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Seven Elements for Learner Autonomy: Querying Good English Learners in Samurai-Style Education

Keiichi Akaishi
Nihon University

Whenever I felt like a sneak or a cad, my dagger used to cry out, — "Shame on you!"

Nitobe (Akaishi, 2010, p. 27)

Introduction

The argument for learner autonomy in the study of foreign language (FL) learning could be considered to have emerged from the maturity or impasse of research on language learning/learner strategies (LLSs). This academic domain, which had been one of the central issues of modern study on good language learners (GLLs) in the 1980s–1990s, appears to have boiled down to the following points: LLSs of GLLs are not much different from those of poor language learners (PLLs) (Chamot, 1987); however, there are differences between the two in terms of quality and quantity (Griffiths, 2003), and a self-regulating capacity influences the use of LLSs (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006). Self-regulation in cognitive psychology has often been used synonymously with autonomy (Wenden, 1998). Autonomy is by nature metacognitive (Victori & Rockhart, 1995), motivated (Dickinson, 1995), social, and individual (Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001).

Autonomy ought to be considered requisite in learning a FL, all the more because it is literally foreign (i.e., not used in a learner's country), and also because, in order to achieve a measure of success in learning a FL (a set of habits that we learn and internalize over time), it is indispensable to maintain the quantity of learning and to improve the quality of learning in and outside of classrooms. Autonomy, the regulator of quantity and quality, is surely a high-priority issue in learning a FL.

In this report, the controversial term "autonomy" refers to conditions for self-regulation, or "the self-directed process" (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 1) of learning equivalent to that of the metacognitive cluster of planning, monitoring, and evaluating (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Autonomy has mainly been regarded as an ability to decide by oneself and take responsibility for learning (Holec, 1981), but is also an attitude to behave in this way (Dickinson, 1995). It appears to be so situational as to be mere ability, while too accumulative to be only attitude; that is, it consists of two features that are as inseparable as the two sides of a coin: maturity and function. The reason why autonomy is achieved differently inter/intra-individually is because autonomy matures in different environments and functions in different situations. The difference between GLLs and PLLs in FL learning is defined by the quality and quantity of self-regulation. Scrutinizing the course of discussions of learner autonomy, the following three conceptual

elements can be considered indispensable for autonomy to mature and function: socialization, metacognition, and motivation.

Socialization

Socialization is the process by which people come to behave in various ways that are acceptable in their societies. People are socialized to meet the requirements and ideals of the society they belong to (Harter, 1999) and may gain strategies cued by people around them such as parents or teachers (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Metacognition is developed through socialization, in which people learn the language and standards of their society, whereas motivation is triggered by socialization and, in some cases, with another objective in mind.

Metacognition

Metacognition is "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them, e.g., the learning-relevant properties of information or data" (Flavell, 1976, p. 232). Previous studies indicate that metacognition is an extension of cognitive development and is synchronized with language proficiency (e.g., Harter, 1999; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). By four to six years of age, people can generally plan, monitor, and evaluate their ability (Higgins, 1991). Metacognitive development, in other words, can be seen as being related to "how the subject becomes progressively able to know objects adequately, that is, how he becomes capable of objectivity" (Piaget, 1970, p. 704), and language is indispensable for the accuracy of objectification. Metacognition, therefore, would not develop without socialization.

Motivation

Motivation involves "what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, and to persist in action" (Ushioda, 2008, p. 19). An essential part of motivation can be said to be interest, or continuous concern with the self (Dewey, 1913), and is seen as being related not only to cognition but also to affect (Renninger, 2000). People can be motivated to do something when possible selves are imagined (Markus & Nurius, 1986), when people experience self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), or when people are given the liberty to make decisions regarding their behavior (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Freer use of metacognition or objectification should enable people to more accurately evaluate their real selves, to imagine their possible selves more vividly, to analyze the discrepancy between real self and possible selves, and to select the best strategy to fill the discrepancy between the real self and the ideal/ought self. People would occasionally require yet another motivation enhancer from something, somebody, or themselves. Motivation, therefore, will not come to be without socialization or metacognition.

Purpose and Method

There has been little research on the elements of autonomy in learning a FL, or what elements are needed for autonomy to mature and function. Therefore, the need for validated measurement scales for assessing learner autonomy (see the discussion in Lai, 2001) remains unmet. The aim of this report is to propose a systematic diagram of learner autonomy elements or variables according to which the degree of maturation and function of learner autonomy varies. This study analyzes the retrospective data of a group of GLLs of English as a FL in Japan, which were collected in Akaishi (2010). The data are derived from 70 graduates of Sapporo Agricultural College (SAC) 1880-1885 from birth to graduation from the college at an average of 22 years of age.

They were originally sons of samurai or quasi-samurai—e.g., heads of villages, rich farmers, or wealthy

merchants who were permitted to follow a code of samurai—families, who made up the ruling class at the end of the Edo period (1603-1868), when there were around 280 feudal domains under the reign of the Tokugawa family. They grew up under the samurai ethos called *bushido*, in which children were regarded as future leaders of their domains and were disciplined to meet the demands required of this position. In school, they were mainly engaged in *sodoku*, the primary stage of *Kangaku*, or Chinese Studies in which they read Chinese classics in Japanese by changing the order of words and adding Japanese particles and verbal inflections. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, however, the new government chose a policy of Westernization to remain independent both economically and militarily, and so the graduates were expected to achieve a level equivalent to Western countries in academic and technical fields. They began to study *Eigaku*, or English Studies, in which they learned Western knowledge in English, firstly from Japanese teachers and native speakers and thereafter mostly in immersive settings. They then obtained their higher education at SAC, which was established by the Japanese Government in 1876 and modeled after Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst, MA, U.S.A. At SAC, they were taught a wide variety of subjects in English ranging from science to literature; the teachers were generally the president or graduates of Massachusetts Agricultural College. The students were gathered from all over the country in order to be leaders of their department, region, or nation.

The graduates were chosen as data suppliers in this report not only because they were well-known for their high English proficiency during their 10-year education in Japan starting in their early teens (see Akaishi, 2010, pp. 18-20, for discussion on the proficiency), but also because it is difficult to find a group of GLLs who are contextually homogeneous or have almost the same language learning variables for both their L1 and target FL, especially in the present day, when learning conditions are hugely diverse.

This retrospective documentary approach, however, has a limitation: The amount of data depends on the quantity of retrospective documents provided by suppliers and collected by a researcher. Although the data used in the present study are not complete enough to allow for quantification, they are sufficient for a qualitative analysis to discuss learner autonomy.

Results and Discussion

Seven elements of learner autonomy—experience, language, model, standards, respect, responsibility, and encouragement—were extracted from the data in the form of practical elements under the three abovementioned conceptual elements of learner autonomy—socialization, metacognition, and motivation (see Figure 1). The reasons why these seven elements were induced are discussed in each respective section. An excerpt from the data collected is demonstrated at the top of each section as a sample.
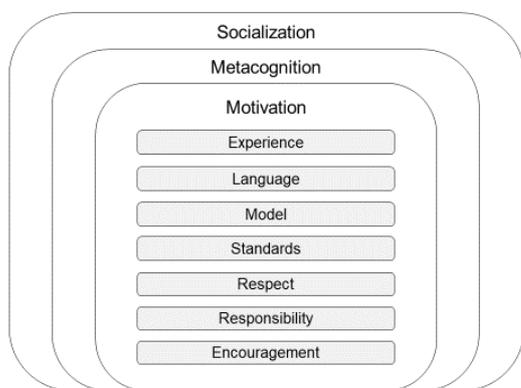

Figure 1. Diagram of learner autonomy elements. Three conceptual elements are represented as three large boxes. The largest symbolizes socialization and encompasses the other two. The second largest, metacognition, encompasses the category of motivation. Seven practical elements are displayed as grey bars in the motivation box. These are considered to be more-or-less related to the three conceptual elements.

Experience

> I learned *sodoku* through *Shisho-Gokyo*[1] from elders at *Kifunjo*[2] located in a castle, calligraphy from Tadato Ota, one of my father's leading students, and horsemanship—riding a wooden horse every morning and evening—from Denya Nitobe, a master of the Otsubo school,[3] who lived next door. I also learned *kendo* and *judo* from elders or masters…. I was busy with kite-flying in spring, fishing in summer, mushroom picking in fall, and ice-skating in winter. This is a memory when I was at my 12th or 13th year of age directly before or after the Meiji Restoration.
>
> *S. Sato* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 55)

The data show that the graduates were motivated to accumulate a wide variety of experiences and, consequently, the knowledge acquired through them. They were supposed to study numerous words and deeds of great people in the history of China and Japan, and to play both indoors and outdoors; moreover, they later learned in English various subjects and activities both in and outside the classroom. People develop strategies for self-regulated learning through both invention and instruction in daily life (Paris, Newman, & Jacobs, 1985). The wider the experiences that people have, or the more varied their cognitive and emotional experiences, the more they can feel, memorize, and think about them.

Language

> Till I entered SAC, I had boarded with a well-known scholar of the Chinese classics, Mr. Shigeaki Gamo, while going to the Preparatory Department of Tokyo University in the daytime. Mr. Gamo disliked my studying English because he still discriminated against Western people at that time... Although I did not feel like abandoning English study, I read *Kaikokuheidan*[4] by Shihei Hayashi on his advice and felt strongly the strategic necessity of defending Hokkaido against the encroachment of Russia.
>
> *Zumoto* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 88)

The data show that the graduates were required to master language: their first language and a target FL. They were supposed to pursue Chinese Studies, where they learned Chinese classics in Japanese, and later received education in English Studies, where they learned Western knowledge in English. The development of language ability can lead people to form stories about "how things are, how they might have come to be that way, and where they might be going" (Bruner, 1996, p. 92). The richer the language, or the higher the proficiency of language people have in either their first language or target FLs, the more they can understand, contemplate, and express things logically.

Model

> Because it was right after the new era began, we were driven by ambition and talked a lot about our dreams of participating in constructing a new nation: becoming a minister or vice-minister; laying long rails like Sengoku Mitsugi; directing our energy to engineering like Koi Furuichi.
>
> *Hayakawa* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 123)

The data show that the graduates were surrounded by significant models. They were supposed to learn how their models succeed or succeeded by imitating the same activities as their models and by listening to or reading stories about their models, who were Japanese or Chinese, and later included Westerners.

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[1] *Shisho-Gokyo* is a set of two collections of Chinese classics called *Four Books* and *Five Classics* in English.
[2] *Kifunjo* was the domain school of the Morioka domain at that time in present-day Miyagi Prefecture.
[3] Otsubo school is one of the classical schools of horsemanship in Japan.
[4] *Kaikokuheidan* is sixteen volumes of books on the national defense of Japan, first published in 1787.

Adults are good models of competence for children (Schunk, 1987). The closer people feel models are to their mind, the more they can idealize the models concretely, and reflect upon the ways they can become more like the model.

Standards

> In our youth, *genpuku*, attainment of manhood, was celebrated when a man born in a samurai family reached his 15th year, at which time we had to go to a castle and execute the necessary formalities. Although the education system was not well organized at that time, we tended to speak as if we were adults. For we had read Chinese classics like *Shisho* from our 8th or 9th year although we did not understand the meaning well.
>
> *Nitobe* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 53)

The data show that the graduates were expected to think, speak, and act under the clear standards of organization and society they belonged to. They were supposed to observe the standards as one in the upper class of their domain, and later Western standards as leaders in their nation. People actively process social information, "seeking norms or guidelines to define appropriate behavior and to evaluate themselves" (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980, p. 105). The clearer standards people have, the more they are conscious of the standards spontaneously, and can examine how they should reach the standards, or acquire confidence in their way of doing so.

Respect

> The new college [SAC] started in September and Dr. Clark became the president. Several boys joined us from the preparatory English school in Sapporo. The rules and regulations of the preparatory department were shown and interpreted to the president. He simply laughed and said, "These rules and regulations can not make men: they should be abolished at once, and I will give only two words in their place, 'Be gentlemen.'" From the next day, we all felt that we were treated as gentlemen, and even some naughty ones began to have self-respect.
>
> *Oshima* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 128)

The data show that the graduates were highly respected as promising youths. They were supposed to be esteemed by their families, neighbors, and occasionally teachers as members of the upper class, and later as leaders of their nation, and even by teachers from Western countries, especially in college. When people are respected by others, they strengthen self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). The more respect people have, the more they can attempt to meet expectations critically, and weigh how they can be a person who deserves respect or gain confidence in their way of winning respect.

Responsibility

> My elder brother lived as a servant in the dormitory for foreigners, which was called *Kyoshikan*, in which the SAC teachers, such as Clark, Wheeler, Penhallow, and so on, lived. I lived with my elder brother and I was asked to be a substitute as an interpreter whenever my brother was unavailable. I accordingly came to be good at English.
>
> *Kojima* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 84)

The data show that the graduates were given responsibility for their life decisions. They were supposed to carry the responsibility of their duties as members of the upper class and were later granted liberty in making as many decisions as possible by teachers from Western countries, especially in college. GLLs intentionally devise and choose their learning environment and opportunities (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

The more direct responsibility people have, the more they can pay attention to their decisions, and judge how they can perform their duties, so as to constantly facilitate acquisition of knowledge slightly beyond their current level, if their choices for learning environments are appropriate.

Encouragement

> When I was at my 7th or 8th year of age, our family temporarily lived in Numazu…. My mother always saw me off at the gates of the castle in the morning sunlight and kept standing on the bank watching me go alone to school. My mother sometimes visited the school and took some lecture notes in the next room.
>
> *T. Watase* (Akaishi, 2010, p. 57)

The data show that graduates were strongly encouraged to be great people. They were supposed to be energized by their families, neighbors, and occasionally teachers to satisfactorily do their duty as upper-class members of their domains, and later as national leaders, even by teachers from Western countries, especially in college. Verbal persuasion can heighten one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). The more sincerely people are encouraged, the more they can reconsider positively how they can reach the goal, even if they had once given up doing so due to belief that the process would be long and difficult.

Conclusion

All seven elements discussed above can be gained either individually, without interaction with other persons, or socially through interaction with other persons. Each is gained in a wide variety of ways that create opportunities for learners to objectify things, others, and themselves more multilaterally and comprehensively, which plays a significant role in accurately evaluating real selves, imagining possible selves vividly, analyzing the discrepancy between the real self and possible selves, and selecting the best strategy to fill the discrepancy between the real self and the ideal/ought self.

Autonomy matures and functions better when learners have wider experiences, richer language, models closer to themselves, clearer standards, deeper respect, more direct responsibility, and sincerer encouragement. These elements should all be involved in an "autonomy-supportive society," which would "promote the experience of interest, the development of enduring interests, and the integration of regulations" (Deci, 1992, p. 61). The maturation and function of learner autonomy should require a long-term elaboration under common standards beyond various levels of communities such as family, neighbors, or school to which learners belong.

For FL learners to study the target language more effectively and efficiently, each kind of environment surrounding them, such as their family, neighbors, schools, or nation, should provide them with opportunities to accumulate a wide variety of experiences through materials and activities using the target language, to develop abilities in both their L1 and the target language, to find models closer to mind who are or were proficient in the target language or who have achieved their goals by taking advantage of ability in the target language, to know clear standards for the achievement of the target language in both short-term and long-term goals, to feel respected as future target-language masters, to take responsibilities and to excuse others in accordance with needs and ability in the target language, and to receive encouragement about learning the target language.

Acknowledgements

The Author

Keiichi Akaishi is an Associate Professor at Nihon University, College of Engineering. He has been engaged in good language learner studies while focusing on a group of good English learners in early Meiji Japan.

English Department
College of Engineering
Nihon University
1 Nakagawara, Tokusada, Tamura, Koriyama, Fukushima, Japan
Email: akaishi.keiichi@nihon-u.ac.jp

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