

Promoting Student Autonomy and Improving Student Abilities in the English Learning Process

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One very common question my students have asked me is, "What is the best way to learn English?" Not only I but probably most language teachers have been asked this same question. On the one hand, teachers struggle to devise more effective ways to motivate students to practice the scheduled teaching materials. More creative teachers devote much time to producing original teaching materials, in the hope that they will be adopted as natural samples of expressions used in daily life. On the other hand, teachers often find frustrated students looking back at their six or more years of English study and asking that same question: "*When* will I be able to use English more naturally and fluently?"

Most English teachers in Japanese high schools still have little autonomy when programming their curricula. Although a lot more flexibility has been given in general to English junior and senior high school teachers in recent years, students now attending college were not given the opportunity to develop their language skills according to their personal abilities. The long history of teacher control and student passivity in Japanese English classes reflects the lack of autonomy among the majority of Japanese students. Studies have shown that a growing number of teachers approve the trend toward guiding students to take responsibility for their own language learning, recognizing its potential for better results.

Training students to become more autonomous also results in greater personal fulfillment. Since students come to college with little or no sense of what autonomous learning is like, initiating them into semi-autonomy seems to be a wise start.

In the first few weeks of each new academic year, I meet students out of high school who show very little learning autonomy. Most expect me, as the teacher, to correct every single sentence, and to guide them step by step. Not surprised at this attitude but hoping to change it, I decided to verify the effectiveness of training them to become more autonomous learners and thus improve their communicative abilities in English. Two basic pedagogical principles guided me when devising learning plans and materials: the principle of group interaction, and the principle that each student should be allowed to progress at a pace and in a manner suited to his individual needs and abilities. A more individualized instruction was also attempted in the hope of reducing the frustration level. I

* In this article I have alternately used "she" and "he" and their variants when referring to teachers and students, since they include both males and females.

used the same coursebook and supplemental materials.

with 24 female freshmen English majors and 30 freshmen (both female and male non-English majors) in two different educational settings for one academic year. The class and homework activities assigned gradually demanded more individual responsibility and control from the students. My goal was to make them learn how to learn in English.

What follows are brief descriptions of the different types of group-work activities as well as individualized teaching used. Here are their brief descriptions.

Group Work

Let me first explain group work. Group work as such is as old as mankind and extends to all man's social activities. Group dynamics has been utilized in education and in foreign-language learning. But in spite of all the modern emphasis on communication, this approach has not yet reached a very effective and satisfying level or has not been seriously considered in the teaching of English in Japanese junior and senior high schools, where most foreign-language learning takes place. Common approaches used are based on generative-transformational grammar and help to focus the attention on certain aspects of the learning process. But they fail to provide a systematic approach to learning how to communicate in the new language. This traditional approach together with other techniques such as audiovisual aids, certainly play an important role in the whole teaching process. It seems strange, however, that little or no use is made of group work. The great potential of this tool has been recognized in various fields of Japanese culture—economic competition being the best example. Group work in foreign-language learning has not, however, found its way into the Japanese secondary-school system.

Some common arguments against this approach are: (1) Correction of mistakes becomes an almost impossible task. (2) Activities, especially in large groups, will become too noisy and difficult to control. (3) It requires too much work of the teacher. (4) Students will not be able to communicate properly in English. (5) Unmotivated students and those poor in English will communicate mostly in Japanese and end up not performing the assigned task. Like all learning activities, group work can overcome such difficulties and can succeed if properly planned and carried out.

What should not be forgotten before forming the groups

a. Principles and goals

This modern age of communication emphasizes the improvement and mastery of communicative skills. Therefore, group work should focus on the spoken use of language and proceed from there to master other language skills.

Learners are exposed to the language they are learning and have to understand it. They actively participate in the activities and learn language functions and words, phrases or expressions. By speaking in a group, learners are given more opportunities for use of something new which has been introduced and/or pretaught before the group activity begins, thus developing fluency in the language. It is clearly the group work

which lets the students actually use the language whereas in the traditional setting the teacher leads an entire class and all the activities, lecturing, questioning, and responding. Group work also develops and improves self-confidence, motivation, a sense of the learning process and social interaction. Practice in the spoken language naturally gives the student the opportunity to use, learn and practice reaction signals, initiators, facilitators (pause fillers, hesitation devices), as well as non-verbal vocalizations that native speakers often use in their daily communication. Lastly, the content being taught may be either the practice of a language function, or a model that alludes to aspects of the cultures of English-speaking peoples.

In principle, everyone involved should be interested, willing to improve, and be an active and thoughtful participant. This is not the reality, however. Lately, even among students specializing in English, motivation to improve their English skills seems to be weak and sometimes even absent. I divide the students into groups of four since I consider this number the most productive and the easiest to control and work with for several reasons: (1) small groups are particularly suitable to developing verbal fluency, (2) learners are encouraged to actively exchange ideas as they have ample opportunity to talk to each other, (3) this is an appropriate situation for better personal interaction, (4) with groups of four, pair activities can be conveniently assigned, (5) such a small group can be easily supervised, (6) when the opportunity arises, the teacher can participate briefly in a discussion or roleplay with a member as long as she takes a non-dominant role, (7) this group size overcomes the disparity in student aims and in the different levels of English fluency, (8) students can freely participate in discussions without the fear of being ridiculed by their classmates, (9) the student will not be chastised by the teacher.

b. *Types of Grouping*

Students may be divided into groups based on: (1) random sampling, (2) ability levels, (3) common interests, and (4) friendship.

Random grouping makes use of the students' present seating arrangements. This method has the advantage of including pupils who do not mix well with their peers and who often find themselves isolated. Forced inclusion of "loners" may cause disastrous results, as they often genuinely prefer to work alone or, if grouping is absolutely necessary, associate with "loners" like themselves. Random grouping can also keep together students who have chosen their seats for friendship reasons.

Ability grouping has both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that less confident speakers will feel more comfortable with peers at the same language level. The disadvantage is that psychol problems could arise between "inferior" and "superior" groups learning in the same classroom. Caution and case-by-case analysis are recommended in this situation.

Common-interest grouping may sometimes overlap with friendship grouping since friends tend to share similar interests. Friendship grouping, however, should also be carefully considered case by case, as sometimes friends are not mature or motivated

enough to see the value of cooperative work and taking responsibility for one's progress. Sometimes "chatterboxes" who wind up in one group are in danger of "taking over" the group.

Considering the above criteria, I paid special attention to where I should place quiet students whose linguistic ability was below the class average. I first had them sit for a time with above-average students in the hope that the latter would encourage the quiet ones to participate more actively. But the results were disappointing. The better students probably felt uncomfortable speaking English in the presence of classmates who found it more difficult communicating in English. As a result, they used Japanese all the time whereas the quiet ones felt inhibited by their poor English and usually remained silent. But when I grouped together students who had more confidence using English, the results were successful. Those who had refused to use English in front of less proficient classmates reverted to using English for most of the allotted time. The low-proficiency students, in turn, participated more readily when grouped with learners at a similar language level. A special type of isolated student is often present in Japanese classes. These "loners" withdraw from classroom interactions, turning away from activities such as pair work or group work. They are, however, generally good students who are diligent about their homework and classroom tasks. Although they rarely initiate conversation with their peers, ask the teacher publicly for clarifications or participate actively in lesson activities, they often seek consultation privately and show a high level of language acquisition. In many cases, they prove to be superior in both speaking and comprehension. Therefore, I would not classify all isolated students as "less proficient in completing learning tasks" as Good and Power (1976) did.

Group Arrangements and Sampling of Group Activities

With college freshmen who have had 6 years of formal English in high school, less controlled activities can and should be used. It is important to mention to them that different types of group work achieve different learning goals. One type of group work suits one kind of task, which may require a certain kind of seating arrangement.

a. *Independent-collaborative Grouping*

Many researchers agree that this is the ideal arrangement for group work because it ensures participation as members depend on each other to complete their tasks. And such participation often involves or can even arouse a sense of interest. Here are just a few sample activities suited to this type of arrangement.

1. Each member of the group has a piece of information that the others do not have, and each piece of information is needed to complete the task. E.g., information on different characters in a story. All the members have a chart which they have to complete with information about characters not their own. The members then have to formulate questions which contribute to revealing the entire story.
2. Each member has a map of a city. Each map shows only some different information such as names of streets, buildings, or shops. By combining information the group

cooperates to complete the map.

3. Other possible activities include strip-story exercises, which require the matching or ordering of pictures or sentences. When working in pairs, maintaining the secrecy of each member's information may be achieved by sitting back to back (setting up a barrier between them such as a cardboard screen may be physically impossible or too time consuming in most cases).
4. Pair work within group work is recommended for activities such as dialogues, checking written work with each other, simple substitution drills and preparation/briefing activities for later group tasks.

When performing group work, the best seating arrangement, of course, is to sit in a circle with members equidistant from each other, so that there is equal access to the necessary information. When they work in pairs, however, both members should face each other so as to better communicate and shield their individual information.

b. Cooperative Grouping

This is the most common group arrangement. All members have equal access to the same information and share their viewpoints based on common material.

Selection of material should be done carefully in order to avoid individualized study. Recommended activities are ranking, ordering, selecting a list of items, actions or information; finding reasons or implications in a story; producing a TV program; solving puzzles; problem solving such as suggesting solutions to letters of writers with problems; drama; interviews; and exchanging opinions.

Depending on the material and the number of students in a group, the seating arrangement can be either a circle or a horseshoe. If the material is mainly pictorial, copies should not be distributed to each individual because this would lead the students to work individually rather than encourage each one to play an active part in the group work. Non-participation and alienation can be avoided by giving each group member a different job such as notetaking or checking certain items.

Changing the group size or introducing new members into a group stimulates individual participation and avoids conflicts caused by exceptional performers who may find it boring working with slower learners. This measure also helps impulsive students who easily get impatient with group work. Moreover, competitive learners who are reluctant to share their feelings and opinions, feel more comfortable to see members move to other groups as sometimes there are good students of very strong character who do not wish to compromise and want to be the "dictators" in the activities. Finally, it relieves the tension caused by a talkative member who irritates more serious students and leaves them feeling excluded.

As Hill (1982), and Johnson et al. (1981) demonstrated in their research, cooperative work requires some degree of equality of skills. As previously explained, I tried without success to form heterogeneous groups with members at various skill levels. Thus in any cooperative grouping arrangement, careful consideration should be given to members' proficiency levels.

c. Student-“student-teacher” Grouping

A third type of group work uses an arrangement very similar to the traditional classroom situation where the teacher leads the activities. In this grouping, however, a student assumes the teacher's role. Among several activities possible in this arrangement are: 1. Dictation and question-answer practice with beginners. The student-teacher uses a text from which she dictates to the other members in the group.; 2. Interviews, information gathering, providing directions on how to get to a place, how to make or arrange something are activities suitable for more advanced students. Question-and-answer practice or using words as clues can be used for text reconstruction, completing a text, interviews, information gathering, and providing directions. For a smoother flow, more able students should take the student-teacher role, as they react more promptly and make fewer mistakes.

The best seating arrangement has the student-teacher facing toward and equidistant from the rest of the group. However, such details can be left to the students themselves as long as the teacher first discusses with the student-teachers the approach to group work and advises them on the materials that will be used and how to proceed.

Teacher's Role

The teacher should insist that group work be conducted entirely in English, encouraging students who use English, and suppressing her own impulse to correct every mistake on the spot. Group tasks must be kept simple enough to understand and easy enough to be completed. Special care should be paid to ensure against discipline problems or frequent long silences due to tasks that are inappropriate to the students' abilities and interests.

Points to remember:

1. The following should be taken into account when dividing the class into groups.
 - a. English proficiency levels
 - b. gender
 - c. personality
 - d. interests
 - e. prior overseas learning experience, if any
 - f. practice goals
2. State the purpose/goal of the task to the students so that they know what to do to reach the objective.
3. Explain the reason for choosing this or that activity as well as why certain techniques are to be used. Slow and or shy students must be specially encouraged to seize the opportunity to practice English conversation. The teacher must help them to overcome their reluctance to speak up in front of the group or the whole class.
4. When necessary, e.g., before starting an unfamiliar exercise, all students, especially, the less able ones, should know clearly what they are supposed to do. The teacher should issue detailed instructions regarding the procedure, explaining the purpose,

rules, time frame, and the role or task each student is expected to perform. Special care must be taken with slow learners, double checking their comprehension or clarifying details.

5. Once the students get started on their tasks, the teacher's role as monitor, helper or guide and resource starts. The teacher has to establish an atmosphere in which students take personal responsibility to carry out the task on their own. They should feel comfortable working in a group, knowing that the teacher is available to help and to offer suggestions. The teacher should circulate among the groups to ensure that the students are involved in their tasks and that problem students are not slacking off or disrupting the group's work. These rounds also provide a valuable chance for the teacher to check both collective and individual progress and productivity.
6. It is advisable that some kind of class debriefing however short be done once the group work is completed. Depending on the task objectives, a group report should be expected. All groups should be allotted equal time to deliver a report. These report sessions give each group a chance to compare differences and similarities from group to group, thus allowing groups to learn how much has been assimilated from the assigned task. The more involved students and those eager to make progress will take advantage of these sessions, which also serve to create an emotional bond among the members who will feel part of a small learning community. Feelings of competition among group members or groups are usually forgotten during these short debriefing sessions. For the teacher, they also provide good feedback for planning subsequent activities.

Individualized Instruction

First-year students almost always arrive accustomed to traditional teacher-centered classes in junior and senior high schools, where the teacher has the role of the imparter of knowledge and the leader of all activities. Thus, group work is a new or infrequent experience, and some, if not many students may still prefer to work by themselves. Group work frustrates those who expect teachers to give them the answers to the practice exercises and then just move on. This attitude is not unusual among adult learners. Individualized instruction offers a solution to this problem as it satisfies self-motivated students. Individualized instruction is not a set of techniques, but rather an awareness by the teacher that students have different needs, that their speaking, listening, writing, and reading abilities span a wide range of proficiency levels, that they learn at a different pace, and that no single method or technique is appropriate for all learners. Individualized learning components allow students to proceed at their own rates of speed and to work on materials suited to their abilities, while also practicing and applying skills they have learned.

The most common individual activities are completing worksheets, listening to comprehension exercises, reading comprehension passages and answering questions, doing exercises from a text or workbook, or doing some kind of writing assignment. The SRA

(Science Research Associates) reading kits, for example, have been used effectively and successfully since, above all, they ensure that the students are working in English. Secondly, the range of readings available allows students to work their way up to more difficult materials according to their abilities. These materials are rich both in content and language functions, and prepare them for future communicative interaction, both with the teacher and with other students.

Teacher's Role

For the successful accomplishment of individual work, even in such a flexible learning environment, the same basic teacher's roles used in group work should be applied. All tasks are assigned with clear goals. Detailed instructions are made simple enough so that the students know clearly what is expected of them. Regarding the issue of control, monitoring of students should be done in a discreet way, preferably in silence when verbal interaction does not seem necessary. Approaching students with a caring, helpful attitude can help to develop a feeling of closeness and psychological support. It is very impressive to find shy students (who would never ask a question if the teacher were conducting the class from the front of the classroom) turn for help to a teacher who is nearby and obviously willing and ready to offer assistance. That distant, unapproachable imparter of knowledge can then become a real helper, an educational ally in the student's learning process.

Data Collection

Wishing to know the results of my experiment, I devised a survey form which was administered in Japanese to the students at the end of the course. The original questions are accompanied by the results in percentages.

How I think I can learn English better and become a more autonomous learner.

| | English majors | | | Non-English majors | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Agree agree (%) | Neither nor (%) | Disagree disagree (%) | Agree agree (%) | Neither nor (%) | Disagree disagree (%) |
| 1. Role-playing a situation with a partner. | 100 | 0 | 0 | 40 | 53 | 7 |
| 2. Doing work with someone. | 66 | 34 | 0 | 60 | 26 | 14 |
| 3. Working alone at my own pace. | 37 | 25 | 38 | 53 | 36 | 11 |
| 4. Working actively in a small group. | 45 | 33 | 22 | 26 | 63 | 11 |
| 5. Working without constant teacher supervision. | 0 | 9 | 91 | 0 | 17 | 83 |

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| | English majors | | | Non-English majors | | |
|---|----------------|---------|----------|--------------------|---------|----------|
| | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Agree | Neither | Disagree |
| | agree nor | | | agree nor | | |
| | disagree | | | disagree | | |
| | (%) | (%) | (%) | (%) | (%) | (%) |
| 6. Doing group work with the teacher available for consultation. | 100 | 0 | 0 | 90 | 10 | 0 |
| 7. Working with students who are at about the same level as I. | 95 | 5 | 0 | 86 | 14 | 0 |
| 8. Given the right materials, studying by myself. | 62 | 38 | 0 | 70 | 30 | 0 |
| 9. Studying with people who want to learn English quickly. | 62 | 13 | 25 | 56 | 18 | 26 |
| 10. Learning English through teacher explanations. | 29 | 59 | 12 | 23 | 71 | 6 |
| 11. By contact with the teacher mainly for speaking practice. | 0 | 9 | 91 | 0 | 47 | 53 |
| 12. Trying any learning situation even if I don't like it or it is not suited to my level. | 16 | 70 | 14 | 16 | 60 | 24 |
| 13. Doing some special practice designed to overcome my individual problems. | 100 | 0 | 0 | 90 | 10 | 0 |
| 14. Comparing what I say or write with what others do to see if my English is correct. | 83 | 17 | 0 | 60 | 34 | 6 |
| 15. Trying to think in English. | 100 | 0 | 0 | 90 | 10 | 0 |
| 16. Developing my own personal techniques to improve my English skills. | 66 | 34 | 0 | 53 | 47 | 0 |
| 17. Doing something I don't usually do to gain more confidence. | 75 | 25 | 0 | 70 | 30 | 0 |
| 18. Doing something I don't usually do to gain more information about English. | 79 | 21 | 0 | 63 | 37 | 0 |
| 19. Outside English class, engaging in activities to improve my English such as, listening to/singing English songs, watching movies in English, etc. | 100 | 0 | 0 | 70 | 30 | 0 |

| | English majors | | | Non-English majors | | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Agree agree (%) | Neither nor (%) | Disagree disagree (%) | Agree agree (%) | Neither nor (%) | Disagree disagree (%) |
| 20. Working at my own pace but having the teacher correct my pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. | 58 | 42 | 0 | 46 | 54 | 0 |

The outcome of the survey shows that the tasks performed an intellectual stimulus to the students. The learning approach used in the classes made them reflect on their individual learning process and consider future ways to improve their abilities. I believe that the students were also encouraged to develop their individual talents and personalities within a non-traditional Japanese learning situation.

Concluding Thoughts

In this project to promote and support students' autonomy and language abilities, I opted for an eclectic approach, choosing what appeared to be the best techniques from several systems or styles of teaching. The basic group-work and individualized techniques and activities had to be adapted to accommodate the students in the two different groups I was teaching, their varied levels of English proficiency and, above all, the fact that they had very little prior exposure to group or individualized work in class. My major concern was not to intimidate them with a 90-minute lesson where they had to practice English using a completely unknown or overly complicated technique. Sometimes, after 20 or 30 minutes of general classwork, the students would get together in their small groups and work on the tasks assigned for the rest of the period. The non-English major group showed occasional signs of apathy presumably because their class was in the first period or because, coming from different departments, they lacked a sense of psychological cohesion as a group. I thus decided to suggest two or three different topics and exercises, so as to give each group the option of deciding on one they found most agreeable. Having thus made their own choice, most of them approached the work with more seriousness and enthusiasm. Although not using English for the whole period (they would covertly slip into their native language) they did at times amaze me by sitting in groups of usually four communicating entirely in English. That clatter seemed to work psychologically in favor of the individual students, especially the shy ones who were still in the stage of adapting to a new educational environment quite different from what they were used to in high school. They seemed to feel relieved from the pressure of having to, when called upon, stand up and speak in English while being watched by the teacher and perhaps later being ridiculed by all their classmates.

The problem of correcting mistakes is of great concern to teachers. Most fear that students gathered in small groups will reinforce each other's errors, and that the teacher will not have the chance to correct them. In both English-major and non-English major

classes, some groups in which there was one rather good student managed to do a good deal of self correcting. When students ran into problems of pronunciation, grammar, or semantics, and could not find a solution by themselves, they would come to me for aid. I was also often called on to confirm the solutions they had found for their problems. Long and Porter (1985) have done considerable research on errors and error correction. Their findings show that accuracy in small unsupervised groups is as high as that in larger teacher-monitored classes and that corrections made in front of the entire class may negatively affect some students' future performance. I support and practice the principle that teachers should accept that "errors are a necessary manifestation of interlanguage development," and that excessive concern with errors and their constant correction create a discouraging learning atmosphere in the classroom.

More than being overconcerned with error problems, the voices of frustrated learners of English show the need for teachers and administrators of secondary schools to realize that most students who fail to achieve a satisfactory fluency in English or any other foreign language do so because they simply did not have any "real" chance to practice the new language creatively—that is, to use it for true *communication*. Group work and individual learning can provide the students with settings in which they have to learn to educate themselves, taking responsibility for their progress and developing confidence in their ability to learn. The benefits of group work and some individualized instruction in average-size classes of 40 to 50 students in Japanese universities are not obtained in the short term. These approaches have to be applied extensively and by more than one or two teachers in a course curriculum to show effective results. Substantial long-term benefits are possible if English as naturally used is given more attention and practice begins early, ideally from junior high school.

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