

Transforming Classroom into Fostering Learner Autonomy in the L2 Classroom

Kyoko Gruendel

Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages

Kyoko Gruendel is an English instructor who holds a master's degree in TESOL from Kanda University of International Studies. She currently teaches English to Japanese learners and Communication Skills at Tokyo City University, and English Speaking and Listening at Surugadai University. Also, she teaches Japan Studies, Debate, and TOEIC SW at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages. Her research interests include learner and teacher autonomy, pragmatics and motivational/affective learning.

As I had been struggling with a segment, "News Report," in my Japan Studies class, I was always trying to find a way to make the class work more interesting since many of my students did not seem to enjoy what we were working on in this segment. After long reflection and observations of other teachers' classes, however, just letting the students choose their own news reports brought a mutually better beneficial result than I anticipated, and the students seemed to enjoy and appreciate their autonomous learning more than when the teacher had brought various news reports to them in the classroom.

Introduction and Rationale

At school, I often think about how I can be an autonomous teacher, because without a teacher being autonomous, I believe that there is no way that my students will become autonomous learners in the classroom. I believe that autonomy in a learner is contagious just like a cold can be contagious. Little says "... since learning arises from interactions and interaction is characterized by independence, the development of autonomy in learner presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers." (Little, 1995, pp. 175) Benson goes on to say that in order to foster students' autonomous language learning, teachers themselves must display a degree of autonomy in their approaches to teaching and learning. Therefore, first and foremost, me being autonomous as a teacher in my classroom is a prerequisite for my students to be autonomous learners.

There is a subject called "Japan Studies," which enables my students to learn, from various perspectives, things about Japan

such as The Imperial Family, shrines and temples, and cosplayers. This subject is very unique in the school where I work, so they decided to adopt this subject as part of a curriculum for the first-year students. Class is conducted once a week. Other teachers share a unified syllabus. In this course, there is a segment called, "News Report." Students are divided into groups of four or five, and each group has a leader. Normally, teachers select an article and prepare a summary ("news report") for the students, and the group leaders lead a discussion based on three discussion questions prepared by the teacher. One of my classes is a lower intermediate class, and the other is a basic-level class. The students cannot really have a discussion verbally in English. So, I ask each leader to have their group members first summarize the news contents, and the leaders ask them to write their opinions. The leaders then submit the opinions including their own on Google Classroom so that I can check if my students have done what they have to do as part of their assignments.

Up until last year, I was struggling with this news report segment with my students largely because, now when I reflect on it, I only gave my learners one news report, and they did not seem at all excited about having a discussion and writing their opinions based on the story. Hence, I prepared two news stories and had them have a discussion and write their opinions based on both news stories. However, again they seemed to get bored rather quickly. My assumption is that they were bored largely because they had to deal with more discussion questions regarding two news stories provided by the teacher, which was too much for them. The situation had not changed in a better and positive way. The students did not seem to enjoy working on the news report segment. Thus, I struggled and was always wondering how this segment could become better. Therefore, I consulted with other teachers about it. I even went to my school on days that I did not work in order to observe two other teachers' Japan Studies classes. One class was conducted by a native English speaker, and the other was conducted by a Japanese teacher. After observing their

classes and reflecting on my past class, I remembered that in the past, I gave two news reports and my students could choose which topic they wanted to work on, and they seemed to enjoy working on the news report segment largely because my learners could take control over their learning (Benson, 2011).

This led me to thinking that I should go ahead and experiment with this news report segment with my current learners (this time, only focusing on the lower-intermediate students' class) and ask their opinions on how autonomous they had become, since learners being autonomous is significantly important in their language learning.

Participants

Participants were 34 lower-intermediate English Major students who come to the vocational college where I work. Overall, their English proficiency level is approximately A2 based on the CEFR scale. The students take my class (Japan Studies) for 90 minutes once a week for 15 weeks. The class is conducted in English.

Background Literature

What is Autonomy?

Researchers have attempted to define learner autonomy in different ways, which usually end up being interrelated. Autonomy can be broadly defined as “the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 2), while Holec defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning.” (Holec, 1981, p.3 cited in Little, 1991, p.7) According to Little (2003), the term learner autonomy has been generally defined as a developing capacity on the part of learners to accept responsibility for their learning.

Teachers who seek to promote a learner-directed learning environment are encouraged to adopt learning patterns that allow

learners to reflect on their own learning, understand the process of learning and the function of language, take ownership, and feel in control of their own progress. Benson notes that "descriptions of experiences in which learners were encouraged to have some control over the planning and assessment of their classroom learning were mostly positive and tended to indicate that learners can control aspects of their learning if given the opportunity and appropriate support." (Benson, 2011 p. 173) Gruendel (2018, p. 145) further states that "autonomous teachers tend to be more comfortable giving more control to learners because they themselves understand the importance of autonomy."

Benson (2011) states that autonomy is created by appropriate methodology and that the teacher is responsible for supporting the learner's autonomous learning. He goes on to say that if students are given the opportunity to take control of their own learning, and if their learning is positively driven by adequate teacher support, students will take more control of their own learning and, as a result, take more responsibility for their own learning. There is considerable evidence that learners are naturally in control of their own learning, even when it is related to complex tasks and within the context of the learning institution.

Treatment

Fifteen 90-minute weekly lessons were conducted. The first four weeks had news report sessions from news reports prepared by the teacher. The first four weeks, two news articles were prepared and summarized along with three discussion questions by the teacher every week so that the students could choose which article summary to read and then have a discussion by each group. As mentioned above, each group had usually four to five students, with a leader in each group. The second four weeks, the leaders selected articles and prepared summaries (news reports) of those articles for the other students to read every week. Each leader could choose the kind of articles they wanted their group members

to read, and they summarized those news articles. Then, following the group discussion, group members would write their discussion answers and give their opinions to their leaders every week. The leaders would then submit their opinions to the teacher through Google Classroom. Upon receiving them, I (the teacher) would make comments, even short ones, to their opinions with encouraging comments, such as “Excellent job!”

Data Collection Procedure

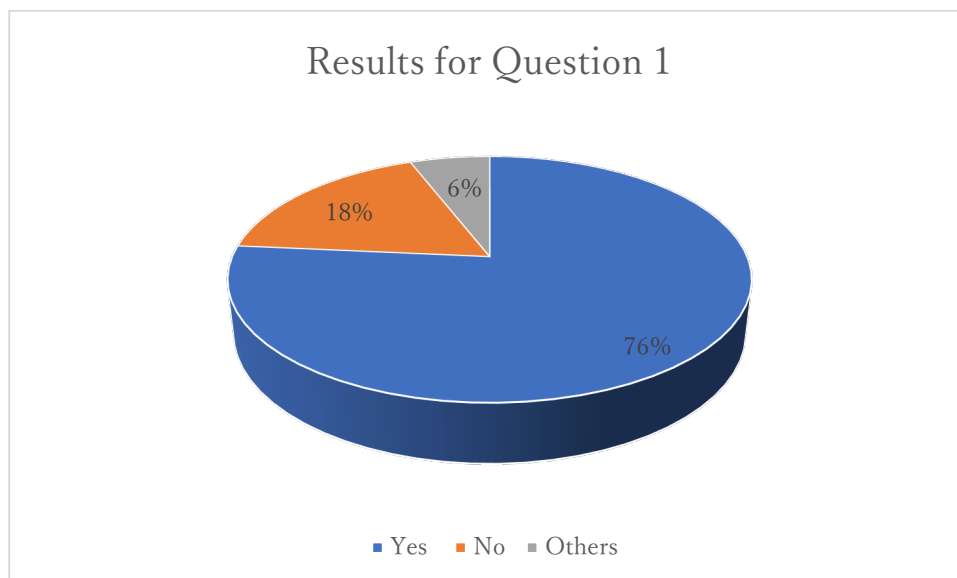
At the end of the first semester, i.e., the 15th week, the teacher administered the following seven questions to the students on Google Classroom:

1. Do you feel more autonomous (i.e., motivated) to write your own news report compared to when a teacher writes the news report?
2. Why do you think so?
3. What are the advantages of writing your own news report?
4. Do you want to continue writing your own news reports for the second semester?
5. Why do you think so?
6. Do you enjoy creating news reports?
7. Why do you think so?

First, the seven above questions were given to the students. They were asked to write their responses to the seven questions as concretely as possible in Japanese. (Having said that, several students wrote their answers in English.) Their responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet on Google Classroom. They were translated into English, and those data were read through, reflected on, analyzed, and finally summarized.

Findings

Question 1: Do you feel more autonomous (i.e., motivated) to write your own news report compared to when a teacher writes the news report?



Summary of the students' comments on their responses:

The survey responses from my English language students display a mix of opinions and motivations concerning their engagement with news reports and assignments in the class. Many of my students appreciate the opportunity to choose their own topics, which allows them to explore areas of personal interest and deepens their understanding of global issues. They find the process of researching, writing, and summarizing news in English to be both educational and enjoyable, as it helps them improve their language skills and learn about new topics.

Several students stated that the teacher's selection of topics and guidance makes the tasks easier to understand and complete, while others feel more responsible and motivated when they are required to choose and work on their own news reports. A few students noted the challenge of balancing this task with other

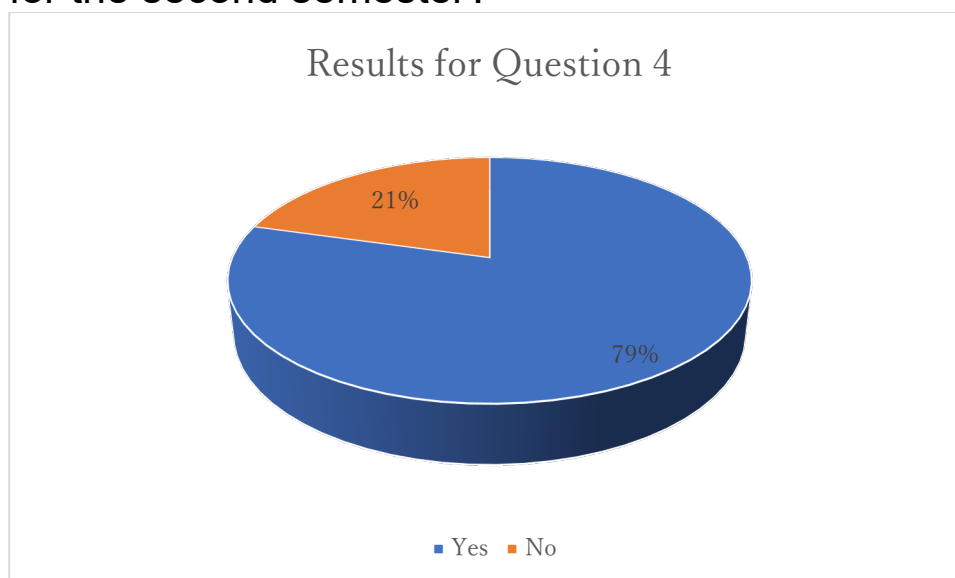
academic responsibilities, but overall, the activity appears to be well-received, with students recognizing its value in enhancing their English proficiency and awareness of current events.

Question 3: What are the advantages of writing your own news reports?

Summary of the students' comments on their responses:

The students seem to appreciate the opportunity to engage with news reports in English, as it allows them to learn new things, stay informed about current events, and improve their language skills. They find that the task of summarizing and writing about news enhances their vocabulary, grammar, and creativity. The activity also encourages active learning and deeper understanding of content, which makes it enjoyable and valuable. Many students noted that it helps them improve their writing and research skills while also making them more interested in global topics. Overall, they feel that this practice is beneficial for their English proficiency and writing abilities.

Question 4: Do you want to continue writing your own news reports for the second semester?

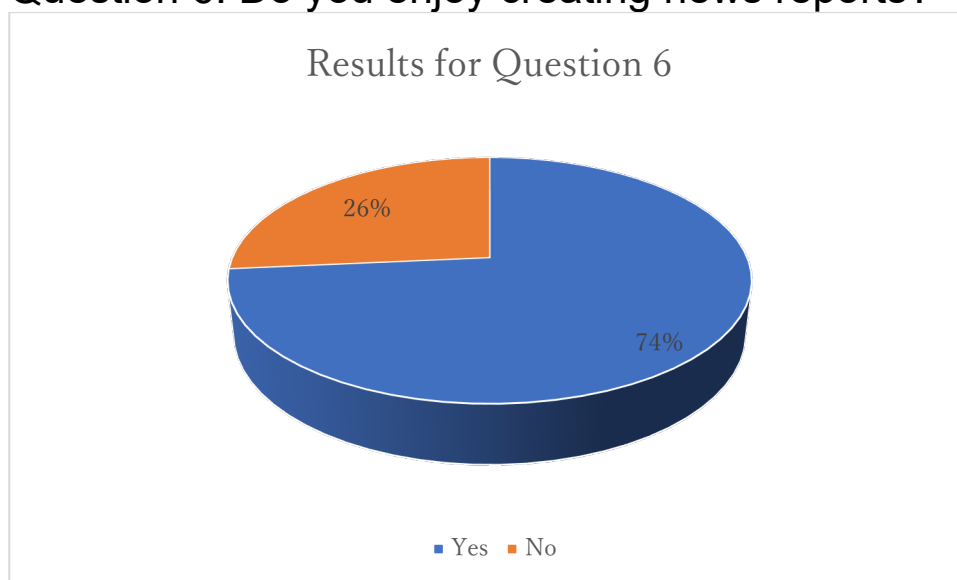


Summary of the students' comments on their responses:

The students who responded “yes” are motivated by several factors. They find the activity enjoyable and believe it significantly improves their English skills. Writing their own reports allows them to engage deeply with topics of personal interest, which helps them better understand and remember new vocabulary. They also value the educational aspect, seeing it as a more stimulating and effective way to learn compared to other classroom activities. Additionally, they appreciate the opportunity to practice writing and receive feedback from their peers, which they find both helpful and rewarding.

The students who responded “no” cite the difficulty and time-consuming nature of the task as their main reasons. They find it challenging to handle this assignment alongside other responsibilities and feel that the process can be overwhelming. Some also express a preference for more structured tasks where topics are provided, as this would make the writing process easier for them. Overall, the complexity and effort required to create their own reports make this activity less appealing to them.

Question 6: Do you enjoy creating news reports?



Summary of the students' comments on their responses:

The students seem to have mixed feelings about the news report assignment. Many of them appreciate the opportunity to learn about global topics, expand their knowledge, and improve their English skills. They find it interesting to explore different perspectives, gain new insights, and engage with content they would not normally encounter. Some students enjoy the challenge of selecting interesting news, creating reports, and developing their summarization and communication abilities. However, others find the task time-consuming, difficult, and tedious. While some see it as necessary and beneficial, others struggle with the workload and find it less enjoyable.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings above, it can be said that the latter four weeks of the news report segment were successful, and also many of my students feel that they are willing to work on news reports autonomously if news reports are provided by themselves instead of the teacher.

Learners' autonomy is very hard to see and measure unless the questions, such as the questions mentioned above, are asked directly to my learners. As I was struggling with this segment for a long time, I am glad to have directly asked my students if they felt differently about using between news reports the teacher made and news reports learners made, transforming the classroom into a slightly more autonomous L2 classroom.

I realized in this small-scale research that if I want to improve some segments or class teaching contents, it is beneficial to ask the students directly for their opinions, experiment with the segments and put the students' opinions into practice. In addition, if possible, it is best to share my findings with other teachers by writing papers such as this one, which in turn may encourage other teachers to

follow my steps and experiment with their students in the same way I did to improve their class contents or segments.

Although this research was very helpful for me and my students, I am aware of its limitations and shortcomings. First, the research was conducted in only one class, a lower-intermediate level class which has 34 students. That number might not have been enough for the researcher to reflect on and analyze the particular study. This may not represent the majority of students who study Japan Studies in the English Department at school. Second, students' feelings about their autonomy might have been different if my teaching context and my learners' proficiency levels had been different.

Since I encouraged my students to bring their favorite news articles into the classroom, the students seemed to have felt control over their learning and they seemed to enjoy being engaged with what they were working on. Through this very limited study, I was able to add new insights to my teaching and valuable learning experience about the way I provide opportunities to my learners to bring their articles themselves instead of by the teacher. Moreover, I discovered once again that if a teacher shows an autonomous attitude, learners tend to show that they also can become autonomous with enough knowledge and guidance, because our interaction with one another affects the students' attitude towards learner autonomy.

Last not but least, I would like to end this research paper with my own favorite citation: "... teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interrelated and intertwined." (Gruendel, 2018, p. 145). In this limited research, I believe that my students and I collaborated and could prove that it holds true to some extent that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interrelated. I would like to continue to be an autonomous teacher, keep seeking ways for my learners to be autonomous in my classroom, and serve my learners to the best of my ability in the future.

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