Relationship Between Learner Autonomy and English Language Proficiency of Japanese Learners

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This study explores the relationship between learner autonomy and English language proficiency of Japanese university students from 16 universities. Questionnaires were administered to 721 students to clarify the perception they hold of their learning and learner autonomy. The students were divided into three levels of English proficiency, based on their score in a vocabulary test. The authors compared the subjects' differences in perceptions of learner autonomy among the three groups. The questionnaire was analyzed using factor analysis, and nine factors emerged. For future analysis, ANOVA and multiple comparisons, using Tukey HSD, were employed on three levels for those factors. Results show that there were differences in the degree of autonomy among the groups and revealed that good performers show attributes of "independent users", the middle group stayed at the range of "independent learners", and the poor performers were struggling at the "dependent learners" level. Based on these findings, the authors have summarized the characteristics present in the three levels of Japanese university students. This paper will present these findings and discuss the pedagogical implications of this study and how learner autonomy can be nurtured in each group.

Key words: Learner autonomy, English as a foreign language, Questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

It is no exaggeration to say that one of the supreme goals in the educational field is to develop inexperienced teenagers into autonomous learners. Most teachers aim to develop a certain degree of autonomy in their students when they enter college. Contrary to this expectation, some students' autonomous skills are lacking. For that reason, many educators, especially English teachers, are concerned with improving learner autonomy.

Since the term "autonomous learner" was not familiar to Japanese teachers until recent years, there is little research into learner autonomy in this country. Accordingly, quite a few researchers have attempted to apply western theoretical frameworks to Japanese educational settings. However, we should keep in mind that the educational environment in Japan is very different from that of European countries, where the concept of learner autonomy was born. The Japanese language is not an Indo-European language. Japan is not multi-racial nor multi-lingual, which means there is no necessity for Japanese people to use English on an everyday basis, as it is not an official language in Japan. In addition, most English teachers in Japan are Japanese people who teach in a teacher-centered environment, and there is the impression that teachers are responsible for students' learning. Related to this, Hyland (1994) and Reid (1987) found that Japanese learners have unique differences in their learning styles from most other cultures.

Under these circumstances, we conceived the idea that although Japanese students may not be able to develop learner autonomy similar to western students, they must have other successful strategies available to them, which enable them to develop learner autonomy. Thus, the objectives of this study were to investigate what kinds of learner autonomy Japanese students exhibit and to explore effective ways to encourage less autonomous learners to be more autonomous in Japanese educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomy in Asian Contexts

There has been increasing emphasis on autonomy in language learning in recent years (Little, 1991). A well-known definition of autonomy by Holec (1981) is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). Historically, autonomous learning has been considered as more appropriate in Western educational contexts rather than in Asian contexts (Lamb, 2004). For example, Ho and Cookall (1995) mention that Chinese students are reluctant to challenge the authority of teachers and at the same time Chinese teachers are unwilling to surrender their control to students. However, this view seems to be superficial, and it is dangerous to conclude that autonomy is not a suitable concept in Asian contexts. In fact, Littlewood (1999) claims that Asian students have the same capacity for autonomy as their counterparts in Western countries do, and some teachers have reported that their attempts to promote autonomy in Asian learners were successful (e.g., Morimoto, 2006; Wakui, 2006).

Compared to reports that discuss the practical aspects of promoting learner autonomy, there is little empirical research investigating whether Asian students have the propensity for autonomy. Spratt et al. (2002) conducted a questionnaire of 508 university students in Hong Kong to explore this issue, taking the relationship between autonomy and motivation into consideration. Their development of the questionnaire was strongly influenced by Holec's (1981) idea of autonomy, and the questionnaire included notions of ability and responsibility operating in five main areas: determining objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has happened. The results of the questionnaire indicated that students have readiness for autonomy to some extent, and motivation seems to be a precondition for their autonomy. However, it was not clear whether these results can be generalized to Asian students in other contexts, who have less

opportunity to use English outside the class. Therefore, Sakai et al. (2008) examined readiness for autonomy in students from Japan, Taiwan, and Korea using a revised version of the questionnaire originally invented by Spratt et al. (2002). The results of factor analysis showed that although students have an aptitude for autonomy, factor 1 named class management (by teachers) was very strong, and the students thought that it was natural for the teachers to control their class management through the choice of the textbooks, learning methods, pace of the lesson, kinds and amount of assignments, and evaluation. The authors presume that as preoccupation prevented them from developing their autonomy, teachers should encourage the students to get involved in class management.

Autonomy and Language Proficiency

In promoting learner autonomy, it is essential to consider not only educational and social contexts, but also the characteristics of each learner. Based on previous studies, we assume that Asian students already have a certain degree of autonomy, but each learner is different and that teachers should employ different approaches to promote autonomy. In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment like Japan, obtaining a high score in English tests is an indicator of good achievement. Students are very keen to obtain high scores in high-stake exams, which often determine their future since "the examination is the soul of ethos about education in East Asian societies" (Cheng, 1996, p. 9). As a result, learners study outside of class, as well as in class in order to obtain good English proficiency, since they do not have ample opportunities to practice English in an authentic context. In other words, students need to take responsibility for their learning in order to obtain high good scores in tests if they want to be academically successful in an exam-oriented culture. This indicates that students' successes in language tests in Japan are related to their learning autonomy.

There is some Japanese research into autonomy and language proficiency in Japan. For example, a report issued by the Society for Testing English

Proficiency (STEP) in Japan claims that there is a relationship between test scores and the degree of learner autonomy (2006). STEP tests are long-established and widely-used English proficiency tests, administered in seven bands in Japan. In 2005, STEP sent its 12,000 successful examinees a questionnaire, which asked respondents how they studied, how much they studied, how much they used English, and so on. Based on the results, STEP classified its successful examinees into three levels: (1) dependent learners (from beginner level to upper basic level), (2) independent learners (low intermediate to equivalent TOEIC 500 or TOEFL 450), and (3) independent users (equivalent of TOEIC 730 or TOEFL 550 to equivalent of TOEIC 860 or TOEFL 600) (For the details and rationale of the three levels of classification, see STEP, 2006).

Another study by Ohno et al. (2008) discovered that good performers have a tendency to be obedient to their teachers and thought that teachers should take responsibility in class management. This finding seems to be contradictory to the notion of autonomy, but those students trusted their teachers and often followed their teachers' instructions. Poor performers tended to be two types of students. One type was indifferent to learning English and the other type was resistant to accepting their teacher's advice. This type of student dislikes to be taught words and linguistic rules and wants to study using their favorite methods or materials. Both of these groups were less likely to be successful in learning English.

Although the studies by STEP and Ohno et al. (ibid.) clarified some of the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful learners in Japanese contexts, participants were limited and further research was necessary to verify that the results can be broadly applied. In addition, there are still some questions left to be answered; for instance, what kind of perceptions of learner autonomy do students have? Are there differences in perceptions between good and poor learners?

Concerning measuring students' English proficiency, a test for measuring vocabulary size (henceforth referred to as a vocabulary test) was chosen because of limitations in budget and possible variances in marking. Some

vocabulary tests can be used free of charge, however, standardized tests, such as TOEFL and TOEIC will charge schools around fifty U.S. dollars per student. As for reliability, some kinds of vocabulary tests adopt a multiple-choice method, which means the reliability of marking these tests should be high. Concerning validity, Ishida et al. (2004) confirmed the validity of diagnosing students' English ability using a vocabulary test by examining vocabulary levels through English proficiency tests and a government-authorized high school English textbook: STEP Grade 2, STEP Grade pre-1, TOEIC, TOEFL and *The Crown English Reading* (2003). In order to discover which vocabulary level each test or text contained, the vocabulary in each material was analyzed by using ALC's Standard Vocabulary List (2000). The results suggest that the higher score a learner wants to achieve in proficiency tests, the larger vocabulary he or she needs. Tohno et al. (1995, p. 14) claims, "There is no objection to using a person's vocabulary size as a scale for measuring his or her English proficiency." Schmitt et al. (2001, p. 55) explains, "their Vocabulary Levels Test is designed to give an estimate of vocabulary size for second language (L2) learners of general or academic English." The rationale for this stems from research, which has shown that vocabulary size is directly related to a person's ability to use English in various settings. Schmitt et al. (2001, p. 60) reports, "To provide this evidence, vocabulary tests are often correlated with proficiency tests, particularly the TOEFL." Therefore the authors in this study decided to use the new Vocabulary Levels Test by Schmitt et al. (2001).

The present study therefore investigates the relationship between learner autonomy and English language proficiency of Japanese students from various universities. Specifically, the following two objectives were addressed:

1. If students are divided into three levels according to their score in a vocabulary test, what differences in perceptions regarding responsibility and autonomy do students have among these three groups?

2. What can teachers do to nurture learner autonomy for each group?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 721 Japanese students, aged between 18 and 24 years (328 male, 366 female, and 27 unanswered), who learn EFL at sixteen universities in Japan. Eighty nine students (12.3%) belonged to the Faculty of Law, 226 (31.3%) study Literature and Foreign Language, 54 (7.5%) study Science and Information, 221 (30.1%) study Commerce and Management, 79 (11%) study Education, and 53 (7.4%) study Humanities and Liberal Arts.

Instruments and Procedure

The students' English proficiency was examined by the Vocabulary Levels Test developed by Schmitt et al. (ibid.). The test adopts a receptive matching format. It presents three words and six definitions of words at a time. The students are directed to read the definitions and choose the right definition for each word. It consists of five sections: the academic vocabulary, the most frequent 2,000 words, the most frequent 3,000 words, the most frequent 5,000 words, and the most frequent 10,000 words. Each section has thirty words. The highest possible score is 150.

Degrees of learner autonomy were measured using a revised questionnaire developed by Sakai et al. (2008) (see Appendix). The questionnaire was written in Japanese. The questionnaire consisted of five scales: Recognition of Responsibility for Learning, Responsibility for Past Learning, Responsibility for Future Learning, Past Learning outside Classroom, and Future Learning outside Classroom. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire using a five-likert scale: The respondents were required to specify their level of agreement with a statement by choosing one of the five responses (1-Not at all, 2-Hardly, 3-To some extent, 4-Mostly, 5-Totally).

The vocabulary tests and questionnaires were sent to seventeen teachers who volunteered to cooperate in the research. Ninety minutes were allotted to

conduct the test and the questionnaire, including time to read the explanation. All teachers conducted these tests from December 2006 to February 2007.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basic Statistic Data of the Subjects' Vocabulary Test

Based on test scores, 721 subjects were divided into three levels: Level 1 (best performers, n=237, max score 140 - minimum score 100, mean 111.0), Level 2 (middle group, n=245, max score 99 - minimum score 76), mean 88.0, and Level 3 (bad performers, n=239, max score 75 - minimum score 35, mean 58.9).

Analysis of the Scales

Questionnaire data was analyzed in two phases on completion of data collection. In the first phase, in order to measure of the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire and reliability of answers, the five scales were calculated using Cronbach's coefficient alphas. All of the Cronbach's coefficient alphas were bigger than .80. This figure indicates that the questionnaire response has a good reliability.

In the second stage, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was used to examine the correlation of each scale. The scores of all scales correlated significantly with each other at $p<.01$ level. This shows that students who felt responsible for their own learning also felt responsibility for their own past and future learning.

Factor Analysis and ANOVA over Factors

Descriptive statistics were computed for all questionnaire items to eliminate skewed items. Item 62 showed the ceiling effect, while eight items

(Items 13, 19, 23, 27, 31, 37, 44 and 49) had the floor effect. The items with ceiling effect or floor effect are not considered appropriate scales because their score distributions are distorted toward the highest end or the lowest end, respectively. These nine items were not used for the factor analysis. The first factor analysis was then conducted, and among the factors that emerged, loadings of the nine factors were found over 1.00. These were the factors the authors used for further investigation. However, items 18 and 48 were found to have weak correlation ($p=.35$) with any of the nine major factors. Therefore, these two items were also excluded.

After conducting the second factor analysis using Promax rotation, the correlation between each item and each factor was found. Next, in order to discover whether these factors are appropriate as scales, their means, standard deviations and reliability (Cronbach's coefficient alpha) were calculated. Then, in order to show what these factors indicated, the label of each factor was developed, based upon its component items, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Mean, Standard Deviation, Coefficient Alpha, Scores, and Labels of Each Factor

F	Mean	SD	α	Question Items	Labels
I	38.23	10.89	.90	40, 42, 39, 55, 56, 38, 43, 51, 41, 52, 54, 50, 57	Authentic English
II	24.89	8.10	.89	22, 24, 20, 28, 32, 26, 14, 30, 18	Class management in the future
III	15.09	5.78	.86	64, 63, 65, 53, 59, 58	Learning methods
IV	16.10	5.18	.85	4, 5, 3, 7,6,8	Awareness of class management
V	17.32	5.84	.83	25, 33, 29, 17, 15, 21, 11	Class management in the past
VI	18.25	4.98	.83	45, 46, 47, 60, 61, 48	Studies on grammar, vocabulary, and tests
VII	14.69	3.31	.73	1, 2, 12, 16	Goals and progress
VIII	10.13	3.07	.77	35, 36, 10	Course evaluation
IX	6.18	2.11	.64	34, 9	Self assessment

In order to discover differences among the subjects, who were divided into three levels based on the scores of the vocabulary test, ANOVA was

employed. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Results of Factor Analysis

Factor			Factor		
Factor I	$F(2,718)=2.83$	$p<.10$	Factor VI	$F(2,718)=2.41$	$p<.10$
Factor II	$F(2,718)=6.06$	$p<.01$	Factor VII	$F(2,718)=2.49$	$p<.10$
Factor III	$F(2,718)=1.65$	n.s.	Factor VIII	$F(2,718)=.51$	n.s.
Factor IV	$F(2,718)=5.01$	$p<.01$	Factor IX	$F(2,718)=3.81$	$p<.05$
Factor V	$F(2,718)=9.71$	$p<.01$			

Multiple Comparison Tests over Factors

The results of the ANOVA analysis show that Factors II, IV, V, and IX had significant differences of either at .01% or .05% level and factors I, VI, and VII were at the .10% level (Table 2). These significant differences in factors show that the students' perceptions about what the factors indicated were significantly different among the student groups divided by test scores. To investigate which level of the respondents was the highest and whether significant differences existed among the levels, multiple comparisons using Tukey HSD were carried out (Table 3). In the tables hereafter, n) means questionnaire item number, and shaded areas show the items with the highest point value.

TABLE 3
Average Scores of Each Level of Factors and Differences

Factors	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Significant Difference or Tendency
I	3.02	2.95	2.85	L1 and L3 ($p<.05$)
II	2.66	2.72	2.94	L1 and L 3 ($p<.01$), L2 and L3 ($p<.05$)
III	2.42	2.55	2.58	n.s
IV	2.55	2.71	2.80	L1 and L 3 ($p<.01$)
V	2.37	2.40	2.68	L1 and L3 ($p<.01$), L 2 and L3 ($p<.01$)
VI	3.07	3.10	2.94	L2 and Level 3 ($p<.10$)
VII	3.73	3.71	3.57	n.s.
VIII	3.36	3.43	3.34	n.s.
IX	2.94	3.19	3.14	L1 and L 2 ($p<.05$)

Factor I (Authentic English)

Table 4 shows that good performers prefer a higher variety of authentic materials outside of the classroom. Items 38, 42, 50, 51, and 56 have significant differences. In addition, in all these items, the best performers' average scores were the highest, the middle group followed, and the poor performers came in last. These results were as we expected. The materials referred in these items were to read web pages, newspaper, magazines, and books in English, and to watch an English movie without Japanese subtitles. These materials required the students to have a high level of English proficiency. Therefore, it is natural that the best performers were confident in using authentic English sources.

TABLE 4
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor I and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L 2	L3	Difference
38) To read web pages in English - until now	2.42	2.17	2.09	L1 & L2 (p <.05) L1 & L3 (p <.01)
39) To watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs - until now	2.64	2.68	2.74	n.s.
40) To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English - until now	2.63	2.56	2.50	n.s.
41) To listen to English songs - until now	3.59	3.57	3.64	n.s.
42) To watch English movies without subtitles in your language - until now	2.49	2.24	2.22	L1 & L2 (p <.10) L1 & L3 (p <.05)
43) To talk to foreigners in English - until now	2.37	2.43	2.32	n.s.
50) To read English newspapers - from now on	3.10	2.87	2.59	L1 & L3 (p <.01)
51) To read magazines and books in English - from now on	3.38	3.29	3.05	L1 & L3 (p <.01)
52) To write an e-mail in English --- from now on	2.90	2.91	2.74	n.s.
54) To watch and listen to English	3.29	3.46	3.30	n.s.

learning TV and radio programs - from now on				
55) To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English --- from now on	3.44	3.37	3.24	n.s.
56) To watch English movies without subtitles in your language --- from now on	3.53	3.37	3.27	L1 & L3 ($p < .10$)
57) To talk to foreigners in English --- from now on	3.46	3.48	3.29	n.s.

Generally, in English classes at Japanese universities, students are taught using commercially available textbooks. These textbooks can seem artificial because most of them are rewritten for EFL and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Data from this study suggests that top students consciously or unconsciously do not like materials that seemed artificial. Among the Factor I items, the items 50, 51, 55, 56 (in Table 4) were the ones that the good achievers allocated higher points than the other groups did. These items contained authentic English and required the students to have a high level of receptive English abilities and a good sized vocabulary. On the contrary, among the three groups, the best performers gave the lowest score to item 54 (in Table 4). This item was about learning English through English television and radio programs. Considering this data, it can be said that good performers show a stronger interest in challenging, authentic materials that can improve their English ability. Presumably, they had higher self-efficacy about challenging and understanding authentic materials than the other groups. Conversely, the data showed that poor performers did not want to use challenging, authentic materials. It can be concluded that high self-efficacy separates good performers from bad performers.

Factor II (Class Management in the Future), Factor IV (Awareness of Class Management), and Factor V (Class Management in the Past)

Table 5 (about Factor IV) shows to what extent the respondents were interested in getting involved in future class management. Overall, the scores

in Table 5 were lower than the middle point of the five likert-scale (3.0), except for items 18, 28, and 32, which show that the students felt that teachers should be responsible for class management. Students probably had such a view of teacher's roles because they learned English in a teacher-centered class, as Holden and Usuki (1999) point out. The results also indicate that the poor achievers' average points were the highest, whereas the best performers' average points were the worst, except for item 22, where the three groups' scores were almost the same. Therefore, the best performing students had less interest in future class management. In other words, the weakest students had a higher interest in how their class would be managed in the future. This result is consistent with Ohno et al.'s (2008) study.

TABLE 5
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor II and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L 2	L3	Difference
14) To decide your class's goal of study in one semester.	2.43	2.53	2.69	L1 & L3 ($p <.10$)
18) To keep record of your studies such as assignments, attendance and test scores.	3.08	3.21	3.50	L1 & L3 ($p <.01$) L2 & L3 ($p <.05$)
20) To decide the textbook and materials you use in class.	2.46	2.57	2.75	L1 & L3 ($p <.05$)
22) To decide topics and activities you learn in class.	2.81	2.80	2.83	n.s.
24) To decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson.	2.44	2.50	2.76	L1 & L3 ($p <.05$) L2 & L3 ($p <.10$)
26) To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work.	2.72	2.76	2.96	L1 & L3 ($p <.10$)
28) To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework.	2.62	2.64	3.00	L1 & L3 ($p <.01$) L2 & L3 ($p <.01$)
30) To decide classroom management, such as seating and class rules.	2.65	2.71	2.88	n.s.
32) To decide ways of assessment, such as attendance, essay and self-evaluation.	2.70	2.75	3.07	L1 & L3 ($p <.01$) L2 & L3 ($p <.05$)

All the questions were asked with "from now on"

As stated before, according to Ohno et al. (ibid.), good performers have a

tendency to trust their teachers' class management; on the other hand, some poor performers like to use their favorite methods or materials. Table 5 also shows that poor performers' scored higher than those the best performers and the middle group in this area. Presumably, these results indicate that poor performers feel more irritated and dissatisfied with class management because they do not feel comfortable learning in a teacher-dominant teaching style, which is common in Japan.

Although Table 6 (about Factor IV) shows that poor performers have stronger awareness of class management, in general students seem to think that it is not their responsibility to be involved in class management. All scores in Table 6 are lower than the middle point of the five likert-scale (3.0). This is probably because students strongly believe that teachers should take responsibility of class management based on their past experiences in high school, as Chan (2001) points out.

TABLE 6
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor IV and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L 2	L3	Difference
3) To decide the textbook and materials you use in class	2.47	2.57	2.62	n.s.
4) To decide topics and activities you learn in class	2.78	2.92	2.88	n.s.
5) To decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson	2.37	2.49	2.60	L1 & L3 ($p <.10$)
6) To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work	2.68	2.89	2.93	L1 & L2 ($p <.10$) L1 & L3 ($p <.05$)
7) To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework	2.52	2.67	2.80	L1 & L3 ($p <.05$)
8) To decide ways of assessment, such as attendance, essay and self-evaluation	2.47	2.73	2.95	L1 & L2 ($p <.05$) L1 & L3 ($p <.01$)

Table 7 (about Factor V) shows that poor performers have shown more interest in class management in the past except for items 11 and 15. Item 11 was "To decide your goal of study in one semester until now", and Item 15 was "To check how much progress you have made until now." The two items

seem to belong to individual metacognitive awareness. Inversely, the best performers' average points were the highest in the two items, which meant their metacognitive maturity was more highly developed than other respondents'.

TABLE 7
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor V and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L 2	L3	Difference
11) To decide your goal of study in one semester.	2.76	2.53	2.72	L1 & L2 (p <.10)
15) To check how much progress you make.	3.03	2.80	2.97	L1 & L2 (p <.10)
17) To keep record of your studies such as assignments, attendance and test scores.	2.48	2.69	2.96	L1 & L3 (p <.01) L2 & L3 (p <.10)
21) To decide topics and activities you learn in class.	2.00	2.03	2.42	L1 & L3 (p <.01) L2 & L3 (p <.01)
25) To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work.	2.03	2.21	2.54	L1 & L3 (p <.01) L2 & L3 (p <.01)
29) To decide classroom management, such as seating and class rules.	1.97	2.07	2.47	L1 & L3 (p <.01) L2 & L3 (p <.05)
33) To assess your study.	2.31	2.46	2.66	L1 & L3 (p <.01)

All the questions were asked with "until now"

Factor III (Learning Methods)

Table 8 shows the subjects' interest in learning English outside of the classroom. Overall, most students did not have a strong interest in using these methods - none of the average scores were over 3.0. Especially good performers were reluctant to get involved in all of the items listed in Table 8. This result was similar to what was observed in Spratt et al. (2002)' research conducted in Hong Kong. Concerning the item "practiced using English with friends", more than 60% of the respondents answered "Never" or "Rarely." Regarding the other items, 81% of the students had never or rarely written a diary in English, 72 % had never or rarely attended a self-study centre", 74% had never or rarely done non-compulsory assignments, and 67% had never or

rarely gone to see their teacher about their work. These activities are thought to improve English proficiency, but even students in Hong Kong, which has a much better social and educational environment for learning English, felt reluctant to do these activities. As for item 58, all of the respondents were reluctant to practice speaking with their friends. The result was similar to Cotterall's study (1999), where more than half of the respondents (most of them were Asians) who joined an ESL class in New Zealand nominated "opportunities to use the language should be provided by my classmates" as the least important. Therefore, it is no wonder that good performers felt reluctant to try these learning methods. Presumably, as good learners often established their own learning style, these learning methods might not have complied with their language learning beliefs.

TABLE 8
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor III and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L2	L3	Difference
53) To keep a diary in English	2.35	2.53	2.46	n.s.
58) To practice speaking English with your friends	2.53	2.67	2.61	n.s.
59) To practice English in an English conversation school	2.22	2.51	2.45	L1&L2($p < .05$)
63) To learn in a self-study center at a university	2.46	2.48	2.59	n.s.
64) To attend a course and seminar provided by a university	2.36	2.30	2.44	n.s.
65) To go to see your teacher in order to discuss your work	2.66	2.78	2.86	n.s.

All the questions were asked with "from now on"

Factor VI (Studies on Grammar, Vocabulary, and Tests)

Table 9 shows students' perceptions of studies on grammar, vocabulary, and tests. Only item 47 "To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP --- until now" showed a significant difference at $p < .05$ level. The best performing group and the middle group had more awareness

of studying in these areas. It is natural that the poor performers had a more negative attitude towards studying for English proficiency tests. Above all, the middle group was the most motivated in studying for future English grammar and vocabulary.

TABLE 9
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor VI and Differences

Questionnaire Items	L1	L2	L3	Difference
45) To learn English grammar --- until now	2.82	2.80	2.73	n.s.
46) To learn English vocabulary words --- until now	2.88	2.79	2.71	n.s.
47) To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP --- until now	2.81	2.79	2.53	L1 & L3 ($p<.05$) L2 & L3 ($p<.05$)
48) To prepare and review for classes --- until now	2.82	2.89	2.69	n.s.
60) To learn English grammar --- from now on	3.47	3.57	3.46	n.s.
61) To learn English vocabulary words --- from now on	3.64	3.76	3.53	n.s.

Factor IX (Self Assessment)

Table 10 shows that the middle group had the strongest awareness of assessing their study. On the contrary, the best performers showed less interest than others in assessing their study. They seemed confident in these areas and did not feel it necessary to do so.

TABLE 10
Average Scores of Each Level of Factor IX and Differences

Questionnaire Items	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Difference
9) To assess your study	2.93	3.17	3.17	L1 and L2 ($p<.10$) L1 and L3 ($p<.10$)
34) To assess your study --- from now on	2.95	3.20	3.12	L1 and L2 ($p<.10$)

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings presented in the previous section, we summarize characteristics of the three levels of Japanese university students and discuss how teachers can nurture learner autonomy in each group.

Implications for the Best Achievers

Based on Holec's definition (1981, p. 3), autonomous learners should take the responsibility for all aspects of their learning, such as deciding upon objectives, selecting the content, choosing strategies, and evaluating their progress. From this point of view, the best performers in this study cannot be classes as completely attaining learner autonomy. They felt disinclined to take charge of class management and assess their study. However, they did wish to select the content of their learning and were involved in developing learning strategies. Our previous study (Sakai et al., 2008) showed that most East Asian assume that their teachers should take responsibility for class management. For that reason, it is understandable that good performers in Japanese colleges are also teacher-obedient. Viewed in this light, their attitude can be viewed as a coping strategy to deal with a teacher-oriented class.

Based upon the discussions above, the authors define the characteristics of the best achievers as follows: they do not believe that teachers are solely responsible for class management, despite being taught in a teacher-oriented classroom; even under such circumstances, they saw it important to set personal goals and control their study path. These abilities are considered to meet the criteria of metacognitive strategies. Therefore, the best achievers exhibit metacognitive maturity. In addition, as stated in the discussion of Factor I, they developed high self-efficacy of challenging authentic English. In this sense, these attitudes show the characteristics of autonomous learners.

To further develop learner autonomy in Japanese students, what can teachers do? Students need to revise their goals. At present, as Item 62 "To

prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP from now on" showed the ceiling effect, the best performers are also overly test-conscious. First, students should be taught that English is a communication tool. Teachers can help them to shift their idea of English learning from a test-oriented perspective, to a communicative one. It is very important to help students to see how English language skills can assist them in future international studies and engagement in international business. One possible learning task could be setting students online research tasks, followed by a verbal presentation on the results, which could then be discussed during class. This form of task will assist students in seeing English not as just a means to good grades, but also a useful life skill. This will help students develop more independence in their learning.

Implications for Intermediate Level Students

What kind of awareness segregated the intermediate group from the best performers? This can be explained in three ways: authentic materials, their attitude toward communication, and their metacognitive strategies. First, regarding this first observation (Table 4), intermediate students gave more than three points on average to the authentic materials (Items 51, 55, 56 in Table 4). Although their point allocations were not as high as those of the best group of students, it can be assumed that they were interested in challenging, authentic materials. In addition, they gave the highest points to learning through television or radio programs (Item 54 in Table 4) of the three groups. They also recognized the importance of studying English grammar and vocabulary (Items 60, 61 in Table 9).

This group also showed more interest in communicating with someone in English than the other groups. They marked this factor the highest out of all the items concerning communication (43, 57 in Tables 4, and 58, 59 in Table 8). These facts suggest that they have a tendency to favor learning English through communication and should be encouraged to use English to communicate with others.

Finally, regarding their metacognitive abilities, the results of items 11 and 15 in Table 7 show that their strategies for deciding their goals and checking their progress in the past were significantly lower than those of the top group students ($p<.10$). Goal setting and checking one's progress are two important factors in owning one's learning. Therefore, intermediate students should be trained in this area.

After careful consideration, the features of the middle group are defined as follows: firstly, although they were underdeveloped in autonomy concerning class management, they are willing to acquire authentic English, grammar and vocabulary. Secondly, they want to study English through communication. Thirdly, they had not developed metacognitive maturity as well as the top group. In conclusion, they are not independent users of English outside the classroom, but can be seen as learners in their classrooms.

Considering the above, the middle group of students would benefit from learning authentic English through using communicative approaches with classmates. In addition, teachers should pay attention to grammar and vocabulary, as well as provide students with training in metacognitive strategies. Possible methods are:

1) Teachers should choose a paperback that can be read within a semester. The study plan should be shown at the beginning of the semester. Each student should know how many pages they have to study before the class and check unfamiliar words in a dictionary.

2) Lessons should be conducted individually and in groups. Each student should answer comprehension questions posed by the teacher. Group members should then get together and check each other's answers in English. Then, they should work together to make an English summary about what they read. Teachers should encourage students to use English as much as possible. Finally, teachers will read the summary and will assess grammar errors. Sometimes teachers had better encourage them to take a proficiency test to see their progress.

These learning strategies will make good use of the students' strong points to improve their learner autonomy.

Implications for Poor Achievers

A great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, wrote in the first line of *Anna Karenina,* "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It can be said that successful learners are all alike; every unsuccessful performer is unsuccessful in its own way. Generally speaking, some have no interest in studying English, some have a feeling of frustration because their English grades are continuously low, and some regret their past idleness. Some feel that they cannot get good grades because their teacher's methods do not fit with their learning style, and so on. The results of this study show that even though the learners were interested in a different class management, they could not be classes as autonomous learners. Their stronger desire to participate in class management seemed to be a mismatch with the Japanese teacher-oriented educational setting. In Japan, teachers require the students to learn rules perfectly and memorize many words. That is, although the students' attitudes toward learner autonomy were very high, their results can be interpreted as them wanting to participate in their preferred ways of learning. It can be assumed that they had not reflected on their poor performing. Accordingly, since their English proficiency was not good, their self-efficacy was also low.

We can easily infer this ability of reflection as one of the factors presented in Little's (1999) definition of autonomous learners. He states, "they (the most successful learners in formal educational context) accept responsibility for their learning, they constantly reflect on (their learning)" (p. 13). Considering this definition, without reflection, the poor performers cannot understand their environment, develop coping strategies dealing with their educational settings, or obtain a good vocabulary. Therefore, they surely need teachers' support to reflect on their own learning effectively.

After considering the poor performers' data, the interpretation of their

traits is as follows: although they had stronger eagerness to be involved in class management than other students, it is doubtful that they could manage to set proper goals or control their studies. They need teacher support in many aspects of their learning, such as receiving vocabulary lessons, grammatical rules, training in metacognitive ability, and also motivation. Therefore, these students would remain dependent learners under teachers' direction.

Considering the above, one single strategy cannot work for all poor performers. Several kinds of support should be developed from various points of views. Some poor performers need teachers' assistance for linguistic aspects, such as studying English grammar and building a good vocabulary. Some need assistance in motivation, and others must be trained to develop their metacognitive strategies. Most poor performers need all the assistance available to them. However, in this paper, all forms of assistance cannot be covered; therefore only one strategy will be recommended.

The fact that these students were not able to obtain good scores shows that they had not developed metacognitive maturity. They could not set a proper goal, check their progress, or evaluate outcomes. A possible way of teaching them could be to assist them in developing their matacognitive abilities. Students should be taught to set a proper goal, check their progress, evaluate the outcome, and reflect on what they could have done to improve their outcome. As for developing metacognitive strategies to enhance autonomy, it is suggested that: at the first lesson of a semester, teachers discuss the goal of the class with the students, display some textbooks possible for class use, allow students to select one, and nominate the reason for their selection. After a few lessons when students have become accustomed to the pace of their teachers, students should be allowed to consider whether the pace of the class suits them. After halfway through the semester, teachers should instruct students to assess whether the textbook has helped them develop their English proficiency. At the end of the semester, students should be asked to evaluate whether the textbook has significantly improved their ability and reflect on their studies. In between, teachers should encourage students to

reflect on their studies. Similar strategies can be used for developing homework tasks. Cotterall (1999) supports these ideas, she states, "Teachers need to allocate class time and attention to raising awareness of monitoring and evaluating strategies, as well as to provide learners with opportunities to practice using these metacognitive strategies."

CONCLUSION

After considering this study, the authors have discovered that the conclusions of the present study are quite similar to that of the STEP (2006) research. In their study, they divided their successful test-takers into three levels: "independent users (who use English in their daily life)," "independent learners (who can study English by themselves)," "dependent learners (who need teachers' help in studying English)". This present research shows that strong performers in this study are approaching the level of "independent users", the middle group stayed at the range of "independent learners", and the poor performers were struggling at the level of "dependent learners." Even though the measuring tools and analyzing methods of each study are different, these similar results can "contribute to construction of learner profiles for typical Japanese learners and aid in research and comparison of learners and learning context in Japan other learning contexts particularly other EFL environments in Asia," as Dunlea (2007) remarked when he concluded the STEP research at the Asia TEFL conference in Fukuoka.

Under each nation's educational system, learner autonomy has developed in its own way. However, in the end, various developments will converge on Holec's definition, for there are many autonomous learners who have been educated in the Japanese educational setting. This present research aims to discover the path to autonomy. The authors focused on the relationship between the development of learner autonomy and that of English proficiency and clarified it to some extent. Further research needs to focus on the practical aspects of promoting learner autonomy to answer questions such as:

what kind of learning scaffolding will be effective for poor English performers in universities in Japan?

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire on Learner Autonomy

Section 1 － Perception of responsibilities toward learning

When you are taking classes, how much responsibility should you take concerning the following items?

1-Not at all   2-Hardly   3-To some extent   4-Mostly   5-Totally

1) To decide your goal of study in one semester
2) To check how much progress you make
3) To decide the textbook and materials you use in class
4) To decide topics and activities you learn in class
5) To decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson
6) To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work
7) To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework
8) To decide ways of assessment, such as attendance, essay and self-evaluation
9) To assess your study
10) To evaluate the course

Section 2 － Responsibilities toward learning in the past and the future.

Until now: To what extent, have you got involved in the following items in the English classes you have taken since you entered the university?

From now on: To what extent, would you like to get involved if you are given opportunities in the future?

(Items with odd number, students were asked "until now", to items with even number, "from now on")

11), 12) To decide your goal of study in one semester.
13), 14) To decide your class's goal of study in one semester.
15), 16) To check how much progress you make.

17), 18) To keep record of your studies such as assignments, attendance and test scores.

19), 20) To decide the textbook and materials you use in class.

21), 22) To decide topics and activities you learn in class.

23), 24) To decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson.

25), 26) To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work.

27), 28) To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework.

29), 30) To decide classroom management, such as seating and class rules.

31), 32) To decide ways of assessment, such as attendance, essay and self-evaluation.

33), 34) To assess your study.

35), 36) To evaluate the course.

Section 3- English learning activities outside the class

Questions 37-49   How often have you done the following English learning activities voluntarily since you entered the university?

Questions 50-65 How often would you like to do this from now on?

1- Never   2-Seldom   3-Sometimes   4-Often   5-Usually

37) To read English newspaper

38) To read web pages in English

39) To watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs

40) To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English

41) To listen to English songs

42) To watch English movies without subtitles in your language

43) To talk to foreigners in English

44) To practice speaking English with your friends

45) To learn English grammar

46) To learn English vocabulary words

47) To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP

48) To prepare and review for classes

49) To attend a course and seminar provided by a university

50) To read English newspapers

51) To read magazines and books in English

52) To write an e-mail in English

53) To keep a diary in English

54) To watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs

55) To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English

56) To watch English movies without subtitles in your language

57) To talk to foreigners in English

58) To practice speaking English with your friends

59) To practice English in an English conversation school

60) To learn English grammar

61) To learn English vocabulary words

62) To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP

63) To learn in a self-study center at a university

64) To attend a course and seminar provided by a university

65) To go to see your teacher in order to discuss your work