Examining Learner Autonomy Dimensions: Students' Perceptions of Their Responsibility and Ability

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This paper was written to clarify misconceptions that East Asian students are somehow less autonomous than learners from other cultural backgrounds. Specifically, based on motivational levels, it examines Japanese university students' perceptions of their responsibility and ability of autonomous English learning and what they can do inside and outside the classroom. Three hundred and ninety-nine students from seven universities in Japan answered a 22-item questionnaire adapted from a recent study on learner autonomy. The results show that students, regardless of motivational level, have the same perceptions of responsibility to carry out the autonomous learning tasks. However, with regard to ability, highly motivated students tend to perceive themselves as being capable of being more involved in their own learning than unmotivated students. Nevertheless, they often do not act on these feelings due to a perception that it is the teacher's responsibility or from a lack of confidence. Pedagogical implications are considered and suggestions on further studies are encouraged.

東アジア圏の学生は、欧米などの他の文化圏の学生に比べて自律的な学習を行わないと言われることがあるが、本稿は、日本人の大学生の英語の自律学習（学習者オートノミー）に関する能力と責任意識、及び実際に教室の内外でどのような自律学習を行っているかを学習意欲の程度別に調査した結果をまとめたものである。7大学399名から収集した自律学習に関するアンケート調査によると、大学生は学習意欲の程度にかかわらず自律学習を行う責任意識に関して同じ認識を持っていたが、自律学習を行う能力に関しては学習意欲の高い学生は低い学生より自信を持っていた。以上の結果を踏まえながら、英語教育において自律性を高める提案に加えて研究の必要性についても言及する。

Background of the Study

This research is based on a study conducted by Holden and Usuki (1999), which attempted to correct the misconception that Japanese students are somehow less "autonomous" than learners from other cultural backgrounds. While their study utilized 10 open-ended interview questions to elicit students' responses for their attitudes toward and beliefs about learning, their expectations of themselves, and their expectations of their teachers in the learning process, our study used a survey questionnaire adapted from the one utilized by Ustunluoglu (2009) in Turkey. This questionnaire contains items which elicited students' perceptions of their responsibilities and what they were capable of accomplishing inside and outside the classroom. In short, our study focuses on determining students' perceptions of the two main dimensions of learner autonomy as described by Littlewood (1999): responsibility and ability.

Responsibility is a major dimension of learner autonomy and is seen as one of the two main features of learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). One of Littlewood's main points is that students should take responsibility for their own learning because only the students themselves can carry out all the learning in the end. In addition, they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education. The second point defines taking responsibility as learners taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods, and evaluating the process. *Ability*, as another dimension of learner autonomy utilized in this study, refers to students' capability of accomplishing those many processes or tasks previously mentioned. The development of this ability is necessary for students to take responsibility for their own learning (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Scharle and Szabo also explained that motivation is an important building block of responsibility. They specifically emphasized intrinsic motivation, which Deci and Ryan (1985) define as the performance of a task for its own sake, and valuing rewards gained through the process of task completion, regardless of any external rewards. As far as this study is concerned, the perceptions of students according to their motivational levels are the main focus. The specific questions it sought to answer are:

- What are highly motivated students' perceptions of responsibility and ability to carry out the autonomous learning tasks?
- What are motivated students' perceptions of responsibility and ability to carry out the autonomous learning tasks?
- What are unmotivated students' perceptions of their responsibility and ability to carry out the autonomous learning tasks?

Aside from clarifying the misconceptions that Japanese students are somehow less autonomous than learners from other cultural backgrounds, the results hope to: (1) add insights into the role of motivation in promoting learner autonomy; (2) support the ongoing Ministry of Education revisions of English education policy that focuses on learner autonomy; and (3) provide an understanding of learner perceptions of current teaching practices that reflect learner autonomy dimensions.

Method

Participants

A total of 399 participants from seven universities in Japan were involved in this research. These participants were first, second and third year students with varying majors. Ninety-three self-identified themselves as being highly motivated, 232 as motivated and 74 as unmotivated. At the time the questionnaire was conducted, these participants were taking English courses, either as part of their requirements as an English major or as a required basic English course in the case of non-English majors.

Instrumentation

Ustunluoglu (2009) designed and conducted the questionnaire to investigate the perceptions of university students and teachers regarding students' responsibilities and abilities related to autonomous learning, and the autonomous activities students were engaged in inside and outside the classroom in Turkey. The study focused especially on the changes in the perceptions about responsibilities, abilities and the actual activities according to their motivational level and gender. The present study adapted the questionnaire by focusing only on examining the perceptions of university students (grouped according to motivational level) regarding their responsibilities and abilities related to autonomous learning.

The questionnaire contains a total of 20 statements and is divided into three sections. Sections 1 and 2 each consist of 10 statements. The former section relates to respondents' perceptions of responsibility and the latter to those of ability. Statement 1 in Section 1 and Statement 11 in Section 2 correspond in content and both ask about ensuring students' progress during English lessons. Statement 1 in Section 1, however, asks who should take this responsibility, while Statement 11 in Section 2 inquires how well (ability) respondents can check such progress. Response choices for Section 1 are "Yours", "Your Teacher's" or "Both". Responses in Section 2 were scored from 1 ("Very Poor") to 5 ("Very Good") on a Likert scale. For ease of interpretation, the data were collapsed into a three-point scale. For example, data for "Very Poor" and "Poor" were merged and labeled as "Poor." Section 3 contains items that ask for students' personal data, such as year level and motivational level. In regard to motivational level, students had to check whether they thought they were "Highly Motivated," "Motivated," or "Unmotivated".

The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and was checked for clarity and accuracy by two Japanese professors of English. To ensure the comprehensibility of the questionnaire, it was administered to a test group of university students and was then revised and finalized based on their feedback.

Results

Table 1 shows the students' perceptions of their responsibility according to motivation. Regardless of motivational levels, a majority of the students perceived learning outside the class as their responsibility (HM= 78%, M= 76%, UM= 71%). As far as making progress during English lessons is concerned, a majority of Highly Motivated (HM) students (55%) and Motivated (M) students (57%), while a higher percentage of Unmotivated (UM) students (49%) thought that it is the responsibility of both the students and the teachers. Also, a higher percentage of all the three groups of respondents (between 40% to 49%) perceived stimulating interest, identifying weakness, and deciding class objectives are their responsibility and that of their teachers. In regard to deciding objectives of the class, UM respondents were split in their responses. Forty-five percent perceived it as the teacher's responsibility while the other 45% thought it is the responsibility of both the students and teachers. Concerning perceptions of responsibility for deciding what to learn, the data reveal an agreement by a higher percentage of the HM (49%), M (46%) and UM (49%) respondents that this activity is the responsibility of the teachers (see Table 1). In regard to choosing activities, deciding how long to spend on activities, choosing materials, and evaluating learning, a majority of HM, M and UM respondents perceived these activities as the responsibility of the teachers, too.

The data in Table 2 reveal that overall, HM perceived their ability to perform all 10 tasks to be OK, but leaning toward Good. M students' perceptions were also OK, with no tendency to lean toward either Poor or Good. UM students' perceptions of their ability to do the same tasks were split between Poor and OK. More specifically, HM students thought they could accom-

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Responsibility According to Motivational Level

Autonomy-Related Tasks	Student's Responsibility			Teacher's Responsibility			Both		
	HM n(%)	M n(%)	UM n(%)	HM n(%)	M n(%)	UM n(%)	HM n(%)	M n(%)	UM n(%)
Q1 Making progress during Eng. lessons	32(35%)	74(32%)	28(38%)	9(10%)	25(11%)	9(12%)	**51(55%)**	**131(57%)**	**36(49%)**
Q2 Ensuring progress outside class	**73(78%)**	**175(76%)**	**52(71%)**	7(8%)	17(7%)	9(12%)	13(14%)	38(17%)	12(16%)
Q3 Stimulating interest	24(26%)	35(15%)	6(8%)	31(34%)	83(36%)	35(48%)	**37(40%)**	**112(49%)**	**32(44%)**
Q4 Identifying weakness	38(41%)	95(41%)	31(42%)	14(15%)	22(10%)	9(12%)	**40(43%)**	**113(49%)**	**33(45%)**
Q5 Deciding objectives of class	17(18%)	27(12%)	7(10%)	34(37%)	96(42%)	**33(45%)**	**41(45%)**	**107(47%)**	**33(45%)**
Q6 Deciding what to learn next in lessons	12(13%)	28(12%)	6(8%)	**45(49%)**	**105(46%)**	**35(49%)**	35(38%)	95(42%)	31(43%)
Q7 Choosing activities to use in lessons	5(5%)	22(10%)	3(4%)	**50(54%)**	**120(52%)**	**42(58%)**	37(40%)	88(38%)	28(38%)
Q8 Deciding how long to spend on activity	15(16%)	33(14%)	11(15%)	**56(60%)**	**132(57%)**	**39(54%)**	22(24%)	66(29%)	22(31%)
Q9 Choosing materials to use in lessons	7(8%)	13(6%)	6(8%)	**61(66%)**	**173(75%)**	**49(67%)**	25(27%)	45(19%)	18(25%)
Q10 Evaluating learning	4(4%)	10(4%)	4(5%)	**49(53%)**	**117(51%)**	**43(59%)**	39(42%)	102(45%)	26(36%)

HM = Highly Motivated, M = Motivated, UM = Unmotivated

n = total number of respondents

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of their Ability According to Motivational Level

Autonomous-Related Tasks	Highly Motivated			Motivated			Unmotivated		
	Poor n(%)	OK n(%)	Good n(%)	Poor n(%)	OK n(%)	Good n(%)	Poor n(%)	OK n(%)	Good n(%)
Q1 Making progress during Eng. lessons	21(22%)	**43(46%)**	29(31%)	60(26%)	**148(64%)**	23(10%)	**36(50%)**	30(41%)	7(9%)
Q2 Ensuring progress outside class	19(20%)	**47(51%)**	27(29%)	70(30%)	**125(54%)**	36(16%)	**34(46%)**	33(45%)	7(9%)
Q3 Stimulating interest	8(9%)	**52(56%)**	33(36%)	40(17%)	**147(64%)**	44(19%)	30(41%)	**34(47%)**	9(12%)
Q4 Identifying weakness	10(11%)	**44(47%)**	39(42%)	47(20%)	**126(55%)**	58(25%)	31(43%)	**35(48%)**	7(9%)
Q5 Deciding objectives of class	26(28%)	**41(44%)**	26(28%)	77(34%)	**128(55%)**	26(12%)	**33(45%)**	32(44%)	8(11%)
Q6 Deciding what to learn next in lessons	17(18%)	**47(51%)**	29(32%)	70(30%)	**123(53%)**	38(17%)	**36(49%)**	27(37%)	10(14%)
Q7 Choosing activities to use in lessons	17(18%)	27(29%)	**48(52%)**	67(29%)	**125(54%)**	39(17%)	**33(45%)**	32(44%)	8(11%)
Q8 Deciding how long to spend on activity	12(13%)	**46(49%)**	35(38%)	68(29%)	**128(55%)**	35(15%)	30(41%)	**34(47%)**	9(12%)
Q9 Choosing materials to use in lessons	10(11%)	30(32%)	**53(57%)**	55(23%)	**106(46%)**	70(30%)	28(39%)	**35(48%)**	10(13%)
Q10 Evaluating learning	15(16%)	**47(51%)**	31(34%)	58(25%)	**132(57%)**	41(18%)	36(31%)	**41(56%)**	9(12%)

HM = Highly Motivated, M = Motivated, UM = Unmotivated

n = total number of respondents

plish two tasks well, namely choosing activities and materials to use in lessons.

Discussion

What are highly motivated, motivated, and unmotivated students' perceptions of responsibility to carry out the autonomous learning tasks?

The results of this study suggest that despite differences in motivation levels, highly motivated, motivated, and unmotivated students showed little to no variation in their responses to the set of 10 questions based on responsibilities. However, there are many underlying points of interest that are worth discussing in relation to how students responded to specific questions related to responsibilities.

Interestingly, the only case where a majority of students in all three motivation levels felt the responsibility lies with the learners themselves was in response to Question 2 (Q2), ensuring learning outside the classroom. This may be a false perception or misunderstanding among student beliefs. The students may feel that the only reason it is their responsibility to continue learning outside the classroom is the obvious fact that the teacher is not present. Additionally, students may assume it is their responsibility, but may or may not act upon that responsibility and engage in autonomous learning. In his study, Ustunluoglu (2009) suggests that students do perceive themselves as motivated, but they neither look for nor are willing to engage in activities outside the classroom. However, this claim seems to contradict the findings of Dickinson (1995) and Fazey and Fazey (2001), who emphasize the importance of motivation in which students will accept more responsibility if they feel they have more control over the outcomes. This may depend on how motivated the students are, either intrinsically or extrinsically. Unmotivated students in our study might confirm Ustunluoglu's suggestion, but motivated and highly motivated students could easily support Dickinson, and Fazey and Fazey. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether the students in our study were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, and further research is needed. However, one suggestion that can be made based on the results of this present study is that teachers should encourage students to be intrinsically motivated. Scharle and Szabo (2000) support this by stating that motivation is a prerequisite for learning and responsibility alike and that encouraging intrinsic motivation, which can be gained through autonomous learning and self-determination, can make students take on more responsibility for their learning outcomes. Scharle and Szabo further contend that motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other. As far as control of learning outcomes is concerned, it is suggested that teachers should allow students to make important academic choices (McCombs, 2012). Having choices allows them to feel that they have control or ownership over their own learning. This, in turn, helps them develop a sense of responsibility and self-motivation.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the perceptions of the responsibility of both the students and the teachers. The findings reveal that, overall, students, regardless of motivational level, were able to show some understanding of autonomy by responding to Q1, Q3, Q4, and Q5 as being the responsibility of both the teachers and the students. The students felt that questions referring to assessment and setting learning goals should be shared equally with teachers, which demonstrates an aspect of autonomy supported by Littlewood (1999) and Sakai, Chu, Takagi and Lee (2008), who surmise that taking responsibility involves learners taking some control of the learning process usually overseen by the teacher, including deciding learning objectives and assessing learning outcomes. The responses made by the students seem to show that motivation has no influence on their perception of assessing learning and deciding goals as all three groups of students responded the same to each ques-

tion. However, the fact that every student demonstrated some capacity for autonomy indicates some contradiction to previous research on East Asian learners. For example, Healey (1999) states that learner self-direction and autonomous learning are Western concepts. This would imply that our students are incapable of being autonomous, but from our study a more accurate claim would be that they are capable of autonomous learning, but have limitations. Holden and Usuki (1999) support this by concluding that Japanese learners specifically are no less autonomous than other learners with different cultural backgrounds. They further explained that educational and behavioral norms and goals for language study in Japan have created an environment in which learner autonomy is implicitly discouraged. Littlewood (1999) further supports this by claiming that East Asian learners have the same aptitude for autonomy as Western learners if they are given the right training and teachers promote an environment where learner autonomy is encouraged.

In responding to questions related to class management (Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10), students in general, regardless of motivational level, felt the responsibility lay with the teachers. This perception of teacher responsibility seems to fall in line with conclusions made about East Asian learners. In studies by Holden and Usuki (1999), Littlewood (1999), and Sakai et al. (2008), a common perception is that East Asian students tend to strongly accept that teachers are the authority figures, and in that, they are responsible for making the majority of the decisions regarding student learning. Another study in Hong Kong by Chan (2003), further supports these claims by stating that no teacher reported asking students to be involved in deciding on materials, activities, or learning objectives. What we may conclude then from the related studies and from the responses made in our research is that the students are capable of taking responsibility (responses to Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10) for their learning, yet they surrender most of the tasks to the teachers. Thus, there is a strong need for teachers to encourage more student responsibility by assisting students to become more aware of the importance of their roles in making decisions regarding their learning. Research by Scharle and Sazbo (2000), supports this by saying both autonomy and responsibility need active involvement; therefore, in order for learners to develop a sense of responsibility, they need encouragement from teachers to realize that success in learning is the responsibility of both the teacher and student.

What are highly motivated, motivated, and unmotivated students' perceptions of their ability to carry out the autonomous learning tasks?

The results reveal clear discrepancies in student perceptions of their abilities. While HM and M student perceptions of their ability are OK, leaning toward Good (OK and Good), those of UM are split between OK and Poor, but leaning toward Poor (OK and Poor). As previously mentioned, it seems that students understand what autonomy is, and they know what they are capable of doing, but they do not have confidence in their ability to take responsibility for their learning. Therefore, the need to show students, regardless of motivational level, that they can achieve on their own and to teach them learning strategies, can lead to greater autonomous learning.

Regarding Q2, ensuring learning outside the classroom, a majority of the students said it is their responsibility, yet their perception of their ability to do this activity is only OK (Highly Motivated, Motivated students) or Poor (Unmotivated students). HM and M students should feel confident enough to do this activity, yet they do not (only OK), which suggests that they lack the training to match their motivation. Holden and Usuki (1999) support this idea in their research by acknowledging that students have an awareness of various meta-cognitive or communicative language learning strategies, but that their ability to fully integrate this knowledge into practical use often falters. Specifically, Holden and Usuki go on to say, "students have a

conception of themselves as independent learners and have meta-cognitive awareness of various means which can be used to facilitate learning, but are unclear about how to actually apply this knowledge to the task of learning." The findings of this study suggest then that if HM and M students are given more training on how to apply what they have been taught, their perception of their ability to accomplish not only learning activities, but individual goals, will greatly increase.

As far as UM students are concerned, they lack confidence in their ability to do activities where the greatest responsibility for learning takes place, such as making progress in class, ensuring learning outside of class, deciding learning objectives, choosing activities, and planning for future classes. In other words, they have little confidence in their ability where it matters most. For UM students in particular, the need to teach them the importance of meta-cognitive strategies, and to develop their abilities, is highly necessary. Scharle and Szabo (2000) pointed out that the development of this ability is necessary for students to take responsibility for their own learning. They also emphasized the need to develop intrinsic motivation because intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify with the goals of learning, and that makes them more willing to take responsibility for the outcome. The findings of this study suggest that unmotivated students are most in need of the teacher's guidance in developing their abilities, which is necessary for taking more responsibility for their learning. They also need the most training and reinforcement of meta-cognitive strategies in order to better understand how important their involvement is for their learning.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

This research project attempted to build on the work of researchers in several countries to map the dimensions of learner autonomy. This particular paper focuses on the Japanese university context and explains students' perceptions of their responsibilities and abilities in relation to their own language learning with special attention put on the effect of overall motivation. Nearly 400 respondents at various universities around Japan have participated in this study so far.

The results show that students, regardless of motivational level, had the same perceptions of responsibility in regard to autonomous learning tasks. The only autonomous-related task they felt they could carry out by themselves was ensuring progress outside the class. Four tasks were perceived to be the responsibility of both the students and the teachers, while five were thought to be the responsibility of the teachers.

As far as ability to carry out the autonomous-related tasks, the findings reveal that HM, M and UM students alike felt they were somewhat capable of performing those tasks. Students understood what autonomy was, and they knew what they were capable of doing, but they did not have confidence in their ability to take responsibility for their learning including the HM and M students.

It can be concluded that students at various levels of motivation perceive themselves as being capable of being more involved in their own learning. However, students often do not act on these feelings due to a perception that it is the teacher's responsibility or from a lack of confidence. This is good news for educators; according to the data in this study, there is ample room in the typical Japanese university classroom for opportunities to change direction for students taking more responsibilities for their own learning. This should include educating and training students in learning strategies to narrow the gap between their perceived abilities and the learning responsibilities they take on.

More work needs to be done to flesh out this study to confirm the results, add qualitative data, and further experimentation to attempt to influence the dimensions of student autonomy

through instruction. The data currently has just under 400 participants, but the intended number is 1000, which will make the results more valid. It is hoped other researchers will independently reproduce the questionnaire and study in a similar East Asian teaching context such as South Korea. This study has produced a large amount of quantitative data, which needs to be more clearly interpreted with the addition of qualitative data through interviews to more clearly ascertain the students' reasons for their beliefs. Furthermore, the underlying reason for this study is to ultimately find ways to foster autonomy. Classroom action research based on the findings above needs to be done to see how teachers can positively influence the learning environment.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Section 1. RESPONSIBILITIES

In this course, whose responsibility should it be?

	Yours	Your Teacher's	Both
1. to ensure you make progress during English lessons			
2. to ensure you make progress outside class			
3. to stimulate your interest in learning English			
4. to identify your weaknesses in English			
5. to decide the objectives of your English course			
6. to decide what you should learn next in your English lessons			
7. to choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons			
8. to decide how long to spend on each activity			
9. to choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons			
10. to evaluate your learning			

Section 2. ABILITIES

If you were given the chance in this course, how good do you think you would be at:

	Very poor	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good
11. choosing learning activities in class					
12. choosing learning activities outside class					
13. choosing learning objectives in class					
14. choosing learning objectives outside class					
15. choosing learning materials in class					

	Very poor	Poor	OK	Good	Very Good
16. choosing learning materials outside class					
17. deciding what you should learn next in your class					
18. deciding how long to spend on each activity					
19. identifying your weaknesses in English					
20. evaluating your learning					

Section 3. PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. How would you describe your motivation (level)?

[ ] Highly motivated to learn English

[ ] Motivated to learn English

[ ] Not at all motivated to learn English

3. Grade/Year level: 1st 2nd 3rd 4th

4. University Type: Private Public

5. Course name you are evaluating:

1. Speaking 2. Listening 3. Reading
4. Writing 5. Other