The Importance of Fostering English Language Learner Autonomy in Secondary and Tertiary ESL Education of Japan: A Guided Approach for Individual Success

Thomas L. Gullikson

Abstract:

As learner autonomy becomes increasingly essential in higher education, teachers and advisors play a pivotal role in empowering and guiding students to take more control of their English language acquisition. This paper will explain the importance of fostering English language learner autonomy at Musashi University. It will provide a brief overview of the current state of English language learner autonomy in Japan's secondary and tertiary English language classrooms and discuss the obstacles that hinder learner autonomy. Such hinderances in fostering English L2LA among Japanese learners at the university center around a shift from the traditional teacher-student relationship to a more student-centered or collaborative approach. Moreover, language teaching professionals are often encounter students who have never been encouraged to think critically about what they wish to learn, how to learn, and why shouldering responsibility for their learning is crucial: most have been passive recipients of information, not actively engaged in choosing their approach to language acquisition.To effectively address these challenges, a clear understanding of learner autonomy principles and techniques that enable language teaching professionals to shift their roles from merely providing information to facilitating critical thinking and self-directed language learning is crucial. Teachers and advisors must be capable of promoting self-directed learning and embrace the fostering of English as a Second Language (ESL) learner autonomy as a means of developing lifelong learning skills. Some effective techniques that can be used to overcome these obstacles will be outlined and explored. Finally, the paper will provide a brief overview of the services available at Musashi University"s Self-Access Learning Center.

Introduction

Second Language Learner Autonomy, or L2LA, is defined as the ability and desire of the L2 learner to take control of what and how the learner chooses to study and acquire the target language. It is the taking of control of the language learning processes and making informed decisions regarding learning strategies, progress, goals, and assessment.

Although the concept of Second Language Learner Autonomy (L2LA) has been around for quite some time, it can be argued that its fostering has been given scant consideration in most of Japan's educational institutions. However, studies generally indicate that learners who are offered choices and can take control of their L2 study are the most motivated and satisfied with their learning, and autonomous learning plays a significant role in improving students' proficiency in a second language and establishing their own learning cycles which guarantee their learning throughout their lives (Benson, 2001; Lee & Heinz, 2016).

Concerning L2LA as it relates to Japanese higher education where the acquisition of English as an L2 is crucial for academic, professional, and arguably, personal/social advancement, the fostering of LA is a worthwhile pursuit, as it empowers learners to take responsibility and gives them satisfaction from the positive results of their efforts. This most certainly leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of both the target language and the culture(s) where it is used. This, in turn, can enhance learners' motivation. This concept of self-directed or autonomous language learning is becoming increasingly vital in language instruction and acquisition, but despite MEXT's promotion of " New English Education" from 2014, both teacher and learners agree that little has changed in the way English is taught and learned in schools, and this fact is unfortunate. Now is the time to make meaningful changes in how English is learned in Japan's educational institutions, and through fostering L2LA, Japanese learners of English will begin to realize the importance becoming more autonomous in their learning and enhancing their motivation to continue the process of English L2 acquisition beyond the

English language classroom.

WHAT IS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY? DEFINITION

Most agree that the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project which started in 1971 made the first calls for promoting LA (Trim, 2007, p. 7). Ten years on, Holec (1981) was one of the first to defined learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", and believes that this ability is something that either comes about naturally or through training and guidance. He states that learners need to shoulder the responsibility of learning — defining learning objectives and goals, selecting methods and approaches, monitoring progress, and evaluating what has been acquired (p.3). Additionally, Little (2002) offers a similar definition of learner autonomy stating that autonomous learners are individuals who willingly take responsibility for their own learning and actively engage in a continual process of what, how, and why they are learning, as well as assess their level of success in relation to their goals.   Of course, each learner is unique and will therefore take different approaches in learning. Little (1991) postulates that factors such as age, gender, culture, language level, and learning needs, to name a few, directly affect the extent of his or her autonomy. However, regarding L2LA, Littlewood (1999) states that there are two common features: (1) Learners need to take responsibility for their own language learning and will need need to continue learning outside the context of school, and (2) learners will need to take control of the processes that have traditionally been the responsibility of the language teacher such as choosing realistic learning outcomes, appropriate methods for fostering language acquisition, and developing valid and reliable assessment tools.

Twenty three years ago, Sinclair (2000) comprehensively described LA by subdividing its characteristics into 13 aspects as follows:

(1) Autonomy is a construct of capacity

(2) Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning

(3)　The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate

(4)　Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal

(5)　There are degrees of autonomy

(6)　The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable

(7)　Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent

(8)　Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e. conscious reflection and decision making

(9)　Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies

(10)　Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom

(11)　Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension

(12)　The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension

(13)　Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures

Sinclair's ideas are logical and understandable, and it may be safe to assume that advocates of L2LA are aware of Sinclair's 13 aspects of learner autonomy. It is also worth noting that although his aspects may be easily understood, the difficulty lies in getting both ESL educators and learners to see the value and importance of ESL learner autonomy and doing something constructive about it.

Bridging the gap between postulation and realization - the understanding and implementation of techniques that foster LA in language learners - is relatively embryonic in Japan, the reasons why will be discussed later. Fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for one's learning and embracing such an approach not only helps to cultivate a deeper understanding of the target language and its culture, it yields other benefits, as well. Giving L2 learners the freedom to tailor their learning according to their unique preferences and pace, the learners motivation, self-confidence, and sense

of fulfillment and achievement are bolstered. Additionally, it promotes metacognitive and sociolinguistic competence, and by encouraging learners to cultivate an exploratory and reflective attitude - integral aspects of ESL learner autonomy, they generally produce a more natural response to socio-cultural settings (Li & Keller, 2018). Sakai and Takagi (2009) also found that linguistic skills were more effectively learned compared to non-autonomous, teacher-centered learning. I know this because I have experienced it as an L2 learner myself, and have seen it in my students of the past 35 years as an English language teaching professional in both the United States and Japan However, before we delve deeper into the benefits of L2LA, a brief but adequate overview of the current state of English language instruction in Japanese high schools and universities is in order.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE OF ENGLISH L2 AUTONOMY IN JAPANESE SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

The 2016 New Course of Study from the Japanese government's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes the importance of education that empowers students to engage in critical thinking, make informed decisions, and communicate effectively to solve complex issues using the knowledge and skills they are to have acquired during their education (Kaneda, 2022). Additionally, and more relevant, perhaps, these competencies are deemed essential for their future endeavors beyond schooling. Also, the government supports autonomous and interactive learning approaches, recognizing these as essential strategies for learners to cultivate the ability and desire for continuous learning throughout their lives (Kaneda, 2022, p.3). These goals are certainly worth pursuing, but unfortunately, little thought seems to have been given regarding how to prepare both teachers and learners to go about achieving these goals, and a chasm remains regarding the desire for student-centered, communicative English lessons and teachers qualified and confident enough to deliver such lessons. Naturally, there has been ample confusion among observers, parents, teachers, and students.   Michaud (2015) found teachers plan and deliver English lessons,

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but MEXT sponsored materials lack the essential guidance regarding how to create a communicative and content-based, student-centered lessons.

It is not difficult to understand why so little is done in the classroom to encourage and promote English L2 autonomy in Japan's high schools when the primary purpose of instruction is to teach grammar, vocabulary, and syntax to pass entrance examinations (Tomita & Spada, 2013). Research also shows that Japanese ESL learners are generally frustrated with their level of English language proficiency. Ryan (2009) found that many teachers are also frustrated due to a lack of training in teaching English for communicative purposes or being prohibited from teaching English in a manner other than traditional ones to pass entrance exams. Nakata (2011) stated that even if teachers wish to foster autonomous learning skills in their pupils, their desires are often quashed due to curricular constraints, unsurprisingly.

In October of 2023, this researcher informally interviewed 34 first and second year students at Musashi University to learn if they had been exposed to English L2 learning activities in their high schools that encouraged learner autonomy. Written and oral explanations and numerous examples of the concept of learner autonomy in both Japanese and English were given for necessary clarification: not one student was able to recall or explain any specific activity, learning task, or English lesson designed to foster their autonomy. "We translated English into Japanese and Japanese into English and my teachers rarely spoke to us in English" (M. Matsumaru, personal communication, October 10, 2023). "Teachers told us to study hard for the entrance exams. We didn't practice communication skills" (J. Tsuruoka, personal communication, October 10, 2023). "I watch movies in English and listen to music in my free time, but in school we only read the textbook and answered grammar and comprehension questions about it. It was boring and I did not like it (Y. Saito, personal communication, October 12, 2023). Suffice it to say that the rest of the responses were unsurprisingly similar.

It was clear that little has changed regarding how English is taught in secondary English language classrooms. As of this writing, the situation in many Japanese

secondary and tertiary ESL classrooms remains mostly unchanged, with traditional, teacher-centered, entrance examination-focused styles of teaching and learning, despite the goals that MEXT has published and promoted. Yes, new approaches are becoming more prevalent - student-centered, content-based, communicative lessons aiming to promote learner autonomy, critical thinking, and the development of four skills - mostly in progressive, private schools, but such practices remain shunned in Japan: adherence to traditional teacher-centered lessons, curricular constraints, and inadequate teacher training are just three reasons.

If the goal of English education in Japan has been and remains "teaching to the entrance exams" and training learners to pass these examinations — not developing intrinsically motivated, autonomous, life-long, globally aware English language learners, then it is easy to understand why fostering English language learner autonomy is challenging. Challenging, to be sure, but not impossible.

Encouragingly, the fostering English L2 autonomy has been gaining some ground, primarily in Japan's private universities. Kanda University, often touted as the leading proponent English L2 learner autonomy in Japan, has on its campus, a "Self Access Learning Center", or "SALC" defined as "…a place where students can individualize their language learning and develop autonomous learning skills." (Kanda University of International Studies, 2020). Similarly, Musashi University has its "Musashi Communication Village" facility or "MCV" that promotes learner autonomy in various ways from guided study with both instructors and peers, to activities that encourage the autonomous study of English (Musashi University, 2023). On October 21, 2023 I attended and presented at the national JASAL (Japan Association for Self- Access Learning) conference at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University where I had the opportunity to learn more about the current state of autonomous learning and self-access learning centers (SALC) at various universities throughout Japan. Although attendance of and participation in the conference was somewhat limited, it was encouraging to hear how other ESL professionals are attempting to foster autonomy in L2 learners at their

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institutions. Founded in 2005, the organization currently has over 350 individual members and continues to grow. (JASAL, 2023).

We can see that despite a long history of research that supports the fostering of ESL learner autonomy, Japanese educators, learning institutions, and learners themselves have been slow to embrace the theory and practice of fostering it. Obstacles have been firmly placed - intentionally or otherwise - by institutions (curricular constraints, traditional entrance exams, lack of empirical data regarding the efficacy of learner autonomy), teachers (traditional teaching methods, poor teacher training, lack of independence in the classroom), and largely unknowingly, by L2 learners themselves. Granted, MEXT (Kaneda, 2022) has published its intentions to overhaul and transform English language instruction in schools, but most academics concur that action, not words is needed. In short, fostering English L2 learner autonomy in Japan is a good thing! It is essential that we encourage English L2 autonomy in order to create lifelong learners who possess the knowledge, responsibility, and motivation to continually improve their L2 and sociolinguistic competence to truly help them become global citizens.

Seven Benefits of Fostering English L2 Autonomy

(1) Greater Language Proficiency

In 2001, Benson bluntly stated that autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning. It implies that those learners who are autonomous tend to be more proficient. If this is true, then it is essential that we do our best to foster learn autonomy both inside and outside of the English language classroom (2001). Regarding the relationship between ESL learner autonomy and English L2 proficiency, the fact of the matter is, it is extremely difficult to accurately measure.　It would be great if there were a reliable and valid test to prove that ESL learner autonomy contributes to a greater proficiency, but thus far there isn't one.　Of course, a great deal of anecdotal and qualitative data exists, but little empirical data. However, *every* English language instructor that I have conversed with regarding learner autonomy and ESL proficiency

contends that those learners who exhibit learner autonomy tend to be more proficient, perhaps because of the sense of "ownership" they feel as a result of having a voice is how they acquire English: it motivates them intrinsically. Let us briefly explore the role of intrinsic motivation regarding L2LA.

(2) Enhanced Intrinsic Motivation

It is no secret that a motivated learner is an inspired learner who makes conscious decisions based upon — more often than not — having met his or her or their own expectations, or achieved goals. "Success breeds success" is what many believe Aristotle said. Whether or not he did, it is accepted that achieving an intended or desired outcome feels good. It inspires learners to keep at it. For example, it can motivate ESL learners to continue acquiring the language and culture of the target language— setting personal goals and achieving them.   Dornyei's study (1990) found this to be true: he states that although many students in his study were motivated by extrinsic goals, those with the highest proficiency were motivated more by sociocultural and nonprofessional reasons: they had the desire to spend extended time abroad and attain a deeper knowledge of both the target language and culture, and intrinsic motivation was they key to their success (45).   Even earlier, Svanes (1987) made similar assertions that L2 proficiency was higher in students who were more intrinsically motivated rather than in those learning a language for educational or professional purposes (347). Conversely, it's no stretch to understand if autonomous learners find a particular approach or method is not helping them achieve their learning goals, they adapt autonomously accordingly to satisfy their needs. It is this personal satisfaction - this intrinsic motivation - that sustains one's learning throughout life, and lifelong learning is fundamental.

(3) Autonomous Learning is Lifelong Learning

All can agree that being a "lifelong learner" is essential for humans to grow and function in a modern society. It can be contended that this intrinsic motivation, as

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opposed to extrinsic motivation - is the kind of motivation that sustains us and keeps us growing. Crabbe (1993) states that the 'ideological' argument for learner autonomy rests on the individual's "right to be free to exercise his or her own choices, in learning as in other areas, and not become a victim of choices made by social institutions" (443).　This clearly is an argument that learning is not only a preparation for life, but an essential, ongoing aspect life. 1965, Bob Dylan sang "that he not busy being born is busy dying," and this researcher agrees. We can see that he was singing about this very thing - being autonomous in learning, making decisions and taking actions to develop as a person through life and as a result, growing: thinking critically and constantly striving to learn something new — in essence — being "born".　If this sounds profound, it may be because it is. It was profound in 1965 and remains so today. More specifically, an ideal ESL learner will never be "finished" learning, and developing one's autonomous learning skills will aid in sustaining this lifelong growth.

(4) Learner Autonomy Enhances Global Understanding and Cultural Awareness

Autonomous language learners seek opportunities to interact with other language users in authentic situations. Naturally, these interactions will entail various aspects of the target language: idiomatic expressions, specific vocabulary, and other language nuances specific to the context that help the learner better understand the sociolinguistic aspects of the language. This exposure to how English is used globally - the norms, values, and practices of the societies where the language is used - helps to create globally aware and culturally sensitive citizens. Furthermore, global competence embodies and is propelled by key dispositions or attitudes (OECD 2018).

[Such] attitudes refer to the mind-set that an individual adopts towards a person, a group, an institution, an issue, a behavior, or a symbol, and this globally competent behavior requires an attitude of openness towards people from other cultural backgrounds, an attitude of respect for cultural differences, and an attitude of global mindedness. These

attitudes can be enhanced explicitly, through participatory and learners-centered teaching, and the fostering of learner autonomy., which enables English L2 learners to actively and willingly seek out and embrace opportunities to engage with people to discover and learn about their cultural perspectives and how they interpret familiar and unfamiliar phenomena. (2018)

Frankly, it is arguably the most important reason why a second language such as English should be acquired: to create culturally savvy, global citizens. In short, if we foster and create autonomous learning skills in learners, then we are enhancing learners' knowledge of the various ways to approach acquiring the target language in ways that suit their individual needs.

(5) Autonomous Learning Strengthens Self-Management Skills

All freshman university students experience dramatic changes when beginning their studies. In Japan, most get part-time jobs, join a club or "circle", make new friends, and many experience the newfound freedom - and the responsibility that comes with that freedom, of living away from their families. Often, this freedom of choice results in students failing to take control of their time, resulting in disappointment and failure. Many of these students lack the necessary time management or self-management skills for such independence: they need guidance. Lin, among others, defines students' self-management learning ability as "students hav [ing] the ability to formulate and implement, evaluate and reflect on learning effectiveness" (2013). In Lin's study, it was found that after a semester of study in an experimental "flipped classroom" aimed at fostering English L2 learner autonomy, as high as 93% of the students thought that teachers' guidance, supervision and management were necessary for the cultivation of autonomous learning ability, but it was found that most of the students only had a basic knowledge of learning strategies, and they lacked some advanced, interactive and effective learning strategies. (2013)

This is one example, but having taught first-year Japanese ESL at the university level for

more than 30 years, this researcher can attest that the percentages in Lin's study are not unusual, so it is critical that early in the semester, learners receive competent instruction and guidance to help them manage their time effectively. It can be something as simple as asking them to complete a "daily/weekly hourly schedule" to help them see how their time is spent. Upon honest completion, it's an eye-opener for most students.

(6) Learner Autonomy Facilitates Success in Studying Abroad

Studying abroad — a part of many English L2 learners education in Japan's universities — can be a challenge for many reasons. However, autonomous learners are flexible and are able to adapt to their learning environments. Naturally, such students will be exposed to diverse linguistic and cultural environments, and having the ability to customize their learning to suit individual needs is essential for L2 acquisition. In such a setting, this involves interacting with native speakers, participating in local activities, and immersing themselves in the L2 environment. Hardy-Gould found (2013) that study abroad programs include many instances where students need to be self-reliant.

In various, recent programs this researcher has been involved with at the University of Hawaii and Hawaii Pacific University, students were expected to complete a range of activities on their own ranging from needing to sign up for a student identification card to taking public transportation to school each day. For some, daily communication with homestay families was also challenging.

Hardy-Gould has stated that self-reliance, or learner autonomy in the field of higher education, is particularly important. Because students may have limited classroom contact time for learning English and may need to rapidly increase their knowledge and skills independently, it is therefore important for them to become self-reliant language learners who can continue learning efficiently outside the classroom (2013). It is quite easy to see that if learners become more independent and autonomous regarding their English L2 studies, then it is highly likely that their experience will be positive and

rewarding.

(7) Learner Autonomy Aligns with Modern Trends in Education

With such ubiquitous online access, AI, and the availability of more SACs on university campuses throughout Japan, ESL learners have educational opportunities that were not available to them even a few years ago. It consequently makes sense for ESL learners to seek for themselves sources of information that best suit their individual learning styles and goals. As learners are no longer are confined to classrooms, textbooks or teacher- centered instruction to obtain information to facilitate their language acquisition, they are free — usually through trial and error — to employ alternative learning sources and strategies. This independence contributes to learner autonomy, and as numerous studies indicate, this autonomy is advantageous in L2 acquisition. However, regarding ESL learners in Japan's high schools and universities, empowering and inspiring learners and fostering their independence is not so simple. Before examining various ways English L2 learner autonomy can be fostered, it is necessary to understand the obstacles hindering English L2 autonomy in Japan.

Obstacles Preventing ESL Learner Autonomy Development in Japan

Japanese learners of English all too often encounter serious obstacles when it pertains to developing L2 learner autonomy, perhaps the most serious ones stemming from the traditional education system. This system continues to prioritize teacher-centered instruction and rote memorization for entrance exams. As an AET in Kagawa prefecture from 1988 to 1990, this researcher was witness to how English was taught in Japanese high schools. Unfailingly, the English classes were teacher-centered and prioritized rote memorization. A few years later from 1993 to 1996, while teaching at at Kansai Gaidai University and later from 2014 - 2018 at Kobe Women's University, I was asked to assist with the developing and administering of the university English entrance examinations. Now, in 2023, I can honestly say that very little changed

regarding the kinds of questions students are required to answer on these exams regarding English.

In traditional English language classrooms of many Japanese high schools, there often develops a kind of "dependency" on the instructor resulting from teacher-centered instruction, structured lessons, and rote memorization. Some scholars such as Dujarrac (2015) believe the country's ethnocentrism ands historical isolation helped to create a kind of parochialism, which manifests itself in these kinds of classrooms and subsequently contributes to the creation of ESL learners who are unmotivated and lack critical thinking skills. Sato (2018) found that most Japanese students who prepared for the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) spend a great deal of time reading, memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary, and attending cram schools. They tended to follow the traditionally prescribed methods for English language study.

Another factor discouraging ESL learner autonomy is that historically, rote memorization or learning has been prevalent in the ESL classrooms of Japan.　The memorization of information through repetition without necessarily understanding the underlying concepts remains commonplace, often disregarding the need for instruction that enhances communicative or sociolinguistic competence. This fact remains, and is murderously slow in changing.　In the context of ESL, however, let us remain hopeful that with the MEXT's latest revisions and guidelines regarding English, there will soon be many more ESL classrooms in Japan where learner autonomy is encouraged and greater emphasis on creating thoughtful, sociolinguistic, global citizens is placed.

Additionally, curriculum constraints in Japan can significantly hinder the development of learner autonomy in ESL students. One notable constraint is the standardized and unyielding nature of curricula, which tends to stifle creativity or freedom or individuality in learning. Wiraningsih and Santosa (2020) found that both national and institutional constraints prevent even the most creative teachers from implementing activities and methodologies that foster learner autonomy. Institutional

constraints include rules and regulations, certification, examinations, curriculums, the school (Little, 2002). Also, course-specific learning outcomes and assessments - exam-oriented approaches to learning or those classes that focus on skills for various exams — often leave little time for learners to follow their interests or tailor their learning experiences, which ultimately demotivates them and discourages learner autonomy.

Thus far we have seen how the traditions in Japan's ESL classrooms have created a dependence on teacher and instructors, limiting the chances for learners to develop a sense of responsibility and control - key ingredients of autonomous learning. Of course, there are other hinderances, a very important one of which is the lack of exposure to authentic English spoken by real people.

Exposure to authentic English language use is crucial for fostering learner autonomy as this exposure helps to guide learners in taking control of their own learning processes and make informed decisions regarding their individual manner of study. It enables them to better comprehend their strengths and weaknesses in their language competency and consequently take action.

Authentic English naturally involves the use of language in real situations, as crazy as it seems! It can not be accurately duplicated: conversations - can not be memorized and real-life scenarios are not role-plays. Without meaningful exposure, it limits learners' contextual understanding and therefore the growth of sociolinguistic competence. With more than 97% of Japan's residents indigenous, it is easy to understand the difficulty for its English learners to find native speakers (Dujarric, 2015).   It is generally understood that having choices and making decisions regarding what and how learners choose to study create a sense of ownership, responsibility, and autonomy.

Still, another confounding obstacle is the fact that many ESL lack the discipline and experience to make the most of their time - to learn autonomously outside a language classroom. Many, but not all ESL learners at the secondary and tertiary level in Japan lack the necessary self-regulation or time-management skills that are necessary for

becoming autonomous. However, there are cultural and educational factors that certainly influence the their study habits. For example, many students are accustomed to structured, teacher-directed learning environments, which directly impact their development of self-regulatory and time management skills. Additionally, cultural factors such as group-oriented values influence how Japanese learners approach their studies. In some cases, students may prioritize group harmony over individual needs, and this could affect their ability to assertively manage their own study time.

The last obstacle to be examined regarding the prevention of fostering ESL learner autonomy in Japan is foreign or second language anxiety, which plays a significant role is hindering learner autonomy. Language anxiety is defined as the fear or nervousness associated with "making mistakes" or receiving negative feedback from a teacher, peer, or a native speaker of the target language. Foreign language anxiety can have a negative effect on the language learning process and production, especially when speaking in the ESL classroom.

Additionally, an early study by Horwitz and others indicated that foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on both the language learning process and production.(Horwitz et al., 1986; Donley, 1999; Foss & Reitzel, 1988). Moreover and more recently, both Fujii (2018) and Masutani (2021) found that language anxiety is quite prevalent among Japanese ESL students at the upper secondary and tertiary levels.

Of course, any English language instructor who has worked in Japan's high schools or universities can tell you that it is very real and hinders learners from taking chances and exploring English. Having taught English in both Japanese public and private high schools and universities for more thirty years, this researcher does *not* need to see empirical evidence to understand English language anxiety's negative effect upon the growth of learner autonomy: it is seen every day among many students in ESL classes conducted every week.

In short, this fear of making mistakes creates students hesitant to experiment or

be creative with English or engage in independent learning, resulting in most feeling it best sticking to the prescribed, traditional, plan rather than employing autonomous learning strategies of their own to achieve individual goals. In short, learner anxiety prohibits learner autonomy. Let us explore how to overcome these obstacles that prevent independent, self-directed ESL acquisition.

Suggestions for Fostering ESL Learner Autonomy

1）Assist with Time Management and Self-Discipline

It may seem unnecessary to some, but this researcher found it indeed necessary to provide guidance to university students early in the semester classes or ESL tutoring/advising sessions regarding time management, particularly among freshman who are perhaps for the first time experiencing a kind of freedom to make choices that previously was unknown to them. Many have moved from their homes to attend school, and all are adjusting to new classes, making new friends, joining new clubs or circles, and experiencing a new life; it can be overwhelming for anyone. More specially, Parsons (2022) encourages students to do the following: (1) create a personalized calendar or schedule, (2) set reminders regarding tasks, deadlines and goals, (3) prioritize tasks, (4) make time for oneself, (5) be realistic and flexible regarding time and tasks, and (6) seek support when needed. In the 1990s, this researcher had students fill out a printed daily/hourly/weekly calendars/timetables. I generally took time in a class or session to hold a "Time Management Workshop" to demonstrate how to do it correctly.

These methods offered utility, but in 2023, it is more practical to use a computer or a mobile device - or both. There are many such templates and apps available for free: the iPhone/Gmail/Outlook platforms should suffice. Giving them useful examples and suggestions early in the term, - conducting a "Time Management Workshop" as I have called it — helps to bolster a sense of responsibility and emphasize the importance of having enough discipline to adhere to a new schedule and prioritize tasks as necessary. I quote the great Elenor Roosevelt who said, "With freedom, comes great

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responsibility." Those who learn to shoulder such responsibility can make the most of their time, and by doing so, gain a sense of ownership which enables them to function more autonomously and take greater responsibility in all aspects of their lives, not only regarding ESL acquisition.

2) Provide a Classroom Atmosphere that Supports Autonomous ESL Learning

From 2014 to 2018, part of this researcher's responsibilities at Kobe Women's University entailed designing an "Advanced English Seminar: Hawaii". This offered the opportunity to create a course and syllabus emphasizing communicative, content-based, student- centered lessons that encouraged learner autonomy. It is important to note that all students enrolled in this course had studied EFL at the University of Hawaii at Manoa for four months in the previous semester, and I had been teaching EFL in Hawaii at both Hawaii Pacific University and UH Manoa before accepting a position at KWU.   These factors seemed to contribute greatly to the success of the class, as students were accustomed a "Western" style of English class.   Additionally, as this class was an elective, students were intrinsically motivated.

In brief, the students were given the opportunity - with instructor guidance - to both collectively and individually choose the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and learning goals of this course. Please refer to the SLOs and goals students wrote for a 15 week course (**Appendix A**). This is one example, but such practices continue to pervade in my ESL classes.   Whenever possible, I endeavor to include the opinions and suggestions of the student regarding learning tasks, goals, and requirements. This practice fosters learner autonomy.

3) Peer Feedback, Self-Assessment and Reflection

In addition to giving students a voice in choosing learning outcomes or course goals, ESL learner autonomy is also fostered in the classroom through the use of "Peer

Evaluation", "Peer Feedback", and "Self-Evaluation/Reflection" assessment rubrics. For example, when learners share writing tasks with one another and provide feedback, they benefit in two ways. First, they are able to see their classmates writing and as a result, reflect upon their own; it enables them to effectively gauge their skills in relation to their peers: if they find their classmates' writing skills to be stronger, then they are generally motivated to work harder to improve. Conversely, if they feel their skills are stronger than than their peers', they feel better about themselves, which is also motivational. Either way, it causes learners to reflect upon their learning and make decisions accordingly to help them reach their goals, whether personal or institutional. This, too, fosters ESL learner autonomy.

"Self-reflection" or "Self-assessment" can also foster ESL learner autonomy. A clear example is that of students watching their formal or informal speaking tasks such a group or individual presentations and subsequently using a rubric to aid them in assessing both their presentation and English skills. Having taught "English Presentation" at Musashi University for the last six years and incorporating group and individual presentations into additional English classes, this researcher has found that most students take these reflections seriously as a result, work individually to strengthen their skills. Once they have watched and honestly assessed their presentations, they are better able to take the steps necessary as individuals to improve their English presentation skills. These reflections and assessments are essential to creating and enhancing ESL learner autonomy.

4) Task-Based Language Learning

Task -Based language learning (TBL) is a popular way to promote language acquisition and foster learner autonomy, and numerous studies such as that of Baek and Eisenberg (2021) and Almusharraf (2018) support the notion that ESL learner autonomy is fostered and enhanced when such "real-life" tasked-based activities are employed and state that this learner autonomy may foster a higher motivation to continue learning a

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foreign language, and may especially be true when learner receive guidance from a teacher.

The key principles of TBL include the completion of "real-life" tasks that students may encounter both in and outside of the classroom such as making a group presentation or writing an email, interaction with other students involving problem solving, critical thinking and decision making: it is a student-centered approach that involves learner autonomy, active participation and collaboration, and authentic and alternative kinds of assessment are often integrated into the tasks themselves.

5) Use of the Flipped Classroom

The concept of a flipped class is one that "flips" the roles of homework and classwork. Students are able to access materials such as recorded lectures, relevant texts, videos, podcasts, and other various materials before class meetings. This style of classroom or lessons allow students to prioritize and customize their learning which fosters learning autonomy, as learners need to take responsibility for their English acquisition. This tends to accommodate diverse learning styles and allows self-pacing (Brame, 2013). Flipping the classroom also enables teachers to provide individual support to learners who have different needs.

Perhaps most importantly, using a flipped classroom allows ESL learners to explore language resources independently. For example, they can seek out additional materials, watch extra videos, or engage in activities that promote a curiosity-driven approach to language learning and encourages learners to go beyond the classroom curriculum. In short, it fosters ESL learner autonomy.

6) Provide Positive Reinforcement and Feedback

Positive reinforcement empowers learners by highlighting their strengths and successes, and this empowerment can be very instrumental in fostering learner autonomy. When learners feel capable and supported, they are more likely to take control of their

own learning, explore language resources independently, and engage in self-directed language practice, thereby reducing feelings of dependency and anxiety. Hattie and Clarke (2019) stated that effective and motivational feedback must involve specific strategy instructions and comparisons with learners' early work to find their progress, and Kaneda (2022) often gave participants explicit strategic feedback and comments complimenting their progress in their language acquisition. In short, is it necessary to provide positive feedback to foster ESL learner autonomy because it motivates learners to take more control of their learning. As the old Johnny Mercer song goes, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, don"t mess with Mr. In Between!" (1944).

7) Encourage the Use of Self-Access Learning Centers (SALC)

In recent years, the number of self-access language centers (SALCs) at Japanese universities has been growing, since he Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) urged universities to develop educational programs that develop citizens who are globally conscious. In response to this need to improve the country's standing regarding foreign language competency as a means to become more globally competitive, many SALCs were formed through MEXT sponsored grants. These SALCs are called by a number of different names such as "World Plaza" at Nanzan University, "Global Hub" at Fukui University, and "English Lounge" at Hirosaki University, and "Musashi Communication Village" (MCV) at Musashi University. The MCV provides a comfortable learning environment for learners to study English as well as various foreign languages. With a linguistically immersive setting, MCV allows students to enhance their language skills through active usage of the foreign language they are learning. As Birdsell's (2015) study found, students who visit a SALC are generally curious and intrinsically motivated, and this motivation, as we know, fosters learner's autonomy.

Since 2012, the MCV at Musashi University has evolved into a vibrant and active hub where students refine their language abilities through interactions with diverse

individuals as well as tutors and instructors who provide advice and feedback to learners regarding their language acquisition. It is a place where ESL learners at Musashi University can work to achieve their individual language learning goals: they can practice conversation skills, attend activity-oriented English programs, and take advantage of the materials there such as graded readers, DVDs, games, and WiFi access. Additionally, English instructors are available to provide advice and assistance to learners on a one-on-one basis.

From 2018 to 2022, as part of instructional responsibilities at Musashi University, this researcher acted as an "MCV Advisor" to assist ESL learners with their language acquisition needs. Each one-on-one session was scheduled for roughly 40 minutes, four times a week each semester. When meeting with individual students for the first time, learners were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their motivation, learning styles, preferences and goals **(Appendix B)** as well as a daily/hourly schedule to help them with their time management **(Appendix C).**   This practice enabled students better understand their individual approach to learning English, their needs, preferences, and the factors that motivate them. I believe these to be essential tools to help each student become more independent and autonomous regarding their English language acquisition journey.

Conclusion

In summary, this purpose of this research paper was to provide comprehensive exploration of the fostering learner autonomy in the context of ESL education within Japan's secondary and tertiary educational system. The paper has examined the complex interplay of cultural, pedagogical, and institutional elements that intricately shape the extent of learner autonomy in Japan and subsequently influence language acquisition and learner outcomes.

The paper has underscored the crucial importance of recognizing learner autonomy as a key determinant in promoting effective English language learning among

Japanese students. The apparent impact of cultural values and traditional education practices on students' attitudes towards autonomy highlights the need for educators to adopt approaches that align with cultural predispositions while concurrently fostering independent learning. Furthermore, the research has emphasized the central role of pedagogical strategies and institutional policies in either facilitating or impeding learner autonomy. The implications of this research transcend theoretical considerations, carrying practical significance for educators, administrators, and policymakers. Acknowledging the pivotal role of learner autonomy, educational institutions should strive to create an environment that empowers students to take control of their learning journey. This entails the implementation of flexible and adaptive pedagogical approaches that accommodate diverse learner preferences while enhancing and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility — learner autonomy — among ESL learners in Japan's high schools and universities.

As the educational landscape in Japan continues to evolve and importance of global awareness and English language skills grows, the deliberate practice of fostering learner autonomy emerges as a critical imperative to enhance the quality and effectiveness of ESL education in Japan. Future research may uncover specific instructional methodologies, teacher training initiatives, and policy frameworks that can optimally harness learner autonomy within the unique cultural and institutional context of Japan. Through such efforts, educators and policymakers can collaboratively shape an educational landscape that not only addresses the distinctive challenges posed by ESL education, but also cultivates a cohort of proficient and self-directed English language learners equipped for success in the globalized world of the 21st century.

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Appendix A

Student Generated Learning Outcomes and Goals: Advanced English Seminar: Hawaii. Kobe Women's University.

At the end of the unit entitled "Picture Brides and Hole Hole Bushi" students should be able to do the following:

1. Improve oral communication skills in English
2. Increase knowledge of Hawaii and Japan through English
3. Discuss and present interesting information as a panel and small group using academic presentation and discussions skills
4. Improve English listening comprehension skills using audio and video such as TedTalks, Podcasts, movies, and television
5. Improve writing and research skills in English by writing a 1500 word research report in English
6. *Enjoy* using English to learn about interesting and meaningful aspects of Hawai`i and Japan"s past and present relationship
7. Increase active and passive English vocabulary
8. Share content knowledge through English in partner, small group, and class discussions
9. Enhance and celebrate the cultures of Japan, Hawai`i, and the USA.
10. Gain confidence in presentation skills using poster sessions and PowerPoint presentations

Appendix B

2018 -

English L2 Learner Autonomy and Motivation Questionnaire

Introduction:
This questionnaire is designed to help you better understand your approach to learning English and the factors that motivate you. Your honest responses will help the MCV Advisors tailor English language services and programs to your needs. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability.

このアンケートは、英語学習へのアプローチとあなたをやる気にさせる要因をよりよく理解するのに役立つように設計されています。あなたの正直な回答は、MCV アドバイザーあなたのニーズに合わせて英語サービスとプログラムを調整するのに役立ちます。できる限り質問に答えてください。

Section 1: PERSONAL INFORMATION
1.　Name ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
2.　Age　　＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
3.　Gender ＿＿＿＿＿＿
4.　Current University/Institution ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
5.　Year of study ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

SECTION 2: LEARNER AUTONOMY
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements using this scale: 1= Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5= Strongly Agree

1.　＿＿ I actively seek out learning resources on my own.
2.　＿＿I set personal language learning goals
3.　＿＿I enjoy exploring topics related to English language and culture independently
4.　＿＿I regularly use online resources (websites/apps/chats/blogs/etc. to enhance my English skills
5.　＿＿I feel confident in my ability to self assess my progress in English learning

SECTION 3: INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements using this scale: 1= Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5= Strongly Agree

1. _____I find pleasure in studying English.
2. _____Learning English is an enjoyable and fulfilling activity for me.
3. _____I am genuinely interested in English language and culture.
4. _____I believe improving my English is important for personal development.
5. _____I enjoy the challenges of learning English, even when they are difficult.

SECTION 4: EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements using this scale: 1= Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5= Strongly Agree

1. _____I am motivated to learn English because it is a requirement for my degree.
2. _____I study English to meet external expectations.
       (e.g. parent's or professors' expectations)
3. _____I am motivated by potential career benefits of being proficient in English.
4. _____I am motivated to study English because of the rewards and incentives it offers.

SECTION 5: ENGLISH LEARNING PREFERENCES

How do you prefer to practice your English skills? Check all that apply.

1. _____Reading
2. _____Writing
3. _____Speaking
4. _____Listening
5. _____Group Discussions
6. _____Self-Study
7. _____Language Exchange with Native Speakers/ other L2 Learners
8. _____English Language songs/movies/TV programs

SECTION 6: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Please use this space to provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding your English learning experience not covered in the questionnaire.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

CONCLUSION:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your responses will help to improve our English language programs to better meet your needs and goals. Your input is highly valuable to us.

Appendix C

Daily and Hourly Planner:

As accurately as possible, complete the planner to help you see how you spend your time each week.

	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
5:00 AM							
5:30 AM							
6:00 AM							
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7:00 AM							
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