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# Of Horses and Water: Giving Learners Free Rein in Developing their Autonomy

**HENRY FOSTER***
*Department of Literature, Bukkyo University, Japan*
**HAYO REINDERS**
*School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand*
**Corresponding author email: foster@bukkyo-u.ac.jp**

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***Abstract***

*Despite progress in recent years, Japanese classrooms continue to present challenges for educators seeking to promote language learner autonomy. Adopting an action research/case study design, the present study explored how, in a 5-week student-led project, an intact group of learners could contribute to the development of their own autonomy. Data consisting of questionnaires, observation notes, video recordings, written reflections, and recorded group discussions were analyzed using inductive qualitative coding and descriptive statistics. The students chose to work together as a class, and negotiated and executed a plan of action. The narrative that emerged highlighted the importance of group dynamics in collaborative autonomy development. Student reactions to the project were largely positive, with indications that the project promoted metacognition and learner motivation. This study provides an example of one approach to involving Japanese learners in classroom management to promote a collaborative, interdependent movement towards autonomy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Language learner autonomy (LLA) has a 50-year history as a research field, and the number of published LLA studies has increased exponentially. From several hundred references in 2007 to well over 3000 now, the growth of the autonomy bibliography (www.autonomybibliography.org) is testament to the significant amount of work done in this area. Most language educators now recognize the value of promoting autonomy, as it leads to learners who can manage and evaluate their own learning efforts, engage in critical self-reflection, find ways to motivate themselves, and make language learning a lifelong pursuit. However, the aims and practices of institutional education can run counter to this goal, resulting instead in learners who are good at conforming to the system and jumping over the hurdles placed before them, but not necessarily practised in forging their own paths. Therefore, a core question for LLA researchers is this: how can language programs and teachers foster autonomy from within the structured confines of the school learning context?

The culture and customs of institutionalized learning in Japan present various obstacles to LLA development. These obstacles include the prevalence of large, teacher-fronted classes, an

emphasis on rote learning and the use of the grammar-translation approach, compulsory courses, top-down administration, and overworked teachers (Kikuchi, 2009; Nakata, 2009; Oda, 2019). Washback from university entrance exams results in teaching approaches that become progressively less engaging and more demanding as students approach the end of high school (Ohata, 2018; Smith, 2020). Then, once students are freed from the 'exam hell' of secondary school, they enter a 'leisure-land' (Clark, 2010) of 'fantasy English' (McVeigh, 2002) where they play at learning English without any real or strong motivation.

Research has long indicated that Japanese learners are ready and capable of becoming more involved and responsible for managing their own learning at school (Usuki, 2002, 2003; Sakai & Takagi, 2009; Sakai et al., 2010; Tomita & Sano, 2016), but even now, they are not given much guidance or many opportunities for doing so. The present study therefore sought to explore what an intact class of university learners could do to contribute to the development of their own language learner autonomy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learner autonomy (LLA) is a multifaceted construct that centers on a learner's innate capacity to manage their own learning (Benson, 2011). The development of that capacity necessitates critical (self-)reflection and a willingness to take advantage of available affordances (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Everhard, 2018). LLA is difficult to quantify, and is best assessed and researched using qualitative data from the learners themselves (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Lamb, 2010). A key issue for both researchers and educators is how to foster LLA in our learners.

### *Promoting LLA in the classroom*

Approaches to promoting LLA can be classified according to their degree of formality, the extent to which they are structured or systematic, whether they take place in or out of the classroom, or in a self-access center, whether they involve students working individually or collaboratively, the degree of teacher or language advisor involvement, and so on. Systematic frameworks for LLA promotion usually involve cycles of reflection, planning, and action (see, for example, Little et al., 2017; Reinders, 2010). This mirrors the action research cycle, and Dam goes so far as to mandate that teachers make their learners 'researchers of their own learning' (2018). Reflection is arguably the most important component, as the exercise of autonomy begins and ends with reflection.

Numerous models and approaches to promoting autonomy have been described (see, for example, Benson, 2011; Everhard, 2018; Holec, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 1999; O'Rourke & Schwienhorst, 2003; Oxford, 2003; Smith, 2003; Ribé, 2003). The present study was intended to involve a high degree of student control and involvement, what Smith (2003) calls the 'strong-version' approach: one that is experiential, and focuses on collaborating with learners to co-create conditions conducive to the expression, development of, and reflection on their innate capacity for autonomy.

### *Interdependence and LLA*

In classroom LLA research, the dynamics of autonomy in a social group context are of interest. In a social environment, taking control of one's learning involves participation in social interaction, cooperation, and collaboration. Researchers have related autonomy in the classroom to constructivist theories of education and Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (e.g., Lantolf, 2013; Little, 2007; Little et al., 2017; Oxford, 2003; Palfreyman, 2003). SCT posits that self-regulation is preceded by other-regulation, taking advantage of the zone of proximal development and involving mediation by expert others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In other words, "autonomy is self-regulation, gained through social interaction with a more capable, mediating person in a particular setting" (Oxford, 2003, p. 78; see also Little et al., 2017).

The literature on group dynamics also bears relevance. Murphey (2003) asserts "autonomy develops its greatest resilience in groups" (p. 1). Groups are bound together by the glue of *belongingness* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is vital to motivation, engagement, and commitment in the school context (Osterman, 2000). Positive group dynamics require that group members feel like accepted and valued insiders. In a synergistic fashion, belonging to a group also affords group members access to resources not available to individuals (Murphey et al., 2012), thus facilitating collaborative autonomy development. Peers can lead each other (Murphey, 2003) and act as role models. The effect of role models increases with proximity, the most effective being *near peer role models*, who are close physically, ethnically, and in terms of age, gender, interests and background (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000). Both peer leadership and peer role modeling can have an autonomy-inviting effect.

### *LLA in Japan*

Studies of university students in Japan have found that learners are aware of the need for reform and are ready to assume a more autonomous stance, but also that there is a gap between their beliefs and their behavior (Usuki, 2002, 2003). Japanese students are shackled by a hierarchical, top-down culture that discourages learner input into how classes are conducted (Tomita & Sano, 2016). Learners need more guidance and impetus to actually begin behaving autonomously (Sakai & Takagi, 2009; Sakai et al., 2010). In short, Japanese students are generally ready, at least psychologically, for autonomy. They are aware of issues and obstacles in the present educational situation that need to be overcome. However, they lack experience and knowledge of how to become more autonomous learners, largely because the school system has not provided them with appropriate opportunities.

### *Interventional studies*

The present study aimed to explore the potential of a bottom-up, or 'bootstrapping' approach to encouraging autonomy development. We therefore surveyed course-level studies that attempted to involve students in agenda-setting in the Japanese university classroom, and that focused on collaboration or group work, as opposed to individual autonomy development.

Some studies involved student collaboration within clearly teacher-structured parameters.

Stewart (2003) describes a two-lesson intervention in which pre-selected teams of students negotiated a plan to prepare for a debate. Hart (2002) details a semester-long project using a cooperative learning approach. Working with a designated social science textbook, groups of students chose and researched sub-topics, and prepared oral and written work, poster presentations, and short speeches. The teacher acted as coordinator and advised students on the use of learning strategies.

Other studies involved students setting goals and making plans for out-of-class language learning. Stephenson and Kohyama (2003) had students plan, execute, and evaluate independent language-learning projects, which were conducted mostly outside of class, supported by some in-class reflective activities and discussions. Students then prepared semester-end presentations about their projects. Fukuda et al. (2015) implemented a 'guided-autonomy syllabus' that aimed to gradually lead students to more self-regulated learning. There were regular peer advising sessions, but the focus was on individual study plans rather than collaborative group work.

Cunningham and Carlton (2003) conducted a semester-long project: to produce a class newsletter in English. Within that teacher-determined framework, students were given free rein, albeit teacher-supported, to plan, organize, research, write, and edit their newsletter. This necessitated group collaboration. The course was essentially an example of project-based learning, with a significant degree of autonomous student action.

Smith (2003) details his implementation of a strong-version autonomous classroom over a period of several years. In a cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation, students established and shared individual learning goals, planned their own out-of-class learning, and suggested classroom activities. In the implementation phase, they implemented their in-class study plans. In evaluation sessions, students gave presentations on their in-class activities and wrote reflections on both in- and out-of-class learning. This approach was a near-perfect realization of the bootstrapping concept, and therefore set the strongest precedent for the approach taken in the current study. However, in most Japanese university courses, it is impossible to offer a course with an unstructured or fully negotiated syllabus, making this approach impractical for general implementation.

***Rationale for the present study***

In summary, only a small body of LLA development research—peaking in the early 2000s—has been conducted in the Japanese tertiary context. A few studies showed successful results in promoting autonomous behavior at the individual level and outside the classroom, while some others have shown promising results from group and class-level projects. However, the quantity of interventional studies conducted so far that aim to explore promoting LLA from within the university classroom remains very small. We therefore endeavored to contribute to the filling of this gap in the literature by incorporating a fully student-planned and student-led project as one component of a pre-determined syllabus in a university course, with the aim of exploring how the learners themselves could contribute to the development of their own LLA.

### *Research questions*

The following research questions were formulated to guide the research:

RQ1a. How do language learners contribute to the development of their own learner autonomy?
RQ1b. What experiences do they have while doing so?
RQ2. How do language learner beliefs and attitudes change over the course of the project in regards to learner autonomy?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Context and participants*

The study was conducted at a private university in Japan. 'English Lecture' was a one-semester elective course taught by the first author that met for one 90-minute session per week for 15 weeks. Students who enrolled in the course were generally second and third-year English majors. It was entirely at the discretion of the teacher in charge to determine the aims and content of the course, which made it possible to build the 5-week project into the syllabus. The first author had been in charge of this course for several years, and had always designed it to be an interactive, student-centered, content-based course focusing on global issues and featuring related TED Talks and other video resources. Students independently researched self-selected topics related to the course theme and shared, presented, and discussed the fruits of their research.

For the semester during which the present study was conducted, 'educational issues' was chosen as the content focus, with learner autonomy as a specific sub-focus. Of the 18 student participants, five were female and 13 were male; all were English majors; 17 were second-year students and one a third-year student; one was an international student from Thailand, and the remainder were all Japanese. The English level of the students ranged roughly from intermediate to pre-advanced or B1 to C1 on the CEFR scale.

The inclusion of a Thai student could be viewed as a potential outlier. However, as an exploratory case study involving an intact class, her presence was considered to be a variable that would complicate but not compromise the value of our findings.

### *Project description*

The student-led project was conducted from weeks 7-11 of the 15-week course. The content of the sessions preceding the project was designed to get the students reflecting on and researching educational issues both globally and in the Japanese context. The nature and purpose of the project were made clear from the start of the course, and students were given guidelines for the project that outlined the aims and goals of the project, the basic procedures they were to follow, the teacher's role as their advisor, and some of the decisions they would

need to make. During the five weeks of the project, they were to self-organize, formulate a plan of action, implement their plan, and finish by reflecting on the outcome. The classes were to be managed entirely by the students. The guidelines were intentionally kept simple to avoid imposing a researcher agenda, and while present throughout the project, the first author did not lead or teach the class, offering input or advice only when requested or when he deemed that the students had begun to veer from the basic course outlined in the overview.

### *Instruments and data collection procedures*

Five types of data were collected. The first was a video recording of each session, employing a fixed-angle camera that had been introduced four weeks before the start of the project to minimize the effect of the observer's paradox (Bailey, 2010). The second type of data collected consisted of open-ended observation notes kept on a laptop by the first author during each session. The notes focused on recording the main sequence of events, researcher impressions and thoughts about those events, and information such as whether individual students seemed to be on task or doing something unrelated to the lesson, and how they seemed to react to the events that were taking place. The third type of data collected was audio recordings of post-project group discussions involving students discussing a set of researcher-prepared prompts in the language of their choice (English or Japanese). The fourth type of data was individual written reflections collected post-project. The students were given prompts and asked to write their reflections in both English (for practice) and Japanese (for clarity). The fifth type of data came from two questionnaires administered pre- and post-project. Each questionnaire had two parts. The first part, identical in both questionnaires, was adapted from Sakai et al. (2010). It consisted of Likert-scale questions concerning student involvement in decisions about learning content and classroom management. The second part of each questionnaire was original and consisted of a combination of Likert-scale and open-ended items. The pre-project items collected biographical information and asked questions about habits and attitudes related to English learning. The post-project items aimed at measuring the self-reported effects of the project on participant attitudes towards autonomy and English learning. Both questionnaires were administered by computer, in the classroom, using Google Forms. The pre- and post-project questionnaires were administered in the third and twelfth weeks of the course, respectively.

### *Data analysis*

A system was developed to record and analyze what transpired during each videotaped session. Specifically, each session was divided into episodes (distinct activities or events); and the elapsed time for each episode, the primary language being employed, the mode of interaction (e.g., teacher-to-students or student-to-student, etc.), the primary speakers, and any additional information deemed relevant by the first author were recorded in a table. The real-time observation notes kept by the first author were used as supplemental reference data during the review and analysis of the video data. Because of the quality of the audio and the limited field of vision, the notes sometimes supplied information that could not be obtained from the video recording. Finally, a narrative description of what had transpired during the project was developed based on the analysis of the video recording and observation notes. This description is presented below in the 'Results' section.

Recordings of the group discussions, conducted primarily in Japanese, were listened to repeatedly and an essentialized English equivalent was written down. These transcripts were combined with the responses to open-ended questions on the post-project questionnaire and the participants' written individual reflections to form a roughly 7,000-word qualitative database using Atlas.ti Cloud software. The documents in the database were then broken into statements or groups of statements that discussed or expressed one main theme or idea. Each of these 'quotations' was labeled with multiple codes. For the first cycle of coding, an eclectic coding approach (Saldaña, 2015) was employed. In subsequent rounds of coding, codes were combined, revised, refined, and grouped into thematic 'supercodes'. This process ultimately generated 115 codes and nine supercodes. This review and coding of the qualitative data facilitated and informed the narrative analysis, as well as the interpretation of what had transpired during the project.

The quantitative items on the questionnaires were analyzed primarily in terms of descriptive statistics, although the sections based on Sakai et al. (2010) were also subjected to paired-sample t-tests in an attempt to detect whether any meaningful changes in thinking had occurred as a result of the project.

## RESULTS

The results will be presented first in terms of what was observed during the project based on the video recording and the first author's observations, and then in terms of what the qualitative data and questionnaire results revealed.

### *Observer perspective: Narrative description of what transpired*

The teacher had suggested that the students could conduct their project as a group, or alternatively break into smaller units each with its own plan of action. In the first session, however, the students opted for the former option. After a brief period of uncertainty about how to move forward, the one non-Japanese participant, Kanya (all names used here are pseudonyms) from Thailand, volunteered to facilitate the negotiation of a plan of action, a move that was welcomed by the rest of the class. This was a pivotal moment in the development of the project, because thereafter, Kanya became the default leader of each session, virtually assuming the role of a substitute teacher.

While the class opted to act as a single unit, there were also three sub-groups that had already been organically established during the beginning of the course and tended to sit together. These groups were based on a combination of pre-existing friendships and affinities, and factors such as gender and age. The most tightly-knit was a group of vocal, almost rowdy male students; the second closest was also all-male, but quieter and more reserved; and the least cohesive group consisted of all the female participants.

The first session was spent on a plan-formulation process that started with the students sharing opinions about whose teachers' classes at the university they liked or disliked and why, and

from there, they began brainstorming possible class activities for the project. The eventual result was a plan to watch episodes of the Netflix series *American Vandal* and discuss them, ostensibly focusing on the portrayal of an American high school and contrasting it with Japanese schools in order to maintain an educational focus.

In the remaining sessions, the class executed its plan of video-watching and subsequent discussion, and at Kanya's instigation, supplemented these core activities with other activities such as watching and discussing short video interviews Kanya had also done an outside-of-class activity with teachers and students about learning autonomy and ways of studying English, a role-play enacted by two other students, and a live interview about studying abroad with one student that was simultaneously video-recorded. Kanya also set up a routine of self-evaluation: after each session, where the students rated themselves on how well they had understood the videos, and how 'brave' they had been in using English.

In the fourth session, there was a change of plans when Kanya arrived late for class, visibly upset. She explained that one participant, Riku (who was absent that day), had refused to cooperate in preparing a mini-presentation for the class, and aired her frustration at the passive and uncooperative stance of some of the class members. She then proposed that they did something more explicitly education-focused than watching more of *American Vandal*, and proceeded to lead the class in watching and discussing some other video clips she had prepared.

In the fifth and final session, Kanya was absent (for reasons which were unrelated to the events that had transpired in the fourth session), and another student took over in her stead. The class went back to watching *American Vandal* and discussing it. Despite an explicit reminder from the teacher at the beginning of the session, no organized attempt was made during this session to reflect on the outcome of the project. However, as post-project reflection was a built-in feature of the research design, the de facto outcome was a complete cycle of planning, action, and reflection.

***Participant perspective: Results of the discussions, reflections, and questionnaires***

Certain topics and trends emerged prominently from the analysis of the qualitative database. Kanya and her role were mentioned the most by participants, who expressed gratitude, awe, and regret at overly depending on her. Another often-mentioned topic was the series-watching and discussion approach; a majority (n=11) described the approach as engaging or interesting, and many also felt it was effective for language learning. Two participants, however, felt the activity was shallow and/or the content was too difficult.

Ten participants described the project as meaningful and a good experience; many made positive remarks about the novelty of a student-planned and managed class; and three of them specified either that they could put this experience to use when they became teachers in the future, or that it would be good to have similar projects as a regular feature in secondary school curricula. Meanwhile, four students felt that the project was not meaningful, because not everyone participated or made an effort to speak English, or because the content was shallow and monotonous, or because the project itself was too short.

More than half of participants (n=9) mentioned the difficulty of a self-managed class, citing the difficulty of working through differences in thinking, ability, and motivation; the difficulty of getting everyone to share their opinions and participate; and the tendency for the class to take the easy way out.

Filtering the qualitative database by individual name codes (e.g. 'Kanya') made it possible to develop profiles for each participant that reflected their reactions to and thoughts about the project. This was done for all participants; a summary of the results is shown in Table 1. Ten of the 17 students had an overall positive reaction; five had a neutral reaction; and two had a negative reaction.

**Table 1**

**Overall reactions to the project by individual**

| Name | Reaction |
|---|---|
| Aina | + |
| Atsushi | + |
| Hoshito | + |
| Itsuki | + |
| Jin | + |
| Kazuki | + |
| Kenta | + |
| Maho | + |
| Minako | + |
| Shunsuke | + |
| Kanya | + |
| Riku | + |
| Yasuto | + |
| Yosuke | +/− |
| Yumi | +/− |
| Koji | +/− |
| Takumu | +/− |
| | +/− |
| | − |
| | − |

Note. A plus (+), minus (-), or plus/minus (+/-) indicates that an individual's overall response was positive, negative, or neutral, respectively.

Overall opinions about the project fell into two general camps. One consisted of the nine individuals in Table 1 who had an overall positive reaction. These students were happy with the project and felt it was a positive and meaningful experience. Their main complaint was

that because of the clash between Kanya and Riku, the class had strayed from its agreed-upon plan in the fourth session. The other camp, consisting of the remaining individuals, were not pleased with, or had mixed feelings about the project. Some were critical of the series-watching plan, and felt the class could have done something more 'serious'. They expressed feelings that not everybody had participated proactively, or that the project could have been more carefully set up. Most members of this group felt that differences in thinking made it difficult to work together as a class.

The distribution of reactions to the project described above was also reflected in the results of the second part of the post-project questionnaire, as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**

**Post-project questionnaire part 2: Descriptive statistics**

| Item | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Q14a: After the project, my thinking about in-class learner autonomy has changed. | 3.71 | .61 |
| Q15a: After the project, I feel more confident about my ability to independently manage my English learning. | 3.43 | .94 |
| Q16a: When the students take control of the class, in-class learning becomes more interesting. | 3.29 | .91 |
| Q17a: After the project, I have become more interested in learning English. | 3.93 | .73 |

Note. Means and standard deviations of responses (n=14) to a 5-point Likert scale. A score of 1 indicates "strongly disagree", while a score of 5 indicates "strongly agree".

The results of part one of each questionnaire and of the above-mentioned t-tests were inconclusive, and have therefore been omitted from this report.

## DISCUSSION

### *Research questions 1a and 1b: Learner contribution to their own autonomy*

The first research question asked how the learners contributed to the development of their own learner autonomy. It can be argued that it was above all *as a group* that they did so. Over the short duration of the project, there was a clear collective effort to manage the class and implement meaningful, self-directed lessons. In doing so, the group moved, in a naturally messy and exploratory fashion, towards their own self-realized pedagogy of autonomy, and showed signs of developing what Murphey and Jacobs (2000) call "critical collaborative autonomy". In classroom settings, group work and project work shift the focus from the teacher to the learners and create affordances for peer collaboration, sharing, evaluation, modelling, and scaffolding, thus leading to opportunities for learners to collectively take control of, and reflect on, their own learning processes.

This process of collaborative autonomy development was the most intriguing aspect of the project. Below, we will discuss ways in which the class acted as a group in moving towards greater autonomy, making reference to the group dynamics literature, the role of reflection, and peer modelling and scaffolding.

***Group dynamics***

Positive group dynamics require that group members feel like accepted and valued insiders. As mentioned in the literature review, one term for this is *belongingness* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which is vital to motivation, engagement, and commitment in the school context (Osterman, 2000). In a synergistic fashion, belonging to a group also affords group members access to resources not available to individuals (Murphey et al., 2012).

As described above in the 'Results', the participants went into the project having already organically established groupings, and this may have facilitated their transition into a collective, student-led mode. Murphey and Jacobs (2000) propose five movements towards autonomy that learners pass through in collaborative contexts: socialization, dawning metacognition, initiating choice, expanding autonomy, and critical collaborative autonomy. Socialization is the foundational stage at which group membership becomes part of learner identity. This movement had likely and largely been completed at the outset of the project, both in terms of whole-class and sub-group identities.

A conspicuous feature of how the participants went about collectively managing the project was their self-selection of a leader figure, which can be seen as an expression of the group's *need* for leadership. In a somewhat paradoxical relationship, leadership serves an important function in autonomy development: just as people often demonstrate a desire to be led to freedom, learners—at least initially—may need to be led to autonomous learning. Compared to her classmates, Kanya was a more competent peer in at least two ways: her English ability and her previously established level of autonomy development. As an exchange student who had chosen to come to Japan and pursue a second bachelor's degree, she was clearly more independent, motivated, and experienced at educational self-direction than her classmates. This made it easy for her to step into a leadership role, which took on the familiar form of class teacher. Murphey (2003) discusses three traditional modes of leadership from the group dynamics literature: autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. Applying these to teachers, who are all by default leaders, he renames the third mode *autonomy-inviting*. Kanya, whom the group had selected as their de facto leader, could be seen assuming all three modes of leadership, at times, instructing the class as to what they should do; at times, democratically negotiating a course; and at times, modeling and encouraging collaboration and self-assessment. Having assumed this student-teacher role, Kanya had clearly put herself into a rather high-pressure position, which undoubtedly involved a more substantial investment on her part as compared to her peers. This difference in level of commitment may explain the clear disappointment she showed towards her classmates by the fourth session.

Another conspicuous feature of the project was the disagreement and friction that had transpired during the fourth session. This can be seen as another sign that the group was

evolving and beginning to mature. Many models of group development include a 'conflict' stage (Forsyth, 2003). For example, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) note that a 'transition' phase, during which conflict typically occurs, is both inevitable and essential to classroom group development. Conflict indicates that group members are becoming more willing to communicate their feelings openly, and also demonstrates their commitment to the group endeavor; no conflict will arise from indifferent members.

Self-selection of a leader and intra-group conflict are both expressions of participant agency, and therefore indicative of a group effort to move toward autonomy. Learners can be seen as both products of and producers of society. Lantolf (2013), in explaining this 'dialectic unity', states that "through their agency humans not only internalize features of the social world, but at the same time, they contribute to it". He further notes that "even individuals who do not change the environment contribute to it by maintaining the status quo and thereby blocking change" (p. 21). The students in the present study who assumed a passive stance and seemed to just go with the flow each time, can be said to have been exercising their agency and contributing to the project by simply maintaining the status quo.

***Reflection***

Whether in the context of individual self-directed learning, in group project work, or in an 'autonomous classroom', self-reflection is essential to language learner autonomy. Reflection is how we build self-knowledge, which is essential for self-directed learning. Taking control of one's own learning begins with reflection, by taking an inventory and performing a needs analysis, formal or informal. Based on this reflection, the learner formulates a plan and acts upon it. The outcome of that action is then reflected on and further plans are made, in an often-overlapping cycle of planning, action, and reflection. This cycle is central to frameworks that have been proposed by autonomy researchers (e.g., Little et al., 2017; Reinders, 2010) as well as to action research (Bailey, 2001).

At the outset of the project, the group adopted a simple and effective approach to negotiating their plan of action. In a brainstorming fashion, Kanya elicited favorite teachers and activities from her peers, thus engaging the group in a process of reflection on their previous learning experiences that had direct relevance to the task at hand. Reflection is key to learning and is most effective when done consciously (Boud et al., 1996, p. 33). Reflection is also a cornerstone of experience-based learning (Andresen et al., 1995). By consciously reflecting on previous learning experiences, the group activated and acted on knowledge that may have been previously unexamined. The negotiation was also an example of democratic group decision-making, essentially a negotiated syllabus approach to planning. Negotiating a syllabus means that students' wants are taken into account. While wants do not equate with needs, to respect student wants is to respect their agency in the learning process, and can boost motivation and engagement. When learners are involved in the syllabus design process, they can also become more self-aware of their own preferences, strengths and weaknesses, and be empowered to become more autonomous (Christison & Murray, 2014).

### *Peer modelling and scaffolding*

In a collaborative group project, the support and stimulation of peer interaction are perhaps the main driving force for autonomy development. One way in which this occurs is through modeling and imitation of desirable behaviors. Social learning theory proposes that we learn new behaviors by imitating role models and through vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Murphey further suggests that the proximity of a role model influences the impact they exert upon us: most effective are *near peer role models*, individuals who are close physically, ethnically, and in terms of age, gender, interests and background (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000).

In the present project, Kanya in particular can be seen to have acted as a role model by proactively introducing activities and materials to supplement the group's series-watching plan, and then by encouraging and helping other students to follow suit. Kanya can be said to have come to the project with a higher degree of autonomous competence than her peers. With her video interviews, she was essentially doing independent research and making links between the classroom and the outside world, signs that Nunan (1997) associates with the highest level of autonomous learning, which he labels "transcendence" (p. 195). Kanya was therefore well-positioned to serve as a near-peer role model. In the language of sociocultural theory, Kanya engaged in 'other-regulation' by explicitly mediating her peers' learning activities. This kind of mediation is now commonly referred to as scaffolding (Boblett, 2012), which can be thought of as a site of "collaborative construction work" (Walqui, 2006, p. 164). This kind of intra-group scaffolding is one of the greatest potential benefits of collaborative learning and group work for the development of language learner autonomy.

### *Caveat*

The discussion hitherto has made admittedly positive interpretations of what took place during the project in terms of a collective move towards autonomy. Consideration must also be given, however, to ways in which the project may be interpreted as a failure to do so. As will be mentioned below, in their reflections, some participants had negative opinions about the value of the project, or expressed disappointment in their classmates. The fact that they largely kept these opinions to themselves during the project is in and of itself something of a failure to move towards autonomy, at least at the group level. This relates to the above-mentioned concept of expressing one's agency by maintaining the status quo. Going against the dominant current of the group requires energy and personal risk; it is often easier to simply keep one's discontent to oneself. Avoiding this kind of stifled dissent would be easier if the project was longer in duration and more opportunities were created for sharing reflections and opinions during—rather than after—the project. Clearly, this is a factor to consider when designing similar projects in the future.

### *Research question 2: Changes in learner beliefs and attitudes*

The second research question asked how learner beliefs and attitudes change over the course of the project in regards to learner autonomy. The discussion here will focus on the qualitative data and on three aspects: how the project fostered metacognitive awareness of autonomous

learning; how it affected motivation; and how it affected participants' concepts of their future selves.

***Metacognitive awareness***

From the results of the qualitative analysis, it can be said that the project seemed to foster metacognitive awareness of individual and group learner autonomy. As mentioned above, Murphey and Jacobs (2000), identified five 'movements' toward collaborative autonomy that groups pass through. The second stage is *dawning metacognition*, at which learners begin to examine the learning process and develop their ability to 'learn how to learn' (Nunan, 1988, p. 53). Part of what is learned is the nature of collaborative learning, as learners evaluate how well they have worked together and how they might collaborate more effectively in the future.

Statements from the qualitative database suggest that the project had positive effects in terms of promoting metacognition. Many of the students seemed to have made realizations about both the challenges and rewards of group self-management. Some participants felt that the difficulties outweighed the potential rewards in this particular case. For example, Yumi wrote that she felt individual differences in level and motivation prevented the project from being very successful, but that she would love to do such a project in a class where everyone was keen on studying English. Koji echoed this sentiment: "I think if everyone could have done what they really wanted to, it would have been a great project". Riku also felt that the project would have been more meaningful if more students had been proactive. Other participants found more value in what had transpired. Itsuki wrote, "I learned how difficult it is for us to conduct our own classes, and that has helped me to grow". Aina wrote that through group planning and class management, "we became more independent". Shunsuke wrote "What I learned from the project was that since we did something we all agreed on together, we could enjoy studying, and I think that was good. It was not bad for our first attempt". Whether they had positive or negative things to say about how the project developed, most of the students seemed to have made meaningful realizations about the nature of an autonomous group effort.

***Motivation***

The project also seems to have affected learner motivation. Various researchers (e.g., Da Silva, 2002; Lamb, 2001; Takagi, 2003) have taken the stance that "enhanced motivation is conditional upon learners taking responsibility for their own learning". However, the reverse has also been claimed, i.e. that "it is motivation that precedes autonomy" (Benson, 2007, p. 29). Spratt et al. (2002), for example, concluded that "one way to encourage autonomy may be to develop students' motivation to learn" (p. 263). In the present study, there is evidence to support both views. On the one hand, it was the more motivated students who displayed the most autonomous behavior during the project. On the other hand, the challenging task of collective self-direction and the lessons that came as a result seemed to motivate some of the students.

The qualitative data suggests that some participants were motivated to at least *want* to become more autonomous by the project experience; for example, Minako: "I want to study more

independently"; and Maho: "Now I understand the importance of autonomy". For Aina, the experience of failure to communicate fluently had a motivational effect: "I wasn't very able to express myself in the group discussion, so I want to try to act more autonomously in the future". Itsuki had a related realization: "I realized that the more you make an effort, the more the conversation expands". Shunsuke seemed to be motivated by the material the class decided to use: "I realized that I want to study the kinds of English that we don't learn in regular courses". Based on such comments, it would seem that learner motivation, and therefore attitude in relation to were affected by the project.

***Future selves***

A final and intriguing way that the project seemed to affect learner beliefs and attitudes about autonomy relates to their imagined future selves. In language acquisition research, the concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) has featured most prominently in Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self-System. According to Dörnyei (2009), the discrepancy between one's current L2 self and an idealized future L2 self is a major source of motivation. Future selves have been related to identity and autonomy, as well. Lamb (2011) proposes that "the self-identity we wish for in the future can be a source of motivation to engage in self-regulated, or autonomous learning which will help us achieve that identity" (p. 177).

Many of the participants in this study are studying to become teachers in the future, and for some of them, the project seemed to have inspired ideas related to their imagined future identities. For example, in the group discussion, Itsuki said "When I become a teacher in the future, I'm sure I will do normal lessons, but it would be interesting to try something like this too, honestly." In another group, Kenta and Shunsuke discussed the novelty of the project as a pedagogical approach, and Kenta commented: "It would be good to have a class like this once a week from elementary through high school". In his group discussion, Atsushi also commented: "It was good in that we could see what would happen if the students create the lessons instead of the teacher, regardless of whether we were successful or not". Aina was thinking more generally about her future self when she wrote "I thought planning and conducting our own lessons was good because we became more independent. We will need to act independently when we enter working society."

In summary, there is evidence in the participants' self-reported data that the project had a positive effect on learner beliefs and attitudes in relation to learner autonomy. Namely, it seems to have promoted metacognitive awareness of autonomous learning, boosted learners' motivation to become more autonomous learners, and affected participants' imagined future selves to include more autonomous roles.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the potential for collaborative learning to promote what has been termed a "group-oriented form of proactive autonomy" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 76) or *critical collaborative autonomy* (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000). In a student-led project spanning five

classroom sessions, the learners made small but definite steps towards that goal, exhibiting signs of near-peer modelling and maturation as a group. Overall, the results also indicated that the project had a positive effect on individual participants' thinking about collaborative self-managed learning, their capacity for constructive self-reflection, and their interest in studying English.

While the student-led project approach might not be easy to implement in many language courses in Japan, involving students in decisions about course content and management, giving them some degree of control over the class, and promoting group-level discussion, decision-making, and reflection, are principles that can and should be incorporated into many kinds of language courses. The autonomous mindset is valuable for any individual in any social context, and therefore seeking learner autonomy in the language classroom can have subtle effects that extend to all aspects of the lives of both students and teachers.

Limitations of the present study include the obvious fact that it was essentially a single case study on one unique, intact group of learners, meaning that the results cannot be generalized to a broader population. Another limitation is the fact that all of the data was collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported by the first author, who was also the teacher of the course, meaning that there is built-in subjectivity to the results. This is, however, a natural and largely unavoidable aspect of both action research and research involving qualitative data. A third limitation is the short time-frame of the project, which would likely have produced more significant developments over a longer period of time.

There are a few key takeaways that can be gleaned from the present study. One is that Japanese university students are capable of, and will benefit from, greater involvement in classroom management and syllabus-related decisions. Another is that when doing so, it is necessary to find a balance between structuring, scaffolding and modeling the process on the one hand, and giving students enough leeway to forge their own way forward on the other. And finally, the present project suggests that an action research approach that actively involves students is perhaps the ideal way to research LLA in the classroom context, as it makes it possible to achieve Dam's (2018) mandate: *make your learners researchers of their own learning*.

In light of the above-mentioned limitations, future research is warranted to build on the findings and improve on the design of the present study. Future project designs should lead students more gradually into the sharing of classroom management and participation in syllabus-related decisions, and the time-frame of future projects should be longer. And as mentioned above in the 'Discussion' (under 'Caveat'), students should have regular opportunities to reflect and share opinions during the course of the project. Ideally, future studies would find ways to work the project into pre-existing syllabi, to explore the extent to which a student-led approach can be non-disruptively incorporated into the curriculum. A research project spanning more than one semester in order to collect longitudinal data would help to investigate changes in learner attitudes over time. Future studies could also explore ways to promote harmonious collaboration among the students in a structured way, in order to leverage the potential of group dynamics for developing learner autonomy. Finally, it would be useful to create a research design that focuses specifically on group dynamics and how they interact with the development of individual learner autonomy.

## THE AUTHORS

***Henry Foster*** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Bukkyo University, Kyoto, Japan. He holds a Doctor of Education degree from Anaheim University. His research interests include language learner autonomy and language learner psychology.
*foster@bukkyo-u.ac.jp*

***Hayo Reinders*** is a TESOL Professor and Director of Research at Anaheim University, USA, and a Professor of Applied Linguistics at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi in Thailand. He is also the founder of the global Institute for Teacher Leadership and the editor of Innovation in Language Learning & Teaching. His research interests are in out-of-class learning, technology and language teacher
*info@innovationinteaching.org*

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