Motivation through Autonomy: A Case Study at a Japanese University

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Abstract
Since the 1990s, learner autonomy has become more widely utilized by educators around the world (Little, 2007), but does it necessarily have a positive effect on motivation in second language classrooms? In an attempt to provide at least a partial answer to this question, a preliminary study was conducted in which students in an oral communication class at a Japanese university were given a degree of autonomy in part of the curriculum and then compared with a similar class in which no such autonomy was granted. Students in the dependent group made autonomous decisions as to how the teacher would assess their speaking effort, how feedback would be provided and how this portion of their grade would be calculated and assigned. While an argument for direct causality is difficult to make, students in the dependent group exhibited a stronger level of motivation than those in the control group at the end of the semester, suggesting learner autonomy had had a positive effect in this case. Potential reasons for this finding are that the greater involvement of the students in the curriculum in the dependent group meant a higher level of self-awareness and reflection with regard to their spoken English. While the findings from this study add support to the argument that there is a potentially strong relationship between learner autonomy and motivation, further research is needed before any conclusive claims can be made.

Introduction
While learner autonomy is increasingly emphasized and seen as beneficial in education these days, motivation is still considered to be the single most important factor influencing language learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). Gardner and Lambert (1959) showed in their pioneering study that language achievement is not only strongly related to language aptitude, but to motivation as well. Further research has supported their findings (Dornyei, 1994; Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura, 2001; Yashima, 2002). Without motivation, learning a second language is exceedingly difficult, regardless of conditions, learning styles, teaching styles,
contexts and other factors. With motivation well recognized as a key factor in language learning, the question then logically turns to how best to increase motivation. Unfortunately for researchers, motivation has proven to be a multifaceted and complicated term (Irie, 2003) which is constantly evolving (Dornyei, 1998), making it not only hard to define and influence but extremely difficult to measure.

In this paper, learner autonomy and its effect on motivation will be examined in a specific case study. Students in two comparable classes were used as subjects. These classes were chosen for several reasons. Most importantly, a high degree of similarity between them would ensure any data collected would be more reliable and any claims made, more valid. With the same teacher, the same materials, the same curriculum, a similar number of students, and a similar level in English proficiency, it was assumed many potentially confounding variables could be eliminated from any later discussion or analysis. One class was chosen at random to be the dependent group, while the other class served as the control group.

The students in the dependent group were granted the autonomy to establish their own criteria with respect to a portion of their grade. Essentially, the initial idea for this project had come about through discussions with other teachers on how to increase student participation and to encourage students to speak English more often in class. Previously, 10% of the students’ grade in this course had been assigned for “participation”. Unfortunately this had proven unsatisfactory as the term was seen as very subjective, and often students and teachers had very different expectations about what “participation” amounted to. To combat this problem, “participation” was changed to “English Effort” and comprised two elements: “speaking in English” and “being on task”.

Every lesson the teacher would make a decision based on the students’ performance and either award one point, or not to each student. While this system was also subjective, it was felt that students seemed to better understand what was expected of them, and the week-by-week grading style was more reflective of their performance throughout the semester. The question then progressed to whether or not this system had any effect on the students’ motivation to speak English in class, thereby providing the impetus to carry out this research. The results in this study indicate that students’ motivation to speak English in class did increase, particularly in the dependent group. This was attributed, in part, to the increase in
learner autonomy, but also to an increase in the general awareness of their spoken English output that derived from being more involved in the curriculum and the course itself. Before looking at the results it is necessary however, to briefly examine motivation, learner autonomy, and the context of learning English in Japan, as well as a couple of similar studies in which students were involved in decisions about the curriculum of their class.

**Motivation**

While motivation is widely considered one if not the most important factor in determining the success of second language learners, most scholars cannot agree on an exact definition of motivation. For the purpose of this paper, motivation will be defined as a “psychological trait which leads people to achieve some goal…maybe mastery of the language” (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

The term or concept of motivation is not simply limited to the field of language learning or education, but originates from the psychology and sociology fields. Recently, however, there has been a steady increase in the number of studies of motivation (Dornyei, 2001; Gardner, 1985; Little, Ridley & Ushioda, 2003), with popular theories being put forth, including Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory, Locke and Latham’s (1990) goal-setting theories, the attribution theory from Weiner (1992), and the self-efficacy theory from Bandura (1993). There has also been a move to investigate motivation more from an educational and language learning perspective, utilizing findings and theories from psychology and sociology. Dornyei (1998) elaborated further on the distinction between instrumental motivation, for instance, the motivation to learn a language because it can help one get a better job or make more money, and integrative motivation, the motivation to become functional within another culture, with learning the language viewed as part of the bigger goal.

However, as Hiromori (2003) noted, even motivational research specifically on education and language learning has yet to have much impact on the actual classroom. The problem with trying to incorporate many of these findings, models and theories on motivation, into the classroom, can often be attributed to practicality. Many teachers do not have the time or adequate training to be able to assess and account for all of the internal factors that influence each individual student’s motivation to learn a second language. This is not to say that these
factors are not important, but in a class of fifty students, it is impossible and impractical for a teacher to analyze each student’s psychological traits and encourage those that might serve to motivate each particular student. There is also the question of whose job it is to improve learners’ motivation, to which the answer is often, sadly, nobody’s responsibility (Dornyei, 2001).

There is also the issue of validity when measuring motivation. Much research has focused on the assumption that learning follows motivation, but surely the opposite is equally plausible in many cases (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) whereby learning, perhaps even incidentally, can stimulate and increase motivation. Add to this more potentially influential factors such as classroom environments, cultural expectations, neurobiological predispositions, and even de-motivation, and it can start to become a little overwhelming if you are a novice teacher trying to motivate a class. Teachers are understandably interested mostly in what they can control, and what they can do to help motivate the class as a whole.

**Autonomy**

One factor that teachers can control and that can relate to motivation is autonomy. Autonomy has been defined by Benson (2007) as when a student takes control of the learning process and the purpose for learning. The student is also more active in determining how and what is learnt, rather than just reacting to teacher initiated stimuli, or to put it more simply, it is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981). It is essentially argued that by giving students a higher degree of autonomy, they will then feel more involved in the learning process and will generally perform better. Considerable literature has indeed shown that learners with more autonomy are more successful language learners (Little, 2009; Nakata, 2011). Related to this, self-determination theory states that the freedom to choose is a necessary prerequisite for motivation (Decci & Ryan, 1985). One thing that should be noted is that autonomy should not be confused with self-study or homework. Autonomy is self-controlled or self-directed learning. The student decides on the goals, methods and results of studying. This also does not mean that the teacher is not involved.

For those who do subscribe to the idea that learner autonomy is beneficial for language learning, there are many ways to promote it, including fostering teacher autonomy as well. Self-reports or reflective assignments have become a frequent way for teachers to get
students thinking about and taking more responsibility and control over their learning. Self-evaluation and diaries are another way. Granting students more control over the curriculum and even grading criteria is another possibility that has been less explored.

While there is strong support for learner autonomy in educational contexts, it is not necessarily a guarantee for learning. Students need to have the appropriate learning strategies to cope with having to take the initiative. Depending on their psychological make-up and educational history, some students may not necessarily benefit as much as other from autonomy. Without a certain level of determination or motivation, too much autonomy can be detrimental and de-motivating for some. Good and Brophy (1994) provide a suitable reminder to all that education sometimes necessitates learning or teaching things that are not always our first choice or priority, and that through granting students too much autonomy, there is the danger of schools being reduced to entertainment centers, where nobody makes the difficult choices and tackles the more difficult tasks.

It should also be noted that autonomy is not an absolute concept, whereby students and teachers either claim to be autonomous or not. There are obviously different levels of autonomy, and even different expectations as to what autonomy is. Nakata (2011) suggested that perhaps it is best if we assess autonomy by the learner’s degree of readiness to take control of learning situations.

**Motivation and autonomy in Japan**

Language learning motivation research does not have a long history in Japan, and this has been attributed to the fact that the Japanese education system is largely teacher-centered (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001), even though teachers are beginning to shift towards a more student-centered approach with the possibility for increased student autonomy (Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001). This shift is possibly the result of an emphasis or push from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in recent years (Nakata, 2011). Nakata (2011) noted however, that there is still a considerable gap between school teachers’ ideal and reality, whereby many failed to follow through on promoting more learner autonomy, despite supporting it.
A lot of earlier research in Japan tended to approach the issue of motivation from a sociological point of view (Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001) and did not substantially examine the motivational factors of individual learners, although recently this trend has been reversed with a focus on factor analysis (Irie, 2003). Kimura, Nakata and Okumura (2001) found that when Japanese students were examined for individual differences regarding their motivation to learn English, multiple factors were at play. Variables such as age, gender, subject major, stage of learning, as well as a host of other factors played a role, perhaps explaining why Japanese learners are notoriously difficult for teachers to motivate. Further research by Yashima (2002) showed that a variable which she called WTC (willingness to communicate) had a substantial effect on motivation. She also noted that English has long been seen as a knowledge-based subject, because of the manner in which it is taught in Japanese junior and senior high schools. She speculates that this has had a negative effect on students’ willingness to communicate. Gender was found to be an important variable too, with girls consistently reporting higher levels of motivation than boys (Fukuchi & Sakamoto, 2005). This same research also found that experience overseas directly correlated with higher motivational levels, and students also reported being more motivated by native speaker teachers. Ryan (2009) noted that there was a correlation between the enjoyment of learning and motivation for Japanese learners, most of whom reported “liking English”. As to what exactly this comment constitutes, Ryan speculated that primarily it served as a socially conditioned response to a potentially awkward question. Irie (2003) analyzed a range of studies on the motivation of Japanese university students (in English and in Japanese) and concluded that instrumental factors, such as exam results or career targets, were the most motivating for Japanese university students.

Autonomy has been far less researched in Japan and has sometimes been dismissed as a Western concept and unsuited to Asian educational contexts. This last point has been criticized as a gross generalization based on little more than stereotypical ideas (Littlewood, 1999) and one that often differs from what learners themselves want. Perhaps part of the reason for the lack of autonomy in Japanese schools stems from the tight control that the Ministry of Education exercises and the pressure for high schools in particular to all teach the same curriculum, ultimately geared towards university entrance exams. While teachers may be reluctant to deviate from the “norm”, students themselves are also sometimes reluctant to take charge of their own learning, both in Japan and elsewhere in the world (Little, 2007).
attributes this to the fact that most learners in educational settings are still children (in a legal sense and also from a maturity perspective) and are not perceived as being ready to take the responsibility, either by themselves or by others.

**Previous cases**
Curriculum-based approaches where autonomy has been encouraged (to certain extents) in schools is not a new concept. However, little research is available to provide us with any background on which to base this research. What is available does suggest there are positive ramifications for motivation, by incorporating more autonomy into the learning process. Leni Dam (1995) showed in Denmark how to successfully get students to be more autonomous by using reflection with a negotiated curriculum. Karlsson, Kjisik, and Nordlund (1997) found that in Finland, autonomy increased motivation and heightened awareness about learning and the learning process. Other researchers have outlined that when students are involved in the assessment process, there are many benefits for them and for teachers (Ishii & Baba, 2003). These documented cases are unfortunately very rare.

**Overview**
Despite the reluctance of some teachers and students towards developing more learner autonomy in language classes, it has been shown that learner autonomy is more often than not directly related with language acquisition and increased proficiency (Dornyei, 2001; Skeehan, 1988). More student involvement also highly correlates with increased motivation, and higher levels of motivation are positively related to an increase in proficiency. There are, of course, critics, and it has been said that none of the evidence presented so far is compelling enough to necessitate the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning (Sinclair, 1999).

If we do assume that learner autonomy is a desired feature of language classrooms that indeed fosters motivation, then how should it be facilitated? Benson (2000) listed five such areas where learner autonomy could be implemented. For our purposes, the fifth area is relevant for this study. According to Benson, curriculum-based approaches are where teachers extend the idea of control (or partial control) over the planning and evaluation of learning to be done. Traditionally, curriculum content has been the exclusive domain of teachers and the education boards/schools (Dornyei, 2001). As far as advice or training on how to implement autonomy, teachers are often simply instructed to carry out a needs
analysis on what their students’ goals and interests are, and then try to incorporate this into their syllabus, if possible (Dornyei, 2001). Unfortunately, this often has to be done at the start of courses, usually after the syllabus has been decided, making it quite impractical. Any teacher who attempts to commit to learner autonomy in some form or another has to have the nerve to relinquish at least partial control of the class and of the idea that teachers themselves are central to learning (Little, 1991), which is often a daunting prospect for many.

The focus of this paper then is to investigate the effects of autonomy on motivation. This will be done by comparing student responses on an attitudinal survey about motivation from two groups, in which only one group was granted the opportunity to take control of a small part of the grading process.

**The study**

There were two class groups, both of which were comprised of non-English majors at a university in Japan who were in the high intermediate range for the TOEIC (500-750). The subjects – 24 in the dependent group and 27 in the control group – were all first-year students. They were required to take an English conversation course and had been streamed prior to the first lesson, with each class made up of students whose language proficiency was similar to that of their classmates. There were more girls than boys in each group, and all the subjects were Japanese, although a few had lived overseas (almost exclusively in the USA) for part of their lives. As mentioned before, the similarities shared by the two groups made them the logical choice for this research.

In the first lesson, all the students in both the dependent and the control group were provided with the course syllabus and schedule, the grading system, class requirements, books and other key components of the course. Students then engaged in a brief “get to know your classmates” activity in English. Questionnaire #1 (see Appendix 1) was then distributed and collected after completion. Students were instructed to answer the questions with the best or most appropriate answer and told that their responses would be anonymous. Afterwards, they were all instructed to discuss with their partner how comfortable they felt speaking English and how important it was to speak English during class. They were then instructed to look at the course syllabus. Under the grading section, there was a sub section which stated that 10% of their final grade was based on “English Effort”. Students then spent a few minutes
discussing what this might entail. Next, the teacher explained that it was an effort grade, not a proficiency grade. The main factor determining how students could do well in this area was if they tried to speak in English. Mistakes were fine and Japanese was okay to a point, if they were unable to say something in English. Each lesson the teacher would evaluate whether a student had made a sufficient effort or not. It would be a simple “yes or no” decision. Naturally this would be subjective, but it was stressed that the teacher would do his best to be consistent on decisions. In the control group, this would entail checking if students were making a reasonable effort to speak in English and were on task throughout the lesson.

Anybody not speaking enough English, speaking too much Japanese, or digressing too often from the task at hand would be warned once, before any final decision was made. A mark would be made on the back of the student’s name card (which doubled as a score card and attendance card) at the end of each lesson. Those meeting the requirements in class would get an “E” mark (for English) and those who did not would get no mark. Those speaking too much Japanese would get a “J” mark. This essentially comprised the “E/J system”, as it will henceforth be referred to. An “E” mark was worth 1% towards the final grade (up to a maximum of 10%). A “J” mark meant -1% and no mark meant 0% for that lesson.

The key to this research was that the students in the dependent group class were given a degree of autonomy, in terms of how the E/J system was used. They decided the rules and the guidelines by which the teacher would make his decisions. They decided in which situations Japanese would be permitted and how many warnings would be given to students not complying. Students also decided which form of reinforcement worked best for them. This was explained as negative reinforcement or positive reinforcement. Most of the students decided they preferred positive reinforcement as it motivated them more. They started with 0/10 and earned points by speaking English each class. Those who preferred negative reinforcement opted to start with 10/10 and tried to keep their score by fulfilling their speaking task requirements. If they didn’t, they would lose a point each class. Essentially, the scores would work out the same no matter which method was chosen, but by granting students the autonomy to decide how they would receive reinforcement, it was hypothesized that motivation would be positively affected. Students were also asked at the end of each class to evaluate themselves in terms of their “English effort,” which entailed giving themselves a score out of five (one being “no effort” and five being “maximum effort”). This
score formed no part of their final grade, but served to keep the students aware of their effort by reflecting at the end of each lesson. The hope was that throughout the term, this sense of self-awareness and involvement in the curriculum and grading process would keep many students on task and maintain, if not increase their motivation to speak English in each lesson. Students in the control group were granted no autonomy in this matter and the teacher unilaterally decided on all of the aforementioned items.

The research was quantitative in nature although it relied primarily on descriptive statistics. Also, even though there was only a fourteen-week gap between the pre-test and post-test measurements, the study was longitudinal. The dependent variable was the learner autonomy the dependent group was given at the beginning of the course in the aforementioned areas.

**Results**

Table 1. Results from the first questionnaire – the pre-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Dependent Group ( /24)</th>
<th>Control Group ( /27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you feel about speaking English?</td>
<td>a) Love it</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Like it</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) It’s okay</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Don’t like</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you feel about speaking in this class?</td>
<td>a) I want to speak as much as I can</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) I will try sometimes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) I will speak only when I have to</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) I don’t want to speak</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How good are you at speaking English?</td>
<td>a) Good</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Okay</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) Poor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Can’t speak</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **What motivates you to speak English?**  
   (1= no, 5=yes)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>E Group Mean</th>
<th>C Group Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) I want to be a better speaker</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) I want to get a good grade</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) The teacher tells me to</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) My partner supports/encourages me</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **In this class you will get 10 points for trying to speak English.**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>E Group Mean</th>
<th>C Group Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your target out of 10?</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Which motivates you more?**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>E Group Mean</th>
<th>C Group Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Start with 10/10 and lose points</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Start with 0/10 and earn points</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. **After each class I will give myself a score out of 5. This will...**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>E Group Mean</th>
<th>C Group Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Help me think about my effort</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) The teacher should decide my score</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) It will not change my feeling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) I don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some questions have been rephrased from the questionnaire to fit in the table.  
Please see the attached appendix for the full version.*

*The control group didn’t have questions 6 & 7 on their questionnaire.*

**Findings**

It was pleasantly surprising to find the majority of students held a positive, or at least neutral, view of speaking English (see Question #1), with only 2 students in the dependent group and 1 in the control group reporting that they didn’t like it. In general terms, it could be said that the control group seemed to have a slightly more favorable attitude towards speaking English. Answers for Question #2 also seem to support this position.
As far as answers for Question #3 are concerned, there was hardly any difference with both groups rating themselves as okay or poor. As they were both the top streams in their respective departments (determined by an English placement test before the semester), it is likely that either the students were suffering from low confidence or were just reluctant to appraise themselves in an overly positive manner.

The answers for Question #4 revealed some distinct differences. Indeed, the dependent group scored higher on all the motivational factors, perhaps indicating a more complex or dependent motivational basis. The highest rated factor for both was the desire to be a better speaker, revealing intrinsic motivation as a strong source of motivation. This was supported by the fact that being told to speak in English by the teacher was the least influential factor for both groups. Importantly, the desire to obtain good grades was rated highly by both groups, suggesting that at least for the dependent group, the autonomy and involvement in the curriculum and grading might be taken seriously.

Interestingly, the dependent group seemed to overwhelmingly prefer positive reinforcement (22 out of 24 students) in terms of grading feedback (Question #6). Members of that group also seemed to have a largely positive view of the self-evaluation and self-awareness task they were required to do after every lesson (Question #7).

Upon evaluation of the results of the first questionnaire, it could be concluded that both groups had a largely positive view of English, and that a complex but similar combination of factors was likely to motivate them. These similarities are important as they allow for stronger claims to be made later on.

The second part of the study was conducted at the end of the semester, when students were given another questionnaire. Some of the questions were the same as in the first questionnaire, in order to measure any possible changes, while other questions were new, to try and measure any particular changes that had or had not occurred in terms of motivation over the semester, and what these changes or lack of changes could possibly be attributed to. The results are presented below in Table 2.
Table 2. Follow-up results (Pre-test responses are presented in brackets for an easier comparison).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
<th>Dependent Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you feel about speaking English?</td>
<td>a) Love it</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>3 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Like it</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
<td>10 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) It’s okay</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
<td>12 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Don’t like</td>
<td>0 (2)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you feel about speaking in this class?</td>
<td>a) I want to speak as much as I can</td>
<td>18 (11)</td>
<td>18 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) I will try sometimes</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) I will speak only when I have to</td>
<td>0 (1)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) I don’t want to speak</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How good are you at speaking English?</td>
<td>a) Very good</td>
<td>1 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Good</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) Okay</td>
<td>10 (12)</td>
<td>14 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Poor</td>
<td>13 (12)</td>
<td>10 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e) Can’t speak</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What motivates you to speak English?</td>
<td>a) I want to be a better speaker</td>
<td>4.73 (4.75)</td>
<td>4.52 (4.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= no, 5=yes)</td>
<td>b) I want to get a good grade</td>
<td>4.21 (4.37)</td>
<td>3.524.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) The teacher tells me to</td>
<td>3.00 (3.50)</td>
<td>3.00 (2.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) My partner supports/encourages me</td>
<td>3.95 (4.62)</td>
<td>3.20 (3.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How has your motivation to speak English</td>
<td>a) It has gone up a lot</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) It has gone up a little</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) It is the same</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

With such an abundance of data, there are many important findings that are unrelated to the original hypothesis, but for the sake of space and time, only a few of the most relevant will be analyzed, pertaining to autonomy and motivation, and what the correlation is between them, if any.

The key question to answer first is this: Did the students’ motivation level increase? The answers for Question #5 show that in the dependent class, 21 students said their motivation had increased, which is an overwhelming majority. 20 students in the control group replied their motivation had increased as well, which was surprisingly high, although still lower in comparison. Interestingly, nobody reported a drop in motivation from the dependent group, while 2 students in the control group did so. This is certainly not a substantial number, but it could offer support for our hypothesis by suggesting that a lack of autonomy can actually be correlated with de-motivation in some cases.

Next, it is important to look at what factors played a part in this increased motivation for both groups. The answers for Question #4 are interesting to consider in terms of the pattern of change observed. The dependent class responses showed a decrease in the importance of external factors for motivation, such as the teacher telling them to speak in English (down to
3.00 from 3.50) and partner support (down to 3.95 from 4.62). This could be attributed to a reduction in anxiety. Most students didn’t know anyone in the first lesson, and certainly didn’t know the teacher, so perhaps they were more anxious about group support and interpersonal factors. By the end of the semester, they were more assured of themselves, and as a result, they viewed internal factors such as the desire to be a better speaker being responsible for their motivation.

Interestingly enough, this does not appear to be the case for the control group. While the desire to be a good speaker remained the same, the importance of the teacher telling them to speak in English and the need for the support of their partners actually increased slightly (3.00 from 2.80, and 3.20 from 3.00, respectively). Perhaps these students felt a lack of ownership or autonomy in the process, and were not as internally motivated. They therefore needed the support or reminding of others in the lesson to maintain their motivation.

Another interesting element of this issue is how motivation affects self-confidence. Question #3 asked students to rate their English speaking ability. While this rating is hardly reflective of their actual levels, it does show how students viewed their ability and how that view changed throughout the course. Surprisingly, there was almost no change, in either group, suggesting that confidence and self-evaluation were not related to motivation, which logically is hard to comprehend.

One finding that was certainly expected was that the students in the dependent group reported more favorably about their attitude towards speaking English in the classroom and in general (See Question #1). It was hypothesized that more autonomy would go hand in hand with a more favorable view of speaking English. Certainly this seems to be the case in the dependent group, although only moderately. In the follow-up survey, no one reported “don’t like” for speaking English (0 down from 2), while more students reported they “love it” (4 up from 1). In contrast, the control group exhibited a general decline in their view of English, with only 3 students reporting they “love it” (down from 9), and there were now 12 students who responded “it’s okay” (up from 6).

Also, with regard to how the students felt about speaking English during the class, in the first week, there was about an even split between answers in the dependent group: 11 said they
wanted to speak as much as they could, while 12 said they “will try sometimes”. By the end of the semester, there had been a positive improvement in the attitude of students, with 18 now reporting they wanted to speak as much as they could, and only 6 reporting they would try sometimes. Certainly it is hard to speculate on causality here. Did more autonomy promote a more positive view of speaking in the classroom? Or were they co-dependent factors? Perhaps another factor influenced this, such as the familiarity of the class leading to a more relaxed atmosphere, and thereby fewer inhibitions towards speaking English.

The control group findings differed significantly. While their answers to Question #2 (about their feelings towards speaking English in the classroom) remained almost unchanged (generally very positive), they reported a drop in the enjoyment of speaking English (8 up from 3 reporting they “love it”, and from 6 up to 12 reporting “it is okay”). This appears to show that a sense of practicality had set in, whereby they realized the importance of speaking in English in the classroom, and had no problems doing so, but they still felt their actual enjoyment or real desire to speak, had eroded to some extent. Once again though, it is hard to conclude that this is the direct result of the absence of any autonomy.

The last two questions also reveal some important findings. The dependent group all seemed clear about the E/J system, as you would expect, and no one had a negative view of it. Revealingly, while 9 thought it was very good, a large majority, 15, thought it was just okay. Perhaps they felt there were aspects of the system that were not quite right, or perhaps this was a reflection of the compromises they had had to make in the first lesson, to get a group consensus on what the rules would be and how they would be graded. Not unexpectedly, the control group had a more negative view of the system, with 3 reporting they didn’t like it, or it wasn’t very good. Only 5 thought it was good, while most students (19) thought it was just okay. These findings were not surprising. Naturally, students are less inclined to support systems that are imposed unilaterally on them, even if they respect the teacher’s judgment. With this system likely having been quite different from anything they have experienced before, there is bound to be some hesitancy in accepting it, particularly if the students have no ownership in the process.

Question #7 revealed some very interesting and important results too. With the involvement of the students in the grading process and the curriculum, it was expected that the dependent
group would be more aware of their speaking and notice their English output more than the control group. The findings seem to bear this out. 18 students in the dependent class reported an increase in awareness of their English output. This is to be expected, as heightened autonomy was predicted to lead to heightened awareness. However, in the control group 15 students noticed they were speaking more English than on the pre-test, while 12 reported no real change. Having over half the students report an increase in noticing/awareness was a surprise and indicates possibly that, although they were not actively involved in the E/J system and had no autonomy, they were still aware of it and that this had a positive influence on how often they spoke English in the classroom.

Extrapolating from these findings and trying to conclude whether the original hypothesis was correct or not is subjective. One can say though, that the dependent class exhibited higher motivational increases than the control class, and a higher awareness of their English output. They also seemed to enjoy speaking English more and certainly had a more favorable view of the E/J system. It could be argued that these differences are the result of having greater autonomy, but there is a problem with this conclusion: the control group also exhibited higher motivational levels than in the baseline and also had generally favorable views of speaking English in the classroom and the E/J system, which could suggest classroom instruction was an important variable. They were also more aware of their English output than before. Certainly the control group didn’t show as favorable a response to these questions as the dependent group, but the fact that they also showed similar increases (albeit at a lower rate) suggests that perhaps other factors were in play as well. Autonomy certainly seems to have played a part in increasing motivation, but perhaps it is just as important to have a clear system whereby students are graded for their English speaking effort. Indeed, it is possible a combination of an awareness of the need to speak English in class working in conjunction with learner autonomy, served to increase motivation.

These findings are potentially important for university classes in Japan, where students often come from high schools with little to no emphasis on actually speaking in the classroom. English in many schools tends to be a matter of written work and largely consists of extensive grammar and vocabulary memorization, usually for the purpose of testing. This is partly due to class size and simple logistics which prevent more communicative activities, but it could also be argued that this is partly the result of a long standing educational culture where
teacher-centered learning is the standard practice. The result of this learning experience is that first-year university students are often confused and fail to understand what their teacher (quite often a non-Japanese national) means by “class participation” and they subsequently score poorly. Simply making students aware of expectations and involving them in the decision process is potentially beneficial for students not only in Japan, but in other similar contexts around the world.

**Problems and suggestions**

As with any self-report questionnaire similar to the Likert Scale, there is a reliability problem concerning the data collected. Do students feel comfortable enough to answer honestly or are they answering how they think the teacher would like them to answer?

It would have been perhaps more revealing to have been able to track changes in individual students, by comparing differences between the pre-test and the post-test on a case-by-case basis, rather than by just looking at class groups as a whole. Practical limitations proved to be too great an obstacle though. Also, it was felt that students might be inhibited from answering honestly if they felt their answers were going to be analyzed on an individual basis.

Another problem is the difficulty in getting a group consensus. Although the class did discuss and decide autonomously on the “English Effort” issue, it was of course not a unanimous decision. The majority ruled, but no doubt some students didn’t get their desired outcome. The students were evaluated by the same method, but may not have seen the class decisions as autonomous decisions on how to approach grading, but rather a decision made by other classmates that was forced upon them, no different than perhaps if the teacher had decided and unilaterally imposed his ideas.

The nature of this study also prevents any definite correlation from being established. While it is possible to speculate about correlations between autonomy and motivation, there will always be other possible factors which might or might not have influenced the findings.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this project, it was hypothesized that learner autonomy would lead to an increase in motivation for students to speak English in this particular Japanese university
language classroom. Results presented here could be seen as favorable, but they also suggest that student awareness of the need to speak English in the classroom has an impact. It could be argued then, that to get students to speak more English in the classroom, the teacher first needs to make students aware of the need to do so, whether by assigning a specific portion of their grade to encourage them, or by other means. Learner autonomy can then be granted in this area, which may lead to an even higher level of motivation, arising from a sense of ownership in the course, a heightened awareness of the need to speak English and increased motivation to do so. This study should be seen merely as a preliminary study and further work needs to be done to ascertain exactly what the relationship between autonomy and motivation is, and how it can productively be manipulated in the classroom.

References


**Appendix 1.** The questionnaire distributed during the first class.

Answer the questions. Do not write your name!

1. How do you feel about speaking English?
   a) I love it  b) I like it  c) it’s okay  d) I don’t like it

2. How do you feel about speaking in this class?
   a) I want to speak as much as I can  b) I will try sometimes
   c) I will speak English only when I have to  d) I don’t want to speak

3. How good are you at speaking English?
   a) very good  b) good  c) okay  d) poor  e) I can’t speak!

4. What motivates (動機) you to speak English? (1=no 5=yes)
   I want to be a better speaker  1 2 3 4 5
   I want to get a good grade  1 2 3 4 5
   The teacher tells me to  1 2 3 4 5
   My partner supports/encourages me  1 2 3 4 5

5. In this class, you will get 10 points for trying to speak English.
What is your target? /10

6. Which motivates you more?
   a) I start with 10/10 and get (-1) if I speak too much Japanese or not enough English
   b) I start with 0/10 and get (+1) if I make a good effort

7. After every class, I will give myself a score ( /5) for my effort. I think this
   a) will help me think about my effort every class
   b) the teacher should decide my score
   c) it will not change my feeling/effort about speaking English
   d) I don’t know

*The control group did have Questions #6 & #7 on their questionnaires.

Appendix 2. The questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester.

Answer the questions. Do not write your name!

1. How do you feel about speaking English?
   a) I love it     b) I like it     c) it’s okay     d) I don’t like it

2. How do you feel about speaking in this class?
   a) I speak as much as I can     b) I try sometimes
   c) I speak English only when I have to     d) I don’t speak

3. How good are you at speaking English?
   a) very good     b) good     c) okay     d) poor     e) I can’t speak!

4. What motivates (動機) you to speak English? (1=no 5=yes)
   I want to be a better speaker     1 2 3 4 5
   I want to get a good grade     1 2 3 4 5
   The teacher tells me to     1 2 3 4 5
   My partner supports/encourages me     1 2 3 4 5

5. How has your motivation to speak English changed since the first class?
   a) It has gone up a lot
   b) It has gone up a little
   c) It is the same
   d) It has gone down a little
   e) It has gone down a lot

6. What do you think about the E/I system?
   a) I think it is very good
b) It is okay

c) It isn’t very good

d) I don’t like it

e) I am not sure

7. How much do you notice your English-speaking now?

a) I notice it a lot more now

b) I notice it more than before

c) About the same

d) I don’t really notice it much

e) I never notice it

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**About the author**

Richard Miles is a language instructor at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. He is currently working on his PhD through Macquarie University and researching oral presentations and the persuasive language that L2 learners use while delivering them.