Developing Autonomy through Conversation Exchange: A Case Study of ESL Learners

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Abstract

There is a common belief that one could quickly improve their second language proficiency once they reside in the country where the target language is spoken, because they have opportunities to use it constantly in an immersion environment. However, scholars have argued that it may be up to the individual student whether she could effectively utilize such a learning environment. Some learners might not have as much access to native speakers depending on their circumstances. Others may not feel comfortable enough to interact in the target language. It is possible that these learners have difficulties developing autonomy, where they take charge of their own learning. This study has examined such learners and their learning process when they are provided with opportunities to converse with native speakers. Specifically, it explored how regular interaction with native speakers could influence ESL learners' perspectives towards their language learning and learning process through examining their journal entries and interviews. The findings indicate that participants developed their own communicative strategies and grew optimistic perceptions towards language learning after these interactions. Pedagogical implications include the significance of creating opportunities for learners to experiment with the language and to reflect on their learning process.

Introduction

Foreign language learners tend to believe that living in the target country is the best way to rapidly propel their proficiency (Ryan & Mercer, 2011). Indeed, it seems likely that learners would have more chances to use the language in the target country. Nonetheless, several previous studies have documented that studying in a target country alone does not guarantee students' interaction with native speakers (Ayano, 2006; Tanaka, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). Employing these opportunities of interaction can be even more challenging for non-students, who went abroad under certain circumstances, such as a spouse's temporary transfer of personnel overseas. Unlike students, they may have limited time that they can invest into studying the target language, as they have other obligations such as taking care of their families and attending to household duties. This study examines such non-students with few opportunities to interact with native speakers. Their approach to language learning may benefit from interacting with native speakers. This study investigates the impact of regular interaction with native speakers on the spouses of Japanese engineers who were transferred to the U.S. Specifically, it explores how such interaction affects their perception towards language learning and their process of becoming autonomous learners.

Literature Review

Language Learner Autonomy and Learners' Beliefs of Living Abroad

The ideas of autonomy first arose in the late 1960s in Europe. The concept was introduced to language education through the fields of psychology and educational theory (Benson, 2009). As scholars point out, defining the notion of autonomy in language learning is not easy (Benson, 2009; Miller, 2009). The most frequently utilized definition, however, is Holec's (1981), in which autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning (p. 3)." Holec (1981) discusses that learners are responsible for making their own decisions on the goals, contents, methods, and techniques of their learning, while monitoring and evaluating their acquisition to be autonomous. These decisions are made in the beginning but also while they continue their studies by "trial and error (p. 14)." It is important to note that this capacity is not innate and must be obtained "in a systematic, deliberate way (p. 3, Holec, 1981)." In other words, a learning structure that enables a learner to take control of their learning is indispensable for them in their developing autonomy.

As Paiva (2011) argues, autonomy plays a significant role in second language learning. It is because autonomy ultimately helps language learners motivate themselves to become life-long learners of the target language. Little (1996) states that autonomous learners can make great use of opportunities to communicate in the target language "beyond the immediate learning environment (p204)." This use of language beyond the learning environment indicates that learners place a high value on the target language in their personal lives. As Little (1996) asserts, "the autonomous learner is the one for whom the target language gradually becomes an integral part of what he or she is (p. 210)."

While research in this area tends to lack in convincing empirical evidence (Benson, 2011), autonomy is a highly complex construct and may not be easily measurable. Benson (2011) points out that language educators should question the possibility of finding effective ways of fostering autonomy and putting learners in charge of their language learning. Previous studies were conducted in an attempt to investigate what learning context and teaching practices could enhance and support a learner's autonomy (Kao, 2011; Little, 1996; Malcolm, 2011).

The findings of these studies indicate that there are different concepts that are related to learner autonomy, such as a learner's self-reflection, their willingness, learning strategies, confidence, and beliefs. Kao (2011) conducted a study on peer tutors and how their peer teaching experiences affected their development of autonomy, using a qualitative approach including the analysis of the participants' reflective journals and interviews. The participants in this study, who were third-year undergraduates in Taiwan, tutored first-year undergraduates with low English proficiency. They wrote reflective journals throughout their tutorial period and took interviews. The findings show that tutors critically reflected on their own learning through writing journals and realizing the importance of learning strategies. Research on learner journal shows that writing about language learning is a useful device for reflection (Bailey, 1983; Benson & Lor, 1998; Matsumoto, 1996). As Little (2011) states, learner reflection is crucial in the course of the development of autonomy. In reflecting, learners must employ self-managing strategies to oversee their learning, which is one of the significant skills of self-directed learning (Wenden, 1991). Kao (2011), using the discussion of Ellis & Sinclair (1989) and Dickinson (1992), also argues that it is essential for leaners to critically engage themselves in reflecting on their process of learning so that they could enhance autonomy in learning.

As a result of self-reflection, Kao's (2011) participants examined their own English learning and increased their use of learning strategies. Learning strategies are closely associated with learner autonomy (Wenden, 1991). The use of cognitive strategies, in particular, are indispensable in developing learner autonomy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990 quoted by Kao, 2011). According to Wenden (1991), autonomous, and therefore successful learners "have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently (p. 15)." In other words, they possess self-regulation skills, through which they manage their learning by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning process (Wenden, 1991).

These attitudes could be related to a learner's internal factors. Malcolm (2011) states that learner internal factors such as psychological elements could support or interfere with their autonomous learning. This is demonstrated in Malcolm's (2011) study, where she examined once unsuccessful students who developed autonomous learning at a later stage. They were students from Arab Gulf countries at a medical university whose courses were taught in English. These participants failed in their first-year courses because of their English and suffered from emotional difficulties, such as frustration and embarrassment. Instead of giving up, however, they searched for ways to improve their English, made their own plans of actions, and gained back their confidence. These efforts were triggered by advice and encouragement by others, such as their peers and family members. These findings imply that a learner's internal factors like their willingness and confidence are vital in developing autonomy. Kao (2011) also states that confidence contributes to developing learner autonomy in a significant manner. Moreover, confidence and willingness to self-directed learning are closely linked (Littlewood, 1996).

Another influential psychological element can be learners' beliefs. Learners' beliefs are considered to be essential in their language learning, as they are pertinent to understanding their learning process (Rifkin, 2000; Weseley, 2012). Weseley (2012) states that scholars have previously described learner beliefs as unchanging and static. This view stems from a cognitive psychology framework, in which beliefs are a type of metacognitive knowledge, hence stable (Alexander & Dochy, 1995 and Wenden, 1999 cited in Amuzie & Winke, 2009). However, learners change as a result of the instruction (Rifkin, 2000), and a learning environment could also trigger their change of beliefs. Some scholars demonstrate that learner beliefs change over time under differing circumstances such as study abroad.

Tanaka and Ellis (2003 as cited in Amuzie & Winke; 2009) investigated learners' change of belief after their study abroad experiences. Their findings demonstrate statistically significant changes in terms of analytic language learning, experiential language learning, self-efficacy, and confidence. Amuzie and Winke (2009) also examined how study abroad influences language learning beliefs. They found that their participants' beliefs post-study abroad had changed compared to those before studying abroad. Their results show that the changes in their beliefs exhibit an increase of independence as a learner. It was their disappointment and dissatisfaction that led them to their belief change. Their participants reported that they were not happy about their learning outcomes, because they used their native language much more than their target language. Consequently, they started to realize that they themselves must take initiative to seek opportunities to use the target language in order to be successful in their language learning.

Ryan and Mercer (2011) discuss the significance of learners' beliefs and how their learning behavior could be attributed to their beliefs. Specifically, they use the theoretical framework of

"language learning mindsets (p. 163)" and particularly stress the role of a learning context in forming their beliefs. To illustrate their framework, they describe some features of "fixed" and "growth" language learning mindsets, even though these two categories are not intended to be two distinct dichotomies, but rather a continuum.

They explored the language learning mindsets and self-beliefs of English learners in Japan and Austria through different studies. A distinct aspect of their data is the learners' strong belief in the importance of an extended period of time abroad for their language learning. According to their data, the participants seem to believe that it is necessary to go abroad in order to reach a high proficiency level, because they felt the limitations of formalized classroom instruction in their home countries. Some of them also appear to believe that language proficiency can rapidly increase effortlessly and unconsciously in a stay abroad environment.

Even though Ryan and Mercer (2011) agree that a stay abroad context is likely to be effective for many language learners, they suspect that a strong belief in language acquisition in naturalistic settings may risk impeding learners' autonomy development by preventing them from taking an active role in their learning. Instead of reflecting on their learning and coping with challenges by use of strategies, they may wait till these difficulties to be resolved by merely going abroad. In fact, in the aforementioned study by Amuzie and Winke (2009), their participants realized that study abroad alone did not guarantee success after experiencing disappointment about their proficiency level. Hence, placing too much emphasis on the language environment could discourage learners from being autonomous.

Living Abroad and Target Language Learning

The strong belief of the importance of living abroad to successfully acquire a target language may stem from an assumption that living abroad promises an immersion in the target language. For learners, the immersion of the target language typically refers to interaction with native speakers. Scholars address that it is imperative for learners to interact with competent L2 speakers in terms of language acquisition and socialization. Long (1996), in his interactional hypothesis, claims that learners negotiate for meanings and generate output in productive ways when they converse with more expert speakers of the target language. Namely, when a learner encounters a language that is beyond their proficiency level, that learner must engage in negotiation of meaning in order to make adjustments of input and output until it is comprehensible. Furthermore, researchers who advocate social approach to language learning argue that learners outperform their current competence through interaction with more expert speakers (Dewey, Brown, & Eggett, 2012). Previous studies support these theories. Isabelli-García (2010) postulates that the interaction with native speakers promoted negotiation of meaning and learners' proficiency development. In Dewey, Brown, and Eggett's study (2012), learners who reported speaking more with native speakers felt more improvement than those who reported speaking less with native speakers.

It is true that living and studying abroad long term positively impacts students' language development (Magnan & Back, 2007). Previous research has also demonstrated that even a short term study abroad program can enhance students' target language growth, including speaking, listening, and reading (Dewey, 2004). Moreover, the benefits could be extended to students' cultural skills beyond their linguistic improvement. Reynolds–Case (2013) found the increase of students' recognition, comprehension, and production of region-specific linguistic forms in a short-term study abroad program in Spain. According to the results, the students displayed their cultural and pragmatic competence through a region-specific linguistic feature.

Contrary to these findings, some studies report that living abroad does not always produce positive outcomes in target language learning. In Amuzie and Winke's (2009) study discussed above, the participants did not feel their improvement in spite of their study abroad context, because they did not interact with native speakers very frequently despite their previous expectations. Similar findings are reported in Wilkinson's (1998) study, which examined the linguistic and cultural experience of American summer study-aboard students in France. The participants were found to be frustrated that they did not speak French often, although they were in France. Furthermore, their miscommunication in French discouraged them from interacting with native speakers, and consequently they opted for American peer group support.

These participants' infrequent interactions with native speakers might be connected with their internal states. Ayano (2006) delved into the psychological experience of Japanese international students, who studied abroad in the United Kingdom. Through interviews, Ayano (2006) pointed out their difficulty of building friendship between Japanese and British students. The participants reported that the British students were not as interested in them as they had expected. Tanaka's study (2007) also reveals findings in agreement. The Korean participants in Amuzie and Winke's (2009) study responded in the interviews that they did not feel comfortable making American friends. Tanaka (2007) conducted interviews and analyzed the diary of Japanese students studying English in New Zealand. While each student stayed with a host family, their use of English outside the classroom was found to be restricted, because they were reluctant to seek opportunities to interact with native speakers. The findings show that the main reason for their limited contact appears to be their inadequate L2 proficiency. The quality of the homestay environment and the large Japanese student community were also discussed as potential reasons.

In addition to these studies, other studies have discussed international students' sense of alienation and isolation (Gareis, 2012; Williams & Johnson, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013). It is important to note that students from Asia appear to have more challenges in adjusting and making friendships with domestic students (Gareis, 2012). Gareis (2012) suggested that the reasons might be related to the linguistic distance between English and East Asian languages, which can cause English proficiency issues. These findings do not necessarily deny the advantages of study abroad environment, however. As Tanaka (2007) claims, a study abroad context provides students with much more opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom, although whether or not to use these opportunities depends on students. While there are much more opportunities, some students seem to be hesitant to seek them because of their L2 proficiency and their lack of confidence. However, their L2 proficiency is less likely to increase without utilizing such opportunities. Thus, a study abroad context could bring about a vicious cycle for some learners.

Studying ESL for Japanese Housewives

As the globalization of various businesses progresses, it is not uncommon that many corporations have branch offices worldwide, including Japanese companies in the U.S. The temporarily transferred employees from Japan become stationed at these branch offices. Often times, the family members, most likely a wife and children, accompany such a transfer. The living circumstances, however, might not be ideal for these family members due to the different language and cultures. After all, they live in the country for their husbands' jobs that they are not directly associated with.

Martin (2007) scrutinizes a case of such Japanese housewives, who came to the U.K. because of their husbands' oversea transfer. According to Martin (2007), these women prioritized

creating an optimal home environment, such as taking care of their children and maintaining Japanese culture at home over learning English. Understandably, it was these women who were responsible for assisting their children to settle into their new school life. Although women increased in the labor force participation and fewer women are 'house-bound' in contemporary Japanese society, it is still a societal belief that motherhood is essential for a woman's life, which should be child-centered. Even though their priority in their overseas lives may not be improving their English skills, English proficiency becomes a key for these housewives as they have to constantly deal with English, such as when helping children with English school work and communicating with teachers and other parents in English. In fact, several participants in Martin's study reported that helping their children with homework was their own motivation to study English and that the homework was very challenging, especially for older children. One of them responded that she often stayed up until midnight assisting her high school son with his homework. For the other participants, too, "learning English is quite simply seen as a necessity for day-to-day living (p. 114)." Vogel (1986) reports that Japanese mothers abroad frequently feel isolated from the local community and have no supportive social networks, if they are not proficient in the target language.

Similar to the international students discussed in the section above, learning English through interaction with native speakers is not always easy for them. Many found it difficult to make British friends, while they made many Japanese friends. Martin (2007) posits that the primary reason for this situation is their English proficiency, as "many informants felt that they were only able to greet English-speaking women on superficial level (p. 11)." Nonetheless, Martin (2007) claims that there are also many successful cases where Japanese women made friends with British women and their families. It is emphasized that the host country members' making the first contact is essential for such success (Martin, 2007). Malcolm (2011) also discusses that even if a learner is highly motivated, their progress might be impeded due to the lack of instructional resources and support. This study created a setting in which the Japanese participants could interact with native speakers of English through conversation exchanges in the hope of offering a supportive environment to their English learning.

The research questions are as follows.

1. How do the learners change their perceptions towards their learning and learning process through conversation exchange sessions?
2. How could conversation exchange sessions enhance the learners' development of autonomous learning?

Method

Participants

Three Japanese native speakers took part in this study. Their participation was voluntary. They all shared a strong desire to improve their English proficiency. Aforementioned, they also used to have the learner's common belief that they would become fluent once they started to live abroad. However, they were struggling and frustrated because they were not progressing as they anticipated. They were female homemakers in their late thirties, whose spouses were Japanese engineers. They came to the U.S.A. because their husbands were transferred to U.S. branch offices temporarily. Their length of stay ranged from six months to two years at the time of this study. Their children went to local American schools. These participants took ESL classes or a tutorial while their children were at school. The followings describe their English learning backgrounds. All the names are pseudonyms.

Aki

At the time of this study, Aki had been in the U.S. for six months. She was taking an ESL class at a local adult school three to four times a week. The length of the class was three hours each day. The level of her class was intermediate during the first eight weeks. The class primarily consisted of an instructor's lecture, where the focus was placed on learning grammar. Little time was spent on practicing speaking. The number of the students was between 20 and 30. After eight weeks, however, she got placed into an advanced level class, in which students were frequently required to work in small groups and to hold a conversation with each other. In addition to this ESL class, she took a group conversation lesson run by two American volunteers for about an hour and a half once a week. In the lesson, the topics of the conversation varied from weekend activities to current events, depending on the day. The class size was between five and ten.

Eiko

Eiko's background is slightly different from the other two participants. She originally came to the U.S. due to her spouse's temporary transfer, stayed for about a year, and went back to Japan after the transfer period ended. However, she returned to the U.S. after a few months because her husband got employed at a U.S. company. She was taking an ESL class for three hours at a school funded through the local government twice a week. The class included students with mixed language proficiency levels and stressed grammar instruction with limited speaking opportunities. The class size was about 25. Additionally, she took the same group conversation lesson as Aki. Because her ESL program did not divide the students into different classes based on their proficiency, Eiko's exact proficiency level was unknown. However, it was estimated to be between basic and intermediate based on the researcher's conversations with Eiko.

Yoshimi

Yoshimi had been in the U.S. for six months at the time of this study. Instead of taking ESL classes, she met with an American tutor once a week for two hours. Yoshimi's choice of taking a tutorial over an ESL class appears to be mostly related to convenience. Her husband was already taking a tutorial session before her, and he recommended the same instructor for her. The tutor taught her grammar using a textbook. Yoshimi claimed, however, that there were many opportunities to speak thanks to the one-to-one setting. Her tutor also encouraged her to speak more fluidly, such as forming complete sentences when meeting with Yoshimi. Yoshimi's proficiency level is difficult to determine, as she was not in a formal class. Similar to Eiko's case, it was estimated to be between basic and intermediate based on the conversations the researcher had with her.

As mentioned above, these participants felt a strong need to improve their English due to their struggles. Although they were taking ESL classes or a tutoring session, they did not consider these to be sufficient, especially because of the atmosphere or the focus of these classes. Aki and Eiko stated that they seldom had a chance to talk with native speaker teachers on a one-on-one basis, because more talkative students always dominated the floor in the classes and they were intimidated. They even experienced some sessions where they did not speak at all. It is true that Yoshimi had a native speaker as a tutor, but their main practice was on the grammar exercises during the tutorial. Even though they also conversed, the topics seemed to be somewhat simple such as weekend plans, and the instructor's focus appears to have been more on Yoshimi's forming complete and accurate sentences than the content of the conversation. They all expressed a desire to have a chance to interact with a native speaker in a natural conversational setting.

Procedure

The three Japanese participants got paired with three native English speakers, who were studying Japanese at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. at the time of the study, as conversation partners. Two of the partners were twenty-two and the other was twenty-one years old. Two were male and one was female. Their partners' Japanese fluency was at an advanced level. All of them had studied in Japan for about four months. As advanced learners, they had a quite deep understanding of and a strong interest in Japanese language and culture. As discussed in a previous section, international students could have a more difficult time in adjusting socially. It has been argued that their difficulties in building a friendship with American students could derive from cultural differences (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010). Lee and Rice (2007) also discuss that international students can feel culturally alienated and marginalized because American students are perceived to be indifferent and unwilling to understand another culture. These conversation partners with an understanding and interest in Japanese culture were chosen in the hope of making the conversation exchange as comfortable and beneficial as possible for the Japanese participants.

They met their partners once a week for half an hour to an hour for ten weeks. They alternated English and Japanese conversations each week so that the college students could also practice their Japanese. In order to help the conversation move smoothly, a short reading was provided to the participants and their partners. They were instructed to think about what they would like to discuss based on the readings in advance of the conversation sessions. At the same time, however, they were encouraged to talk about anything without limiting themselves exclusively to the readings. The English readings were either selected chapters from *American ways: A cultural guide to the United States of America* (2011) or articles from the website, VOA Learning English (2013). The former was chosen because it focused on unique cultural aspects of the U.S.A. However, the participants commented that they had great difficulty understanding the text. Therefore, the latter was incorporated. Though they did not write so in their journals, all the participants told the researcher that the readings from the website were at an appropriate level and very helpful. The Japanese readings were from the websites, Japanese Language Reading Tutorial System: Reading Tutor (n.d.) and 47 News, (2013).

Each week, the participants submitted a one page journal they wrote in Japanese about how the session went, what worked or did not work well, changes they planned to make for the next session, and anything else they noticed that they thought important. The journal was intended to support their process of becoming autonomous learners. After all the sessions were finished, they took a semi-structured individual exit interview. The interview was conducted in Japanese and took approximately thirty minutes.

The interview questions (Appendix A) included their overall gains from the conversation exchange, any changes they perceived in terms of their communication skills, and suggestions for a similar project in a future. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Both the journal entries and the interviews were reviewed to determine general themes regarding the development of autonomy as well as similarities and differences among the participants. The analysis of these data took a qualitative approach to better understand the participants' perception towards their learning process more in depth.

Findings and Discussion

Becoming Autonomous Learners Through Finding Strategies

Based on the weekly journal entries, it was obvious that all participants reflected on how they communicated with their partners and tried to improve using various strategies on their own. For instance, Aki had a difficult time understanding the provided short reading to prompt the conversation. Therefore, she looked up every word she did not know and wrote down all the sentences she planned to say to her partner before her first session. Although the first session did not go well, she set some goals for the next session:

> Because I will not be able to answer any unexpected questions, it was my intention to be fully prepared so that I could say what I wanted to. However, because I was clinging to what I prepared too much, I just read the written sentences aloud and I don't think we had a conversation. My next goals are to enjoy the conversation and to speak without looking at anything written. (Aki, week 1 journal)

Starting from the following session, she stopped bringing the written sentences. She also came up with her own strategies to better understand the reading:

> Triggered by my previous failure in which I didn't comprehend the words appeared in the reading in the conversation, even though I looked up their meanings in advance, I decided to read aloud the material even if I could only do so slowly. I think we had a conversation this time, though sometimes the flow was awkward. (Aki, week 2 journal)

The first session was not very successful for Eiko and Yoshimi as well. Consequently, they also developed their own strategies that actually differed greatly from those of Aki. Unlike Aki, Eiko did not prepare anything written, but struggled understanding what her partner was saying:

> I really had a hard time understanding my partner. I was also constantly faltering while answering her questions. When she had a long sentence such as "What do you think …," I got lost about what is being asked. Maybe I understand better if I see what is being said on a piece of paper. I know that my ears need to get used to listening to English, but next time I want to incorporate communicating in writing as a trial. (Eiko, week 1 journal)

Similarly, Yoshimi felt a need to bring some written sentences to the second session as she ended up using Japanese in her first session:

> I was panicking because I didn't understand what my partner was saying. He speaks differently from my tutor I'm used to. I used Japanese when I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say or when he didn't understand my English. My partner tried very hard to speak only in English. I wish I could have done so too, but it was hard. Next time, I will bring some English sentences to use when I don't understand or when I want to confirm something. I will try my best to have a conversation exclusively in English next time. (Yoshimi, week 1 journal)

Scholars have argued that learners' use of strategies can be influenced by different individual variables such as proficiency, motivation, personality types, and etc. (Park, 1997; Wakamoto, 2000; Wharton, 2000). Thus, it can be considered natural that the participants in this study incorporated different strategies depending on an individual.

However, they also employed similar strategies as well. In the exit interviews, all participants looked back on how they developed their strategies through trial and errors in the conversation exchange sessions, particularly in their comprehension skills:

> I started to identify some important words and guess their meanings in conversations. (Yoshimi)

> When I didn't understand a word, I guessed its meaning and asked my partner "Does this mean…?" If the meaning was close to the word I already knew, it helped me understand what my partner was saying. (Eiko)

> Before this conversation exchange, I used to get panicked when I encountered a word I didn't know and stopped listening altogether. However, now I keep listening even when I don't understand. If there are some parts I do understand, I connect them and I can guess the meaning. (Aki)

These responses indicate that they began to use metacognitive strategies to help the self-management of their learning, as well as social and affective strategies that represent actions taken to control aspects regarding others and self (Oxford, 1990). Researchers have examined learning situations and the social settings that may influence the use of language learner strategies (Anton, 1999; Takeuchi, 2003). Moreover, their strategies were utilized for their process of negotiation of meaning that helps make incomprehensible input comprehensible, which leads to improving their language proficiency (Long, 1996). Aforementioned, these participants did not have ample opportunities to negotiate meaning through communicating with a native speaker in their previous learning environment. It is thus possible that the conversation exchange setting, which enabled them to have extensive amount of time interacting with a native speaker, contributed to their active employment of effective strategies.

It is significant to note that the participants began to enjoy the conversations as the sessions progressed. Their journal entries show that they were more attentive to the conversation itself rather than trying to manage the English communication:

> We talked about drinks today. My partner asked if Japanese people don't care even though their faces turn red when they drink. Of course, it's OK. Even if they are tipsy, they can walk home because it is a safe country. I was happy to discover Japanese good part today. (Aki, week 4 journal)

> Our topic was family life today. We talked about differences between Japan and America. I asked my partner when she wants to get married, if she plans to continue to work after marriage, etc. It was more like chatting today. (Eiko, week 6 journal)

Their development of strategies may have helped them better communicate with their partners.

Easing Anxiety in Speaking Triggered by Conversation Exchange

Even though the participants in this study were taking ESL classes or tutor lessons besides the conversation exchange sessions, their interaction with English native speakers seems to have been limited prior to this conversation exchange based on their interviews:

> The only time that I speak English was with my tutor or when I do shopping. So it was great to have a chance to speak with an American partner in English. (Yoshimi)

> I'm proud that I could tolerate an English conversation for an extensive length of time like half an hour or an hour. Normally, when I am in the situation where the interaction

is exclusively in English, I can't stand it and I go somewhere else. Well, this time I guess I couldn't do that. (Eiko)

Although the decrease of anxiety or nervousness may not be directly linked to developing autonomy, it is associated with self-confidence at the conceptual level (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997). Clément (1980) asserted that a learner's self-confidence indicates that their learning anxiety is absent. As discussed earlier, a learner's confidence could be helpful in their process of becoming an autonomous learner. Thus, these participants' comments suggest that the conversation exchange helped them build a foundation to develop autonomy.

Their comments above indicate that they may not necessarily be comfortable speaking with a native speaker in their daily lives. Meeting with the same partner regularly, however, appears to have helped the participants slightly ease their anxiety, though not completely:

> I was very nervous till the end. However, my partner started to realize that I can't speak English very well. I could feel that he does not have a very high expectation of me, which eased my nervousness gradually. (Yoshimi)

Additionally, the fact that their partners were also language learners may have been helpful:

> My partner is studying Japanese now and her Japanese is not perfect yet. Therefore, I thought my English being imperfect is not something embarrassing. When I thought that way, I felt a little more comfortable and it made me feel like trying to say something even if it may not be comprehensible. (Eiko)

The participants also seem to have learned the complexity of language learning through having Japanese conversations. The following excerpts from the participants' journal show that they found understanding the cultural differences to be important in a smooth communication:

> I noticed that my partner was sometimes saying uniquely English expressions like "that's a good question" in our Japanese conversation, though they sound weird when they are put into Japanese. I should have corrected those, even though they are not grammatical mistakes, but more like cultural mistakes. (Yoshimi, week 6 journal)

> My partner had a hard time understanding the concept of *hashiyasume* in today's Japanese conversation. It may be something that does not exists in America. He misunderstood it as leftover, and I couldn't explain it well. Culture is important in understanding each other in any language. (Aki, week 8 journal)

Change of Attitudes for Future Autonomous Learning

The participants expressed positive attitudes towards interacting in the future with native speakers and communicating in English beyond this conversation exchange setting. They feel that they still have much room for improvement, but their interviews imply that they may become more spontaneous to interact in English in the future. The following comments are from their interviews:

> I can at least ask to repeat when I speak with others now. Before I just let it go when I didn't understand. Now I can ask people to repeat or rephrase a few times, and I sometimes understand after that. Up until now, I didn't have courage to even ask to repeat. (Aki)

> In the past, I was trying to translate what I wanted to say from Japanese to English and after all, I couldn't say anything. Through this project, I realized it's not about

translating. It is OK if the meaning gets communicated eventually, even if my sentences are short. I would like to keep trying this method in the future as well. (Eiko)

I think I gained some courage. My partner waited for me to finish my sentences in spite of my poor English. Even if I made mistakes, he guessed what I was trying to say and asked me "Do you mean …?" I felt that maybe everyone else is like him. If so, I would feel OK making mistakes. I feel like I may be able to speak English more spontaneously in the future. (Yoshimi)

Their responses indicate that their perceptions towards their future language learning changed to optimistic and favorable. It is significant to note that the participants also talked about their failures in communication in the past. These failures may have contributed to their positive attitudes and stronger motivation. The participants in Malcolm's (2011) study also started to exercise greater responsibility for their English learning triggered by their experience of failure. In Amuzie and Winke's study (209) as well, the participants realized that they must take an active role in learning after feeling their lack of improvement despite of their being abroad. Therefore, it is possible that the participants in this study, who were forced to face their difficulties in their English proficiency, were also propelled to become autonomous by being in charge of their learning more actively.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study explored how regular interaction with native speakers could influence ESL learners' perspectives towards their language learning and their learning process, when they wrote reflective journals after their sessions. These learners in this study may not be typical compared to other participants in ESL research studies in that they were not students but housewives. Therefore, they had limited interaction with English native speakers and were somewhat afraid of such interaction, even though they resided in the U.S.A. However, with their conversation partners, who shared a strong interest in Japan and understanding of challenges of studying a foreign language, they became more comfortable and developed spontaneity and motivation towards communicating in English. While it is often assumed that one could become proficient in a target language quickly once they live in a country where the language is spoken, a living environment alone may not promote a learner's language acquisition without their autonomous learning. What might matter more is a learner's perception towards their learning, their confidence, and their taking control of finding the communicative strategies that fit into their styles. This study showed how the participants' perceptions towards autonomous learning changed through conversation exchange and writing journals.

Additionally, it is important to note that this study is a small case study and that making generalizations from the results is not the aim of this study. Nonetheless, some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings as discussed above. First, it is suggested that language educators create an environment where learners need to be independent. The participants in this study started to be responsible for a successful communication once they were put into a situation where they had no option but help themselves. Language educators may be able to make similar circumstances for their students, such as an interview project with a native speaker.

Second, it is critical for learners to have opportunities to experiment with the target language and assess themselves (Ridley, 2003). The conversation exchange was the place for the participants in this study to discover their strategies through "trial and error." They also had a

chance to reflect on their conversation sessions when they wrote a journal, which helped them evaluate their strategies as well.

Finally, learner collaboration may also be helpful to certain students. Even though the participants in this study stated that having a conversation partner was very beneficial, they also said that a bigger group setting could have been helpful at times. This comment might be due to a fact that they were from Japan and they were more accustomed to a Japanese style of communication. Maynard (1997) contends that Japanese speakers place importance on cooperation and collaboration in face-to-face encounters. As MacIntyre, MacKinnon, and Clément (2009) suggest, language educators need to consider cultural variation in the concept of autonomy. Hence, a conversation session should be one that does not cause learner anxiety, which could hinder students' autonomous learning. An ideal situation might be the one in which both parties have a high motivation with regard to learning about each other's language and culture, and can share the sympathy towards the challenges of studying a foreign language.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. In your opinion, what are the overall gains from the conversation exchange?
2. How did the conversation exchange session help you in terms of how you feel about interacting with native speakers?
3. How do you think the conversation exchange has changed your self-confidence in using the language?

4. How has this experience affected you with regard to your engagement with native speakers outside of this conversation exchange?
5. Have you noticed any change in terms of your speaking/listening skills and your use of speaking/listening strategies over the course of the conversation exchange sessions?
6. What suggestions do you have regarding how to improve this conversation exchange project in the future?
7. Please share any additional comments.