

# One Year Later: Students' Visualizations of "Independent-Mindedness" in the L2 University Classroom

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Over the past two decades, Japan's Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, Culture and Technology (MEXT) has proposed several action plans for curricular reform which state that upon graduation from tertiary institutions, students should be able to function effectively, in English, in an international setting. Each year, there has been an increased emphasis on "independent-minded learning." This study examines whether students, after one year of tertiary education, could reflect on their current situation, visualize changes in their development, and consider what it meant to be "independent minded" in their approach to learning. An Independent Learning Scale (ILS) was introduced to students as a horizontal line drawn across the whiteboard, with the numbers one to five evenly interspaced along the line. The number one represented a learner dependent on teacher instruction, while the number five represented a proactive, independent learner. Students were asked to choose the number which best represented their perception of themselves. Data showed students' perceptions at each of the five levels. Interpretation of the findings suggests that learners were indeed capable of reflecting on learning, but felt they needed training in how to learn in order to become more "independent-minded."

過去20年にわたり、文部科学省は、高等教育課程修了段階で、学生が国際的な舞台や状況において英語で不自由なくコミュニケーションがとれるようになることを明言したカリキュラム改革に対するさまざまなアクションプランを策定してきた。その中で、年々、高等教育レベルでの「主体的な学び」の必要性が高まりを見せている。本研究では、高等教育を1年間受けた学生が、現況を省察し、自己成長過程における変化を視覚化し、自身の学習の「主体性」の意味に関して考察できるかを検証する。調査手法として「主体的学習指標 (Independent Learning Scale: ILS)」を用いた。ホワイトボードに描かれた横線に1から5までの番号を等間隔に振り、1は教師の指示への依存を示し、5は自発的、自律的な学習者であることを説明した後で、学生には学習者としての自己について最もよく当てはまる番号を選ばせた結果、回答は5段階のレベルそれぞれに分かれた。本研究結果より、学習者は学習を省察する能力を身につけているが、より主体的になるために学習方法のトレーニングが必要だと感じていることが示唆された。

## Keywords

learner autonomy, visualization, reflection-on-learning, independent-mindedness, EFL

## キーワード

学習者オートノミー、視覚化、学習の省察、主体性、外国語としての英語学習

**B**eing an independent learner assumes a readiness to be proactive about one's learning or as Holec (1981, p. 3) defines it, "the ability to take charge of one's learning". In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, this idea of independence in the L2 classroom is considered to be beneficial in empowering learners by helping them to understand their stage of development, reflect on their capabilities, adopt strategies that would best suit their specific skill-set and learning style, evaluate their progress, and visualize their future selves based on their reflections. This is the kind of learning environment that many higher education teachers strive to achieve; however, as is the case in many L2 situations, there are a variety of approaches to learning.

Learner Autonomy (LA), or the idea of becoming a self-reliant learner, has its roots in western cultures and is in many ways in direct conflict with the Asian concept of collectivism (Wu & Rubin, 2000). Studies around the world have shown that there is a definite relationship between the mainstream cultural practices in a particular society and to what extent LA

is accepted as a part of institutional culture (see Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). After working for several years as a teacher in various secondary institutions in Japan, I found that the concept of "taking charge of one's learning" was largely non-existent at the secondary level, due to teachers preparing students (typically using a grammar-translation methodology) for the competitive university entrance exam tests rather than engaging learners in practices of self-efficacy. Participants in this study also mentioned the lack of training in learning how to learn while in high school. Students further reported that trying to cope with this new expectation of independent-mindedness in university was not only difficult in their language learning classes, but also a challenge in their Math and Physics classes.

Over the past decade, Japan's Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, Culture and Technology (MEXT) has proposed several action plans for curricular reform. With regard to English education, MEXT (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) states that upon graduation from tertiary institutions, Japanese students should be able to function effectively, in English, in an international environment. Each year, there has been an increased emphasis on independent-minded learning. In MEXT's 2015 Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, they state:

what is truly needed in Japan is independent-minded learning by individuals in order to realize independence, collaboration and creativity. (MEXT, 2015)

As a result, institutions have been charged with adapting curricula to reflect MEXT guidelines. In order to facilitate this change, tertiary institutions have tried to adopt new measures in the L2 classroom—but with mixed results.

The notion of being an independent learner has been around for decades, but it is still a novel idea within many Japanese institutions. I became interested in understanding this phenomenon after changing jobs from an advising position in a private university to a teaching position at a prestigious national university in Japan. At the time, the university was undergoing extensive curriculum reform which saw Learner Autonomy in the classroom as one of three main principles underpinning the new curriculum. The underlying philosophy was that students would take ownership for their learning by making decisions about their study plans, plan their learning, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes (Yasuda, 2015). Interviews with instructors at the institution post-curricular change found that, in particular, older instructors who had research experience and training in fields outside of TEFL methodology struggled somewhat with not only the new concept of "independent learning," but more so, with *how* to incorporate it into their current teaching practices. On the other hand, the instructors who had recently completed a degree in TEFL, and therefore had some training in and knowledge of current TEFL theories, found it less challenging to adjust their teaching to fit within the new curriculum. As such, efforts to assist learners in becoming more active participants in their learning were varied, depending on teacher training and practices. Thus, one of my aims in doing this research was to create a snapshot of students' visualization of their stage of learner development so that I could form a clearer picture of the degree of autonomy that students were realizing under the current curriculum.

## Contextual Overview

Prior to this study, I had disseminated a questionnaire (see Appendix A), which sought specifically to identify transitional difficulties between the high school and university L2 classroom, to approximately 400 non-majoring English freshman students (135 females and 268 males) at the end of their first semester as freshman students. Students across eight departments (Agriculture, Design, Economics, Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Aeronautical Engineering, Literature, and Medical Sciences) participated in this study. Based on student responses, I perceived the three main adjustment difficulties to be:

1. Poor language skills to cope with university-level classes (45.35%)
2. Lack of independent learning skills (30.52%)
3. Lack of ability to reflect on learning (20.93%).

In this current study, students in each language class were of mixed-proficiency levels and took two mandatory 90-minute English courses per week: A Writing/Speaking class and a Reading/Listening class over a 15-week semester for a total of 22.5 hours of teaching instruction per semester. Students changed English instructors each semester as a way of exposing them to different teaching styles, accents, and nationalities. Although there was a core curriculum, creating a culture of autonomy in which each teacher introduced a centralized concept of independent-mindedness proved to be challenging. In essence, this was because timely meetings between faculty members and the mainly adjunct instructors could not be easily organized as adjunct instructors were each teaching on different days and times during the week.

The current study thus follows up on the earlier questionnaire-based research and examines whether students, after one year of tertiary education, could reflect on their current situation, visualize changes in their development, and consider what it means to be “independent-minded” in their approach to learning.

## Methodological Framework

Participants in this study were 125 male and female freshman students at the end of their first year of tertiary education. The participating students were purposefully selected as they had already been involved in a study I had conducted previously. In the previous study, they had identified Learner Autonomy as one of their major challenges in transitioning from high school to university. As participants came from different faculties, had learned from various language instructors with varying teaching styles, and had mixed levels of English proficiency and attitudes towards language learning, I was able to get a wide cross-section of views.

Students were asked to take part in a reflective activity in their final English class of their second semester. The aim was to identify to what extent students' understanding or personal visualizations of learner autonomy had developed at the end of one year in a tertiary L2 environment. As the collected data were to be used for research purposes, I asked the students not to write their names or any other personal information that could be used to identify themselves. The three questions the students reflected on were:

- What knowledge have you gained in your language learning after one year at university?
- How do you visualize your development as an independent learner?
- What action can you take to be a better learner in your second year?

Students answered the first question in the format of an open-ended written response and then compared responses in groups. The third question was answered as a whole class activity to raise awareness of the various services and resources that students could access for self-directed learning. For the second question, students were first given a worksheet (Appendix B) with examples of a Level 1 student and a Level 5 student transcribed from interviews in the previous research in order to clearly understand what was expected of them. Students first responded to the prompt in written form in English on the worksheet before participating in the teacher-facilitated discussion. The discussion was prompted by using a student-centred Kanban Board Technique (KBT).

The KBT (Ohno, 1978) emerged early in the 1940s as the Toyota brand restructured their approach to their manufacturing and engineering production systems. The KBT was intended to help employees visualize their work (using coloured paper to differentiate task importance), work effectively in their limited time, focus on flow, and practice continuous improvement. I decided to use the KBT style of data collection as visuals (such as charts, graphs, mind maps, photos, drawings or diagrams) have typically been used in research to represent concepts that are difficult to explain. Students were thus asked to visualize their thoughts about their feelings of autonomy in language learning.

Due to its highly visible nature and ability to facilitate communication, the modified KBT worked as a quick and effective method to help students:

1. understand the meaning and importance of learner autonomy in learning
2. reflect on what it means to be an autonomous learner
3. become aware of how each student is unique in his/her visualization of themselves as autonomous learners
4. visualize their current situation and future goals
5. think about how to take action to improve their current or future situation based on shared experiences.

Using the visual format of the KBT, an Independent Learning Scale (ILS) was then introduced to students to gauge their developmental level. In practice, a horizontal line was drawn across the board, with the numbers 1 to 5 evenly interspersed along the line (see Figure 1).

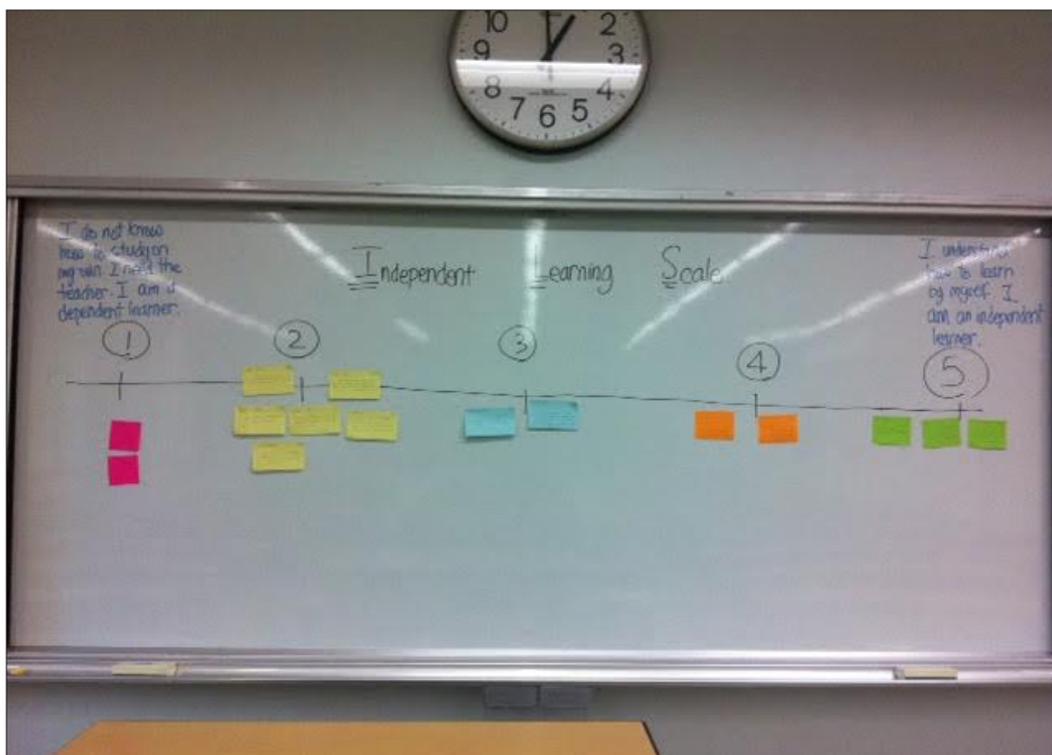


Figure 1. Independent Learning Scale.

The number 1 was representative of a learner who perceived himself or herself to be largely dependent on teacher instruction, while the number 5 represented a learner who considered

himself/herself to be a proactive, independent learner. The students were then asked to choose the number which they felt best represented their perception of themselves as an independent learner. They were given Post-it notes in different colours representing the five numbers, asked to write the reasons why they had chosen the particular number, and then place it next to the number on the board. This exercise worked as a meaningful visualization tool for students' perceptions of what it meant to be an independent-minded learner.

Students were given time to walk to the board and read the other students' ideas and then return to their groups to discuss the results with the following prompts:

1. Which number were you on the Independent Learning Scale?
2. Why did you choose that number? Give examples.
3. How do you think you can improve your English in the future?

Visualizing these insights was a critical step in order for students to deepen their reflections about their current developmental state as well as their progress as independent-minded learners. ILS data were collected and compiled in a table format to identify students' perceptions of Learner Autonomy at each of the five levels. Results are discussed below.

## Students' Personal Visualizations of an Autonomous Language Learner

Students' personal visualizations of themselves as autonomous language learners were separated into five distinct levels ranging from one to five. For each level, it was found that students were indeed capable of reflecting on their learning. Level 1 learners tended to be more self-deprecating of their language skills and write surface reflections (McCarthy, 2013), while Level 5 learners, although critical of some aspects of their learning, had a more positive outlook for the future and concrete ideas of how to improve their language skills. For all learners, it appeared that more support and training from teachers were needed to see further development.

The following descriptions indicate how students rated themselves in each category during the reflective activity.

### **Level 1**

A Level 1 learner showed characteristics of a learner lacking confidence. Of the 125 participants, there were seven students who considered themselves to be lacking independence in their language learning. Specifically, students showed negativity through the vocabulary they chose to express themselves:

*I do not study outside of class*

*I only do homework*

*I only want credit*

*I think that I do not need English in my future. I regret now.*

Words such as "do not," "only" and "regret" are a good illustration of stereotypically unengaged students. For a few, there was little effort to do more than simply the basics to gain the course credit. Others felt a sense of frustration that they did not possess the required skills to participate actively on their own in class. Level 1 students in general thus showed a preference for full teacher instruction.

## Level 2

Of the 125 participants, 50 students considered themselves to be Level 2 learners on the ILS. This was the largest grouping. These students showed some aspects of negativity. Like the Level 1 students, some were concerned mainly with passing tests or doing only enough to gain the credit required to graduate. Lack of interest in learning English or using any English-related resources was also a point raised by several students. However, underlying the negativity, there were usually some ideas of how to improve specific aspects of their language learning:

*I can't speak, listen or read, but I enjoyed presentation*

*I am not good at English, but I study at home and look back after class*

*It was difficult for me to write an essay, but after the teacher taught me structure, I was able to make it.*

*I am not interested in English, but I think I can learn English very well through watching movies.*

*I cannot communicate with anyone, however, I visited SALC and listened to English songs. I don't have English skills, but I will make effort in the future.*

Looking at the language itself, many students added "but" or "however" as a way of showing that they were aware that they had the capacity to develop further. In many instances, there was the realization that they *should* study, but there was no concrete action planning even though they had some idea of their future goals. As such, these students found it difficult to make improvements in their language learning:

*I should study more*

*I should have done new things and been more active*

*I have a plan that I want to do in the future, but I do not try to achieve it*

*I want to study with more potential*

*Although I know to speak English is advantage in the future, I reject learning English.*

Learning how to learn seemed to be the biggest challenge for Level 2 students as they had received little training during their first year as freshman students:

*I want to learn but I don't know what to do*

*I think we can learn "how to study" and "what to study" from our teachers*

One of the main problems identified was students' anxiety in and outside of the language learning classroom, which affected their participation and overall performance:

*I don't like English class. I feel painful in English class. I have a sleeping disorder so I can't wake up. I'll try more.*

*I do my homework certainly, but I always don't study by myself. I want to go to SALC but I couldn't go there.*

*Trying to speak I get upset and can't say anything.*

Having worked with Japanese students for over a decade, I have learned that talking to the teacher was found to be a cause of anxiety for some students (mainly due to the language barrier), thus opportunities during class time and also in the final 10 minutes were always provided for students to communicate with friends in their L1. The social-interactive dimension of LA has been explored extensively by Dam (1995), Brown (2001), Richards (2006), Little (2007), La Ganza (2008), and Benson and Cooker (2013). They suggest that the learner's capacity, as well as willingness to be an active participant in their learning, depends not only on individual-cognitive thinking, but interdependence through cooperation with others. I found that whereas only a few students in each class chose to work alone, most students considered their friends as a major source of academic and emotional support:

*I don't ask the teacher or friends for help*

*I often ask my friends to tell me the contents of the class*

*I am not good at speaking, but I am able to notice my mistakes in my presentation when my friends listen to it and tell me.*

Despite many students mistakenly believing that becoming an independent learner meant studying alone (an idea reinforced by being instructed to complete the independent learning CALL course in isolation), student reflections illustrated the importance of having some form of support on the road to becoming an independent learner.

In essence, Level 2 learners, although showing a preference for teacher instruction, expressed an interest in receiving some guided instruction as well as learner training in how to be more autonomous rather than simply being told what to do.

### **Level 3**

Level 3 was the third largest grouping on the ILS behind Level 2 and Level 4 respectively. Of the 125 participants, 29 considered themselves to be Level 3 learners. In this group, student motivation for language learning was higher and there was some recognition of the necessity of improving English skills for future purposes as well as efforts to set goals and make plans to achieve them:

*I do English for a long time however I cannot speak English well. I have a little plan that I want to do in the future. I am going to clarify my plan.*

*I think my language skills are not good. I know I should learn English for my future so I start learning these days*

*In the future I will need English skills, so I want to learn English now and in the future.*

Having a future goal was thus important in helping such students to become more passionate and responsible about their learning (McCarthy, 2011). Personal responsibility in completing assignments on time and asking others for help when needed also played an important role in helping students become more independent-minded in their thinking:

*I often have my homework done before the deadline*

*I can communicate at the minimum. I often ask teachers only when I cannot find the answers by myself such as specific vocabulary*

*I study for tests, presentations and essay in English by myself. I also study points I cannot under-*

*stand in my house*

*I am sometimes dependent on my friends, but I always finish by myself*

*I cannot speak English well and have little time to study English, but I submit my reports on time.  
I can achieve with effort.*

In this way, Level 3 students demonstrated a good understanding of their language learning strengths and weaknesses, which can be taken as evidence of having the capacity for autonomous learning. Not only did they recognise areas of weaknesses, they also had concrete ideas of how to learn, knowledge of useful resources connected to their interests and motivation to be more active in their learning:

*I don't like to read English, but I like to watch movies in English*

*I like to read books for example Harry Potter, so I sometimes read such books that are not directly concerned with English classes. However, I don't speak English good so I do not practice it.*

*I cannot speak with foreign students but I like to watch TED videos every week*

*I've been interested in English for several years, but my English skills still leaves much to do. However, my friends and I enjoy talking in English in LINE so it helps us to get accustomed to English.*

Here again we see a level of anxiety about communicating with others. At the same time, being able to use applications such as "LINE" (a free social networking application) was viewed as a means through which students could experience authentic English with peers. This idea of encouraging out-of-class learning that is directly connected to students' real-world interests is an area that the researcher felt could help to foster a culture of autonomy within the institution.

Students at this level, although having some feelings of anxiety about their lack of language skills, were in general somewhat active in their language learning and were in most cases willing to ask friends and the teacher for support:

*I can communicate at the minimum. I often ask teachers only when I cannot find the answers by myself*

*I couldn't ask the teacher for help before I started university, but now I can ask the teacher for help.*

For Level 3 learners on the ILS, although they were motivated to do some self-study and had a learning goal and ideas of how to achieve their goal, similar to Level 2 learners, they seemed to need teacher instruction on specific areas to complement their self-study:

*I cannot speak English well so my homework is very hard, but my English teacher is friendly and explains good. I want to be better so I need my effort and teacher's advice*

*I think advice of the professor and professionals is necessary to acquire a right scientific learning method, but I think that to learn by the method of talking with foreign student in English by oneself is also important*

*I would like to study at my own pace. However, I can't understand contents of class for example Philosophy and I don't know where I make mistakes in essay. Therefore I need my teacher's help.*

Level 3 students thus showed a preference for a balance between taking responsibility for their own language learning and relying on the teacher for specific training.

### **Level 4**

The second largest grouping on the ILS was Level 4 students at 34 of 125 students. In this group, students had a strong awareness of language strengths and weaknesses and showed more effort and motivation in trying to achieve goals. Like Level 3 learners, there was recognition of the necessity of improving English skills for future goals, however for these students, there was a stronger connection between future goals and motivation to learn (McCarthy, 2011):

*I study for what I want to do in the future. Sometimes the teacher advises me about subjects or how to study, but usually I plan my schedule and study by myself*

*When I entered university, I made some goals. First, doing my best at learning English. Second, communication with many people. Third, having my own opinion about every event. I achieved these goals.*

In addition, class participation for Level 4 learners was quite strong and students actively tried to learn outside of the classroom:

*Before and after class I review work to become interested*

*I am independent from teacher's support I think. For example, I find interesting areas myself and research*

*My English level may be average but I got able to speak English words more exactly. These days I care about overseas news not only Japanese news. I want to be more active to English movie, TV, music.*

*My English skill is not high however I did my homework hard. Of course I faced many problems at home, but I achieved my task by myself. I got confidence.*

Although Level 4 learners in many cases considered themselves to be lacking in English ability, they had a positive attitude to language learning and were thus able to improve. For many of these students, the idea of being an independent learner was a novelty which they tried to embrace:

*I study liberal arts more harder now, not enforced by teacher or parents than when I was a high school student. Now I haven't become a completely independent learner because I'm lazy and not active. Recently I speak what I should do in order to improve myself, so I am becoming more independent*

*I can learn Physics very efficiently when I realize theories of it. It is true that you listen to the teacher, however I think the most important thing is realization by myself in learning*

*In my high school, my homeroom teacher told me everything we should do. I don't like to be told to study so I was frustrated by the system. In university, there is no homeroom teacher, so I can make my schedule on my own and study the things I want. It is a good situation for me now.*

This self-awareness, reflected in the students' abilities to make plans and find appropriate resources to achieve learning goals, is indicative of a good independent learner. The comments below are examples of how students participated actively in the learning process:

*I watch TED during my part-time job. Although I don't understand it all, I can scan it*

*I am learning German and I enjoy comparing the grammar and pronunciation to English*

*I think my style is independent learning because I know how to do "active learning." Active learning focuses on "metacognition" which is for example writing a mindmap*

*I watch TED and listen to podcasts. If I improve my skill more and more, I can go abroad by myself! It has been 10 months since I have entered this university and I think I have become more independent. For example I research the meaning of words, listen to music and study IELTS by myself.*

Part of these learners' success was actively seeking help from others or offering help to those who needed it. This is a crucial point to note when trying to create a culture of autonomy within an institution. In situations where the learner could not get assistance, it sometimes led to frustration:

*My problem is Mathematics. Almost all teachers consider it as independent study and I get no help at all*

*I always know what I should do, but I sometimes need others' help and advice. For example, I want to be an engineer. Although I should study Math and Physics, it is difficult for me to do these subjects by myself. I need others' help for these*

*I teach my friends about how to write an essay in English*

*When I do my homework, I do it by myself, but sometimes when I don't know how to do it, I ask the teacher or my friends for help*

*When I can't solve the problems, I searched websites, asked my seniors at club and emailed the teachers. I don't like to leave questions unsolved. I sometimes meet with my friends to study.*

To see evidence of these behavioural attributes in students who state that they have experienced little or no learner training (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Sheerin, 1989; Dickinson, 1992) is a good argument for encouraging peer-support, active learning and knowledge-sharing.

Examining the language of Level 4 learners, we can see a more critical awareness of various aspects of language learning, including not only linguistic but also affective and social concerns. Level 4 students thus recognised the necessity of applying themselves more rather than depending solely on the teacher. In general, they showed a preference for teacher-facilitated instruction in that they would take on more responsibility for their learning with timely teacher feedback.

## **Level 5**

As might be expected with a group of freshman students still in their first year of tertiary education, only 5 students of the 125 participants rated themselves at Level 5 on the ILS. These students had the most confidence and for them, the key points were similar to Level 4 learners in the effort they put in to improve their skills and in having a clear goal for their future. What distinguished these students most from the others was their interest and curiosity in learning new things:

*For the first time I wrote an academic essay and was able to learn many new things*

*My goal is to become a diplomat. To achieve my goal, I try to put in my maximum effort into English work. To improve my English work, I always try to fix every problem that was pointed out by my teacher*

*I entered this university because I wanted to study by myself. If I need a teacher individually, I will contact with someone who can advise me*

*University itself is not how we only get education. I am an active learner because I am inquisitive about everything.*

This intrinsic motivation in their learning led to social and academic empowerment as students could find enjoyment, interest and relevance in their learning activities. By satisfying these three needs, students were able to create meaningful connections with their language learning and social grouping in class as well as feel comfortable in the knowledge that they were able to self-regulate their learning. In essence, Level 5 students had developed the capacity to work both independently and interdependently depending on the situational context.

Table 1 summarizes students' personal visualizations of what it meant to be an autonomous learner.

**Table 1. Summary of Students' Personal Visualizations of an Independent Learner**

Total N=125	Level	Anxiety (affective issues)	Knowledge of resources	Goal-setting planning	Asking for support	Self-control	How to learn	Be active / effort	Curiosity and interest
7	1	0							
50	2	0	0						
29	3	0	0	0	0				
34	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
5	5		0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## Discussion

As the notion of learner autonomy continues to play a major role in MEXT discussions, it is important that studies continue to be conducted to show whether training students to be more reflective and goal-oriented about their future is beneficial or not. My interpretation of the findings indicates that learners were indeed capable of reflecting on learning, some more critically than others, but there was a general consensus that some level of training in learning how to learn was required in order for students to become more "independent-minded." This idea is in line with a previous study conducted by the author (McCarthy, 2013).

In this study, students reflected on their independent-mindedness using the simple prompt:

*How do you visualize your development as an independent learner?*

Because students had been taught by a variety of teachers during their first year, exposure to autonomous principles differed. As such, it was difficult to know how much influence previous instructors had had on student development. Interestingly, student ideas about what

constitutes an autonomous learner were similar to concepts found in widely-read research articles about LA from the last 30 years or more:

- Recognizing strengths and weaknesses, setting goals and/or achievable targets and making plans to achieve targets (Holec, 1981)
- Understanding language learning styles and strategies and selecting appropriate materials (Skehan, 1989; Oxford, 1990)
- Working individually, without supervision (Geddes & Sturtridge, 1982; Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Nakata, 2014)
- Working collaboratively with peers and teacher (Brown, 2001; Richards, 2006)
- Asking for support (Little, 1994; Dam, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Umeda, 2004; Benson & Cooker, 2013)
- Affective issues such as anxiety and motivation (Benson, 2001; Cohen & Dornyei, 2002; Dornyei, 2002)
- The need for learner training (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Dickinson, 1992).

After discussions about the ILS, the students were once again reminded that learning was a journey, that at each step of the way there would be successes and pitfalls and also that they would possibly move upward and/or downward on the ILS several times over the course of their studies. Further, understanding the developmental process was instrumental in helping them to become more aware that each student was unique and that everyone had specific strengths and weaknesses. It was thought that through this reflective activity students would be more cognizant of the effort that would be required of them if English is to become a part of their future professional life.

Based on students' written visualizations, the following figure (Figure 2) was created to reflect their ideas of the role and responsibility of the learner and teacher:

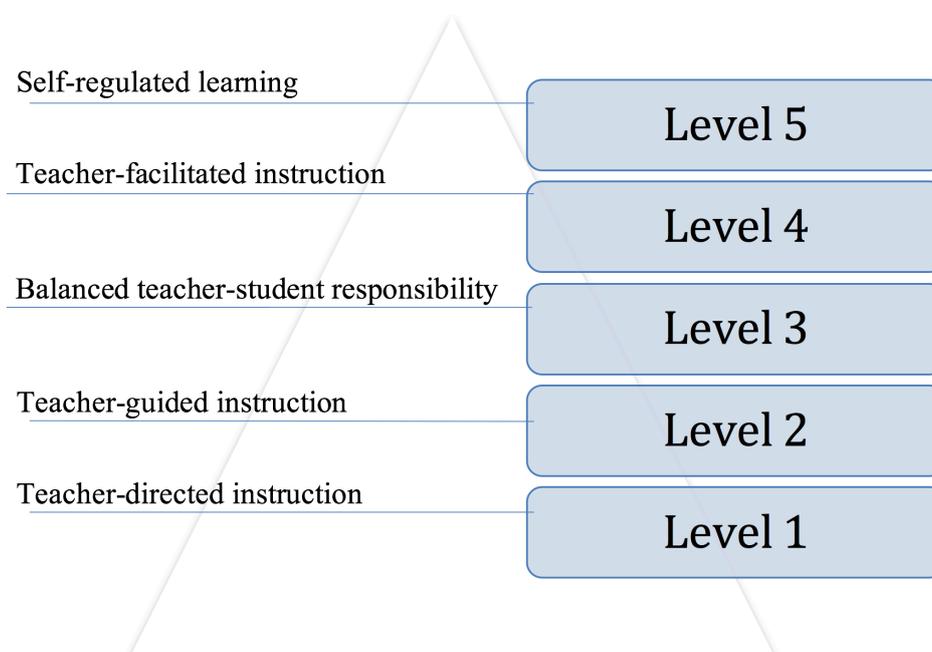


Figure 2. Students' Personal Visualization of the Breakdown of Responsibilities in the L2 Classroom.

I found the results of this study interesting as research into Learner Autonomy in the Japanese context has largely presented students as being passive or teacher-dependent due to cultural factors of “oneness” (Dore & Sako, 1989; Holliday, 2003). However, many of these students showed a strong capacity for independent-mindedness without having experienced much (or any) training in the way of reflection-on-learning or in learning how to learn.

## Further Considerations

Three main areas lacking in data collected from the student reflections which might be examined further are:

1. How students evaluate progress and reevaluate goals based on evaluation
2. How perceived level of language proficiency correlates with perception of independent-mindedness
3. How students transfer independent-minded skills to new situations.

As previously stated, students at the university in which this research took place changed instructors each semester. As such, creating an institutional culture of autonomy remained a challenge. Having a core definition of learner autonomy and ideas of how to implement it within the classroom should therefore be a careful consideration in future curriculum development. This would help to guide instructors in helping students to set goals and learn how to self-assess growth. Having students reflect on language proficiency using a framework such as The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2017) would help both instructors and students to see if there is a relationship between language level and autonomous practices. This could then serve as a springboard for classroom discussion on how to develop into a more independent-minded individual. Most importantly, if students could understand how skills learned in university classes connected to other situational contexts as well as their future lives, they would be more cognizant of the relevance of classes and feel more motivated to participate actively.

As the role of support and training was a central theme in student reflections, this is the core area that could be built into how teachers manage their classrooms. By connecting more closely to Japanese cultural practices, such as the *senpai/kohai* (senior/junior) bond, it is possible to engage students further in learning. This could also reduce anxiety about asking teachers for help. Another consideration in how to encourage out-of-class learning is to assign points to English learning connected to student interest such as LINE. Although the university’s Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) offered language services to help students, texting seemed to provide a bridge for students not yet ready to engage in conversation. The CALL program which instructed students to work independently would need to be discussed further to see how it could be adjusted to encourage more collaboration and to evaluate progress. As intrinsic motivation (through enjoyment, interest and relevance to future goals) was the main factor connected to the development of Level 5 students, how to cultivate this within the classroom should also be considered.

## Final Thoughts

This research has shown a snapshot of 125 students’ personal visualizations of their autonomous stage of development at a top national university in Japan. For students who had received no formal training from the university in how to take more responsibility for their

learning, the fact that over half the students identified as Level 3 or above was quite positive. This is particularly surprising for two reasons: First, although Japanese students usually tend to select the middle point (3) in a scale (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995), results showed a mixed distribution (see Figure 3).

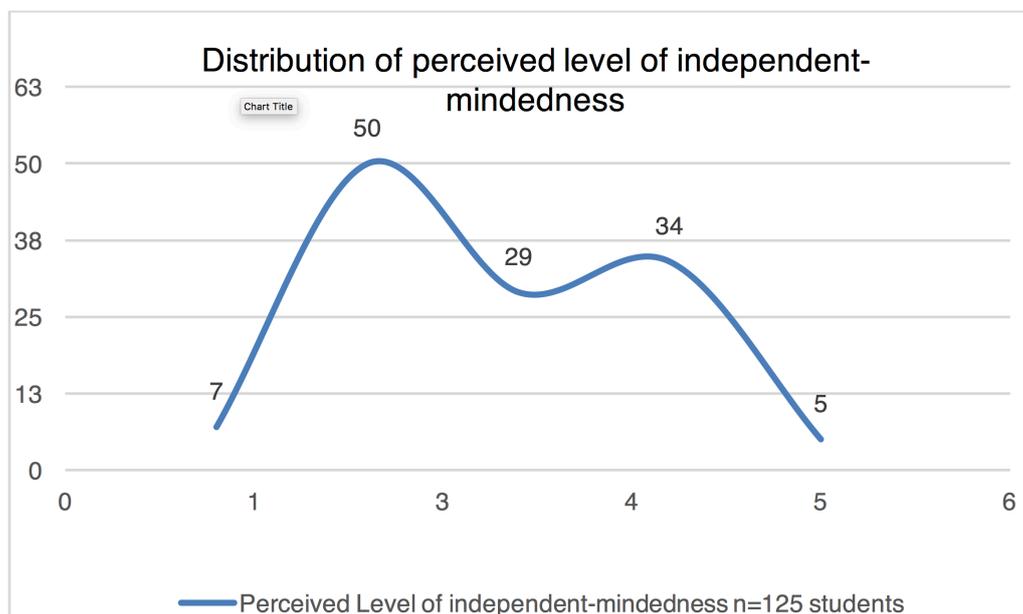


Figure 3. Distribution of Students' Perceived Level of Autonomy.

Second, in the “training” students received from the university to facilitate autonomous behaviour upon arriving as freshman students, a CALL programme was introduced to students only twice—once during their orientation upon entering the institution and once again through flyers distributed at the beginning of the semester during an English class—and done in isolation.

There are two factors that could have led to these surprising results. First, since 2011, MEXT has made significant efforts to introduce conversational English into primary educational institutions, which may be contributing to students' confidence, language gains, and ability to reflect on learning progress. The institution in which this research took place was considered to be one of the top universities in the country, and, as such, the students entering had already developed strong study habits. Replicating this study at a lower-ranked tertiary institution would possibly have very different results as motivation and attitude to learning might be lower.

A second factor could be students' exposure to a larger number of external influences through smartphone technology. Having constant access to the outside world may be one of the factors which influences students' ability to be more autonomous in their approach to learning. As students in this study reported reading world news through other news outlets than Japanese outlets, learning about interesting topics through resources such as TED Talks and engaging in casual English talks through smartphone applications such as LINE can be encouraged. There has been a considerable amount of research focusing on the connection between student interest and motivation to learn (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008), which can be explored further. In particular, student ideas can be passed on to SALC staff as a means of knowledge-sharing to assist other students.

It can thus be assumed that if top universities in Japan continue to accept high-performing students, the current trajectory of students with the capacity to be independent minded will

continue. For students who did not achieve the results to get into top universities, it is important that out-of-class learning be incorporated into existing curricula in order to tap into student interest and increase motivation. As the main change agents in curricular reform, it is important that clear guidelines and definitions of autonomy-in-practice be decided by teachers in order for the change to be meaningful. It is only by fostering a culture of learner autonomy within an institution that any progress in turning students into “independent-minded individuals” will be seen.

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## Review Process

This paper was open-reviewed by the following members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network: Dexter Da Silva and Chika Hayashi. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind review.*)

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## Appendix A

### *Survey questions in first semester research [English translation]*

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your major?
3. Which of these, if any, do you have a problem with in your university classes? [select from the choices below]
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher's speed of talking</li> <li>• Teaching style</li> <li>• Language skill</li> <li>• Course objectives</li> <li>• Group work</li> <li>• Independent learning</li> <li>• Reflection on learning</li> <li>• Give details for your choice: _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher's accent</li> <li>• Computer skills</li> <li>• Amount of homework</li> <li>• Textbook content</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• English-only class</li> <li>• Relationship with peers</li> </ul>
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4. What are the differences between your high school and university English learning experiences?
5. If there were a short English program to bridge the gap between high school and university, would you be interested in participating in it?
6. What do you think could have facilitated the move from high school to university English language classes more easily for you?
7. What kind of support or guidance have you had to help you with your challenges?
8. How have you changed your approach to learning since entering university?

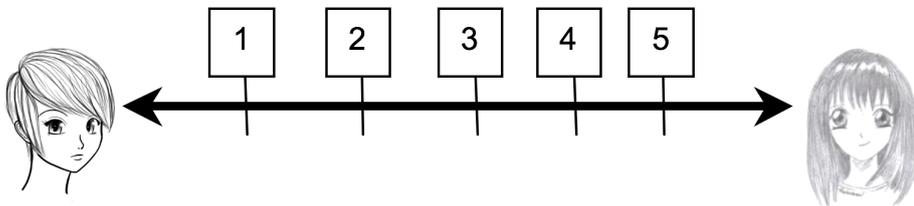
9. What advice or suggestions do you have for students to assist in the transition from high school and university?
10. What advice or suggestions do you have for teachers to assist in the transition from high school and university?

## Appendix B

### Worksheet for ILS reflective activity showing example responses of a Level 1 and Level 5 learner

**LEVEL 1 Learner:** I cannot speak English well and I do not know how to study. I think I am bad at everything. I don't know what I want to do in the future so I have no plan. I prefer the teacher to tell me what to do because it is difficult for me to learn by myself. I do homework but I don't ask the teacher for help. So sometimes my homework is bad. I know there is a SALC but I am nervous to go there.

#### Independent Learning Scale



**LEVEL 5 Learner:** When I started university, my language skills were average and I could not communicate well. But now I know my weak and strong points. I have made a goal for myself and I try to achieve it. In the future I want to use English so I know I have to learn how to study by myself. I prepare before every class, I do research, I talk with foreign students to improve my speaking and I watch TED videos. When I need help I ask the teacher for advice. I have become very independent in my thinking at university. I am excited about the future!