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Promoting Learner Autonomy in the UAE and Japan

Jo Mynard

After seven years of teaching in the United Arab Emirates, I felt that I had a fair understanding of my students' approaches to learning. I knew a number of successful classroom techniques which helped to develop learner autonomy, and I often wondered whether these approaches would work elsewhere. The time had come to learn about somewhere completely different, and for my next destination I chose Japan.

I have been in Japan for over a year now, but I still feel that I have so much to learn. I am far from having the same understanding of my students here as I did in Abu Dhabi. Nevertheless, I would like to share some initial observations based on my experience and reading so far. Please note that I am not attempting to make any generalisations. I will describe some of the similarities and differences between my students in both places. I will also discuss some of my teaching approaches that encouraged autonomous learning with my students in the UAE and comment on how well these approaches have worked in Japan.

There are a number of similarities between first year students at the college where I teach now in Japan and first year students at the university I taught at in the UAE. With very few exceptions, my students in both

places are all female nationals, aged around 18, with a common mother-tongue which uses a non-Roman script. In addition, almost all of the students in both locations experienced a school system which allowed very few opportunities to develop autonomous learning skills. All the students took English classes at school for many years and most enter college with a pre-intermediate level. Few of the students had been taught by a native speaker of English or in the target language. I doubt that many had been active participants in their classroom learning until they began college. Generally, both groups of students have had very little freedom in their lives so far: in the UAE most Emirati females are not at liberty leave the confines of the home, school or college unaccompanied by male relatives. In Japan most teenagers have little time to themselves as after school they usually take part in rigidly scheduled club activities and often evening "cram" schools (Vye, 2005).

The first area for comparison is the general classroom atmosphere. My Emirati students would answer questions posed by the teacher either by calling out or by putting up their hands. They were keen to show the teacher how much they knew. I had become so used to this that I was baffled in my first weeks in Japan. I would ask the class a question, just as I did in the

UAE, but the response would be absolute silence with 30 expressionless faces looking back at me. Now I know that my Japanese students expect to be called on by name before they will offer a reply, though they are learning that I like to be less formal and many now offer responses without being called on. The students in both locations continue to behave as they did at school, at least initially. Despite this different classroom atmosphere, what both these groups had in common in the first months of college was that they were generally reluctant to question the teacher or give their opinions. I had to find ways to create the right environment in my classroom in the UAE whereby students could question, share and comment without feeling as though they were criticising. I find that the same approaches work with my students here in Japan. One approach I use is to produce deliberate mistakes for the students to reflect on and respond to. Another way is by setting group tasks (see Robbins 1996) where the students have to discuss their opinions on a topic or offer suggestions for change or improvement. A secret ballot approach is also one which has worked well in both places when I am seeking students' input on something related to the class or course.

A second area for discussion is the students' reactions when getting back a test or a grade. In the UAE, new students would often try to negotiate a higher grade with the teachers. When students failed a test, there would often be anger or even tears as they had been unaccustomed to failure in high school (McLoughlin, 2003). In Japan, the students silently accept their grade, never questioning or referring to it. Students in Japan are used to being pushed and challenged. Overcoming obstacles makes them stronger (Hemmi, 2006). What the two groups do have in common however is that they are not used to evaluating their own performance on the test or identifying how they could improve next time. Explicit grading procedures, such as the use of rubrics, can help both groups understand how the grades are allocated. In the UAE, rubrics were a good way of justifying a grade which the student was querying, and I continued to use them in Japan through habit. Initially, the rubrics confused the students, and I learned that many of them were used to simply receiving a letter grade with no feedback from the teacher. As they became used to my rubrics, my Japanese students realised that they were being given guidance on how to improve, and many of them acted on the feedback. Activities that encourage students to reflect on their performance on the test are also helpful, for example returning a blank test paper for students to work on in groups or asking reflective questions before students see their actual paper (Mynard and Sorflaten, 2003). This has worked well in both the UAE and in Japan.

Another aspect of classroom learning that I could not fail to notice relates to accuracy and fluency. In the

UAE, the students with a pre-intermediate level of English were usually able to communicate their message reasonably well orally, but the discourse contained a lot of basic grammatical errors. Students in the UAE are used to communicating, even in a limited way, in English, with people from many nations working in the service and hospitality industries or with domestic staff. In Japan, my students often do not contribute very much to communication activities, but when they do however, it is usually grammatically correct. People do not usually need English in their daily lives in Japan so there are fewer opportunities for students to practice and feel confident using it. In addition, a lot of emphasis is put on perfection in Japan which makes people reluctant to make mistakes. The school system also places an emphasis on *form over meaning* (Kanda and Beglar, 2004) and mainly prepares students for various external exams (Sakui, 2004). What both my Emirati and my Japanese students have in common, however, is that they are not generally aware of their difficulties or how they can improve. Giving students time to prepare for some communication activities has had benefits for both groups. Japanese students appreciate having time to rehearse, look up words in their electronic dictionaries, and feel comfortable with the language before they speak. Preparation time is also useful for Emirati students as it gives them the opportunity to improve their accuracy, question their fossilised errors and to use a more extensive range of vocabulary. Recording some speaking activities and letting the students listen to them later also increases their awareness of their difficulties and helps them to address these problematic areas.

Finally, one of my research areas in the UAE was how Internet chat rooms could promote language acquisition and learner autonomy (Mynard, 2003), and I was keen to do similar investigations in Japan. My research so far has shown the following: both groups communicate more in a chat room in English than they do in similar face-to-face discussions – there is usually 100% participation in chat rooms. There are some differences in the type of interaction however. The Emirati students contributed quickly and frequently to the online discussions producing lengthy transcripts. These transcripts contained numerous grammar and spelling errors. In general, the Japanese students contributed fewer turns, but were very careful about spelling and grammar. Both groups demonstrated autonomy as they took charge of their learning, at least for a limited time. They communicated effectively by applying comprehension and communication strategies in chat rooms. They made decisions about how and what to contribute to the online discussion, and they transferred language they had learned in other classes to the chat room discussions. In both cases, the chat rooms removed the barriers imposed by traditional

learning environments and empowered the students to move out of their “comfort zones” (Hoven 1999:157). Encouraging both groups of learners to examine the transcripts has been very effective at developing the students’ metacognitive awareness. The Emirati students had the opportunity to identify and reflect on their mistakes and to learn from them. The Japanese students were able to identify ways to develop the discussion further through follow-up questions and giving feedback to interlocutors.

Clearly there are many more areas which could be compared, and I am sure that with time and a little more research, I may be able to comment on them. As I expected, my experience in Japan has been a learning opportunity for me, but I have been able to draw on my previous experience with promoting learner autonomy. I have found that classroom approaches that I came to rely on in the UAE also work in Japan, but often for very different reasons.

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Nordic Workshop Report

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This is a report on the 9th Nordic Conference on Developing Learner Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: Status and Ways Ahead after Twenty Years, held from 31 August to 2 September 2006 in Copenhagen

Prelude

The biggest challenge after attending conferences, retreats, seminars, etc. is to somehow manage to transform the inspirations and budding friendships of the event into practice. This set of narrative reflections, which I probably should have begun writing five weeks ago is one of the steps I am taking in the attempt to transform my learning journeys in Copenhagen into on-going practices. I have, as all travelers must, allies and guides to help me, even as I honor the necessity of getting lost as a part of these very processes.

The first of these allies was the overall design by the conference organizers, which has led me to

consistently remember those three days as the 9th Nordic Workshop, not ‘conference’ as in the official title. This is not merely a false memory, but the primary term used by Gerd Gabrielsen, Leni Dam, and Hanne Thomsen throughout the conference. After opening remarks, and personal reflections by Leni and Gerd, Richard Smith presented a plenary talk on *The History of Learner Autonomy*. In this first session, with its focus on history, the discussion was framed by Gerd, who asked, “Who are we?” and “Where have we been?” -- but with a clear focus on the use of the past to illuminate our way. This focus on the future formed the heart of our discussions, and found explicit expression in David Little’s closing plenary, *Language Learner*