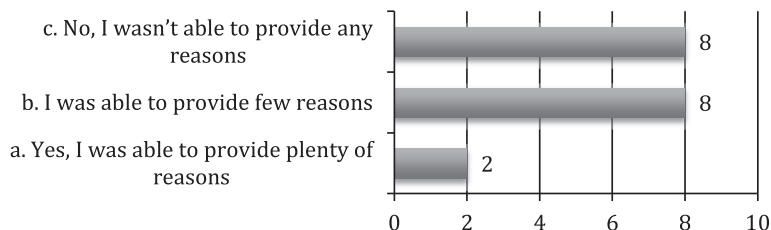
1) Did you have any difficulty stating your purpose of joining the English Academic Writing Classes?



2) Were you able to outline your strengths and weaknesses?



3) Were you able to provide any reasons to support your ideas when you explained the ways these classes can help you in the future?



closed-ended multiple choice questions. The bar graphs below show the questions and the number of responses given by students.

The first question tried to identify if the students were able to state their purpose of taking the Academic Writing course. As indicated in the graph, the responses suggest that the overwhelming majority of the students had difficulty demonstrating a clear purpose for participating in the Academic Writing classes. In the context of ESL, learners are expected to have the ability to perform a thorough assessment of the situation in order to state their motivation. This process requires reflective and independent thinking and it can be achieved with the help of autonomous learning skills (Little, 2006).

The second question was asked to find out if the students were able to perform a self assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses. As the responses indicate that thirteen students were not able to perform a thorough and objective assessment of their strengths and

weaknesses while four students selected the answer choice of "I was able to outline some of my strengths and weaknesses". Only one student was able to make a thorough and objective assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Such self-evaluation involves active thinking such as thinking deeply about themselves, questioning and evaluating their skills and drawing well-thought and reasoned conclusions (Ennis, 1987). Ku (2010) suggests that promotion of effective learning in second language classes requires maximizing learners' potential for learning through critical reflection. The quantity of learning heavily depends on the quality of mental activity at the moment of learning. In other words, learners need to be able to analyze the situation thoroughly and perform their own individual assessments in order to achieve better learning outcomes.

In the third question students were asked if they were able to provide reasons to support their ideas. Only two students out of eighteen were able to provide effective reasoning while the rest provided either limited or no reasoning to support their ideas.

According to Paul and Elder (2001), one of the key elements of critical thinking is coming to well-reasoned conclusions. In other words, critical thinking requires the one to use their ability to reason. It is about being an active learner rather than being a passive recipient. Critical thinkers rigorously question ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value. They will always seek to determine whether the ideas, arguments and findings represent the whole picture or they are simply insufficient in the way they are formed.

Based on the responses to the questionnaire, the majority of the participants failed to demonstrate sufficient critical thinking skills. From an educational standpoint, we can link their inability to teacher-directed learning during their previous English education. The teacher's role in the teacher-directed approaches is to pass on the knowledge and information needed to their students. This controlled style leads to passive learning and thus, leaves learners no room to develop their own independent learning skills.

If learners are not given freedom and support by their teachers, it would be unrealistic to expect them to develop their autonomous learning skills. As a result, it will also impede the process of developing their critical thinking and problem solving skills. As Brown (2001) suggests that when learners are encouraged to develop their capacity and readiness to control their own learning, they will gradually reach the point where they can acquire their own independent learning skills and reflect on their experiences (pp. 88-89).

Interactive Learning Through Research, Discoveries and Presentations

As an educator I strive to promote autonomy and critical thinking in every aspect of my

teaching. In this paper I would like to introduce one of the approaches I've been implementing to promote both learner autonomy and critical thinking in my English classes at Japanese universities. I named the method "Interactive Learning Through Research, Discoveries and Presentations". Firstly, I aim to help students develop their autonomous learning skills and as they become more autonomous and independent, I encourage them to demonstrate their critical thinking skills.

At the end of each class I briefly introduce the language point for their next lesson before giving students their weekly assignments. This is to encourage them to learn more about the language points by themselves and make practical use of them while working on their assignments. Upon completion of their research and discoveries of the new language, students write short essays based on a certain context from their textbooks including the target language points. For instance, if the next lesson focuses on reported speech and the context is news stories, I give students the freedom to choose any news story to report on. Once they complete their writing, they submit them by email. Then, I give them brief feedback on their use of the target language.

Since we choose the pre-task topics related to the textbook contents, they prove to be significantly helpful for their language acquisition and understanding of the context. In addition to that, it is an effective practical approach to encourage students to become more autonomous and self-directed.

The next stage is the verbal presentation of their essays to the other students in class. In larger classes such as classes that consist of 30 or more students, I divide students into small groups. In each group, students take turns presenting their ideas, stories or findings to their group members. During the presentations, they actively use the target language points. Once the verbal use of the language is achieved, it generally results in higher levels of motivation and self-esteem in students. As a result, they take more responsibility for their own learning. This positive cycle gradually leads to higher levels of autonomy and independence in students.

I have been implementing this method in a variety of different classes at universities such as English Communication, Academic Writing, Academic Reading, Presentation and Debating. The method is fairly flexible that it is also possible to implement with other subjects.

Once learners get accustomed to the routine of "research + discover + present" method, which usually takes up to several weeks, I include Q&A sessions in the routine to stimulate critical thinking in learners. Once a presenter from each group completes their presentation, other group members either ask the presenter questions or give their opinions on the presentations with the condition that they also provide reasons. As a result, they have to listen to the presenters carefully and take notes. During this process students are expected to demonstrate

their critical thinking skills by carefully analyzing the presentations and questioning the presenters' ideas and assumptions. During this process the listeners ask their questions and/or give their opinions and make reasoned arguments to challenge the presenters. Needless to say, the presenters are also free to defend themselves by making counter arguments.

As the method suggests, once learners are given the freedom and encouraged to take control of their own learning, they'll gradually gain confidence and become more independent from their teachers. As a result, they will begin to self-direct their thinking and become more reflective and independent. This in return will help them develop their critical thinking skills. However, the teacher's role as a facilitator is vital during this process. Thus, the role of teacher autonomy in learner autonomy and critical thinking should be emphasized further.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to emphasize the importance of autonomy in the development of critical thinking and proposed a method to promote autonomy and critical thinking in English classes at Japanese universities. In order to assess the role of learner autonomy in critical thinking, I conducted two survey questionnaires and gave students the opportunity to reflect their thoughts on their autonomy and critical thinking skills. The findings suggested that teacher-centered educational approaches in high school English classes significantly hindered the development of learner autonomy and critical thinking skills among the students. As I illustrated in the proposed method above, if teachers take on the role of a facilitator and guide students towards autonomous learning, they will give them the utmost freedom to develop their critical thinking skills. In the future, I aspire to promote learner autonomy and critical thinking in higher education by drawing more attention to the role of the teacher as a facilitator.

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