A Comparative Study of Learner Autonomy in EFL Education

Timothy Buthod, Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University

Introduction

In recent years, education scholars have talked on and on about developing autonomy in learners. As an English teacher in Japan, I have struggled with passive learners for many years. Many people blame Japan's traditional education system, or even the national character, but I wondered whether Japan was really so special in this regard. In the summer of 2008, I had the chance to escort a group of Japanese students participating in an intensive English program in the United States where their classmates were from various other countries, and I decided to take the opportunity to find out about English education in their home countries.

Procedure

My goal was to learn about how learner autonomy was incorporated into English education in various countries, so I created a survey on the topic. With the permission of the host university, Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, I distributed the questionnaires along with consent forms to 39 students of six nationalities. Unfortunately only twelve responded, representing four nationalities, Russian, Taiwanese, Japanese and Polish. As a result, the survey was not as universal as I would have hoped, and the small number of responses makes it impossible to use the numerical data for any real statistical analysis. However, since the survey included some open-ended items which students answered freely, it did provide some anecdotal clues about the type of education that some students get in these countries.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of two parts. First there was a series of thirteen statements regarding student involvement in and decision-making, from "Students choose their own topics for papers or other homework." to "Students write the syllabus." The respondents were asked to rate these items on a scale ranging from "We did it all the time." to "I have never done this." A table of the results of this section appears in Appendix B. The second part was three open-ended questions...
about the nature of their lessons at home and their own preferences and priorities. The responses to this section are listed in Appendix C.

**Results**

**Part I**

Since quantitative data from a sample this small is highly suspect, I will limit myself to a qualitative overview of the results of the first section.

Looking at the table in Appendix B, the first thing that you notice is that some ways of incorporating learner autonomy are quite common while others are very rare. Teachers in various countries seem to embrace the idea of students studying on their own. However, they seem a bit more skeptical when it comes to letting students make decisions regarding the syllabus or curriculum. Generally speaking, such techniques as students keeping vocabulary notebooks, reading outside of class or using a self-access center seemed not to be especially radical. Activities advancing metacognitive awareness, on the other hand, were not applied as broadly. Perhaps not surprisingly, student diaries and self-evaluation were relatively uncommon. In addition, curriculum features which might cede some of the decision-making power from teachers to students were unpopular in almost every country. Rarely could you find students setting goals, creating texts or designing the syllabus.

With the small numbers of participants, country-by-country comparisons are dangerous. On the whole, the only country that stands out is Taiwan (The two Taiwanese students identified Taiwan as their country, so I have used that name to refer to their nationality, rather than Chinese). Taiwanese students generally gave higher scores on the frequency of learner-centered activities in their curriculum than the other countries.

When looking at these scores, a good bit of caution is in order. While of course there is always the issue of cultural differences in rating frequency on a sliding scale, there is also the possibility of a language problem. In one case, a respondent wrote in the margin in Japanese that he/she had not understood the item, and in a few cases items were left blank. This raises the question of how valuable ESL research done in English can be. While I understand Japanese, I do not understand the native languages of the other respondents, so there was no choice but to conduct the survey
in English. For a fuller picture, a multilingual survey would be necessary.

Part II
If you have a look at Appendix C, you can get an idea of the results of Part II of the survey. Again, these results may be skewed by the respondents' limited English, and their responses could also be influenced by the suggestions of Part I. However, the responses generally indicate a fairly traditional view of education, with students quite willing to accept a large measure of teacher control in their learning process.

Perhaps the questions in Part II presented the issues in an overly dualistic manner, but many of the respondents showed a nuanced understanding of the issues at play. Though many objected to their old-fashioned, teacher-centered pattern, these respondents also showed an appreciation for the importance of a teacher's direction. The answers in general demonstrated no great demand for more student control of curriculum content or processes.

Again in Part II, it is well worth being skeptical of the comments given. Several students wrote very short answers, and one even wrote in Japanese. I have translated this response into English in Appendix C, but the respondents were instructed to respond in English, so others may have limited their responses to what they could say comfortably in English. On the whole, this language barrier may have limited the depth of the responses given.

Conclusion
Though unfortunately there were not enough respondents to make sweeping general statements about learner autonomy in English education around the world, there were some interesting points raised by individual respondents. In a field like EFL, where hard and fast data can be elusive, teachers have to pay attention to students' voices, and in this survey students gave us something to think about. First of all, the idea of students studying on their own is already well established and thus not worth fighting too strenuously for. Second, notions of student input into the curriculum and self-regulation are still relatively alien to teachers in most countries. This is probably an area where teachers might want to focus their efforts. Finally, though there is some possibility that English education in Taiwan is addressing these problems, it would appear that the same issues face teachers throughout the world.
Appendix A

A Comparative Study of Learner Autonomy in EFL Education

Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey. I hope to learn a little about English education in your country. I want to study how much the teacher controls how you study and how much students control their own learning. I am collecting this information on several countries. Your answers will give me information to study. Thank you for your help.

Tim Buthod, Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University, Japan

What is your home country? ________________________________

Part I

How often was each of these a part of your English education? Use the following scale:

4 = We did it all the time. This was our usual routine.
3 = We did this fairly often. It was normal to us, but we didn't do it every time.
2 = We sometimes did this, but it was not our usual routine.
1 = I have done this before, but not often.
0 = I have never done this.

1. Students choose their own topics for papers or other homework. ____
2. Students do individual or group projects. ____
3. Students choose their own language skills or structures to study. ____
4. Students take some courses by independent study. ____
5. Students use a self-access learning center to study. ____
6. Students set their own learning goals for a course. ____
7. Students evaluate their own work and/or progress. ____
8. Students carry out an extended reading program outside of class. ____
9. Students keep a notebook of vocabulary they think they need to study. ____
10. Students keep a diary of their learning process. ____
11. Students create texts to use in the course. ____
12. The teacher consults with students for input on the syllabus. ____
13. Students write the syllabus. ____
Part II

Answer these general questions in your own words.

1. Would you say your English classes in your home country were more student-centered or teacher-centered? Why?

2. Were you happy with that approach? What would you do differently?

3. Which do you think is more important—teacher guidance or student freedom?
**Appendix B**

**Results of Part I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Respondent/Nationality*</th>
<th>19R</th>
<th>25R</th>
<th>26R</th>
<th>27R</th>
<th>28R</th>
<th>34R</th>
<th>12J</th>
<th>35J</th>
<th>36J</th>
<th>13P</th>
<th>37T</th>
<th>38T</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students choose their own topics for papers or other homework.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students do individual or group projects.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students choose their own language skills or structures to study.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students take some courses by independent study.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Students use a self-access learning center to study.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Students set their own learning goals for a course.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Students evaluate their own work and/or progress.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Students carry out an extended reading program outside of class.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Students keep a notebook of vocabulary they think they need to study.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Students keep a diary of their learning process.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Students create texts to use in the course.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The teacher consults with students for input on the syllabus.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Students write the syllabus.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*R-Russia  J-Japan  P-Poland  T-Taiwan
Appendix C

Answers to Part II

(All answers are transcribed exactly as they were written, without correction.)

1. Would you say your English classes in your home country were more student-centered or teacher-centered? Why?

Russia

I think it is more teacher-centered because a lot depends on teacher. (19)
I think, teacher-centered, because teacher usually decides what to learn and how. (25)
Actually, teachers always choose program, homework, topics for some projects. But sometimes we can discuss it. (26)
Teacher-centred. The teacher guides everything, gives assignments & controls. We are used to it. (27)
English classes in my country are more teacher-centered, because we have fixed education programme and we can't change anything. (28)
Teacher centered. It is traditional for our country. (34)

Japan

Teacher-centered. Because the teacher runs his class.
先生が指示をしたあとに生徒がグループワークというかんじ。(It's like after the teacher gives instructions, students do groupwork.) (12)
Teacher-centered. It is custum. (35)
The English classes have difference, under high school and university. Under high school is teacher-centered but university is teacher-centered. Because, under high school's purpose is an examination for entrance to university. But, university's purpose is acquisition of the practical English skills. (36)

Poland

Teacher centered. Teacher is teaching and students are listening maybe answering questions. (13)

Taiwan

As an English majore student, I think most of the time was teacher-centered. They make arrange for everything! (37)
I think it's a teacher-centered, because the teachers teaching on the stage for most of the time, since they have their own teaching schedule, they don't wanna postpone it, that's why students have less chances to speak or discuss. (38)

2. Were you happy with that approach? What would you do differently?

Russia

Not so much. I would like to study in a self-access learning center and create texts to use in course. (19)
I think, that's OK. Sometimes we think differently if we have a lot of homework (25)
Now we studying business English and fixed program is better for us. So I'm satisfied. (26)
Yes, so far. More freedom in choosing the home assignments. (27)
I'm not happy, because routine is boring. I would like to do something different and funny. (28)
Well, yes, as we don't know what the other way is. It would be useful to try sth. Else. (34)

Japan

Soso. (12)
Happy. Especially nothing. (35)
No, I can't speak English well with this English education style. I want to get English conversation skill when I am younger. (36)

Poland

Then yes—I was happy because, I didn't know any different. Now I would do many things different way. (13)

Taiwan

No. (38)

3. Which do you think is more important—teacher guidance or student freedom?

Russia

Teacher guidance, because a lot of pupils would not no what to do without teacher.
Both variants within reasonable limits. (25)
Both are important. Teachers should control studying process; students should have some freedom to start their own projects and choose some extra programs. (26)
Both. (27)
I think 50/50. We can't study without teacher and our own project is important too. (28)
Both to some extent. (34)

Japan
Teacher guidance because, if “student freedom”, students will be lazy. I think it's depends on the passion of students. (12)
Teacher guidance. (35)
In terms of reading skill, teacher guidance style is good. But conversation skill is better with student freedom style. So, both style is important. We need a balance. (36)

Poland
(Teacher guidance circled in the question)
We all need someone to look after us, but this knowledge comes with age. (13)

Taiwan
Personally, I think student freedom be more important, in Taiwan, most of the English teachers tend to cram new stuffs to students without arising their interests! (emphasis in original) (37)
(Teacher guidance crossed out and student freedom circled in the question)
“Student freedom” would be more important, as students know what they exactly want, not just just sitting and taking the notes for all day long! (38)