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Revisiting Littlewood: Cultural Stereotypes and Learner Autonomy at a Vocational College in Japan

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Introduction

This paper examines the attitudes toward autonomy of a group of learners at a vocational college in Japan. Learner autonomy strongly correlates with, and is a predictor of, students' English proficiency (Deng, 2007; Koad & Waluyo, 2021). The authors of this study felt that greater learner autonomy should be an outcome of the education our students received at the college, and therefore wished to develop the students' ability to direct their own learning within our classrooms.

However, we were not sure whether such autonomous learning was a desirable outcome in the Japanese educational context, or how our students would respond if we prodded them towards doing more for themselves in their studies. We wanted to know what our students' stance was toward autonomous learning, and if we could do more to foster their ability to self-regulate their learning.

We employed a survey developed by Littlewood (1999), in which he asked about students' learning preferences. Although this survey, conducted in Hong Kong, was originally aimed at providing a check on the idea that cultural patterns influencing students in particular regions were universally applicable to each individual student, it has proven useful as a tool to examine students' attitudes to learning beyond the original scope for which Littlewood used it. Importantly, it has already been used to explore learners' attitudes toward autonomy in Japan (see Aliponga et al., 2013; Mineishi, 2010). In much the same way, we felt the questionnaire could help us better understand our own students, and shed light on the two specific questions we sought to answer:

1. Would Littlewood's survey about East Asian students' attitudes toward their classroom environment be replicated in our context?
2. What were our own learners' attitudes toward autonomy?



In this study, we first summarize the theoretical concept of learner autonomy, including the history of the idea and how it relates to the East Asian context, as well as how it informed our research questions. We then describe our data collection and processing procedures, and the eventual results. Next, we discuss those results in terms of our research questions and, finally, offer conclusions regarding the implications of our findings and how they might influence further research.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy within the East Asian Context

In simple terms, learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3, as cited in Benson & Voller, 2014, p. 1). Learner autonomy very quickly became associated with students acting independently and individually. Leslie Dickinson (1987, as cited in Benson, 2007, p. 22), for example, used the term autonomy to describe the situation in which a student went about his/her learning on his/her own, choosing what to learn, when to learn, and how to learn it.

The paradox of how to encourage such independence within an educational institution was answered by the development of the self-access resource center. The idea was that students of a high enough level could go into these centers and spend time studying videos, listening texts, newspapers and magazines, all in English, and all without any direction from a teacher. But attempts to plant these types of resource centers further afield met with a lot of resistance. Jones (1995, p. 228, as cited in Littlewood, 1999, p. 72), for example, attempted to establish a self-access center in Cambodia, but the failure of students to use the center led him to conclude that the concept of autonomy was “laden with cultural values, particularly those of the West”. Cross-cultural researchers, in particular, sometimes claimed that autonomy represented an inherently Western bias (see Iyengar & Devoe, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Later, however, the link between individualism and autonomy began to be eroded. Little (2000, as cited in Benson, 2007, p. 23) returned to Holec’s original definition of autonomy as an innate attribute, shifting the focus onto the underlying psychological qualities that made autonomy possible. The implication was that a particular student may exhibit certain capabilities in terms of autonomy, and develop others in time. Little (2007), describing changes in national curricula during the 1990s, suggests that there was “an important shift of emphasis: learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves” (p. 14).

This led to an exploration of the way in which autonomy was expressed within various cultural contexts. One prominent example is Littlewood. In his paper, “Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts” (1999), he did not attempt to refute cross-cultural research highlighting the differences between Western and East Asian learners. Instead, he made use of such research to explore the East Asian context and then make inferences about how autonomy could be applied in it, hoping ultimately to construct a “culture-free definition” of autonomy.

Method

Participants

In our study, we surveyed first and second year students at a two-year, private vocational college in Kawasaki, Japan. The school has four departments: English Communication, Trading, Hotel/Bridal & Tourism, and Information & Communication Technology. All students are required to take the general English course, English Communication, as well as other courses related to external exams such as the TOEIC Test. Students are divided into five levels, from E on the low end (A1 on the CEFR levels), through to level A (B2 on the CEFR levels) on the high end, and these are determined upon entry to the college via

a combination of scores on the Trial TOEIC test and an internal placement test. All students who were enrolled in English language classes were given our survey, and of the total sample, 214 were received and usable.

Our Survey Instrument

Our survey (see appendix A) was based on an instrument developed by Littlewood (1999) to test a set of predictions about East Asian learners' attitudes toward their classroom environment. The predictions were drawn from three particular hypotheses emerging from cross-cultural research into East Asian cultures: such cultures are group-oriented, comfortable with differences in levels of authority, and have a strong belief that success is based on hard work. The ten items in the survey were grouped as follows:

1. Interdependence with other students (items 1-4): this refers to the sense among East Asian students that they are part of a group formed by the class, and that their particular learning needs are subservient to those of the group;
2. Awareness of status differences in the class (items 5-7): this refers to the sense that the teacher is the authority and source of knowledge;
3. Ambition to achieve and preparedness to put in a lot of effort for study (items 8-10): this refers to the strong belief that success in the language classroom depends on the amount of effort devoted to studying.

Participants answered the survey using a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 expressing total agreement with the item, and 1 expressing total disagreement, with 3 being the midpoint. Littlewood sought with his questionnaire to provide a sort of check on the hypotheses and predictions, a way to "falsify" sweeping claims in order to remind the reader that they were not always true and to avoid falling into stereotyping of learners. Our instrument followed this model closely, with only two major modifications made to the original survey.

The first modification was that we provided Japanese translations of all the survey content. We felt this necessary due to the low English level of some of the respondents. It was also hoped that the Japanese translations would facilitate a better understanding of the items even in mid- and high- level students.

The second modification made was an inclusion of metadata collection. We collected background information on general English levels, native and other spoken languages (with self-assessed proficiency), length of time spent at the college, gender, and nationality (see appendix A). We felt that this information was pertinent to our context, which was more international than Littlewood's original cohort of university students in Hong Kong.

Procedures and Analysis

The surveys were distributed in English Communication classes by native English-speaking teachers. Once distributed, students were given ten minutes to fill them in and return them. Students signed a consent form in English and Japanese specifying that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The data from the surveys was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and the data was then separated by nationality. Since classes were mixed between native Japanese speakers, and those with different native language backgrounds, we surveyed the whole population. For the current study, however, we narrowed the focus of our survey results to the Japanese subset of students only, in which there was a total of 123 students. This was done to draw comparisons to Littlewood's original, homogenous, cohort. As can be seen in Table 1, 78 of these were female and 43 male, with two respondents not assigning themselves a gender. In terms of English level, D-level students, who are approximately A2 on the CEFR levels, were the largest subset (32 students), while A-level, or B2 on the CEFR levels, were the smallest (15 students). Again, there were two students who chose not to disclose their English level.

TABLE 1

Breakdown of Respondents According to Gender and English Level

	Gender		Class						
	Male	Female	N/A	A	B	C	D	E	N/A
Number of respondents	43	78	2	15	23	25	32	26	2

The raw data collected was analyzed over several factors. Analysis of validity variances between Littlewood's initial findings and those of our students were performed using the *t*-test and the Mann-Whitney *U* test. Results can be viewed in the appendix section (Appendix B). ANOVA tests were also run between the individual questions to check for significance, with the significance levels set as $p < .05$. Additionally, answers to each item were expressed as a percentage of the total number of respondents, and then averaged for Mean Agreement. Moreover, items were analyzed in terms of the groupings mentioned above (interdependence with other students, awareness of status differences in the class, and ambition to achieve and preparedness to put in a lot of effort for study), in order to reveal patterns based on the hypotheses about East Asian learners revealed by cross-cultural research. Additionally, our data were analyzed for Mean and Standard Deviation in order to get a more accurate picture of our averages, and then in terms of the Mann Whitney *U* Test in order to determine the similarity of our surveyed population with that of Littlewood.

Results

In terms of the first item grouping, consisting of items that reveal a respondent's views of interdependence, our average level of agreement was below that of the students in Littlewood's original survey, although a similar positive view was observed (*Mean*: 3.42). As can be seen in Table 2, a statistically significant difference was observed between responses to items 1-3, all of which focused on participation in groups – our students agreed to a lesser extent than those in Littlewood's original survey. The fourth item, relating to voicing opinions and questions in the group context, revealed equivalent results.

TABLE 2

Comparison of Results from Our Survey and Littlewood's Survey (1999), in Terms of Views on Interdependence with Other Students

	Mean	
	our survey	Littlewood's survey
Q1	3.57	3.96
Q2	3.38	3.94
Q3	3.54	4.04
Q4	3.18	3.16

Referring to Table 3, it can be seen that the second grouping of items, those relating to the status of the teacher as an authority figure, elicited an overall negative response from students, and this was statistically similar to the previous survey conducted by Littlewood.

TABLE 3

Comparison of Results from Our Survey and Littlewood's Survey (1999), in Terms of Views on Status Difference

	Mean	
	our survey	Littlewood's survey
Q5	2.70	2.78
Q6	2.81	2.50
Q7	3.12	2.98

Finally, in the third grouping of items, concerning a strong belief in the connection between hard work and success, overall agreement was expressed by both survey populations. Notably, however, a statistically significant difference was observed in responses to items 8 and 10 (see Table 4), while item 9 obtained an almost identical result. Item 8 expressed the connection between motivation and the perceived practical value of learning tasks and our students agreed considerably more (4.05) than the original population (3.66). Item 10 related to a sense of pressure to perform in the classroom, and this was less important to our students (3.37) than those in Littlewood's original survey (3.82).

TABLE 4

Comparison of Results from Our Survey and Littlewood's Survey (1999), in Terms of Views on Ambition and Effort

	Mean	
	our survey	Littlewood's survey
Q8	4.05	3.66
Q9	3.69	3.48
Q10	3.37	3.82

Discussion

Our first research question aimed to establish the replicability of Littlewood's original survey results in our own context in Japan. Student responses were remarkably similar in both populations, a finding that supports Littlewood's contention that we should be cautious about making generalizations (Littlewood, 1999, p. 89). In this sense, the survey encourages a more enlightened view of any particular group of students, not as bound by their cultural context, or as stereotypical expressions of that context.

Nevertheless, certain statistically significant differences were revealed by our analysis. The first of these, observed in the set of items related to group work within the classroom, suggests that our students have a more individualistic attitude than the sample in Littlewood's original survey. However, it should be understood that our Japanese learners operate in a classroom environment that is not homogenous. The classes are generally made up of a variety of nationalities, although the majority of students are from Japan – a situation that might lower the sense of classroom cohesion. That said, a further suggestion of a more individualistic outlook emerges from the difference in answers to item 10 – our students were less concerned with performing well in front of their classmates than those in Littlewood's original survey – intimating that their focus is more oriented towards their own individual performance in relation to their own individual goals. This may suggest a Japanese subset within the greater East Asian cultural context, or may, on the other hand, be further evidence of a lack of a sense of togetherness within the classroom. These possibilities require further study in order to understand more clearly the factors at play.

The above findings are also consistent with previous research in Japan that revealed a desire on the part of Japanese high school students to be more autonomous despite their educational environment not allowing for a great deal of individual responsibility (Aoki & Smith, 1996, as cited in Littlewood, 1999, p. 72). One of Littlewood's main contentions is that East Asian students are not incapable of the proactive autonomy which, as he defines it, entails that learners take charge of such aspects as the choice of direction, execution, and evaluation of their learning; but rather that these aspects of autonomy are not typically supported by the educational context in which they find themselves. It might then be seen as one of the English language teacher's tasks to gradually progress towards proactive autonomy in their courses (Littlewood, 1999, p. 88). The authors of this paper suggest that further study might be devoted to understanding this process of developing greater proactive autonomy, especially in terms of the classroom activities that might encourage such transformation.

Regarding the difference in the results for item 8, associating motivation with the practical value of learning tasks, it is not surprising that students at a vocational college might be focused very much on the direct value their learning has on their chosen future careers. Our students often have specific goals, and

see English lessons as having practical value, especially in terms of either how they might use the language in their work, or how a high score on an exam of English might improve their job prospects. This may contrast with the population Littlewood surveyed, who were first-year tertiary students in a Hong Kong university, and potentially had a softer focus in terms of how their English studies might benefit them in the future.

Conclusion

This study aimed to replicate the results of a survey developed by Littlewood (1999), at a vocational college in Japan, and to draw conclusions about our own students' attitudes towards learner autonomy. Although the results in both surveys were remarkably similar, some statistically significant differences were found, especially in terms of the greater sense of individualism indicated by our own students, and their sharper focus on the applicability of their studies to their careers.

A number of implications for further research emerged from our study. Further research, and a more precise instrument, may help to refine the predictions Littlewood made broadly about East Asian culture into more focused predictions based on particular cultures within East Asia, while bearing in mind Littlewood's own cautions about making such generalizations and recognizing the reality of individual variations.

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand what particular activities can be employed in the East Asian classroom in order to foster a greater sense of proactive autonomy, and how those activities can be staged in an order of progression over time, allowing for greater and greater degrees of self-regulation.

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Appendix A

Our Survey

Class (授業): A B C D E Grade Year (学校年) : 1 / 2 / 3 / 4					
Semester you started (始まった学期) : Spring (春) / Fall (秋)					
Gender (性別) M (男) / F (女) / NA (無)					
Nationality (国籍): _____ Native Language (母国語): : _____					
Other languages you speak and how well you can use them (他の話せる言語またはそれぞれの言語のレベル)					
Language (言語) : _____ Beginner (初級) Intermediate (中級) Advanced (上級)					
	Compl etely Agree	Agree	Neutra l	Disagr ee	Compl etely Disagr ee
1. I like activities where I am part of a group which is working towards common goals. (共通の目的に向かい、グループの一員として取り組む活動が好き)。					
2. I like to take part in activities which involve discussion in a group. (グループ内での議論に加わるのが好き)					
3. When I am working in a group, I like to help maintain a sense of harmony in the group. (グループ内での議論に加わるのが好き)					
4. In the open classroom, I often feel hesitant to 'stand out' by voicing my opinions or questions. (授業中に自分の意見や質問を发表し、目立つことにためらいを感じる)					
5. In the classroom I see the teacher as an authority figure. (教室において先生は支配者だと思う)					
6. I tend to see knowledge as something to be 'transmitted' by the teacher rather than 'discovered by me as a learner.' (知識は学習者として自分で探し出すというより、先生から受け継ぐものだと考える傾向がある)					
7. I expect the teacher (rather than me myself) to be responsible for evaluating how much I have learnt. (自分の成果に対し、自分自身ではなく先生が評価するべきだと考える)					
8. I feel strong motivation to follow through learning tasks of which I perceive the practical value. (自分が実用的な価値があると見出した課題をこなす時、とてもやる気が出る)					

9. I feel more motivated to work when my own success contributes to the goals or prestige of significant groups (e.g. family, other students). (自分自身の成功が特定のグループ (家族、クラスメート等) の目的や評判に貢献する時、よりやる気を感じる)					
10. In the classroom I feel very concerned to perform well and correctly in what I do (教室内で何かをする時、正しく上手に やらなくてとはとても心配をする)					

Appendix B

Current Study's Questionnaire Results and Analysis Compared to Littlewood

Question	Compare	No	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mann-Whitney U test: asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Littlewood	50	16	64	20	0	0	3.96	0.60	0.005
	This Study	123	1.6	4.9	37	47	8.9	3.57	0.79	
2	Littlewood	50	16	62	22	0	0	3.94	0.62	0.000
	This Study	123	1.6	6.5	51	33	7.3	3.38	0.78	
3	Littlewood	50	32	42	24	2	0	4.04	0.81	0.001
	This Study	123	0.8	2.4	47	41	8.9	3.54	0.73	
4	Littlewood	50	4	30	44	22	0	3.16	0.82	0.936
	This Study	123	2.4	17	49	24	8.1	3.18	0.90	
5	Littlewood	50	0	18	42	40	0	2.78	0.74	0.638
	This Study	123	8.9	32	43	13	3.3	2.70	0.92	
6	Littlewood	50	0	22	28	40	10	2.50	0.95	0.238
	This Study	123	5.7	27	53	9.8	4.9	2.81	0.87	
7	Littlewood	50	4	22	44	28	2	2.98	0.87	0.280
	This Study	123	2.4	15	53	26	3.3	3.12	0.80	

8	Littlewood	50	6	56	36	2	0	3.66	0.63	0.003
	This Study	123	0.8	1.6	22	43	33	4.05	0.83	
9	Littlewood	50	14	40	30	12	4	3.48	1.01	0.332
	This Study	123	1.6	2.4	40	37	19	3.69	0.86	
10	Littlewood	50	20	50	22	8	0	3.82	0.85	0.003
	This Study	123						3.37	0.92	