Autonomy in Language Teaching and Learning

Adam Jennings, M.Ed
University of Salford, England

ABSTRACT: *The present study attempts to test the hypothesis of compromised learner autonomy hinders students' ability to demonstrate critical thinking in oral communication activities in Japanese University EFL classes. Two surveys were administered to advanced-level L2 learners (N=168). The results showed a correlation between teacher dependence and the inability to demonstrate critical thinking skills in the majority of the students (N=168). Furthermore, twenty students, who represented the remaining minority, perceived themselves as independent/autonomous learners in the initial survey and identified as the ad hoc group. In the second survey, the ad hoc group checked all the affirmative statements of critical thinking skills. Despite being a small sample, the positive correlation between autonomous language learning experience and critical thinking warrants further investigation into the link between learner autonomy and critical thinking in English language education.*

KEYWORDS*:* Autonomous learning, learner autonomy, critical thinking, demonstrate, teacher dependence, L2

INTRODUCTION

Learner Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to control one's learning. Autonomy is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process. (Benson, 2001). Autonomy does not imply learning in isolation, learning without a teacher, or learning outside the classroom. Nor does autonomy imply particular skills and behaviors and particular methods of organizing the teaching and learning process (Egitim, 2022). It is defined as readiness and capacity to take charge of one's learning.

Learner autonomy is bound up not only with the learners' but also with teachers' own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs about autonomy (Lamb, 2008, p. 286). According to a definition made by Aoki 'teacher autonomy includes the capacity, freedom,

and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's teaching' (2002, p. 111). Autonomy also requires tutors to trust students' abilities and to promote the use of student-directed learning.

Students should constantly be encouraged to develop their capacity and readiness to take charge of their learning which will enable them to acquire their independent learning skills reflect on their experiences create their meanings and challenge ideas and theories. Acceptance of responsibility is a conscious intention that entails the development of explicit skills of reflection, analysis, and evaluation. Teachers need to communicate openly and emphatically with their students and vice versa. (Egitim & Umemiya, 2023).

Voller (2014) suggests that ''The rise to prominence of learner autonomy as a goal in classroom settings, in turn, has led to needs for retraining and enhanced awareness both of the importance of the teacher in structuring or 'scaffolding' reflective learning and of the complex, shifting interrelationship between teacher and learner roles in pedagogy for autonomy. If students are to learn to take control, the teacher may need to learn to 'let go', even as she/he provides scaffolding and structure. Therefore, we should emphasize the role of autonomous teachers in developing autonomous learning skills as the classroom is the main environment where learning takes place (Egitim, 2017).

However, accepting responsibility for our learning is not only a matter of gradually developing cognitive functions throughout the learning process. It has an equally important dimension: in their commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach, autonomous learners are motivated learners. Although they may not always feel entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks.

Fostering students' motivation toward learning is essential to establishing a positive classroom climate. Deci defines autonomy as ''feeling free and volitional in one's actions'' and thinks that ''Autonomy is a basic human need that is as relevant to learning as to any other aspect of life. Autonomy is nourished by, but in turn, nourishes our intrinsic motivation and our proactive interest in the world around us. Learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation.'' (Deci 1995, p. 2).

Holec (1981, p. 3) describes the meaning of autonomy as ''the ability to take charge of one's learning.'' However, Benson and Voller (1997, p. 1) suggest that in language education the word has been used in at least five different ways;

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of skills that can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn capacity suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their learning;
5. For the right of learners to determine the directions of their learning.

However, we should also bear in mind that the complexity of the learning and teaching process may sometimes force tutors to take charge of the overall learning situation. We may all agree that knowledge, understanding, and skills differ significantly for each learner. Thus, not all learners obtain an equal level of knowledge and understanding to build their independent learning skills and they may sometimes fail to determine the direction of their learning (Egitim, 2022). Learning involves risk-taking and therefore, presents numerous challenges for teachers and learners. It is mostly the teacher's job to ascertain each learner's own preferred learning style and adapt it to learners' needs and expectations. For instance; an elderly man would presumably have a different learning style than a teenage girl.

METHOD

The present study investigates the link between Japanese university EFL students' autonomous language learning experience and their ability to demonstrate CT skills. A quantitative research design was employed to test the following hypothesis: Prior language learning experiences influence students' ability to demonstrate critical thinking in oral communication activities in English.

Participants
168 first-year Japanese university EFL students aged between 18 and 19 participated in this study. To participate in this study, the following conditions were set:

1.   The students studied English in the Japanese public school system.
2.   The students perceived their communicative language competence as adequate to participate in oral communication activities in English.

The estimated sample size was determined via Structural Equation Modeling (Westland, 2010). The anticipated effect size was set to a default of 0.03, as suggested by Fisher (1992) and power was set to 0.8, as suggested by Cohen (2013). The computed minimum and maximum sample sizes indicated that the values in between may be deemed as an appropriate sample size for this study.

Table 1
Sample Size

Anticipated Efect Size	Desired Statistical Power Level	Latent variables	Observed variables	Probability Value	Min. Sample Size	Max. Sample Size
0.3	0.8	3	12	0.05	119	187

Note. The estimated sample size was calculated based on the Structural Equation Modeling (Westland, 2010). The minimum and maximum sample sizes indicated that the values in between may be an appropriate sample size for this study.

Instrument
Two surveys were performed in sequence. The first survey aimed to determine TD and LA through students' LLE during their high school English language education. The instrument was informed by Grow's (1991) fourth stage of the SSDL model, and it was named the LLE scale. The SSDL model considers language learning habits and the medium of instruction as the primary tools to assess their self-directed learning stages. These language learning habits include self-directed knowledge attainment, decision-making, goal setting, progress monitoring, and self-assessment.

In the next phase, a second survey was administered following an academic discussion task in the classroom. The activity was designed based on the CTM to allow the students to demonstrate the elements of CT in their discussions. The CTM suggests that students' CT skills are assessed based on their ability to engage in critical analysis, self-reflection, self-assessment, problem-solving, and reasoning (Paul & Elder, 2019, p.21). The discussion activity was designed to have students think of three key concepts they learned since they started their college education and explain why these concepts mattered for their self-growth, and future career pursuits. Thus, the students were expected to elaborate on the reasons for choosing their major, and its connection to the three concepts they had chosen and reflect on their self-growth through the concepts by making convincing arguments and drawing on personal experiences and stories. Finally, students were asked to discuss how learning these three concepts would help them beyond university education.

The LLE scale was designed to predict the students' TD based on the observed variables of instruction, knowledge attainment, progress monitoring, learning goals, and learning decisions. To analyze the data from the LLE scale, descriptive statistics were performed. Each factor was assigned a value to predict the students' perception of variables based on the following three categories: Teacher-Dependent (TD) = 1, Somewhat Teacher-Dependent (STD) = 2, and Independent/Autonomous (I/A) = 3 (See Table 4). After completing the initial analysis, a fraction of the students (*n*=20) consistently appeared to

select I/A for each variable (see Table 4). This was also verified through their pseudonyms. As a result, these students were identified as the ad hoc group for the CTSA survey.

During the second phase, the same group (*N=168*) was given the Critical Thinking Skills Assessment (CTSA) survey to understand whether they were able to demonstrate the elements of CT in their discussions according to the CTA model (Paul & Elder, 2019). The ad hoc group (*n=20*) was also examined to verify whether there was a correlation between the students' autonomous language learning experiences and their ability to demonstrate CT skills through an academic discussion task (See Table 1).

The study employed a 4-point Likert scale omitting the *neutral* option to ensure the students were forced to avoid the safe option. Each item on the Likert scale was given a value from one to four (See Table 5). The higher values of three and four represented *disagreed* and *strongly disagreed*, and the lowest values of one and two represented *strongly agreed and agreed.* Descriptive statistics were also employed during the second phase to determine the central tendency and the measure of dispersion through organized and systematic results. The scores were used to interpret how each statement reflected students' perceptions of their own ability to demonstrate CT skills.

Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values were measured to ensure the instrument's internal consistency. According to CA, reliability scores are measured between 0 and 1. Since CA values greater than 0.7 are considered to be acceptable, the average value of 0.802 was obtained from the first survey while the second survey produced 0.751. Hence, the internal consistency of all items was ensured before the data collection phase (see Table 4). The final step involved piloting the instruments with a small group of first-year high intermediate-level students from a different university (*n=24*). The convenience sampling technique was used based on the respondents' availability and convenience (Sedgwick, 2013).

Before the students were engaged in the discussions, they were allowed ten minutes to take notes. Note-taking is deemed useful to organize thoughts before engaging in a discussion (Siegel, 2016). After the academic discussion task, the CTSA survey was administered to determine whether the students were able to apply the five elements of CT (critical analysis, self-reflection, self-assessment, problem-solving, and reasoning) to their discussions through their own perspectives.

The CTSA survey involved five affirmative statements, which were tested against a 4-point Likert scale, with 1¼strongly disagree, 2¼disagree, 4¼agree, and 5¼strongly agree. The 4-point Likert scale is a forced Likert scale with the aim of receiving specific responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The affirmative statements in the survey were also informed

by the CTM (Paul & Elder, 2019). The survey also provided students with another opportunity to engage in self-assessment and determine whether they were able to demonstrate the five elements of CT in their discussions.

Protocol

The study employed *Google Forms* as an online survey tool. The data was collected in the classroom by the researcher. The online survey tool allowed the collection of numerical data with less time and more efficiency. Before delivering the surveys, students' permission was obtained to participate in the study with a written consent form. Both surveys were written in Japanese and English to ensure the survey questions and the affirmative statements were understood by the students. The two surveys were given two weeks apart from each other to ensure that they were treated independently and that the students' perceptions were not influenced. During the surveys, the students were allowed to ask for clarifications. The study employed a strict anonymity policy as part of the human subject protection protocol.

Therefore, all students were assured that no personal information would be used in this study and beyond. Ethical review was waived by the institution after the following conditions were met:

1. Informed consent was obtained from all students at the time of original data collection.
2. The researcher completed the universities' ethics code training.
3. The data involves no personal information.

However, the students were requested to use pseudonyms to compare the results of the two surveys and determine whether individual responses showed correlations.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A two-step validation process was employed. After the instruments were designed, they were sent to two experts, who knew the SSDL and CTM models for their validation. Revisions were made according to their feedback. Potential issues with the items on both scales were identified before performing the surveys. Based on the experts' comments, certain items from both LLE and CTSA were either deemed repetitive or outside the scope of the study and thus, removed from the instruments. The study employed a single-factor model for the LLE scale to measure the extent to which the single domain, TD influenced the five observed variables of *Instruction, Knowledge Attainment, Progress Monitoring, Goals,* and *Learning Decisions* (See Figure 1). The factor loadings for the observed variables were tested greater than 0.7 indicating a positive linear relationship between the

items.

Figure 1
Single Factor Analysis of LLE
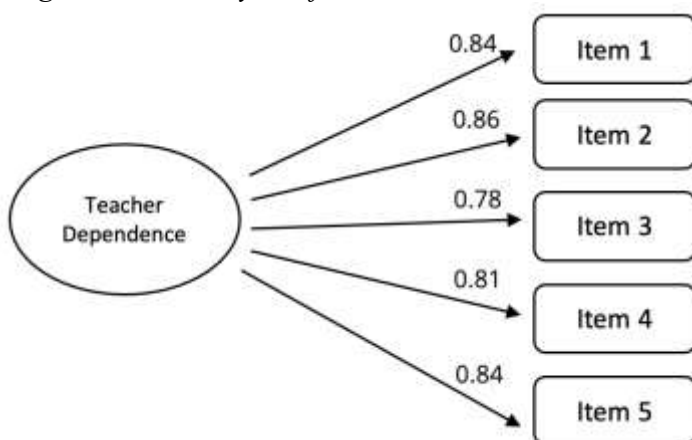
Note. The observed variables listed as items in Fig. 1 are representative of the variables listed on the LLE scale in their respective order.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that passive learning habits resulting from teacher dependency posed a hindrance to students' ability to take initiative in academic discussion activities, which associates the absence of learner autonomy with the inability for self-expression. Unfortunately, it was not possible to measure to what extent each student's autonomous language learning experience was compromised during their pre-tertiary English education. However, these results provided clues about the role of the language learning experience scale in self-expression through the academic discussion task.

Promoting learner autonomy from an early age in pre-tertiary English education should be the primary focus of school administrators and policymakers when they design their English language curricula. Furthermore, pre-tertiary English teachers should act as facilitators and encourage students to take ownership of their learning in a psychologically safe learning environment to help them gain autonomous language learning skills from the elementary level (Benson & Voller, 2014; Dörnyei, 2014; Little, 2022). Then, favorable circumstances would be established for teachers and students to cultivate LA to express CT in the L2 (Egitim, 2022).

Especially, when learner engagement and motivation are enhanced through learner-

centered instruction in the L2, meaningful interactions between learners can also take place (Dörnyei, 2014; Little, 2017). As a result of these interactions, learners can have the opportunity to look inward and engage in self-examination and self-reflection which can help them recognize the limitations of their past learning habits. This metacognitive process can raise learners' awareness of what they are learning and why they are learning it. They can abandon the old learning habits and develop new ones. Learners' active presence in their learning is what stimulates a "disciplined, self-directed and purposeful" thinking process (Carter et al., 2017, p. 1).

References

Aoki, N. (2002). Aspects of teacher autonomy: Capacity, freedom, and responsibility. In: P. Benson & S. Too Good (Eds.). *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to Research and Practice* (pp. 110-124). Authentic.

Benson, P., & Voller, P. (2014). *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Routledge.

Benson P (2016) *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Benson and P. Voller (eds.) *Autonomy and independence in language learning.* Longman. 98-113.

Carter, A. G., Creedy, D. K., & Sidebotham, M. (2017). Critical thinking evaluation in reflective writing: Development and testing of Carter assessment of critical thinking in midwifery (Reflection). *Midwifery, 54*, 73-80. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2017.08.003

Cohen, J. (2013). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Academic Press.

Deci, E. (with R. Flaste), (1995). *Why we do what we do: understanding self-motivation.* Penguin.

Deci, E. L., Hodges, R., Pierson, L., & Tomasson, J. (1992). Autonomy and competence as motivational factors in students with learning disabilities and emotional handicaps. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 25*, 457-471

Dörnyei, Z. (2014). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition.* Routledge.

Egitim, S. (2017). The role of autonomy in critical thinking, *Meiji University Global Japanese Studies Review, 9*(1): 155–164.

Egitim, S. (2017). The reflection of teachers' prior language learning experiences in ESL teaching approaches. *European Journal of Education Studies*.

Egitim, S. (2020). *Understanding Japanese university English teachers' experiences as collaborative leaders: Engaging learners in teaching and classroom management.* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. https://doi.org/10.17760/D20394199

Egitim, S. (2021). Practical and theoretical implications of teachers' prior language learning experiences for their teacher identity development. International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, 10(4),1-3. http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.10n.4p.1

Egitim, S., & Garcia, T. (2021). Japanese University students' perceptions of foreign English teachers. English Language Teaching, 14(5), 13-22. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n5p13

Egitim, S. (2021). Collaborative leadership in English language classrooms: Engaging learners in leaderful classroom practices and strategies. International Journal of Leadership in Education. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1990413

Egitim, S. (2022). Collaborative leadership through leaderful classroom practices: Everybody is a leader. Candlin & Mynard.

Egitim, S. (2022). Do Japanese students lack critical thinking? Addressing the misconception. Power and Education, 14 (3)

Egitim, S. (2022). Voices on Language Teacher Stereotypes: Critical Cultural Competence Building as a Pedagogical Strategy. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 1-15.

Egitim, S., & Umemiya, Y. (2023). *Leaderful classroom pedagogy through an interdisciplinary lens: Merging theory with practice.* Springer Nature.

Fisher, R. A. (1992). *Statistical methods for research workers*. Springer.

Holec, H., (1981) Autonomy and foreign language learning. Pergamon.

Kim, S. (2004). 'When and how to resolve language issues of non-native-English-speaking teachers-in-preparation in TESOL programs'. *NNEST Newsletter,* TESOL 6/2.

Little, D. (1995). "Learning as dialogue: the dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy." *System 23*.2, pp.175-81.

Little, D., Dam, L., & Legenhausen, L. (2017). *Language learner autonomy.* https://doi.org/10.21832/little8590

Little, D. (2022). Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching. *Lang*

Pennycook, A. (1995). English in the World / the World in English. In J. Tollefson (Ed.) Power and Inequality in Language Education. Cambridge University Press, 34-58.

Philipson, R.(1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2019). *A guide for educators to critical thinking competency standards: Standards, principles, performance indicators, and outcomes with a critical thinking master rubric.* Rowman & Littlefield.

Reinders, H. (2008), *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, realities, and response.*

Sedgwick, P. (2013). Convenience sampling. BMJ, *347*(2). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f6304

Siegel, J. (2016). A pedagogic cycle for EFL note-taking. *ELT Journal, 70*(3), 275-286. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv073

Suzuki, K. (2006). *Critical thinking kyoyuiku no rekishi.* In K. Suzuki, K. Ooi, & F.

Takemae (Eds.), Critical thinking to kyoiku: Nihon no kyoiku wo saikouchiku suru (pp. 4-21). Sekai shishou sya.

Voller, P. (2014). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning?. In *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 98-113). Routledge.

Wang, L., & Lee, I. (2021). L2 learners' agentic engagement in an assessment as a learning-focused writing classroom. *Assessing Writing, 50.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2021.100571]

Westland, J. C. (2010). Lower bounds on sample size in structural equation modeling. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, 9*(6), 476-487.