SACcess: Learning to be a better learner

より良い学習者になるためのトレーニング：セルフ・アクセス・センター（SAC）

Nigel Henry

Joseph Sheehan

日本人の英語能力レベルの向上を図るためには先生中心の授業から学習者中心の授業に変わらなければならない。学習者中心の授業では、学生が自分の学習に責任を持つことになる。本稿では、自立学習に関する考え方がどのように発展したかを歴史的に考察した後、日本の三つの私立大学にあるセルフ・アクセス・センターがいかに学生の自立学習を促進させているかを見る。最後に、関西大学の英語Ⅰコミュニケーション授業に自立学習を組み込む方法を提案する。

"From the idea of man as a *product of society*, one moves to the idea of man as a *producer of society*."

H. Janne

Introduction

The majority of Japanese learners of English as a foreign language appear to experience excruciating difficulty expressing themselves outside their mother tongue. Undoubtedly, Japanese learners studying English in Japan face a number of hurdles in their quest for communicability:

- English is neither the native language nor widely spoken in the general populace
- many teachers of English at secondary schools lack proficiency in English, thereby depriving students of successful models of the language
- an almost exclusive emphasis at the secondary level on the English grammar necessary to pass university entrance exams
- an over-reliance on the authoritarian aspect of teaching; in other words, teacher-centered instruction

While the above list is not meant to be inclusive of all the difficulties Japanese learners face

1

when learning English as a foreign language, it does highlight some of the problems facing Japanese learners. It is the last point, however, that will be addressed in this paper. The idea that students can take a more active role in their learning, both inside of and outside classrooms, is a viable alternative to the more traditional teacher-centered classroom, wherein the decisions of not only *what* to study but *how* to study reside solely with the teacher. The idea of learner autonomy is firmly rooted in the belief that people learn best when they are personally invested in their learning. What follows is an overview of the concepts of learner autonomy and self-access, a description of three self-access centers currently operating in Japan, and suggestions regarding the introduction of learner autonomy into the Communication I program.

Historical Influences

Gremmo and Riley (1995), while admitting that the ideas of autonomy and self-access cannot be traced to one single origin, propose several major factors that lead to the emergence, spread, and development of these ideas since the end of WWII. These influences include:

- Minority rights movements
- Reaction against behaviorism
- Developments in technology
- Increase in the demand for foreign language education
- Commercialization of language teaching materials
- Increase in university population

Each of these factors contributed uniquely to the quest of educators and students alike to learn how to learn better. With the emergence of minority rights movements, prepossessed education beliefs (i.e., teachers are repositories of knowledge, knowledge is a politically neutral commodity) came to be the target of serious investigation and reflection. This included questioning the traditional roles and relative importance of givers and receivers of knowledge. Additionally, reacting to the behavioristic models of human interaction proposed by B.F. Skinner and others, educators as divergent as Freire (1972) and Halliday (1976) began to focus attention on "learner-centerdness" and the role of language as "a tool for communication". Concurrent with these paradigm shifts were technological developments that included tape recorders, TVs, VCRs, fax machines, and most recently computers. Technology, though fraught with its own inherent limitations, has augmented the range of pedagogical options available to teachers and students;

when the decentralization of teaching places more emphasis on learning how to gather, organize, and create knowledge through proactive student participation, all involved benefit.

A fourth factor that cultivated a heightened awareness of learners' roles in learning was an increase in the demand for foreign language teaching following the rise of multinational corporations, easier travel, and more tourism. Internationalism necessitates being able to speak a second or foreign language. Internationalism also brings together peoples and practices from vastly different backgrounds, thus fostering an investigation into a wide range of preconceived, culturally biased notions, including education practices. The emergence of so many new language learners was not lost on the publishers, always ready to feed the market, but with a more sophisticated learner as buyer now, the voice of the consumer took on a new significance. With an increase in the number of learners came an increased sensitivity to the differences between learners. And finally, as the numbers of students in the educational sector increased, so too did the need to develop alternative methods for dealing with such large classes and enrollments. One approach has been to view learners as capable of making many of the decisions connected to their learning that were more traditionally reserved for teachers and/or policy makers.

Defining Learner Autonomy

One of the seminal definitions of learner autonomy was offered by Holec (1979), who defined an autonomous learner as "capable of taking charge of his own learning" (pp. 3). Other definitions framed the idea as belonging to a more general set of personal characteristics, as a political concept, or as part of a larger set of educational practices (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Littlewood (1997) qualifies learner autonomy as being "possible only to the extent that students possess both the *willingness* and the *ability* to act independently" (pp. 82). Sheerin (1997) proposes that learner autonomy be viewed "as a complex cluster of attributes" (pp. 59) belonging to individual learners, and Nunan (1997) describes autonomy as occurring in degrees. Esch (1996), on the other hand, prefers to define autonomy in terms of what it is not—"it is not self-instruction or learning without a teacher...it does not mean that intervention or initiative on the part of the teacher is to be banned...it is not something teachers do to learners" (pp. 37). What each of the these researchers shares in common, however, even when not defining learner autonomy in exactly the same terms, is the belief that learners need to learn how to learn better.

3

Developing Learner Autonomy

How then do learners go about honing their independent learning skills? Littlewood's (1996) framework focuses specifically on developing learner autonomy through foreign language learning. Littlewood (1997) sees teachers' primary role as helping students cultivate the motivation, confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to:

- communicate more independently
- learn more independently
- be more independent as individuals

The role of self-access for Littlewood is to "provide a context for exercising and developing personal learning strategies and engaging in independent work" (pp. 84). These self-access activities, to be most effective, should stimulate a full range of language learning processes, from pre-communicative work through authentic communication. Additionally, the activities should provide learners with the option of focusing on either analytical strategy (form-focused) or experiential strategy (meaning-focused). For Littlewood, this two dimensional approach to self-access ensures that learners progress from a state of dependence on external support towards a greater aptitude to engage the world around them in more responsible and conscious ways.

Sheerin (1997) also supports this view of self-access by stating that "learning is more effective when learners are active in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in the decisions which affect it" (pp. 56). Rather than see independence (autonomy) as an end in itself, however, Sheerin prefers to view the development of learner independence as a means to an end. Sheerin's framework distinguishes between learners' disposition to/ability to take responsibility for their own learning, with a continuum that stretches from dependence to independence. As an example, Sheerin cites a learner who may have the disposition to plan a program of work to achieve specific objectives, but who may not have the ability to undertake such an ambitious course. Furthermore, Sheerin stresses that "learner development is not something that teachers 'do' to learners...learners develop themselves" (pp. 60). Sheerin encourages teachers, who may be wondering what their new roles comprise if students are assumed to undertake the setting and accomplishing of their own educational goals, to become resource managers skilled at focusing on the needs of individuals.

Still a third view of how to prepare students for the transition from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning is offered by Nunan (1997), who focuses more closely on how to develop materials in such a way as to encourage autonomy. Nunan proposes a five-level approach to materials development based on different learner actions to take place at each level:

1. awareness
2. involvement
3. intervention
4. creation
5. transcendence

For Nunan, "developing autonomy can be a normal, everyday dimension to regular instruction" (pp. 201). From the initial stage wherein teachers make students aware of the pedagogical goals of available materials, learners move to being able to select their own goals from a series of choices offered by the teacher. This involves students more directly in the learning process, which then leads to learners being able to modify and adapt their goals in light of their specific aims for learning a language. By the time learners reach the creation stage, it is theoretically possible for them to begin to create their own tasks, and in the final stage of transcendence learners actually become teachers and researchers. Nunan's final analysis is that "if learning is to take place, the learners must do it for themselves" (pp. 202).

Three Models of Self-access Centers

One way learners can begin to take more responsibility for their learning is through self-access centers. As will be evident below, these centers can be arranged in a number of different ways to accommodate not only different institutions but also various learners within those institutions. It is important to remember though that while self-access centers are potentially beneficial to students, they are not panaceas for learning. Extensive planning and intelligent organization are crucial to help self-access centers fulfill their roles as means to ends in students' endeavors to become autonomous. The following section highlights three examples of self-access centers at Japanese universities. The examples run from a small, modest operation to a facility as a joint venture with a school library to a larger example of what a SAC can comprise.

Sugiyama Jogakuen University (Nagoya)

The Self-access Center at Sugiyama Jogakuen University is a part of the Communicative English Program within the Department of Foreign Studies. It is integrated into the first year curriculum as a one-semester learner training course which works towards helping learners develop skills they need for independent learning.

The center is a modest 80 square meters. There is a teacher's desk and a meeting table for student conferences situated at the front of the center. There is also equipment for up to 25 learners including 13 tape/ CD players, 10 video players and two computers. The lack of computers is due to the budget the center has to work with. Rather than spend the limited funds on computer-based materials, it was believed that the money would be better spent on audio and visual materials. This is not seen as a major concern as the university has a computer lab which allows students free access to the Internet. The materials library is stocked with 80 titles, most of which have multiple copies. The center also has close to 1000 graded readers which are stacked in the main library of the university. The cataloguing and tracking of these readers is done by the library staff which frees teachers at the center from that extra duty. Having the readers in the main library also means that the department's library budget could be used to add more titles to the collection in the future.

All students in the Communicative English Program are required to attend the SAC. Freshmen and sophomore students have scheduled periods to work in the SAC. It is believed that if students receive sufficient training in using the SAC in their freshmen and sophomore years, they will be able to understand its benefits and carry on with their independent learning in their latter university years. The native teacher who works in the center has monthly conferences with individual students to review their progress and give guidance in using the center. They go over such areas as listening work, extensive reading and conversation taping homework. Heigham (2004) notes that students need a lot of explanation, support and training so that they can understand the value of self-access work. This may seem contradictory to the idea of self-access/ learning, but it must be remembered that for students to become autonomous they must first "wake up" to the importance of independent learning. From this realization, and with the teacher's assistance/guidance, students can begin to grow towards autonomy.

Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration (Nagoya)

When the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business

Administration began planning for their Self-access Center, they considered a suitable location to be fundamental to the success of the facility. The SAC was seen as being a place where students could expand on what they were doing in the classroom and provide opportunities for language practice. With this in mind, the SAC was placed in the Information Center (Library) where there was space not only for the center but also for future expansion of the center.

The SAC coordinator is a full-time bilingual Japanese staff member. Their duties include liaising with the library administration and staff; liaising with members of the Faculty of Foreign Languages concerning the planning and supervision of facility expansion; supervising the acquisition and preparation of new SAC materials; and counseling students in planning their study. The coordinator is assisted in their duties by part-time Japanese staff. Student helpers also help in the preparation of materials, such as worksheets, under the direction of the SAC Coordinator and faculty members. Many SAC materials are ordered through the library and may be borrowed for home study.

The SAC contains 30 booths with cassette players and CD players, 12 of the booths also contain MD players, and six have headsets with microphones for recording voices on audio-cassette, 24 video stations, and a student lounge. The SAC is divided into distinctive areas: the audio booths are located at the far end of the SAC so students can record in privacy, and the video area close to the entrance where students can watch videos using headphones. The materials available in the SAC include coursebooks, audio-cassettes and worksheets for all courses taught in the Language Center; 2030 Graded Readers, 1200 of which are audio books; over 100 books for TOEFL, TOEIC and EIKEN exam preparation; over 100 English videos; and worksheets for studying grammar and phonetics. There is also a Global Access Room conveniently located on the floor above the SAC. Here students can access the Internet using one of 52 Mac or Windows computers.

Since it's inception, the SAC has been integrated as part of the English language curriculum, most particularly for first and second year students. Five of the seven courses taught in the first year require SAC attendance. For example, the course videos, audio cassettes, and oral drill cassettes for the English Listening Skills course are exclusively available in the SAC. Students are required to work on oral drills and worksheets from the course in the SAC. In their paper on establishing the SAC at NUCB, Monk and Ozawa (2002) found that among students attending the SAC 1st year students attended four times more than 2nd year students and approximately five

times more than 3rd year students. The daily attendance to the SAC showed an overall increase between the 2000/ 2001 and 2001/ 2002 the academic years. This indicates that the SAC had a positive influence on independent learner studies.

Kanda University of International Studies (Chiba)

The Self-access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies was built with the aim to provide learners with a structured environment to support independent learning outside of the classroom. The state-of-the-art centre was built as a large open space design. The space is divided into two main sections: A group access space and an individual access space. Within the centre there are 10 subsections including a reading lounge, listening stations, a PC writing area, and speaking booths (See Cooker & Torpey, 2004, p.13 for more details). The centre has a large variety of learning materials both commercially produced and produced in-house by materials writers. All materials are chosen specifically for self-access use. Materials are available in English, Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

There were three factors that instructed the design of the centre: 1) The location of the different sections within the centre; 2) the furnishings that were necessary for each sections; and 3) the equipment available for each section. For example, listening booths were located in an area near the entrance so as to afford the learner some quiet and privacy while speaking booths, which are sound proofed, are located next to the conversation lounge and the group access area near the rear of the centre. This insures that no group is disturbed during their study activities.

The centre also has learning advisors who aid learners in developing learning strategies, using equipment at the centre, and locating materials appropriate to their level of language competence. Two modes that advisors use to aid students are the drop-in advisory service and the SALC Homework Module, which is a 10 week course. The 30 hour self-study module is done at the student's own pace. The SHM is used to promote the self-access nature of the centre. Learners are taught how to plan course work, take responsibility for their learning, explore which learning styles suit them best and evaluate their own learning (Cooker &Torpey, 2004, p. 15). Learners are initially required to make a study plan and write a weekly learning diary. They must also meet with learning advisors twice during the course and submit a report evaluating their learning by the end of the 10 weeks. The Focus/ Transfer/ General Model (Toogood, Pemberton, Tsang & Ho, 2002) of learning was utilized to help students think more explicitly about their learning objectives and how to achieve them.

Integrating Learner Autonomy into the Communication I Curriculum

The English Communication I program was established at Institute of Foreign Language and Research at Kansai University in 1993. It was established to help freshmen develop their English communication skills, more specifically speaking and listening skills, so that they can express themselves more openly and accurately in a variety of real world situations. During the first semester, students work on basic conversation skills (e.g., opening a conversation, taking turns, follow-up questions) to lay a foundation so they can participate more fully in topical conversations in the second semester. Each class meets once a week for two semesters. Materials for classes are developed in-house by members of the English Communication I teaching team.

If a self-access center were to be established in the Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research, a number of criteria would need to be met:

- variation, flexibility, adaptability of materials (Esch, 1996)
- adequate time and financial resources to plan, revise, and launch the physical environment of the center (Heigham, 2004)
- institutional support in the form of adequate training for both students and center personnel

This list is by no means exhaustive, but meant to be representative of some of the basic considerations when establishing a self-access center. It is not actually possible to foresee all affective factors involved; introducing such politically charged notions as learner-centered syllabi and learner self-assessment, both traditionally secure in the realm of teacher decision making, often reveals the double-edged sword of policy implementation.

Though no self-access center presently exists for students of the Institute, as the above review and examples demonstrate, developing learner autonomy and self-access materials can begin within the classroom. One of the first steps teachers need to take is conduct a thorough needs analysis of their students. Without knowing how students think about themselves, it is impossible to begin to help them think differently. Learners need to perceive that they are responsible for their own success and failure both within the classroom and beyond (Dickinson, 1995). Further, to guide students through the transition from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning, classroom materials can be developed with a focus on encouraging autonomy.

9

For example, students could be asked to generate their own vocabulary lists based on English words they encounter in their daily lives, whether while studying, reading, watching television, or listening to music. Additionally, for students enrolled in the Communication I course, second semester topics or themes can be student-generated as opposed to the current system of teacher-generated topics. Personally investing students in some of the decisions usually relegated to teachers is the beginning of helping students understand the pivotal role they must play in their own learning. If all of the decisions about *what* to learn as well as *how* to learn continue to be the sole propriety of teachers, students will continue to fail in appreciating the joy of discovery inherent in learning. In the final analysis, if any learning is to take place, the learners must do it for themselves (Nunan, 1997).

References

Cook, L., & Torpey, M. (2004). From the classroom to the self-access center. *The Language Teacher, 28*(6), 11-16.

Dickinson, L. (1995). Autonomy and motivation: a literature review. *System, 23*(2), 165-174.

Esch, E. (1996). Promoting learner autonomy: Criteria for the selection of appropriate methods. In R. Pemberton, E. Li, W. Or, & H. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking Control: Autonomy in language learning* (35-48). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Friere, P. (1972). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). Establishing Self-access from Theory to Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gremmo, M. & Riley, P. (1995). Autonomy, Self-Direction and Self-access in Language Teaching and Learning: The history of an idea. System – vol. 23 (2) pp. 151-164.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1976). Learning how to Mean: Explorations in the development of language. London: Edward Arnold.

Heigham, J. Starting up self-access. (2004). *The Language Teacher, 28*(6), 17-19.

Holec, H. (1979). Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning. New York: Pergamon Press.

Janne, H. (1977). Organization, content and methods of adult education. New York: Seabury.

Littlewood, W. (1996). "Autonomy": An anatomy and a framework. *System, 24*(4), 427-435.

Littlewood, W. (1997). Self-access: Why do we want it and what can it do? In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 79-91). New York; Longman.

Monk, B., & Ozawa, K. (2002). Establishing a self-access center in a Japanese university. *NUCB Journal of Communication and International Studies, 4*, (2), 49-58.

Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 192-203). New York; Longman.

Sheerin, S. (1997). An exploration of the relationship between self-access and independent learning. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (pp. 54-65). New York; Longman.